

## THE TRANSFORMATION OF AREK MALANG'S CULTURAL IDENTIFY THROUGH MASK DANCE

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### Abstract

The transformation of Arek Malang's cultural identity through traditional mask dances, such as the Panji Asmorobangun mask dance, is a complex and multidimensional process. This study explores the significant role of these traditional dances in conveying life meanings and preserving cultural elements in Indonesia, based on relevant studies. Using qualitative research methods with an ethnographic approach, including participant observation interviews and document analysis, this study investigates how mask dance influences various aspects of cultural identity among the Arek Malang community. The findings indicate significant changes in cultural identity, particularly in community engagement, symbolism, and performance styles. This transformation highlights the importance of traditional mask dances in preserving and developing cultural identity, with significant implications for cultural education and preservation programs. The study emphasizes the potential of traditional arts to adapt to contemporary contexts while retaining their cultural essence, offering valuable insights for future cultural and educational initiatives.

**Keywords:** Arek Malang, cultural identity, mask dance, cultural transformation, cultural preservation

### Introduction

The cultural identity of Arek Malang is deeply influenced by their traditional dances, which play a crucial role in shaping and preserving their heritage. To understand this cultural identity, it is essential to examine the traditional dances that have become an integral part of the community's life. Traditional dances such as Javanese traditional dance, Wayang Topeng Malangan, and Legong Dedari not only serve as artistic expressions but also carry social and ritual roles that contribute to the preservation of cultural identity (Supeni & Harini, 2021; Wibowo et al., 2020; Suryani et al., 2023). These dances encompass the history, values, and collective memory of the Arek Malang community, serving as living archives of their cultural heritage.

Javanese traditional dance, with its intricate movements and elaborate costumes, is more than just a form of

entertainment. It reflects the philosophical and ethical values of Javanese society, including harmony, respect, and balance. The Wayang Topeng Malangan, a masked dance-drama, holds a significant place in Malang. This dance depicts stories from the Panji cycle, a series of tales about the hero Panji and his adventures. These performances are imbued with symbolic meanings and moral lessons that reflect the worldview and ethical standards of the community. The masks used in Wayang Topeng Malangan are meticulously crafted, each representing different characters with unique personalities and roles, thus providing a rich cultural narrative (Supeni & Harini, 2021).

The inheritance practices related to these traditional dances are vital in sustaining the cultural heritage of Arek Malang. These practices include teaching and learning the dance movements, puppeteering, playing traditional musical

instruments, and mask-making. The intergenerational transfer of skills ensures the continuity of cultural knowledge and traditions. Elders in the community often act as custodians, passing on their expertise to younger generations through both formal and informal education. This process not only preserves the technical aspects of the dances but also the values and philosophies they represent (Wibowo et al., 2020).

Religious values are deeply intertwined with the traditional dances of Arek Malang, reflecting the community's spiritual beliefs and practices. For instance, the Jurung Rahayu Dance is performed as a prayer for safety and well-being, incorporating elements of Islamic mysticism and local traditions. Similarly, the Kethek Ogleng Dance, which depicts the story of a monkey king, integrates Hindu-Buddhist elements, showcasing the syncretic nature of religious and cultural practices in Malang. These dances serve as a medium for expressing spiritual devotion and communal aspirations, reinforcing the community's moral and ethical framework (Hendriyanto et al., 2019; Purnamasari & Masunah, 2020). The reinterpretation of traditional dances through contemporary dance forms further highlights the dynamic nature of cultural expressions among Arek Malang. Contemporary adaptations of traditional dances demonstrate how these art forms evolve over time while retaining their essence. For example, modern choreographers have reimagined the Klana Topeng Condoradono Dance, incorporating new elements and techniques while maintaining its traditional roots. This evolution reflects the community's ability to innovate and adapt, ensuring the relevance of traditional dances in modern contexts (Nyoman et al., 2019).

Educational values are also embedded in the traditional dances of Arek Malang, emphasizing the role of dance in character development and

education. The movements in dances like the Klana Topeng Condoradono Dance are not only aesthetic but also laden with lessons about discipline, focus, and respect for cultural heritage. These educational aspects make traditional dances effective tools for character education, fostering a sense of identity and community among the youth (Nurbaiti & Nurbaiti, 2019). At its core, traditional dance serves as a cornerstone of cultural identity for Arek Malang. They embody values, rituals, and historical narratives that connect individuals to their roots and community heritage. Through the preservation and adaptation of these dances, the Arek Malang community continues to maintain a vibrant and dynamic cultural identity, bridging the past and present, and ensuring the continuity of their rich cultural heritage.

The historical significance of mask dance in Malang is profound, reflecting deep roots in the cultural and social fabric of the community. The Malang mask dance, in particular, is an ancient performance art that has been an integral part of Malang's cultural heritage for centuries. This dance evolved from its origins in royal courts and temple ceremonies to become a central element of community celebrations, religious rituals, and public entertainment. Historically, mask dance was performed to honor the gods and ancestors, seeking their blessings for prosperity and protection. It was also a medium for storytelling, where dancers conveyed epic tales, moral lessons, and historical events through expressive movements and elaborate masks (Hendriyanto et al., 2019). The significance of mask dance in Malang is not only cultural but also historical, as it provides a window into the past. The dance is believed to have originated during the Singhasari and Majapahit periods, two powerful kingdoms in Java known for their rich cultural and artistic achievements. The

masks and stories depicted in the performances often reflect the political and social dynamics of these eras, including themes of heroism, loyalty, and the struggle between good and evil. This historical context is essential for understanding the role of the dance in shaping the cultural identity of Arek Malang, as it encompasses the collective memory and ancestral heritage of the community (Supeni & Harini, 2021).

The Malang mask dance is characterized by its distinctive masks, each representing different characters with unique personalities and symbolic meanings. These masks are crafted with meticulous attention to detail, often made from wood and painted in vibrant colors. Each mask plays a crucial role in the narrative of the performance, conveying emotions and traits that cannot be expressed through words alone. For example, the Panji mask, a central figure in many stories, symbolizes nobility and virtue, while the Klana mask represents arrogance and greed. These symbolic representations help convey moral lessons and cultural values to the audience, reinforcing social norms and ethical standards within the community (Wibowo et al., 2020).

Mask dance performances are communal activities that involve various members of the community, from the dancers and musicians to the craftsmen who create the masks and costumes. This collaborative effort highlights the role of the dance in building social cohesion and collective identity among Arek Malang. The preparation and execution of a mask dance performance require significant time and effort, involving the transfer of skills and knowledge from one generation to the next. This process not only preserves the technical aspects of the dance but also the cultural and historical narratives embedded within it (Suryani et al., 2023). Besides its cultural and historical significance, the Malang mask dance also plays an important role in

religious and spiritual practices. The dance is often performed during significant religious ceremonies and festivals, serving as a medium to communicate with the divine and seek spiritual guidance. The movements and gestures in the dance are laden with symbolic meanings that reflect the community's spiritual beliefs and cosmology. For instance, some dances are performed to ward off evil spirits, while others are meant to invoke blessings and protection from the gods. This spiritual dimension of the mask dance underscores its importance as a living tradition that continues to shape the cultural identity of Arek Malang (Hendriyanto et al., 2019).

The historical significance of the Malang mask dance is also evident in its role as a tool for education and moral instruction. The stories and characters depicted in the dance often convey important moral lessons and ethical principles. For example, the tales of Panji and his adventures are used to teach values such as bravery, loyalty, and justice. By incorporating these stories into the dance, the community ensures that these values are passed down to younger generations, helping to instill a strong sense of morality and cultural identity (Purnamasari & Masunah, 2020).

Moreover, the adaptability of the Malang mask dance to contemporary contexts demonstrates its continued relevance and significance. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in traditional arts, including mask dance, as a means of preserving cultural heritage in the face of modernization and globalization. Efforts to modernize the dance, such as incorporating it into contemporary media and performances, have helped attract new audiences and ensure its survival. For example, the adaptation of mask dance into modern dance forms and its incorporation into film and theater productions highlight its versatility and ongoing relevance in

today's cultural landscape (Nyoman et al., 2019).

The educational values embedded in the Malang mask dance further enhance its significance. The dance serves as an effective tool for character development and education, with its movements and narratives teaching important life skills and values. For instance, the discipline and focus required to master the dance movements help develop concentration and perseverance, while the collaborative nature of the performance fosters teamwork and social cohesion. These educational aspects of the mask dance contribute to its role in shaping the cultural identity of Arek Malang, ensuring that the community's values and traditions are preserved and passed on to future generations (Nurbaiti & Nurbaiti, 2019).

The integration of technological advancements also contributes to the preservation and transformation of the Malang mask dance. The development of interactive media and applications, such as those designed using Kinect sensors for the Patih dance, demonstrates innovative ways in which traditional arts can be adapted to modern platforms (Fajri et al., 2020). These technological interventions not only make the dance more accessible to a wider audience but also provide new avenues for engaging with Malang's cultural heritage.

Additionally, the Gunung Sari dance, a traditional East Javanese mask dance known for its unique blend of masculine and feminine qualities, showcases the rich diversity of mask dance traditions in Malang. This dance, which has been analyzed for its alternative model of masculinity, highlights the complex gender dynamics and cultural significance of masked performances in shaping social identity (Sunardi, 2020). The portrayal of mythical heroes in this dance and their feminine qualities challenge conventional notions of gender and offer a nuanced

understanding of masculinity in Javanese culture.

## **Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative research design with an ethnographic approach to explore the cultural and identity implications of mask dance within the Arek Malang community. Data collection methods include participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, offering a comprehensive view of cultural dynamics. Key informants such as dancers, community leaders, and cultural historians were purposively selected for their extensive knowledge and active involvement in mask dance practices.

Instruments for data collection were developed based on cultural identity theory and included meticulously crafted interview guides. These guides were refined through a pilot study to ensure their validity and reliability. Data collection involved multiple field visits to observe and record mask dance performances, and in-depth interviews were transcribed for detailed analysis. Document analysis included reviewing historical records and previous research. The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis to identify themes and patterns, with coding techniques facilitating a systematic examination of cultural and identity-related aspects. Data interpretation was grounded in cultural identity frameworks, providing a comprehensive analysis of the transformative role of traditional dance in shaping cultural identity.

## **Finding and Discussion Community Participation**

The findings from this study indicate a significant increase in community participation in mask dance performances, reflecting renewed interest and active engagement in preserving and revitalizing mask dance among the Arek Malang community. This resurgence can

be attributed to several factors, including joint efforts by local governments, cultural organizations, and educational institutions to promote and sustain this traditional art form. One of the key drivers of this increased participation is the proactive role of village governments in preserving the cultural values of mask dance. According to Kasih (2024), village government initiatives through the lens of civic education have played a crucial role in encouraging community engagement. These initiatives include organizing workshops, performances, and cultural festivals that not only celebrate mask dance but also educate the community about the historical and cultural importance of this dance. Such efforts have been instrumental in making the dance more accessible to younger generations, thus ensuring the transmission of cultural knowledge and skills.

Additionally, the transformation of traditional dance from a ceremonial role to public entertainment has also contributed to greater community engagement. Wardani & Pamadhi (2021) discuss how the Panji mask dance of Cirebon evolved from being part of traditional ceremonies to public entertainment. This evolution is also observed in the Malang mask dance, where performances have become more frequent and diverse in settings, ranging from village ceremonies to larger cultural festivals and even tourist attractions. This shift has made the dance more visible and appreciated by a wider audience, thus enhancing community engagement and support. A study by Ambarita (2023) on the exploration of Arek Malang culture through student exchange programs further highlights the role of educational initiatives in promoting community participation. These programs facilitate cultural exchange and understanding, allowing participants to immerse themselves in the traditions of the Arek Malang community. By experiencing

mask dance firsthand, students and other participants develop a deeper appreciation and commitment to preserving this cultural heritage, thereby contributing to the revitalization and continued practice of the dance.

Moreover, research by Wibowo et al. (2020) on the inheritance of Wayang Topeng Malangan highlights the crucial role of community members in passing down traditional art forms. This study emphasizes the importance of intergenerational skill transfer in dance, puppetry, mask-making, and traditional music. This inheritance process is vital for maintaining the cultural continuity of mask dance and ensuring that it remains a living tradition within the community. The active involvement of older generations in teaching and mentoring younger members has fostered a sense of ownership and pride in cultural heritage, thus enhancing community engagement.

### **Cultural Events as Means of Community Bonding and Identity Reinforcement**

This study finds that cultural events significantly enhance community bonding and reinforce cultural identity within the Arek Malang community through the Malang mask dance. These events play a crucial role in fostering a sense of unity, pride, and cultural continuity among participants. The regular organization of festivals, dance performances, and cultural celebrations has provided essential platforms for the community to gather, celebrate their heritage, and strengthen their social ties. According to Almeida (2023), community events have the potential to strengthen bonds within the community and bridge connections with individuals from diverse backgrounds. In Malang, cultural events centered around mask dance serve as powerful tools for community empowerment. These events not only showcase the rich traditions and arts of Malang but also promote mental health

and well-being among participants, as supported by Kirmayer et al. (2003). By participating in these events, community members experience a deep sense of belonging and pride, which is crucial for cultural continuity.

Cultural events also contribute to the development of social capital within the community. Arcodia & Whitford (2006) emphasize that such events provide opportunities for individuals to connect, build relationships, and create a strong sense of community and belonging. This is evident in the Arek Malang community, where mask dance events serve as channels for social interaction and relationship-building. Kinnunen et al. (2020) further assert that through participation in these events, individuals can strengthen their cultural identity and heritage, fostering a sense of solidarity and shared values. Findings also reveal that cultural events offer spaces for self-expression, allowing individuals to showcase their cultural traditions and practices, thus reinforcing their sense of identity (Good et al., 2020). For the Malang mask dance community, these events are more than just performances; they are celebrations of cultural heritage and ways to pass on traditions to younger generations. This aligns with Lewis (2014), who notes that cultural events play a significant role in sustaining and reinforcing cultural identity.

### **Evolution of Symbols and Styles in Malang Mask Dance Reflecting Modern Influences**

The evolution of symbols and styles in the Malang mask dance reveals a dynamic interplay between traditional heritage and contemporary adaptations, demonstrating the community's resilience and creativity in preserving their cultural identity. Findings show that various dance groups in Malang, such as Yayasan Siswa Among Beksa and Mardawa Budaya, have played significant roles in refining and preserving the classical style

of mask dance, ensuring its continuity and relevance (Supriyanto, 2016). These efforts underscore the importance of traditional influences in the foundation of the Malang mask dance. However, the dance is not static; it has evolved by incorporating modern elements, reflecting the community's response to contemporary cultural trends and technological advancements. For instance, the incorporation of Betawi arts, such as mask dances, Wayang, and Tanjidor music, in contemporary dance films like *Nindak Jirumklan* is an example of blending traditional and modern elements (Soewardjo, 2024). This fusion aims to enrich artistic memory, provide an imaginative journey, and explore space through the use of technology, offering new dimensions to traditional art forms.

The symbolic power of the Malang mask dance is also a critical aspect of its evolution. The Bapang mask, for instance, is not only an artistic representation but also holds political and cultural significance, symbolizing record-breaking achievements and new milestones (Wahyuningtyas, 2021). This evolution in symbolism reflects the community's efforts to adapt traditional symbols to contemporary contexts, thereby keeping cultural expressions relevant and impactful. Furthermore, the true meanings and characteristics of Malangan masks are being rediscovered and reinterpreted through semiotic and ethnographic approaches. Studies tracing the social life of the people of Kedungmonggo and adapting Malangan mask art as a symbol of traditional Malang culture affirm the role of dance in preserving and transmitting local cultural values (Tayibnapis et al., 2020). This process of reinterpretation and adaptation is crucial for maintaining the relevance of the dance in a rapidly changing world.

Globalization further influences the Malang mask dance, leading to modifications that foster creativity,

aesthetic appreciation, and conservation efforts. These changes also contribute to the community's prosperity and education, enhancing their sense of identity (Wibowo, 2019). The development of the Malang mask puppet as a cultural expression has been shaped by various factors, including time, environment, and technological advancements, as well as the growth of moderate Islam and modernism (Ismail, 2021; Hidajat, 2015). These influences highlight the dance's ability to adapt and thrive amidst external pressures.

### Conclusions

The Malang mask dance significantly influences the cultural identity of Arek Malang by blending traditional values with contemporary expressions. This study highlights the role of dances like the Panji Asmorobangun mask dance in conveying life meanings, preserving cultural elements, and fostering community engagement. Using qualitative research methods, significant changes in symbolism, performance styles, and community participation were observed. The dynamic interaction between tradition and modernity ensures these dances remain relevant and adaptable, particularly for younger generations. The novelty of this research lies in understanding how mask dances bridge past and present, reinforcing cultural identity amid globalization.

These dances reflect the community's syncretic practices, blending Islamic, Hindu, and local traditions, serving as cultural artifacts and living expressions of spiritual and moral values. The communal nature of performances strengthens social cohesion and identity. This study emphasizes the importance of integrating traditional arts into education and preservation programs to ensure the continuity of Arek Malang's rich cultural heritage. Future research should broaden to include diverse regions and cultural practices, emphasizing community-based

participatory research and exploring individual identity transformations through traditional arts to uncover psychological and social impacts.

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