

Carving Art of Jepara As A Local Cultural Heritage as A Social and Economic Identity of the Community

Ahmad, Faqihuddin¹, Ahmad, Saek², Anggun, Hana Charenta³, & Naifila, Kashita Nashwa⁴

¹Universitas Muria Kudus, Kudus, Indonesia

²Universitas Muria Kudus, Kudus, Indonesia

³Universitas Muria Kudus, Kudus, Indonesia

⁴Universitas Muria Kudus, Kudus, Indonesia

Email Address:

ahmad.faqihuddin@umk.ac.id (Ahmad Faqihuddin), 1202333121@std.umk.ac.id (Ahmad, Saek), 2202333125@std.umk.ac.id (Anggun, Hana Charenta), 3202333141@std.umk.ac.id (Naifila, Kashita Nashwa)

*Corresponding author: Ahmad, Faqihuddin

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Abstract: Jepara wood carving, known since the reign of Queen Kalinyamat in the 16th century, is an integral part of Indonesia's rich cultural heritage. Jepara carvings possess high aesthetic value and contain profound philosophies that depict the relationship between humans, nature, and God. This study explores the philosophical meanings within Jepara wood carving and its role in shaping the cultural identity of the local community. The research methodology used is a narrative qualitative approach with data collection techniques including interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. The findings indicate that Jepara wood carving is an aesthetic expression and a symbol of social status, cultural identity, and economic power for the local community. On the other hand, Jepara wood carving faces significant challenges, such as the decreasing interest of the younger generation and competition with mass-produced products. Therefore, preservation efforts through skill training, design innovation, and the utilization of digital technology are crucial to ensure its sustainability. With these measures, Jepara wood carving is expected to continue to develop and remain relevant in the global market while maintaining the cultural values embedded in each carving.

Keywords: Jepara wood carving, cultural identity, preservation, younger generation, creative economy

1. Introduction

Indonesia is an archipelagic country with diverse ethnic groups and cultures. Culture, based on human behavior, is a collection of actions, systems of ideas, and human creations for social life that can become part of human ownership through learning (Sutardi, 2019). Jepara is a district in Central Java, and one of its most famous cultural elements is its carving art (Prasiska & Wati, 2024). Carving art has evolved into a new craft form and developed as an effort to preserve cultural identity. The carving craft industry has grown and developed in line with the local cultural values of Jepara's people, making Jepara carvings a symbol of Jepara city (Indrahti, 2022).

Jepara is one of the districts located along the northern coast of Central Java, but it also has a strong agrarian culture. As such, the district is home to diverse cultures, including maritime and agrarian traditions and carving crafts. Due to its abundant carving production, Jepara is known as the carving city and "The World Carving Center." Carving is a form of art and local wisdom in Jepara that is still preserved today. The activities behind the creation of these crafts attract many tourists. Furthermore, with its uniqueness, Jepara's crafts can attract local and international consumers (Hanifa & Putri, 2023).

Raden Ajeng Kartini played a role in developing Jepara's carving art during her time. She encouraged carvers to create frames, ashtrays, tables, and chairs with various carving designs. These products were then marketed to Semarang and Batavia. Through these sales, the people of Jepara gained wider recognition for their carving skills. The carving art of Jepara evolved into a craft industry that could be sold. Kartini not only advanced Jepara's carving art into a craft industry but also worked to develop traditional carving motifs. One such motif, the "lunglungan bunga" motif, became popular.

It is now recognized as the original Jepara motif among the people of Jepara.

The development of carving today cannot be separated from the influence of Queen Kalinyamat and R.A. Kartini. Both played important roles in spreading and increasing the prominence of carving in Jepara. The "Macan Kurung" carving, which became popular during Kartini's era, has unique characteristics, especially in its production technique. Moreover, this carving carries significant philosophical meaning. Today, the "Macan Kurung" carving has become an icon of Jepara's culture. However, most people are unaware of the philosophical meanings embedded in this carving, which indicates that, in essence, the Macan Kurung carving is not well-preserved. Despite being an icon of Jepara, the Macan Kurung carving has seen a decline in interest, both in national and international markets. This is because there have been no significant efforts from the government or carvers to popularize this carving. Nowadays, carvers follow market demand to ensure their products remain sold (Setiawan et al., 2017).

Jepara's carving art has become a driving force for the local community's economy, particularly for artisans specializing in carving. This can be seen from the many furniture industries spread across Jepara, from the city center to various villages. Carving skills are passed down through generations (Nangoy & Sofiana, 2013). Jepara is a district located along the northern coast of Central Java, bordered by Pati, Kudus, and Demak. Due to the distinctive carvings associated with the city, Jepara is often referred to as the "Carving City." The Jepara government has reinforced the region's identity as a global center for carving by mapping and developing its superior potential (Sejati, 2024).

Jepara carvings have been recognized internationally and part of global trade since the 1990s. The trade centers are located in the villages of Ngabul, Senenan, Tahunan, Pekeng, Kalongan, and Pemuda, and the main center in Mulyoharjo Village, Jepara District, Central Java, Indonesia (Rifandi & Haryanto, 2020). Jepara is an iconic city in Central Java, renowned as the Carving City due to the large number of carvers in the district. As such, it is no surprise that many people in Jepara become wood carvers. However, with modern times' development and industrialization's arrival in Jepara, many people have switched professions and chosen to work in the garment industry. This shift has significantly changed the community's economy, welfare, and livelihoods (Alfiana Damayanti, 2021).

Regeneration is essential for preserving Jepara's carving art, a valuable cultural heritage and a world-class asset. Beautiful, highly marketable carvings require skilled, diligent, and professional carvers. Jepara carving is a profitable industry, but it faces challenges such as a shortage of wood and a decreasing number of artisans (Rohmah & Salam, 2022). Artisans are key figures who turn ideas into creations. They produce art and designs that can be further developed into craft products (Zulfa & Wijaya, 2020). Preserving a cultural heritage is a duty for every citizen, especially when the heritage is globally recognized. Efforts to preserve and develop local wisdom are crucial to ensure that Indonesian culture retains its distinct regional characteristics. Preservation efforts should start early and be formalized through education at various levels, from primary school to university. For example, Jepara's carving art, as a potential local asset, should be maintained through education by developing local curriculum programs that introduce Jepara carving to younger generations (Mahfudlo et al., 2019).

This research explores the deeper meanings and values embedded in Jepara's carving art, focusing on its philosophical significance and role in shaping cultural identity. Jepara carving is not only a valuable cultural heritage but also an indicator of local identity and a primary source of livelihood for the community. We can uncover the symbolic meanings behind each pattern and motif by investigating the philosophical aspects of carving designs.

Furthermore, this research aims to understand how Jepara's carving art remains relevant amidst modern developments. This art form has made Jepara known as a center for creative industries, significantly contributing to the local economy. The study will also evaluate efforts to preserve Jepara carving in the face of challenges such as globalization and examine how younger generations continue to maintain and develop this cultural tradition to ensure its competitiveness and relevance.

2. Method

Qualitative research is a process used to understand human or social phenomena by creating a comprehensive and complex description that can be presented in words, reporting detailed views obtained from informants, and conducted in natural settings. (Cresswell, 2014). Qualitative research is a study that uses a natural setting to interpret a phenomenon, conducted using various available methods. It seeks to discover and narratively describe the activities undertaken and the impacts of these actions on the lives of the individuals involved. There are several approaches in qualitative research, including phenomenology, ethnography, hermeneutics, grounded theory, narrative/historical, and case study. In this article, the method used is the narrative qualitative method, Narrative/Historical: a method in social science research to help understand an individual's identity and worldview by referring to stories (narratives) heard/told. Every research activity must follow a step-by-step process. Below are the specific stages of narrative qualitative research.

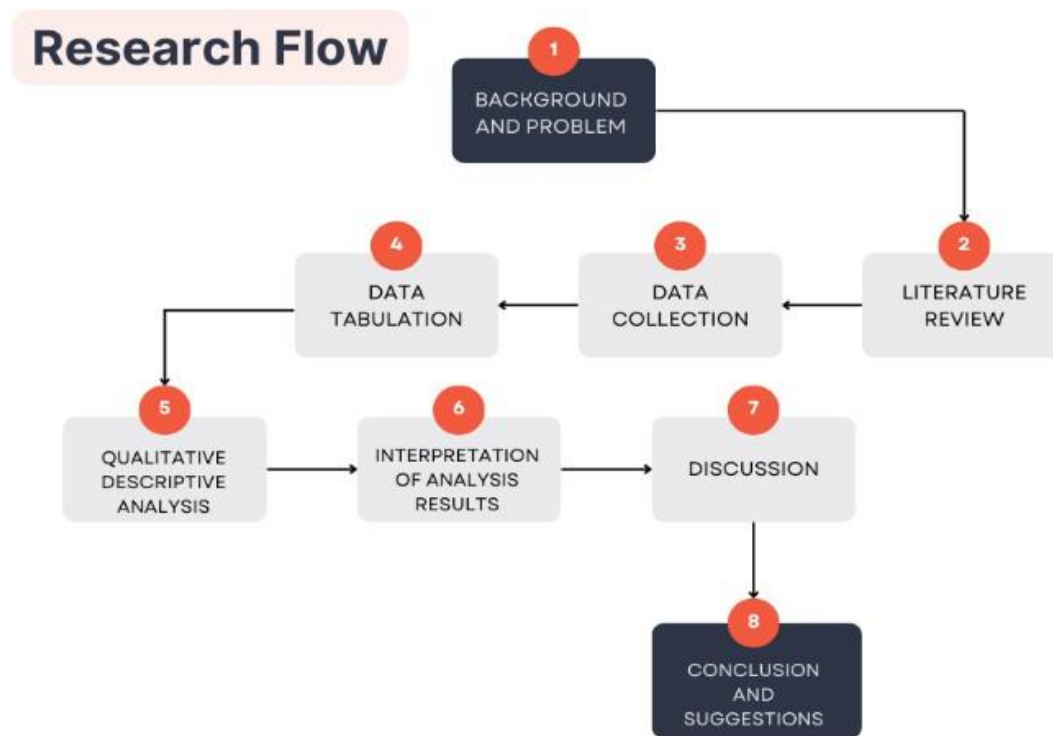


Figure 1. Research Flow Diagram

The data collection technique refers to the fact that the researcher must pay attention when selecting and determining potential objects/participants to engage the participant's ability to participate in the research actively. Data collection in qualitative research needs to be carefully considered, as the quality of the research dramatically depends on the quality and completeness of the data obtained. The key questions always considered during data collection are what, where, when, and how. Qualitative research typically relies on data triangulation obtained from three methods: interviews, participant observation, and document analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

First, interviews aim to record opinions, feelings, emotions, and other matters related to individuals within an organization. Second, participant observation is conducted by directly observing the behavior of individuals and interactions within the research setting. Therefore, the researcher must be actively involved in the daily life of the subjects being studied.

Second, participant observation is conducted by directly observing the behavior of individuals and interactions within the research setting. Therefore, the researcher must be actively involved in the daily life of the subjects being studied. Third, document analysis provides unique evidence in case studies that may not be found in interviews or observations. This data source can support data obtained from observations and interviews. Additionally, examining organizational records can provide insights into the organization's historical context. The data sources may include administrative records, correspondence, memos, agendas, and other relevant documents (Fitrah & Lutfiyah, 2017). Data analysis and interpretation refer to the process of analyzing or interpreting the data collected by the researcher to generate new ideas or theories. The researcher must capture, record, interpret, and present information for analysis. The researcher must note that data analysis cannot be separated from data collection and archival sources in qualitative research. Data analysis should be carried out immediately to determine the next steps in data collection.

According to Miles and Huberman, there are three types of activities in data analysis: data reduction, data display, and conclusions. Data reduction means summarizing, selecting key points, focusing on important aspects, identifying themes and patterns, and eliminating unnecessary information. In other words, the reduced data will provide a more precise figure and make it easier for the researcher to collect further data and search for additional information when necessary. Electronic tools can also assist in data reduction, providing specific aspects to facilitate the process. Data display (data presentation) is the stage after data reduction, done in descriptions, charts, relationships between categories, and similar formats.

Conclusions and verification involve drawing insights from the initial data collection, flow, cause-and-effect/causality, and other proportions. Conclusions in qualitative research may answer the research questions formulated at the beginning. However, they may also not because, as mentioned earlier, qualitative studies' problems and research questions are often provisional and evolve as the research progresses. However, conclusions in qualitative research are expected to lead to

new findings (novelty) that did not exist before. These findings may take the form of descriptions or theories about a previously unclear object but become more apparent after the research is conducted (Barrett & Twycross, 2018).

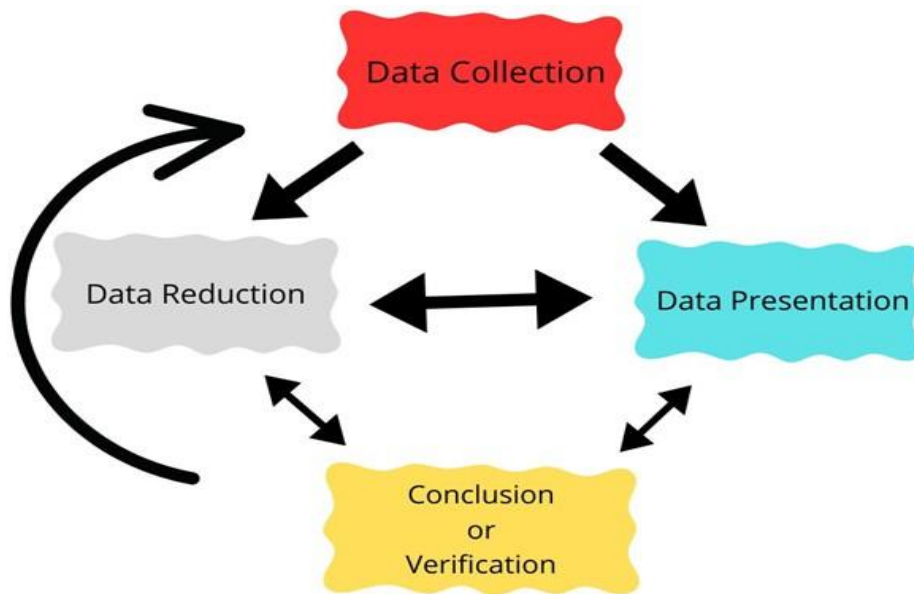


Figure 2. Conclusion Flow Diagram

The Jepara carvings can be traced back to the reign of Queen Kalinyamat (1521-1546) in 1549. The Queen had a daughter named Retno Kencono, who played a significant role in the development of carving arts. In the kingdom, a minister named Sungging Badarduwung came from Champa (Cambodia) and was a skilled carver. The Queen built the Mantingan Mosque and the Jirat Tomb (her husband's tomb) and asked Sungging to decorate these structures with carvings. Sungging then fulfilled Queen Kalinyamat's request. To this day, these carvings can be seen in the mosque and the tomb of Sultan Hadlirin, where there are 114 reliefs on white stone. In the area behind Mount, there was supposedly a group of carvers tasked with fulfilling the carving needs of the royal family. This carving group then developed its skills, and the surrounding community began to learn from them. The number of carvers increased, and their group flourished during the reign of Queen Kalinyamat. However, after her passing, they stagnated. They later experienced a resurgence during the time of Kartini (Prasiska & Wati, 2024).

3. Results and Discussion

Jepara wood carving art has been recognized as an inseparable part of Indonesia's rich cultural heritage. Its existence serves as a form of aesthetic expression and a medium to convey profound philosophical values. For example, the motifs of Jepara carvings, often inspired by nature, such as Plants, animals, and spiritual elements, carry meanings beyond decorative ornaments.



Figure 3. (a) first picture. Carving Result

According to Andayani (2019), Jepara carving represents the close relationship between humans, nature, and God. Every detail in these carvings contains deep life philosophies that remind the people of Jepara to maintain the balance of nature and live with wisdom. Originally applied to household furniture or buildings, this carving art has become a sought-after masterpiece in international markets, highlighting Jepara's profound and rich culture.



Figure 4. (b) second picture. Home Furniture Carvings

Jepara wood carving also plays an important role in shaping the social identity of the local community. Each carving produced has its quality and uniqueness that distinguishes social classes, the skills of the artisans, and the history of the family or community. (Sari & Iskandar, 2020) Jepara wood carving symbolizes cultural identity and is a tool for displaying an individual's social status within the community. For example, carvings found in traditional houses or places of worship function as decorations and symbols of rank or respect for their owners. The presence of intricate and beautiful carvings on a house or place of worship signifies a higher prestige and social status. This can be seen in how the people of Jepara use carvings to beautify important buildings such as mosques, churches, and palaces, making them symbols of prosperity and honor for the families or individuals who own them. (Asis et al., 2024).



Figure 5. (c) third picture. Carving For Beauty

Socially, Jepara wood carving also strengthens the bonds among community Members. Generally, the process of creating carvings does not involve just one individual but often includes collaboration between family or community

members. This collective process fosters strong connections among artisans, seen in community work events to create carvings for important occasions, such as weddings or religious celebrations. This aligns with the views of Iskandar and Sari, who stated that Jepara wood carving plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of togetherness within the community. This makes Jepara wood carving not only an artistic product but also a tool for strengthening social solidarity in the community.

From an economic perspective, Jepara wood carving significantly contributes to the local economy. Jepara carvings, particularly furniture and household items decorated with the distinctive Jepara carvings, have high demand in domestic and international markets. (Nurhasanah, 2021) revealed that the growing demand for Jepara carved products, whether for home decoration or as art collections, has made this art form a primary livelihood for many families in Jepara. In recent years, Jepara wood carving has evolved into an industry capable of creating jobs for thousands of people, including artisans, woodworkers, and sellers of carved products. This has positively impacted the local economy by creating job opportunities and attracting tourists interested in purchasing carved products as souvenirs or personal collections.



Figure 6. (d) forth picture. Local Workers

It is important to note that Jepara carvings cater to the domestic market and are exported to various countries in Europe, America, and Asia. Handcrafted products such as carved chairs, tables, and cabinets have a very high market value internationally, and their quality is often valued more highly than mass-produced items from other furniture industries. This demonstrates that Jepara wood carving holds cultural value and provides significant economic value to the local community.

However, despite its great potential, Jepara wood carving faces several challenges threatening its sustainability. One of the main challenges is the declining interest among the younger generation to learn and develop carving skills. Fadilah explains that this phenomenon is primarily caused by technological advancements, which have led many people to be more interested in jobs that offer quicker and more practical income, such as those in the industrial or technology sectors. Additionally, many young people are influenced by global trends and overlook traditional crafts like carving, which require more time and skill.

Competition with mass-produced products made using modern technology also poses a significant challenge to the sustainability of Jepara wood carving. Automated machines can now produce items with designs similar to traditional carvings but at much lower prices. This has threatened traditional carvers, as they cannot compete on price. However, Fadilah also suggests that one way to overcome this challenge is by utilizing social media and digital platforms to promote Jepara carvings to international markets. In this way, artisans can introduce their work to a broader audience and find new markets that appreciate the uniqueness and quality of traditional products.

The preservation of Jepara wood carving relies on introducing the products to global markets and involving the younger generation in the learning and training processes. Sulastris (2018) emphasizes the importance of skill training and cultural value introduction to the younger generation so that they appreciate wood carving as a cultural heritage and continue to develop these skills. Moreover, this training can be combined with design innovations and new technologies to improve the quality and competitiveness of Jepara carvings in the global market.

Overall, Jepara wood carving plays an important role in shaping the community's social, cultural, and economic identity. However, to ensure its sustainability in the future, more intensive preservation efforts are needed, such as training for the

younger generation, digital promotion, and design innovation. These Jepara wood carvings can continue thriving as a rich cultural heritage and contribute to the local community's well-being.

4. Conclusion

The woodcarving art of Jepara is a rich cultural heritage with profound philosophical meanings. In addition to being an aesthetic expression, Jepara carvings also represent the close relationship between humans, nature, and God and serve as a symbol of the social identity of the local community. As one of Indonesia's leading centers of woodcarving art, Jepara produces artwork with high cultural value. It serves as a significant source of livelihood for many families through its rapidly growing carving industry.

Jepara wood carving plays an important role in strengthening community ties and fostering social solidarity, as the process of creating carvings often involves collaboration within the community. Economically, Jepara carvings make a significant contribution to the local economy, with their products being highly sought after in both domestic and international markets.

However, Jepara wood carving faces serious challenges, such as the declining interest of the younger generation in preserving this skill and competition with mass-produced, technology-based products. Therefore, preserving Jepara wood carving requires serious efforts to engage the younger generation through skill training, design innovation, and digital promotion to introduce carving products to international markets. In this way, the sustainability of Jepara wood carving can be maintained, and it will continue to contribute to the cultural identity and economy of the local community in the future.

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