

# Pride and Legacy of Cultural Heritage The Example of the Javanese *Panji* Tradition

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the characteristics of the tradition of the mythological Javanese stories on Prince Panji, going back to the 12th/13th century, which are manifest in a broad variety of expressions in art and literature. The legacy of the rich *Panji* tradition represents an outstanding example of safeguarding, of enacting and of transforming cultural heritage, and thus raise pride and appreciation. Responsible ways of enacting this living heritage are a challenge for stakeholders and practitioners, for the benefit of society.

**Keywords:** Cultural heritage, *Panji* stories, Performing arts, Majapahit period.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Being proud of a cultural heritage property requires (1) knowledge and understanding, imparting (2) awareness, imparting (3) pride, imparting being ready for (4) preservation and safeguarding of the cultural expression, and to (5) appreciate it as a meaningful legacy which is apt for transformation. This holds universally true for any cultural expression, and in particular for local culture and for the local community as owner as practitioner. Compared to the more widely used and discussed topic of "cultural heritage", the term "legacy" puts a stronger emphasis on the history and the process of a cultural tradition. The *Panji* tradition is a specific example of legacy, with its many forms and manifestations in ancient art, literature, and performances, and the potential of a "living heritage" [1].

## 2. FROM KNOWLEDGE TO TRANSFORMATION

(1) The *Panji* tradition is supposed to go back to the 13th or even 12th century CE. Various stories on Prince Panji from the kingdom of Jenggala, and his betrothed Princess Sekartaji from the kingdom of Kediri have been created over the centuries. The earliest evidence is given in ancient Javanese temple reliefs depicting episodes of *Panji* stories: in Panataran temple and in Mirigambar temple (both 14th century), in Kendalisodo temple (15th century) and other sanctuaries, all of them being built during the Majapahit period (ca 1300-1500 CE). Panataran Temple is supposed as the Majapahit state

temple, Mirigambar temple was a commemorative temple for a deceased king, Kendalisodo temple was part of a hermitage complex. The earliest known written form of *Panji* stories is a manuscript from the late 18th century, the *Panji Angreni* kept in the Indonesian National Library. There exist a large number of manuscripts from the 19th century. The earliest *Panji* story, be it in oral version or in written form, is not known. We may assume that a long oral tradition existed before they were depicted in stone carvings on temples. *Panji* stories were also performed: the mask dance is evident from verses of the *Nagarakrtagama* (canto 92.4), mentioning that King Hayam Wuruk dances the *raket*, which is supposed to be the early name for *wayang topeng* (mask dance). Another performing art is the paper scroll theatre *wayang beber* which is described in the report of the Chinese traveler Ma Huan in 1413 CE: [2].

“There is a sort of men who paint on paper men, birds, animals, insects and so on; the paper is like a scroll and is fixed between two wooden rollers three feet high; at one side these rollers are level with the paper, whilst they protrude at the other side. The man squats down on the ground and places the picture before him, unrolling one part after the other and turning it towards the spectators, whilst in the native language and in a loud voice he gives an explanation of every part; the spectators sit around him and listen, laughing or crying according to what he tells them.” [3]

Other forms of performing arts are certain kinds of *wayang* puppet plays: *Wayang Gedhog*, *Wayang Krucil* or *Klithik* whose origins are not known.

There exists a large variety of Panji stories, all having the same plot: Panji and Sekartaji are separated due to some circumstances, they search for each other, have to overcome many hindrances and obstacles, being brave and not giving up, and in the end they meet each other again and marry. There are two different kinds of Old Javanese literature: the *kakawin* literature is connected to Indian literature, concerning language, metrum and the narratives based on the Indian *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The *kidung* genre was created independently from Indian literature, concerning language, metrum and the narratives; Panji stories belong to *kidung* literature. While *kakawin* relate of kings and deities and have a sacral character, the *kidung* tell stories of royals of lower status and of commoners, having a more down-to-earth character. The Panji stories even have a folklore character being close to simple life. This simplicity holds true for all manifestations mentioned above: temple reliefs, *wayang topeng*, *wayang beber*. A number of the manuscripts are embellished by narrative illustrations which also have the simple style of *wayang beber* paintings. Panji, himself being a royal, has an attitude of being close to common people. He gives an example of an ideal human: being a poet, a musician, a good fighter, a good lover, loyal to his betrothed while at the same time having amorous affairs, seeking advice from wise men and women, never giving up. Thus, Panji and the various forms of the *Panji* tradition give an example of values for human beings and how to conduct their lives. It is important to understand these values beyond merely looking at the material manifestations of the *Panji* tradition.



**Figure 1** Illustration of the *Manuscript Panji Jayakusuma*, MSS Jav 68, ff. 83v-84r, credit: British Library (photo: Lydia Kieven) [4].

(2) Awareness of the richness of the *Panji* traditions and of the values arises, when knowledge and understanding are communicated and conveyed. This happens through performative actions, be it lectures, performances, guided tours, publications, and others.

(3) Pride in the own tradition and culture is the outcome: the *Panji* tradition is a specific indigenous Javanese heritage and an expression of local wisdom, independent from outside influences.

(4) People recognize the need of preserving and safeguarding of the *Panji* tradition. Means are many fold: through extended performative actions, becoming actors themselves and feeling responsible as individual and community. Preservation and safeguarding works on all levels of society and institutions.

(5) Having recognized the value of the *Panji* theme, actors may become creative themselves in developing new forms and ways of presenting and transforming the tradition. Artists, popular as well as academic writers, libraries, experts of digital media, event organizers, and so forth, and transfer the creativity of the Panji figure into creative ways of enacting the *Panji* tradition. Panji is the example *par excellence* of creativity and lays the ground of the *Panji* tradition to be a "living heritage" [5].



**Figure 2** Panataran temple (14th century): scene of a depiction of a Panji story, on the Pendopo Terrace (photo: Lydia Kieven).

### 3. THE LEGACY OF THE PANJI TRADITION AS A LOCAL WISDOM

The *Panji* tradition represents a "local genius" and a "local wisdom", created in Java, independently of outer influences from the Indian culture, and thus different from the Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. It was continued throughout the ages, also in other parts of Indonesia as well as Southeast Asia. In the early days of the re-discovery of the "*Panji* culture" in the 1990s, the late environmentalist Suryo Wardhoyo Prawiroatmojo became the motor to develop and enact the revitalization of this rich culture. For him, the "*Panji* culture /*Budhaya Panji*" was just one example of local wisdom amongst many others, such as the cult of ancestor worship in Flores, all of these traditions having been marginalized over the last decades. Local culture was considered as "inferior culture" in contrast to "peak culture". [6] This attitude was also characteristic for archaeologists of the

late 19th/ early 20th century who considered the ancient art of the East Javanese period as a deterioration compared to the high Indian-based art of the prior Central Javanese period. This attitude has continued until recent time, for example mask dances practiced in villages have been considered as rough and rural and not part of a high culture, compared to the court arts of Central Java.

An increasing awareness of local culture has developed on a general global level, going along with the UNESCO program *Intangible Heritage* which in 2003 was established in a convention, signed by many countries, including Indonesia. Properties include rituals, oral traditions, traditional practices and know-how. It was recognized that such heritage is menaced by getting neglected and even distinct imparting a great loss for the respective local community and the global appreciation. Preservation and safeguarding the cultural heritage contribute to strengthen the cultural identity of a community and people which in present times is crucial in the context of globalization. The convention of *Intangible Heritage*: [7]

"(a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; (b) performing arts; (c) social practices, rituals and festive events; (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; (e) traditional craftsmanship (...)

The "intangible cultural heritage" means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity."

The *Panji* tradition is a specific example of cultural intangible heritage, even without being a property in the UNESCO list. It is remarkable that one manifestation of the *Panji* theme, the manuscripts from the late 18th and the 19th century, have in 2017 been acknowledged by UNESO as *Memory of the World*, which is another category of World Heritage, established in 1992. It is the convolute of 76 *Panji* stories kept in the Indonesian National Library, more than 230 pieces kept in the Dutch Leiden University Library, and a few in the National Libraries of Cambodia and Malaysia [8].

Major tasks of a UNESCO cultural property are preservation, safeguarding, public and academic access, programs of research and education. These tasks have to be applied to the *Panji* stories as a Memory of the World,

and also to the *Panji* traditions in general. Over the years, programs have been conducted to make the *Panji* theme known to the public, by popular activities such as performances, seminars, and exhibitions, attracting a large audience. In this way, knowledge and awareness have been raised. Programs raising understanding and appreciation of the values, and education programs, however, still require a stronger attention and enactment. Such developments has become a common trait in the processes of presenting and revitalizing cultural heritage and has been a topic of discourse in academic and popular discussions and publications. There has been critique on instrumentalization and "disneyfication" [9] with a loss of the inner values of the cultural property. One example is the *Bedhaya* Dance of the *kraton* of Surakarta which has a sacral character and is originally performed over several hours. It has been reduced to one-hour-performances to match the needs of touristic programs. Touristic and economic criteria dominate in many cases over the criteria of safeguarding and exploring the traditional values [10].

A crucial aspect in safeguarding cultural heritage is education. The younger generation has to know and understand and be proud and then be ready to safeguard their traditions. Educative programs are required which can be installed by governmental projects and by individuals. In the case of the *Panji* revitalization it is remarkable that educational programs have been practiced in an increasing way by the initiative of local artists, teachers, historians, activists, and communities. The early initiatives by Suryo W. Prawiroatmojo have inspired others to continue and apply and transform the living heritage. Throughout the last years there has been a real "boom" of *Panji* activities both on local community level and on institutional level.



**Figure 3** Workshop *Wayang Beber*, Trawas 2007, conducted by Suryo W Prawiroatmojo (photo: Lydia Kieven).

Same as in other cases of revitalization of cultural heritage, there is also the tendency in the case of the *Panji* revitalization that institutional stakeholders take over



"ownership" of the programs by marginalizing local communities.

"It has been thought that the look at [the] values from the "inside" has been the motor which has inspired "active owners and modifiers" [11] on a local community level to initiate and enact the process of revitalization in various forms to be continued and modified throughout the years. However, the recent developments imposed by the authorities is far more strongly tinged with the "outside": the Panji theme has been recognized as a bearer of rich cultural expressions and put "on stage" as entertainment; the inner values have so far been revealed only as no more than a glimpse." [12]

It is the challenge on both sides to cooperate and be creative in their respective specific ways and impacts, matching with the given talents and conditions, and contribute to raising the awareness of and appreciation by audiences and for the benefit of society. In particular the *Panji* theme, having the large variety of expressions in performing art, visual art, literature, represents a perfect model of individual creativity. Creativity is also one of the characteristics of the Panji figure himself, finding ways for the struggle in life and his search for his final goal. Thus, the Panji narratives themselves and their cultural expressions have the outstanding value of creativity.

Other values of the *Panji* theme are spirituality and ritual practice, which in fact are not easy to be enacted and requires the responsible attitude of specialists.

Beyond safeguarding and popularization, the living of a heritage and tradition requires innovation. "Innovation is not a contradiction to tradition", "tradition is change" [5]. Tradition a process, encompassing innovation and transformation. Innovative and transformative programs have in fact been created and conducted by Panji activists over the years. In this way, broad levels of society can be reached and can become participants themselves in developing and creating new forms. Creativity is the keyword for the "living legacy".



**Figure 4** Transformation: A Westerner and a traditional court dancer from Solo perform a new creation of a Panji story (Trawas 2007).

#### 4. EXAMPLES OF PROGRAMS

Examples of revitalization and enactment of specific forms of the *Panji* traditions are numerous. Here is a selection of representative programs:

- (1) 2007, Workshop of *Wayang Beber*, conducted by Suryo W. Prawiroatmojo in Trawas: children learn about the nearly distinct *wayang beber* and create an own performance, by paintings, by practicing traditional *macapat* singing, within a ritual atmosphere.
- (2) 2013-15, *Panji* Festival in Blitar (conducted three times) by Dewan Kesenian Blitar: 70 schoolclasses present their performances based on narrative relief depictions of Panji stories at Panataran temple.
- (3) 2013 and onwards, Creation of "Wayang Jantur Panji Udan" by Agus Bimo Prayitno, Klaten: presentation of the story Enthit with own creations of puppets and music, as a transformation of the values of the *Panji* theme.
- (4) Since 2007, a large number of *Panji* Festivals with performances, and seminars. [xx]
- (5) Corona period did not stop Panji activities: Since July 2020 regular *Panji* Webinars have been successfully conducted by Prof Dr Wardiman Djojonegoro, assisted by Henri Nurcahyo, presenting the broad spread and manifestations of the "*Panji* Culture". Universities and cultural institutions have been conducted webinars and presentations on Panji, most recent example: Kraton Yogyakarta 7 August 2021, presentation by Lydia Kieven on the *Panji* traditions in the Javanese past

#### 5. CONCLUSION

The *Panji* tradition and its development over the centuries, as well as transformative processes, are a specific example of a living cultural heritage. The legacy of this Javanese/Indonesian cultural property represents an example of raising pride on an indigenous local culture which is apt for strengthening cultural identity. Besides the creativity of forms and expressions in art and literature, the content of the narratives themselves are characterized by creative attitudes of the protagonists. Thus, the Panji stories represent an example of creativity concerning life in general. Safeguarding and enacting this valuable legacy is a task for the future generation.

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