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Reinventing Heritage through Participatory Authenticity: Cultural Legitimacy and Policy in Indonesian Puppet Theater

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Abstract: This study examines how adaptations of Indonesian puppet theater sustain cultural legitimacy and inform heritage governance. It focuses on Wayang Kontemporer Cilikmen (WKC), a contemporary performance practice developed in Pacitan, East Java, Indonesia. The research employed an interpretive qualitative case study combining interviews with 12 informants (one puppeteer, four artists, and seven audience members), observations of six performances, and documentary analysis. Fieldwork was conducted between 2022 and 2024, with formal interviews taking place primarily in 2024. Each observed performance lasted approximately three hours, providing a total of 18 hours of observation. Iterative thematic analysis, combining inductive and theory-informed approaches, identified three interconnected patterns: selective continuity of inherited narrative structures, symbolic elements, and ethical values; improved cultural accessibility through adaptations in performance duration, staging, language, music, and audience interaction; and the negotiation of authenticity through audience recognition. Participants considered adaptations culturally meaningful when recognizable connections with traditional wayang were maintained, although their interpretations of authenticity varied. The study develops the concept of participatory authenticity as an extension of negotiated and relational authenticity, emphasizing how audience interpretation, responses, and continued engagement contribute to the evaluation and cultural legitimization of adapted performances. However, audience participation does not establish authenticity solely through popularity or replace practitioner expertise. The findings

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suggest that heritage governance can support adaptive performance formats, practitioner–audience dialogue, and intergenerational cultural transmission alongside traditional safeguarding practices. These policy implications represent recommendations derived from the case study rather than empirically demonstrated policy outcomes. The study contributes to heritage scholarship by highlighting how cultural continuity depends on both the preservation of meaningful traditional elements and the social relationships through which audiences recognize and sustain them.

Keywords: participatory authenticity; cultural policy; cultural legitimacy; heritage governance; audience participation; Indonesian puppet theater.

通过参与式真实性重塑文化遗产：印度尼西亚传统木偶戏的文化合法性与政策研究

摘要：本研究探讨印度尼西亚传统木偶戏的适应性变革如何维持文化合法性，并为文化遗产治理提供参考。研究以印度尼西亚东爪哇省巴芝丹地区发展起来的当代木偶戏形式 Wayang Kontemporer Cilikmen（WKC）为研究对象。研究采用解释性质性个案研究方法，结合对 12 名受访者的访谈、六场演出的现场观察以及文献资料分析。受访者包括 1 名木偶戏表演者、4 名艺术工作者和 7 名观众。田野调查于 2022 年至 2024 年期间开展，正式访谈主要集中在 2024 年。每场观察的演出持续约 3 小时，总观察时间约为 18 小时。研究采用归纳分析与理论导向分析相结合的迭代式主题分析方法，识别出三个相互关联的主要模式：一是对传统叙事结构、象征性元素和伦理价值的选择性延续；二是通过调整演出时长、舞台布置、语言、音乐及观众互动方式，提高文化活动的可及性；三是通过观众认同与评价协商文化真实性。研究发现，当改编后的演出仍保留与传统哇扬木偶戏之间可辨识的文化联系时，参与者通常认为这种改编具有文化意义，但不同参与者对真实性的理解和判断存在差异。本研究进一步提出“参与式真实性”概念，作为对协商性真实性和关系性真实性理论的拓展，强调观众的理解、回应和持续参与如何促进对改编演出的评价及其文化合法性的形成。然而，观众参与并不意味着仅凭受欢迎程度即可确立文化真实性，也不能取代表演者的专业知识与艺术判断。研究结果表明，文化遗产治理可以在保护传统文化的同时，支持适应性演出形式、表演者与观众之间的对话以及文化的代际传承。上述政策启示是基于个案研究提出的建议，而非已经通过实证检验的政策成效。本研究通过揭示文化延续既依赖于具有重要意义的传统文化元素的保留，也依赖于观众认同和维系这些元素的社会关系，为文化遗产研究提供了新的理论视角。

关键词：参与式真实性；文化政策；文化合法性；文化遗产治理；观众参与；印度尼西亚传统木偶戏。

1. Introduction

The sustainability of cultural heritage has become an increasingly important concern in contemporary cultural policy, as social, technological, and cultural changes reshape the conditions under which heritage is produced, experienced, and transmitted. Globalization, new media environments, and changing patterns of cultural participation increasingly challenge stewardship models that center on preserving inherited forms. Contemporary heritage scholarship conceptualizes heritage less as a stable inheritance and more as an ongoing cultural process through which meanings and practices are continually negotiated [1, 2]. Therefore, cultural policy faces a central question: how can living heritage adapt to changing conditions of cultural participation while retaining cultural legitimacy? Addressing this question requires cultural sustainability to encompass not only preservation but also the capacity of cultural practices to remain meaningful, recognizable, and socially viable over time [3].

This challenge is particularly evident in

traditional performing arts. Unlike material heritage, performance traditions depend on repeated enactments, embodied knowledge, and continuing relationships between practitioners and audiences. Their cultural meanings cannot be sustained through documentation or formal recognition alone; they must be continually reproduced through performances and public engagement. However, as cultural participation changes, preservation and accessibility can come into tension [1, 4]. Heritage governance must therefore consider whether fidelity to inherited conventions should remain the principal measure of continuity or whether adaptive innovation can enable traditional arts to remain viable in contemporary cultural life. Consequently, the policy question is not whether traditions change but how such changes are interpreted, legitimized, and governed [1, 4, 5].

Indonesian puppet theater (wayang) provides a particularly revealing context for examining these tensions. Wayang has long served as a medium of storytelling, ethical education, cultural memory, and collective identity. Its cultural significance derives from interconnected narrative, linguistic, musical, and performative conventions through which knowledge and values have been transmitted across generations [6, 7]. However, conventional performances are often characterized by extended durations, highly formalized storytelling, specialized linguistic registers, and established staging practices. Such characteristics can create barriers to participation for audiences whose cultural experiences are increasingly shaped by shorter, interactive and mediated forms of communication [8, 9]. The challenge is therefore not simply to preserve wayang as an inherited form but to sustain the cultural relationships through which it continues to be recognized and valued.

One response to these changing conditions has been the emergence of new forms of puppet theater that selectively retain and reinterpret traditional elements of the art. Originating in Pacitan, East Java, Wayang Kontemporer Cilikmen (WKC) retains recognizable elements of traditional wayang while introducing shorter performances, simplified staging, contemporary musical references, accessible language, and greater audience interaction. Such adaptations illustrate how living heritage may be reorganized in response to changing communicative environments and audience expectations rather than being sustained through formal replication alone [10, 11]. Simultaneously, adaptation raises policy questions about what should be preserved, what may legitimately change, and who participates in determining whether the transformed cultural practices remain authentic. Therefore, WKC provides a valuable case for examining the relationships between heritage reinvention, public participation, cultural legitimacy, and heritage governance [1, 10].

Despite the growing scholarship on heritage transformation, three important gaps remain. First, although heritage scholarship increasingly conceptualizes heritage as processual and socially constructed, cultural policy approaches to living heritage often continue to privilege the fidelity to inherited forms. Research has similarly demonstrated tensions between conservation-oriented policy frameworks and locally situated understandings of living heritage, highlighting the need to recognize heritage as an evolving social practice [1, 2, 12]. This emphasis can obscure the possibility that adaptation may sustain continuity by enabling cultural practices to remain socially meaningful to the community. Therefore, the analytical challenge is to distinguish transformations that erode culturally significant meanings from those that preserve symbolic relationships through re-interpretation and renewed engagement. A process-oriented approach requires continuity to be assessed not only through formal stability but also through the persistence of cultural meaning and recognition under changing social conditions [3, 12].

Second, studies of traditional performance have extensively addressed preservation, aesthetic value, identity, and symbolic meaning but have paid comparatively less attention to audience participation as a basis of cultural legitimacy. However, cultural value is produced relationally rather than exclusively by cultural practitioners or institutions, and recent heritage research has increasingly demonstrated the importance of community involvement and audience engagement in sustaining relationships between heritage practices and their publics [5, 13, 14]. Audiences contribute through interpretation, response, recognition, and continued participation, thereby influencing the social meaning of the transformed practices. Consequently, audience participation should not be understood merely as an outcome of cultural consumption but as a constitutive element of heritage sustainability and governance. This perspective shifts audiences from being recipients of cultural provision to participants in the continuing production and recognition of cultural value [4, 13, 14].

Third, the relationship between mediatization and cultural policy debates concerning heritage legitimacy and sustainability remains comparatively underdeveloped. Media environments reshape not only cultural circulation but also expectations of accessibility, immediacy, interactivity, and participation [11, 15]. These communicative conditions can influence performance duration, staging, language, music, narrative organization, and performer–audience relationships, even when digital technologies are not directly incorporated into live performance. However, cultural policy often treats preservation and communicative adaptation as distinct concerns. Connecting mediatization with heritage governance makes it possible to understand adaptation as a response

to changing conditions of cultural participation, rather than merely as formal transformation [11, 16].

This study develops participatory authenticity to explain how audiences help validate adaptive heritage practices. Negotiated and relational accounts establish that authenticity is socially produced [1, 3]; the proposed concept specifies a mechanism within that process: audiences assess whether changed performances retain recognizable inherited meanings, and their interpretations, responses, and continued engagement contribute to cultural legitimacy. It is therefore a focused elaboration of these accounts, rather than a claim that participation itself is new. Popularity alone does not establish authenticity, and practitioner expertise remains important [12, 14].

Against this background, this study addresses the following questions: (1) Which elements of traditional wayang are retained and recontextualized in WKC? (2) How do changing performance and communicative conditions reshape WKC, and how are audiences involved in this process? (3) How is cultural legitimacy co-produced through audience recognition and participation, and what are the implications of this process for heritage governance and cultural policy? Together, these questions connect cultural transformation with the policy problem of sustaining legitimacy under changing conditions of participation [1, 4].

This study makes three contributions to cultural policy scholarship. First, it advances a process-oriented account of heritage sustainability through selective continuity, demonstrating how adaptation can coexist with symbolic continuity [2, 3]. Second, it positions audience participation as a constitutive mechanism of cultural legitimacy, rather than merely an outcome of cultural production. Third, it develops participatory authenticity as a conceptual framework that connects adaptive innovation, symbolic continuity, and public recognition. Together, these contributions support an approach to heritage governance that balances preservation, innovation, and participation while sustaining meaningful relationships with inherited cultural traditions [1, 4].

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Heritage as Process: From Preservation to Negotiation

Contemporary heritage scholarship understands heritage as a cultural process through which meanings, values, and practices are selected and negotiated in the present. This perspective challenges the assumption that continuity requires formal stability across generations [1, 3]. Preservation remains important, but cultural value also depends on the relationships that communities, practitioners, and institutions establish with inherited practices under changing social conditions [2].

This perspective is particularly relevant to performance-based heritage because traditions such as wayang depend on repeated enactment, embodied knowledge, interpretation, and public recognition. Their continuity cannot be secured solely through documentation or the reproduction of established conventions. Rather, cultural practices are continually recontextualized as performers and communities determine which elements remain meaningful and how they should be expressed under new conditions [1, 3]. This study therefore conceptualizes reinvention as potentially constitutive of heritage continuity rather than necessarily opposed to it. Within this framework, selective continuity describes the process through which culturally recognizable elements are retained while other dimensions are reorganized to sustain accessibility and relevance. Heritage consequently becomes a negotiated field in which continuity and change interact in the ongoing production of cultural legitimacy [2, 12].

2.2. Mediatization and Cultural Transformation

Mediatization provides a second analytical lens for explaining why the communicative conditions of traditional cultural production are changing. Rather than treating media simply as technologies for transmitting cultural content, mediatization theory examines how evolving media environments reshape social practices, institutional arrangements, and expectations of communication. Media-related logics increasingly influence expectations of accessibility, immediacy, visibility, interactivity, and participation [11, 15]. These transformations are relevant to heritage because cultural practices operate within the same communicative environments in which audiences encounter increasingly compressed, interactive, and multimodal forms of cultural expression. Mediatization can therefore affect how heritage is organized and experienced even when digital technologies are not directly incorporated into a performance [11, 17].

In traditional performing arts, these processes may become visible through shorter performance formats, accessible language, narrative restructuring, musical hybridization, simplified staging, and more interactive performer–audience relationships. Such transformations reflect adaptation to changing communicative conditions rather than the straightforward displacement of traditional culture by the media. Mediatization can also facilitate cultural hybridity by enabling inherited and contemporary expressive forms to coexist within evolving cultural production systems [15, 18]. For cultural policy, this perspective complicates the conventional distinction between preservation and transformation by showing that communicative adaptation may become a condition of cultural continuity. Policies concerning living heritage must therefore consider not only what cultural forms are preserved but also whether changing communicative conditions enable those forms to remain

accessible and socially meaningful. Communicative adaptation may be one mechanism through which heritage remains accessible to contemporary publics while sustaining meaningful connections with inherited cultural identities [1, 19].

2.3 Authenticity as a Negotiated and Participatory Process

Authenticity has long provided an important criterion for evaluating heritage, frequently through notions of historical continuity and fidelity to inherited forms. Such approaches can protect cultural practices from arbitrary transformation, but they may also imply that authenticity is an intrinsic and relatively stable property of cultural forms. Contemporary heritage scholarship increasingly challenges this essentialist interpretation by conceptualising authenticity as relational, contextual, and socially negotiated [1, 20]. This perspective is especially relevant to living heritage, where performers and communities continually confront tensions between established conventions and changing conditions of cultural participation. Authenticity consequently involves judgments about whether transformed practices continue to embody culturally recognizable meanings rather than merely whether their formal characteristics remain unchanged [3].

Participatory authenticity identifies the process through which audiences evaluate whether adaptive performances remain culturally authentic. Audiences interpret recognizable inherited meanings, respond to transformations, and contribute continuing engagement through which adaptations acquire cultural legitimacy [1, 20]. The concept specifies an evaluative mechanism within negotiated and relational accounts, rather than claiming that participation itself is new. It does not make popularity a sufficient measure of authenticity or displace practitioner expertise [4, 15].

2.4 Cultural Production and Participatory Agency

Theories of cultural production further explain how such negotiations occur through relationships among multiple cultural actors. Cultural production cannot be understood solely as the expression of individual artistic creativity; it develops within networks involving practitioners, audiences, institutions, technologies, markets, and policy environments. Meaning and cultural value are consequently produced relationally rather than transmitted unidirectionally from producers to passive recipients [5, 18]. In performance-based heritage, practitioners retain substantial creative agency in selecting, interpreting, and reorganising inherited cultural resources, but this agency operates in relation to audience expectations, institutional opportunities, and changing communicative environments. Participatory forms of cultural production therefore complicate conventional producer-centered accounts of cultural authority [15, 17].

Audience agency is particularly important to the present framework because audiences interpret adaptations, respond during performances, and contribute to whether transformed cultural forms receive continued social recognition. Yet participation does not occur outside structures of power. Funding arrangements, cultural institutions, technological infrastructures, access to performance spaces, and policy priorities shape who can innovate, participate, and influence definitions of legitimate culture [4, 5]. Cultural reinvention should therefore be understood as a socially situated process emerging through the interaction of practitioner agency, audience participation, and institutional conditions. This perspective connects participatory authenticity directly with cultural governance by recognizing that policy can enable or constrain the relationships through which cultural legitimacy is negotiated [1, 18].

2.5 Reinvention, Cultural Sustainability, and Adaptive Governance

Within this integrated framework, reinvention is conceptualized as a potential mechanism of cultural sustainability. Cultural sustainability does not require cultural practices to remain formally unchanged; rather, it concerns their capacity to maintain social, symbolic, and intergenerational significance under changing conditions. For living heritage, sustainability therefore depends on maintaining cultural meaning while enabling continuing participation and transmission [1, 21]. Adaptation becomes culturally productive when it preserves recognizable symbolic relationships with tradition while creating conditions through which contemporary publics can continue to encounter, interpret, and value heritage. Continuity and change are thus mutually constitutive rather than inherently opposing dimensions of sustainable cultural practice [3].

Adaptive heritage governance provides the policy dimension of this framework. Preservation protects cultural knowledge, while support for experimentation and participation enables practitioners and communities to negotiate legitimate change [1, 4]. The framework links heritage negotiation, changing communicative conditions, selective continuity, audience evaluation, and governance. These concepts guide the analysis of how WKC sustains recognizable meanings through adaptation [5].

3. Methods and Materials

3.1. Research Design

This study employed an interpretive qualitative case study to examine how the reinvention of Indonesian puppet theater shapes cultural continuity, authenticity, and legitimacy amid changing cultural and communicative conditions. A qualitative approach was appropriate because these processes involve meanings, interpretations, social relationships, and cultural

judgments that cannot be adequately understood through quantitative measures alone. Within an interpretive paradigm, cultural practices are understood as socially situated processes whose meanings are continually produced and negotiated among cultural actors [22, 23] This approach enabled the study to investigate not only how WKC has changed as a performance form but also how practitioners and audiences understand and evaluate those changes.

WKC was selected as a case because it provides a particularly relevant context for examining the relationship between heritage preservation and adaptive cultural practice. WKC retains recognizable elements of traditional wayang while modifying the performance duration, staging, language, music, and audience interaction. The case therefore enables a close examination of how living heritage is recontextualized and how cultural legitimacy is negotiated when inherited conventions encounter changing communicative conditions. Case study research is particularly appropriate for investigating such processes within their social and cultural contexts [24]. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, this study pursued analytical insights relevant to broader debates concerning living heritage, cultural legitimacy, and adaptive heritage governance [25].

3.2. Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted in Pacitan Regency, East Java, Indonesia, where established wayang traditions coexist with contemporary cultural experimentation. This setting provided an appropriate context for examining how practitioners and audiences negotiate continuity and change within a living-performance tradition. WKC was examined within this local cultural environment rather than as an isolated artistic product, allowing the analysis to consider the social relationships through which cultural adaptation is produced, interpreted and recognized.

Participants were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in the production, performance, or reception of WKC. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that the participants possessed relevant experience and could provide perspectives from different positions within the cultural production process [24, 26]. Twelve informants participated in the study: one puppeteer (FJ), four artists (SK, BS, TS, and KA), and seven audience members (AP, ER, PT, DY, RK, TM, and HS). Including both cultural practitioners and audience members was important because the study conceptualizes cultural legitimacy as relational rather than being determined by performers alone. Practitioners provided perspectives on decisions concerning adaptation and continuity, while audience members provided accounts of recognition, accessibility, authenticity, and cultural meanings associated with transformed performance practices.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were generated through multi-year field engagement conducted between 2022 and 2024 in Pacitan, East Java. This period enabled the study to follow the development of Wayang Kontemporer Cilikmen (WKC) across changing conditions of live cultural performance, including the resumption and consolidation of performance activities following pandemic-related social restrictions. Rather than relying on a single source of evidence, this study combined semi-structured interviews, direct performance observations, field notes, and documentary materials. Formal interviews were conducted primarily in 2024, whereas observational and documentary data were accumulated across the broader fieldwork period [23, 24].

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 informants occupying different positions in relation to WKC, including the puppeteer and creator of WKC, performing artists, audience members, and individuals familiar with its development and performance context. Participants were purposively selected because of their direct experience with, participation in, or knowledge of WKC. The interview guide addressed the transformation of wayang performance, artistic experimentation, audience engagement, perceptions of tradition and authenticity, and the changing conditions under which WKC was performed. The semi-structured format allowed these themes to be explored consistently across participants while permitting follow-up questions to pursue experiences, interpretations, and issues raised by individual informants [26, 27].

The interview data were complemented by direct observation of six WKC performances in Pacitan during the research period. Each performance lasted approximately three hours, producing approximately 18 hours of direct performance observation. The researcher adopted a position of moderate participation, attending performances and engaging with the field setting while remaining outside the performers' principal activities. This position enabled WKC to be observed as a situated cultural practice rather than solely through retrospective accounts provided in interviews [28, 29].

Observations focused not only on narrative content but also on the material and communicative organization of the performance. Field notes documented puppet forms and visual characteristics, language choice, musical arrangements, humor, narrative themes, the puppeteer's communicative strategies, audience interaction, and responses that emerged during performances. Particular attention was given to the ways audiences participated in and responded to the performance because engagement was not always expressed through explicit verbal commentary. Laughter, responses to particular dialogues, interaction with the puppeteer, and other forms of situated participation were therefore treated as

contextual evidence for understanding how WKC operated as a living cultural practice [28].

Interviews were documented through field notes and, where participants consented, audio recordings. Recordings were transcribed and checked against field notes before analysis. Statements were retained as closely as possible to participants' original wording, including Javanese expressions carrying culturally situated meanings. Original-language excerpts were accompanied by English translations that sought to preserve contextual and cultural meaning rather than impose literal equivalence [23, 27].

Data collection and preliminary interpretation were performed iteratively. Interview accounts were read alongside performance observations, documentary materials, and other relevant records, allowing claims from one source to be compared with the evidence from others. Convergences and discrepancies were retained, rather than automatically reconciled. This process of methodological triangulation strengthened the interpretive basis of the analysis by examining cultural meanings across different forms of evidence, rather than relying on a single source of data [23, 24, 30].

3.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis through an iterative combination of inductive and theory-informed coding. The interview materials were transcribed and organized with observation notes and relevant documentary materials. The researchers first read the dataset repeatedly to become familiar with the participants' accounts, performance practices, and recurring points of tension. Initial coding remained close to the empirical material and identified recurring issues concerning tradition, pakem, adaptation, accessibility, audience engagement, cultural recognition, authenticity, and legitimacy [31, 32].

The analysis subsequently moved between inductive codes and concepts derived from the theoretical framework, including heritage as a process, mediatization, participation, and negotiated authenticity. Theoretical concepts were used as interpretive resources rather than as predetermined categories into which the data were forced. This iterative procedure allowed unexpected meanings and tensions to remain visible while enabling empirical patterns to be interpreted in relation to the study's conceptual concerns. Codes were compared across practitioners, audience members, observations, and documentary materials before being organized into broader patterns [30, 33].

Through repeated comparison and refinement, the analysis generated three interconnected analytical domains: selective continuity in the recontextualization of tradition, adaptive cultural accessibility through changing performance and communicative practices, and the negotiation of authenticity through audience recognition and participation. This iterative movement from codes to broader analytical domains is consistent with thematic approaches that emphasize recursive theme development and theoretically informed interpretation rather than linear categorization [31, 33]. The final interpretive stage examined how these domains interacted in the production of cultural legitimacy and how they informed the development of participatory authenticity and its implications for heritage governance. This progression maintained alignment between the research questions, empirical evidence, and theoretical interpretation without treating the conceptual framework as a predetermined coding template, thereby preserving space for meanings and tensions to emerge from the data [30, 32].

3.5. Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Several procedures were used to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis. Methodological triangulation enabled comparisons among interview, observational, and documentary evidence, while perspectives from practitioners and audiences allowed interpretations to be examined across different actor positions. Coding decisions and theme development were systematically documented, and verbatim extracts were retained in the findings to clarify the relationship between empirical evidence and analytical claims. Reflexive attention was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis to consider how the researchers' positioning and familiarity with the cultural context could shape interpretation [30, 34].

Ethical approval was issued by the Academic Senate of STKIP PGRI Pacitan (Senat Akademik STKIP PGRI Pacitan), approval No. 954/STKIP PGRI/KL/IX/2023, dated 7 November 2023. The approval document specifies voluntary participation and the right to withdraw, coded participant identities, permission-based audio recording, secure data handling, and respect for local cultural knowledge.

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were identified using pseudonyms or identification codes to protect confidentiality, and research materials were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes. This study followed the established principles of qualitative research ethics, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, respect for participants, and responsible representation of cultural knowledge [35].

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Selective Continuity and the Recontextualization of Tradition

The findings show that WKC maintains its relationship with traditional wayang through selective continuity rather than through formal replication. Performers retain culturally recognizable elements while modifying their organization and communicative

forms in response to contemporary performance conditions. Traditional conventions therefore remain important, but their continuity depends on how they are recontextualized within the transformed performance.

Extract 1

"*Saya juga masih menggunakan beberapa unsur wayang purwa dalam Wayang Cilikmen, seperti antawacana, jejer, dan sebagian gending iringan.*"

("I still use several elements of traditional wayang purwa in Wayang Cilikmen, including antawacana, jejer, and some forms of musical accompaniment.") (FJ)

Extract 2

"*Aspek tradisional itu tetap saya perlukan agar wayang ini tidak lepas dari akarnya.*"

("Traditional elements remain necessary so that this form of wayang does not lose its roots.") (FJ)

These accounts show that the puppeteer does not treat innovation as requiring the removal of inherited conventions. Elements such as antawacana, jejer, and gending are retained because they maintain recognizable connections with established wayang practice. Their significance lies less in exact reproduction than in their capacity to anchor the transformed performance within an inherited cultural tradition. WKC thus distinguishes between culturally constitutive elements and aspects of performance that can be reorganized. Such selective retention allows substantial changes in duration, staging, and communication without rendering the performance culturally unrecognizable. This pattern is consistent with research showing that living heritage is sustained through ongoing negotiations among continuity, community meanings, and changing conditions of participation rather than through formal conservation alone [10, 12, 14].

Language provides a clear example of this process.

Extract 3

"Tidak hanya menggunakan Bahasa Jawa Kuna, tetapi juga Bahasa Jawa sehari-hari dan Bahasa Indonesia agar lebih mudah dipahami."

("The performance uses not only Old Javanese but also everyday Javanese and Indonesian so that audiences can understand it more easily.") (SK)

The participant distinguishes older Javanese expressions from everyday Javanese and Indonesian. These resources are combined to retain connections with established performance practice while enabling audiences to follow the narrative. Language therefore becomes a means of negotiating cultural recognizability and comprehension. The account supports an interpretation of linguistic adaptation as expanding access, although it does not establish the historical or linguistic classification of every expression used. Research on performance adaptation and community involvement similarly connects accessibility with the continued circulation of heritage meanings [10, 12, 14].

Audience accounts reinforce the importance of this adaptation.

Extract 4

"Kalau terlalu banyak bahasa lama, penonton muda sulit mengikuti ceritanya."

("If too much older language is used, younger audiences find it difficult to follow the story.") (AP)

Extract 5

"Dengan bahasa yang lebih sederhana, pesan wayangnya lebih mudah diterima."

("With simpler language, the messages of wayang are easier to understand.") (ER)

These responses show that accessibility forms part of how audiences evaluate contemporary performance. Participants did not reject traditional language itself; rather, they questioned its extensive use when it prevented audiences from following the narrative and understanding its messages. Therefore, linguistic adaptation operates as a means of sustaining cultural transmission rather than merely simplifying cultural content. Across these extracts, selective continuity emerges as a practical process through which performers preserve recognizable cultural markers while adapting their communicative form. The findings indicate that WKC's continuity depends less on reproducing every inherited convention than on maintaining symbolic and cultural recognizability while enabling contemporary audiences to participate meaningfully in the tradition. This interpretation aligns with studies emphasizing public participation, communicative accessibility, and audience engagement as increasingly important conditions for sustaining living heritage [12, 13, 14].

4.2. Adaptive Transformation of Performance

The second pattern concerns the reorganization of WKC in response to changing conditions of cultural participation. Adaptation occurs across temporal, spatial, musical, and relational dimensions, which collectively make performances more accessible to contemporary audiences. Rather than operating as isolated modifications, these changes reshape how WKC is organized, encountered, and experienced while preserving its recognizable connection with wayang.

Extract 6

"Wayang semalam suntuk sudah sulit diminati masyarakat sekarang. Karena itu pertunjukan kami dibuat lebih singkat."

("All-night wayang performances now struggle to attract people's interest. That is why we have made our performances shorter.") (FJ)

Extract 7

"*Sekarang orang ingin hiburan yang cepat dan langsung menarik perhatian.*"

("People today want entertainment that is fast and immediately engaging.") (TS)

Performance duration emerges as a significant

site of adaptation. Participants associated the conventional all-night format with patterns of cultural participation that no longer corresponded easily to contemporary routines, leisure practices, and audience attention. Therefore, shortening the performance was not understood as a rejection of wayang narratives but as a practical means of enabling audiences to experience the performance more fully. Consequently, temporal organization becomes negotiable: cultural and narrative significance can be retained even when inherited conventions of duration are modified. Studies have similarly suggested that reformatting traditional performances can enhance their accessibility to contemporary audiences while maintaining meaningful connections with inherited cultural forms [10, 12, 13].

Adaptation is also evident in the material and spatial organization of the performance.

Extract 8

"*Panggung dibuat lebih sederhana agar mudah dipindahkan dan bisa tampil di berbagai tempat."*

("The stage is made simpler so that it can be moved easily and used for performances in different locations.") (SK)

Extract 9

"*Tidak perlu perangkat yang terlalu besar seperti pertunjukan wayang tradisional."*

("There is no need for equipment as extensive as that used in traditional wayang performances.") (BS)

Simplified staging increases mobility and reduces the logistical requirements associated with conventional wayang kulit. Participants emphasized the possibility of performing in different locations without relying on elaborate equipment or fixed spatial arrangements. Spatial flexibility, therefore, extends beyond production efficiency: it expands the range of settings in which WKC can circulate and creates additional opportunities for different publics to encounter the performance. Such flexibility illustrates how living heritage may be reorganized around changing social contexts without necessarily abandoning the cultural meanings through which it remains recognizable. This finding is consistent with scholarship emphasizing accessibility, community engagement and adaptation as important dimensions of contemporary heritage practice [10, 12, 14].

Musical adaptation constitutes another dimension of this transformation, and participants described the incorporation of contemporary music as a means of aligning the performance with current audience preferences.

Extract 10

"Kami memasukkan musik yang lebih dekat dengan selera masyarakat sekarang."

("We incorporate music that is closer to contemporary audience preferences.") (KA)

Extract 11

"Kadang ada lagu-lagu populer supaya penonton lebih tertarik mengikuti pertunjukan."

("Popular songs are sometimes included so that audiences remain interested in the performance.") (TS)

Contemporary musical references are incorporated alongside, rather than substituted for, traditional elements. Participants associated popular music with attracting attention and creating a sense of familiarity for contemporary audiences. Thus, music functions as a communicative bridge between inherited performance conventions and current cultural experiences. Importantly, musical adaptation does not necessarily entail the displacement of traditional cultural content; instead, different musical resources coexist in the performance. This combination demonstrates how traditional performance can incorporate contemporary expressive forms while maintaining cultural recognizability, reinforcing the broader role of adaptation in sustaining audience engagement with living heritage [10, 13, 14].

The same orientation toward accessibility is evident in changing performer–audience relationships.

Extract 12

"*Penonton sekarang ingin lebih dekat dengan pemain dan ikut terlibat dalam pertunjukan."*

("Audiences today want to be closer to performers and participate in the performance.") (RK)

Extract 13

"*Interaksi langsung membuat pertunjukan terasa lebih hidup."*

("Direct interaction makes the performance feel more alive.") (DY)

Audience interaction transforms participation from mere attendance to an active component of performance. Direct responses, humor, spontaneous exchanges, and other forms of interaction create a more dialogic environment in which audiences contribute to the unfolding event. Consequently, participation becomes part of how WKC is experienced and socially sustained, rather than merely an outcome of spectatorship. Heritage research likewise emphasizes the importance of audience and community engagement in sustaining relationships between cultural practices and contemporary publics [12, 13, 14]. Taken together, temporal compression, spatial flexibility, musical adaptation, and interactive participation constitute adaptive cultural accessibility: WKC reduces practical and communicative barriers while retaining the cultural features through which audiences continue to recognize it as wayang [10, 14].

4.3. Negotiating Authenticity through Audience Recognition

The third pattern concerns competing understandings of what makes an adapted wayang performance authentic. The participants did not apply a single evaluative criterion. While some associated authenticity with fidelity to inherited performance

conventions, others emphasized the continued presence of cultural meanings, ethical values and recognizable symbolic elements. Therefore, authenticity emerged from the data as a matter of cultural evaluation and negotiation rather than as an uncontested property of the performance.

Extract 14

"Ada yang mengatakan ini bukan wayang yang sebenarnya karena bentuknya sudah banyak berubah."

("Some people say this is not real wayang because many aspects have changed.") (SK)

Extract 15

"*Tapi menurut saya yang penting nilai-nilai wayangnya masih ada."*

("But for me, what matters is that the values of wayang are still present.") (KA)

These statements reveal two competing criteria for evaluating authenticity. The first privileges formal continuity, whereby extensive departures from established conventions potentially weaken the performance's claim to being recognized as wayang. The second privileges symbolic continuity, allowing formal adaptation, provided that culturally significant meanings and values remain recognizable. Therefore, the disagreement concerns more than aesthetic preference; it reflects different understandings of what constitutes legitimate continuity. Participants who accepted adaptation did not reject tradition but located its significance primarily in the persistence of cultural meaning rather than in formal reproduction. Such variation is consistent with living-heritage research showing that authenticity and cultural value are continually negotiated among communities, practitioners, and institutional frameworks rather than secured through conservation of form alone [12, 14].

The audience participants connected these competing evaluations directly to the contemporary relevance of wayang.

Extract 16

"Kalau bentuknya tetap sama seperti dulu, anak muda mungkin tidak tertarik menonton."

("If the performance remained exactly the same as in the past, younger audiences might not be interested in watching it.") (AP)

Extract 17

"Justru karena ada perubahan, wayang menjadi lebih dekat dengan masyarakat sekarang."

("Precisely because of these changes, wayang becomes closer to contemporary society.") (ER)

These accounts indicate that adaptation can contribute to perceptions of cultural viability rather than necessarily signaling cultural loss. Participants regarded the capacity to engage younger and contemporary audiences as relevant to whether wayang could continue functioning as living heritage. Their evaluations, therefore, connected authenticity retrospectively to inherited cultural conventions and prospectively to the capacity of the tradition to remain socially meaningful. Contemporary relevance did not replace tradition as an evaluative criterion; instead, participants negotiated legitimacy through the relationship between cultural continuity and present-day accessibility. This finding resonates with research showing that sustaining living heritage increasingly involves active relationships among cultural transmission, contemporary participation, and community recognition [10, 13, 14].

The distinction between formal transformation and cultural meaning becomes explicit in the final two excerpts.

Extract 18

"*Pesan moralnya masih sama, hanya cara penyampaiannya yang berbeda."*

("The moral message remains the same; only the way it is communicated has changed.") (TM)

Extract 19

"*Nilai-nilai yang diajarkan wayang tetap bisa dipahami meskipun bentuk pertunjukannya berubah."*

("The values taught through wayang can still be understood even though the performance format has changed.") (HS)

Participants thus distinguished changes in modes of presentation from changes in cultural substance. Moral messages, symbolic meanings, and cultural values were treated as more consequential indicators of continuity than the preservation of identical staging or communication forms. Consequently, authenticity emerged through the relationship between inherited meaning, transformed performance, and audience recognition. Rather than being guaranteed by formal preservation or contemporary innovation alone, it was evaluated according to whether adaptation maintained culturally recognizable meanings while enabling continued engagement. This pattern supports scholarship that approaches living heritage as dependent on negotiated relationships among continuity, adaptation, and social recognition [10, 12, 14].

4.4. Co-producing Cultural Legitimacy

The final pattern demonstrates that cultural legitimacy develops through relationships between practitioners and their public. Although performers initiate many WKC adaptations, participants repeatedly emphasized that the performance's continuing viability depends on whether audiences recognize, engage with, and support these transformations. Therefore, legitimacy emerges relationally rather than being established solely through artistic expertise or practitioner authority.

Extract 20

"Kalau tidak diterima masyarakat, pertunjukan sebagus apa pun akan sulit berkembang."

("If the community does not accept it, even the best performance will struggle to develop.") (FJ)

Extract 21

"Yang menentukan hidup atau tidaknya pertunjukan ini adalah penontonnya."

("What determines whether this performance survives or not is the audience.") (SK)

These statements explicitly position audiences within the conditions through which cultural practices are maintained. Artistic quality, practitioner expertise, and commitment to tradition remain important, but participants did not regard them as sufficient to secure WKC's continuation. Public recognition, attendance, and sustained engagement provide the social conditions within which performance can develop. Significantly, practitioners acknowledged this dependence, suggesting that cultural authority is relational rather than exclusively derived from custodianship or expertise. Research similarly emphasizes that living heritage depends on relationships among cultural practitioners, communities, institutions, and participating publics, rather than on preservation activity alone [12, 13, 14].

Audience participants similarly described their relationship with WKC in terms extending beyond conventional spectatorship.

Extract 22

"*Kami merasa ikut memiliki pertunjukan ini karena sering terlibat dan memberi masukan."*

("We feel a sense of ownership of this performance because we are often involved and able to provide feedback.") (RK)

Extract 23

"*Ada hubungan yang lebih dekat antara penonton dan pemain dibandingkan pertunjukan wayang biasa."*

("There is a closer relationship between audiences and performers than in conventional wayang performances.") (DY)

The language of involvement, feedback, and ownership indicates that repeated participation creates a relational investment in performance. Audiences do not merely receive a cultural product but contribute responses that practitioners can interpret and incorporate into their subsequent performances. Continued engagement simultaneously provides social recognition that particular adaptations are meaningful and acceptable. Cultural value, therefore, develops through reciprocal interaction rather than through a unidirectional process of transmission from performer to spectator. This participatory relationship corresponds with research emphasizing audience engagement and community involvement as important mechanisms through which heritage meanings are circulated, interpreted and socially sustained [10, 13, 14].

This relational process also develops over time.

Extract 24

"Awalnya banyak yang meragukan, tetapi lama-kelamaan masyarakat mulai menerima."

("At first many people were skeptical, but gradually the community began to accept it.") (KA)

Extract 25

"Sekarang masyarakat mulai melihat bahwa perubahan tidak berarti meninggalkan tradisi."

("People are beginning to see that change does not necessarily mean abandoning tradition.") (BS)

These accounts suggest that cultural legitimacy can develop over time. Participants reported a movement from doubt toward acceptance as audiences encountered transformed performances and recognized connections with tradition. This is a retrospective account of changing reception, rather than a measured trajectory shared by all audiences. Read alongside the earlier extracts, it links the retention of recognizable elements, increased accessibility, audience evaluation, and continuing engagement [10, 14]. These relationships provide the empirical basis for the discussion of participatory authenticity below.

4.5. From Preservation to Selective Continuity

The findings distinguish continuity in culturally meaningful elements from continuity in every performance convention. WKC retains antawacana, jejer, gending, narrative conventions, and ethical meanings while reorganizing duration, language, staging, and interaction. Participants treated these retained elements as anchors connecting adaptation with wayang. Heritage scholarship helps explain this relationship as an ongoing negotiation between inherited practices and present circumstances [1, 10, 12].

Selective continuity specifies the distinction participants make between culturally constitutive elements and conventions that can be modified without undermining recognizability. It does not imply that every adaptation preserves meaning. Rather, continuity depends on how practitioners and audiences evaluate what is retained and changed. This shifts the analytical question from whether a tradition changes to whether its transformations sustain meaningful cultural relationships [2].

Selective continuity also shifts attention from preservation as an institutional objective to continuity as cultural work undertaken by practitioners and communities. WKC performers exercise interpretive agency when deciding which conventions remain indispensable and which can be reorganized to address changing conditions of participation. However, such decisions are not made by practitioners in isolation; audience responses to linguistic accessibility, duration, and contemporary cultural references influence which adaptations become socially viable. Recent heritage scholarship has similarly emphasized that cultural value is produced through relationships among practitioners, communities, institutions, and other cultural actors rather than residing inherently in cultural objects or practices [3, 12, 14]. The WKC case extends this argument by demonstrating that continuity is

relationally evaluated. For cultural policy, this suggests that safeguarding living heritage requires room for practitioner experimentation while maintaining mechanisms through which communities can participate in evaluating the cultural consequences of change [4].

4.6. Adaptive Accessibility under Mediatized Cultural Conditions

The temporal, spatial, linguistic, and musical changes in WKC collectively increase opportunities to encounter and participate in performance. Shorter events, mobile staging, accessible language, popular musical references, and direct interaction connect performance organization with contemporary expectations of engagement. Mediatization scholarship provides a lens for interpreting these expectations within wider communication environments [11, 15].

The data do not establish that media exposure caused particular adaptations. They show practitioners describing changing audience preferences and reorganizing live performance in response. Adaptive cultural accessibility therefore identifies an empirical relationship between format and participation; mediatization remains a theory-informed interpretation of the broader conditions surrounding that relationship [17, 18].

The case suggests that accessibility can contribute to continuity when audiences can follow narratives, understand messages, and participate in performances. Mobile staging broadens possible settings, linguistic adaptation reduces barriers to comprehension, and shorter formats make attendance more practical. These findings locate accessibility in how cultural production is organized, as well as in audiences' willingness to engage [10, 13, 14].

For policy, this supports evaluating the quality of participation alongside audience reach. Understanding, feedback, and repeated involvement provide evidence of engagement that attendance figures alone cannot capture. Whether particular adaptations support intergenerational transmission requires further investigation rather than being assumed from accessibility itself [1, 12].

4.7. Participatory Authenticity and Cultural Legitimacy

The most important conceptual implication is authenticity. Participants disagreed on whether authenticity should be judged by fidelity to established conventions or by the continued presence of cultural meanings and ethical values. This tension confirms the argument that authenticity in living heritage is socially negotiated rather than an intrinsic property secured by historical continuity alone [1, 20]. However, WKC findings extend this perspective by identifying audience recognition as an active mechanism within this negotiation. Audiences did not simply respond positively or negatively after encountering a legitimized cultural product. Their interpretations of whether linguistic, musical, temporal, and performative changes remained compatible with wayang contributed to the social validation of these transformations. Therefore, authenticity emerges through the relationship between symbolic continuity and participatory recognition, rather than through either formal preservation or contemporary relevance in isolation [3].

Participatory authenticity specifies the evaluative mechanism illustrated by these accounts. Audiences assess whether adaptations remain recognizable in relation to inherited meanings, and their responses and continuing engagement contribute to the legitimacy of the transformed practice [4, 15]. The concept elaborates negotiated authenticity by identifying how publics participate in this process; it does not replace relational accounts or make popularity the measure of authenticity. Practitioner expertise and audience judgment remain distinct, interacting sources of cultural evaluation [1, 17].

4.8. From Audience Participation to Co-produced Legitimacy

The accounts show how recognition can develop through repeated exchanges between practitioners and audiences. Performers described community acceptance as necessary for sustaining WKC, while audiences reported involvement, feedback, and a sense of ownership. These interactions connect engagement with the social validation of adaptation [13, 14]. The reported movement from skepticism to acceptance suggests that legitimacy can accumulate over time. However, these qualitative accounts do not establish a uniform trajectory of acceptance or demonstrate agreement across all audiences [1, 15].

Audience participation operates within unequal relationships. Practitioners retain specialized knowledge, while access to resources, performance spaces, and institutional recognition shapes who can influence cultural evaluation [4, 5]. Governance should therefore create opportunities for dialogue without assuming that audiences, practitioners, and institutions possess equivalent authority or that community acceptance eliminates disagreement [18].

4.9. Toward Adaptive Heritage Governance

The findings suggest four practical priorities for heritage policy. Funding criteria could accommodate shorter and mobile performance formats while requiring practitioners to explain which inherited meanings they retain. Community discussions could enable practitioners and audiences to evaluate adaptations together. Support for intergenerational learning could connect experimentation with the transmission of repertoires and skills. Evaluation could consider narrative understanding and meaningful involvement

alongside attendance. These are case-informed recommendations rather than tested policy outcomes [12, 14].

Such measures would connect safeguarding with the relationships that sustain participation. They would support experimentation while keeping the cultural consequences of change open to practitioner and community evaluation. The WKC case suggests that governance can attend to both retained cultural meanings and the conditions under which contemporary publics encounter them [1, 4]. Whether these measures improve heritage sustainability requires further research in other performance and institutional settings [5].

5. Conclusion

This qualitative case study shows how WKC retains recognizable narrative, symbolic, and ethical elements while adapting language, duration, staging, music, and audience interaction. Across practitioner and audience accounts, these changes supported accessibility without necessarily severing connections with wayang. The findings therefore identify selective continuity as a situated process through which adaptation can sustain inherited cultural meanings.

The principal conceptual contribution is participatory authenticity: a focused account of audience evaluation within negotiated and relational authenticity. Audiences assess the recognizability of transformed performances, and their responses and continuing engagement help validate adaptation. This mechanism connects inherited meanings with cultural legitimacy while preserving the distinction between public acceptance, popularity, and practitioner expertise.

For cultural policy, the case supports attention to adaptive performance formats, dialogue between practitioners and audiences, and intergenerational transmission. These priorities complement safeguarding, but their effectiveness was not tested in this study.

The findings are limited to one locally situated performance practice, 12 informants, and six observed performances. They do not establish the prevalence of these processes across Indonesian wayang or other heritage traditions. Comparative and longitudinal studies could examine how audience evaluation changes over time and how institutional conditions enable or constrain it.

Declarations

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, B.S., W., S.K.H., and T.S.P.; methodology, B.S. and W.; investigation, B.S.; data curation, B.S.; formal analysis, B.S. and S.K.H.; validation, W., S.K.H., and T.S.P.; supervision, W., S.K.H., and T.S.P.; writing, original draft preparation, B.S.; writing, review and editing, B.S., W., S.K.H., and T.S.P. All authors have read and agreed to the final version of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The study draws on qualitative interviews, field observations, and documentary materials. The underlying interview and fieldwork records are not publicly available because they may contain information that could identify participants or disclose context-specific cultural knowledge.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical approval for the study was issued by the Senate of STKIP PGRI Pacitan (Senat Akademik STKIP PGRI Pacitan), approval No. 954/STKIP PGRI/KL/IX/2023, dated 7 November 2023. The approval document records the ethics status as “APPROVED” and sets out requirements for voluntary participation, confidentiality, permission-based recordings, secure data handling, and respect for local cultural knowledge.

Informed Consent Statement

Participation in the interviews was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participants’ identities were protected through pseudonyms or identification codes, and audio recordings were made only with their permission.

Conflicts of Interest

The The authors declare that they have no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest that could have influenced the design, conduct, analysis, interpretation, or publication of this research. All authors confirm that the study was conducted independently and that the findings and conclusions are presented objectively, without any undue influence from external parties.

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