



Cultural Literacy for Preserving the Cosmological Axis of Yogyakarta: A UNESCO World Heritage Site in Indonesia

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Received : Aug 28, 2025

Revised : Aug 28, 2025

Accepted : Aug 28, 2025

Online : October 14, 2025

Abstract

This study examines the role of cultural literacy in preserving the Cosmological Axis of Yogyakarta, which was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2023. A qualitative case study design was employed, combining semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), field observations, and document analysis, including digital content from the official Instagram account @sumbufilesofi. The findings show that the initial top-down strategy effectively introduced the designation of the Cosmological Axis along with its underlying Javanese philosophical values. However, this approach proved insufficient to sustain long-term community engagement and often generated tensions in urban governance. Dialogical forums, such as *Rembukan* and *Jagongan Kampung*, can foster trust, build consensus, and strengthen community ownership. At the same time, social media functions as a tool of cultural literacy by translating cosmological concepts into accessible narratives, engaging younger generations, and reinforcing collective pride. Integrating cultural literacy into heritage governance can help mitigate resistance to policy, enhance local stewardship, and transform heritage from static monuments into a living, dynamic cultural identity.

Keywords: *cultural literacy, preservation, UNESCO World Heritage Site, cosmological axis of Yogyakarta*

INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage plays a pivotal role in shaping collective identity, fostering social cohesion, and generating socio-economic benefits through tourism. World Heritage Sites (WHS) serve not only as historical and spiritual symbols but also as development assets that enhance the well-being of local communities (Weise, 2024; Mukuya et al., 2025). However, the preservation of cultural heritage faces increasingly complex challenges in the modern era, including rapid urbanization, climate change, the pressures of mass tourism, and the erosion of intangible cultural values embedded in community practices, rituals, and narratives (Alazaizeh et al., 2019). These challenges underscore the pressing need for heritage governance approaches that are holistic, inclusive, and forward-looking.

Innovative approaches are required within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 11.4, which emphasizes the protection of cultural and natural heritage. While traditional conservation strategies remain essential, they are often insufficient to address contemporary dynamics shaped by globalization, digital transformation, and shifting community roles. Therefore, strategies that link conservation with community welfare, strengthen cultural education, and promote sustainable tourism development are crucial (Najjar et al., 2025).

One of the most critical threats exacerbating the vulnerability of WHS is overtourism. The surge of uncontrolled tourist flows produces adverse effects, including physical damage to heritage sites, disruptions to local communities, and the commodification of cultural practices that erode

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authenticity (Milano et al., 2019). Overtourism creates a paradox: WHS generate significant economic value but simultaneously face degradation due to the practices that make them profitable. To address this paradox, scholars advocate for participatory and literacy-based governance models, in which communities are not passive recipients of tourism but active co-creators and custodians of their heritage (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2022).

The concept of cultural literacy has gained momentum in the field of heritage studies. Cultural literacy extends beyond recognizing symbols or artifacts; it encompasses the capacity to interpret, communicate, and engage across cultural boundaries in inclusive and participatory ways (Ochoa et al., 2020; Maine et al., 2019). In heritage management, cultural literacy bridges the gap between conservation goals and community needs, ensuring that heritage remains meaningful, relevant, and transmitted across generations (El-Khadrawy et al., 2022).

Indonesia illustrates the urgency of cultural literacy, with its diverse cultural landscape and six UNESCO WHS, including Borobudur Temple, Prambanan Temple, the Sangiran Early Man Site, the Subak System in Bali, the Ombilin Coal Mining Heritage of Sawahlunto, and, most recently, the Cosmological Axis of Yogyakarta. Indonesia holds rich cultural capital. However, systemic challenges persist in literacy, ranging from reading and digital to historical and cultural literacy (Afrina et al., 2024). These limitations hinder community participation in heritage preservation and the effective use of digital technologies for cultural education. Bridging this gap is essential to ensure inclusivity and equity in national cultural strategies.

Cultural literacy is vital in safeguarding WHS as it equips communities with the knowledge, skills, and values to engage actively in preservation amid globalization pressures. Beyond awareness, cultural literacy empowers communities to co-manage heritage, ensuring that conservation strategies remain socially relevant and sustainable (Mukuya et al., 2025; Nam & Thanh, 2024).

This study focuses on the Cosmological Axis of Yogyakarta, designated as a UNESCO WHS in 2023. Stretching six kilometers from Panggung Krapyak in the south, through the Yogyakarta Palace (Keraton), to the Tugu Pal Putih monument in the north, the axis embodies Javanese philosophical principles: *Sangkan Paraning Dumadi* (the origin and purpose of human existence), *Hamemayu Hayuning Bawana* (living in harmony with nature), and *Manunggaling Kawula lan Gusti* (the unity of humans with God) (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology & Government of the Special Region of Yogyakarta, 2023).

Cultural literacy is essential in interpreting these symbols, enabling communities, tourists, and stakeholders to understand the cosmological, historical, and socio-political dimensions embedded in the axis. This interpretative process fosters cognitive understanding and emotional attachment to cultural heritage (Asbagh & Tümer, 2021). Literacy-based interpretation through storytelling, guided tours, and digital applications promotes responsible tourist behavior and sustainable tourism development (Nowacki, 2021; Costa & Carneiro, 2021).

Although research on cultural literacy and heritage governance is expanding, significant gaps remain in Southeast Asia. Empirical studies examining how cultural literacy can be systematically integrated into preserving newly designated WHS, such as the Cosmological Axis of Yogyakarta, are still limited. Current practices in Indonesia are fragmented, characterized by low public awareness, weak community participation, and minimal use of digital media for cultural education (Rachmawati et al., 2024).

To address these gaps, this study explores how cultural literacy can be harnessed as a communicative and participatory strategy for preserving the Cosmological Axis of Yogyakarta. The research aims to contribute theoretically to the cultural literacy discourse while providing practical policy recommendations for sustainable heritage management aligned with SDG 11.4. By emphasizing inclusivity, digital innovation, and participatory governance, the study highlights how

cultural literacy can transform heritage preservation into a socially embedded and future-oriented process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural literacy

Cultural literacy plays a central role in safeguarding and transmitting traditional knowledge and practices, as it combines understanding, appreciation, and intercultural skills that enable communities to maintain their cultural identity amid the forces of globalization. Integrating traditional knowledge into formal and non-formal education, such as embedding local wisdom in science learning, encourages younger generations to connect scientific concepts with their cultural heritage (Minsih et al., 2025). Moreover, cultural literacy promotes the documentation of local knowledge in regional languages and digital formats, thereby expanding access and ensuring its continuity for future generations (Poorna et al., 2014).

Cultural Literacy for Preserving Heritage Site

Cultural literacy, understood as the ability to interpret and engage with cultural symbols, narratives, and practices, is a critical foundation for heritage preservation. It enables communities to recognize the historical significance and intangible values embedded in heritage sites, fostering informed participation in their protection and promotion (Blake, 2019). In UNESCO World Heritage contexts, such as the Cosmological Axis of Yogyakarta, cultural literacy is not limited to awareness of tangible structures like monuments or city layouts, but extends to understanding the philosophical narratives, rituals, and socio-political histories that shape the site's identity. Embedding cultural literacy into educational initiatives, local storytelling, and participatory tourism strategies ensures that preservation efforts are grounded in shared meanings, thus strengthening community stewardship and intergenerational transmission of cultural values (Banda et al., 2024; Nam & Thanh, 2024).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to investigate the role of cultural literacy in preserving the Cosmological Axis of Yogyakarta as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for examining complex socio-cultural phenomena that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measurement, as it emphasizes contextual interpretation and meaning-making through direct engagement with participants in authentic cultural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lewis, 2015). Following the case study framework outlined by Tarnoki and Puentes (2019), data collection employed multiple techniques, including semi-structured interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), on-site observations, and document analysis. Key participants included officials from the *Balai Pengelola Kawasan Sumbu Filosofis (BPKSF)* under the Yogyakarta Department of Culture, local community leaders, and cultural practitioners. The FGDs served as participatory spaces for stakeholders to reflect on strategies for embedding cultural literacy into heritage interpretation. At the same time, field observations provided insights into artistic practices, rituals, and spatial arrangements along the Axis.

Document analysis played a critical role in providing contextual depth and policy grounding. Primary documents included UNESCO heritage management roadmaps, local preservation regulations, notably the Peraturan Gubernur DIY Nomor 2 Tahun 2024/ Governor Regulation of the Special Region of Yogyakarta, which formalizes governance frameworks for the Cosmological Axis of Yogyakarta, and archival materials such as the official @sumbufilesofi Instagram account, which communicates heritage narratives to broader audiences. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), consisting of familiarization, coding, theme development,

refinement, and narrative integration. Methodological triangulation across interviews, FGDs, observations, and documents enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Kisely & Kendall, 2011).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Cultural Literacy Initiatives and Socialization Efforts

Following the UNESCO nomination, the Yogyakarta Provincial Government intensified its efforts to promote public cultural literacy regarding the Cosmological Axis through a predominantly top-down socialization strategy. In 2021, the provincial authority established the Badan Pengelola Kawasan Sumbu Filosofi (BPKSF), which subsequently organized training sessions and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) targeting village (*Kelurahan*) and sub-district (*Kemantren*) officials. As one government officer emphasized, “one of the first tasks was to socialize the understanding of Cosmological Axis to the apparatus at the *kelurahan* and *kemantren* levels, down to the neighborhood (RT)”. The initial phase primarily focused on clarifying the philosophical foundations (*Sangkan Paraning Dumadi*, *Hamemayu Hayuning Bawana*, and *Manunggaling Kawula lan Gusti*) while also distinguishing between the simplified notion of the “imaginary axis” and the more complex cosmological meaning of the Cosmological Axis.

Over time, this approach evolved into a multi-tiered governance model involving the Joint Secretariat (a collaboration between the provincial government and the Yogyakarta Palace/Kraton) and the Pokjanis (Pokja Jaringan Istimewa), a forum bringing together village heads and community representatives within the heritage zone. Village leaders who had undergone training were expected to serve as cultural literacy agents within their communities.

It is important to note that the philosophical values themselves were not contested. As one informant stated, “The philosophy is good, all the aims of the UNESCO inscription are good.” Instead, tensions emerged in the technical implementation of urban management policies. Regulatory measures such as the relocation of street vendors (PKL) and vehicle restrictions along Malioboro Street generated anxiety among residents. The Cosmological Axis was sometimes scapegoated as a pretext for eviction or stricter controls.

Confronted with these challenges, stakeholders, notably BPKSF officials, gradually recognized the limitations of one-way communication. A more dialogical and participatory approach was considered essential. As one interviewee observed, “the character of Yogyakarta’s people is that they only want to be talked to, not simply informed after the fact”. This observation aligns with the local *tradition of rembukan* (deliberative discussion), which serves as a culturally embedded mode of consensus-building. To operationalize this, stakeholders proposed the development of “Jagongan Kampung” informal village forums infused with *guyon maton* (witty Javanese humor) to make heritage literacy more accessible and relatable. Such culturally sensitive strategies are expected to bridge the gap between abstract philosophical ideals and the practical concerns of residents, thereby enhancing community participation in safeguarding the Cosmological Axis of Yogyakarta as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Social Media as a Medium for Cultural Literacy

The Instagram account @sumbufilesofi, managed by the Yogyakarta Cultural Office, has become a vital medium for disseminating cultural literacy and promoting the heritage values of the Yogyakarta Cosmological Axis. With over 25,000 followers and 1,400 posts (as of 2025), the account employs a deliberate digital strategy to translate complex cosmological concepts into accessible, visually engaging content. High-quality photography and short videos of key landmarks, such as the Keraton Palace, Tugu Pal Putih, and Panggung Krapyak, are curated with a cohesive aesthetic,

transforming the feed into a “scrollable gallery” of Yogyakarta’s philosophy and history.

The content analysis of the @sumbufilesofi account reveals four key focal points of cultural literacy: first, the explanation of philosophical and historical narratives such as *Sangkan Paraning Dumadi* and *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* combined with the symbolism of vegetation along the Cosmological Axis; second, coverage of rituals and cultural practices such as *Garebeg* and *Selasa Wagen*, which affirm the character of the Axis as a living cultural space; third, public education through information on both tangible and intangible heritage, including education about architectural attributes and vegetation types along with their associated philosophies within the Axis; fourth, portrayals of social life in communities along the Axis such as Badran, Keparakan Kidul, Bumijo, Serangan, Suryatmajan, and Ratmakan, that represent the application of cosmological values in the socio-economic practices of local communities. These findings suggest that social media serves not only as a channel of dissemination but also as a participatory arena that fosters cultural literacy, enhances collective pride, and bridges heritage philosophy with the dynamics of contemporary community life. Although engagement per post is relatively modest, stakeholders and audiences have a positive perception of the account, particularly in reaching younger generations. Its consistency and thematic integration demonstrate how digital platforms can complement on-the-ground heritage governance by providing continuous, accessible, and culturally resonant narratives. Ultimately, @sumbufilesofi functions as both an educational tool and a virtual extension of the heritage site, reinforcing cultural pride, enhancing public awareness, and fostering preservation ethics in the digital sphere.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that cultural literacy—the public’s understanding of the meanings, values, and significance embedded in cultural heritage—functions as a fundamental foundation for sustainable heritage governance. In the case of the Cosmological Axis of Yogyakarta, the integration of Javanese philosophical concepts (*Sangkan Paraning Dumadi*, *Hamemayu Hayuning Bawana*, and *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti*) into public communication has bridged intangible cultural values with the tangible management of the site, by emphasizing why preservation matters. Local authorities have begun to address one of the central challenges of heritage governance, particularly in urban living heritage contexts where community support largely determines the effectiveness of policy implementation.

The findings highlight the limitations of a top-down governance model. While initial socialization campaigns organized by BPKSF and local officials successfully clarified UNESCO’s requirements, community tensions soon arose around urban management issues, such as the relocation of street vendors or traffic restrictions along Malioboro Street. These challenges revealed that one-way communication was inadequate. More dialogical and participatory approaches were introduced, notably through *rembukan* and *Jagongan Kampung* forums, which were infused with local humor (*guyon maton*). These culturally embedded practices proved essential for building consensus, enhancing trust, and fostering local ownership of heritage initiatives.

Equally significant is the role of digital platforms. The Instagram account @sumbufilesofi exemplifies how social media can expand the scope of heritage communication. Beyond simply broadcasting information, the account curates philosophical narratives, documents rituals and festivals, provides educational content on architecture and vegetation symbolism, and highlights community transformations in kampungs such as Badran, Keparakan Kidul, Bumijo, Serangan, Suryatmajan, and Ratmakan. By portraying these local stories, the platform illustrates how cosmological values are practiced in everyday social and economic life, strengthening cultural literacy and fostering collective pride. This indicates that digital tools can transform passive awareness into active cultural citizenship, especially among younger generations who are highly

engaged online. In summary, the case of the Cosmological Axis of Yogyakarta highlights that integrating cultural literacy into heritage governance not only strengthens public knowledge but also fosters social cohesion, emotional resonance, and collaborative momentum—critical elements for sustaining heritage in the digital age.

CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the crucial role of cultural literacy in sustaining the preservation of the Cosmological Axis of Yogyakarta, a newly designated UNESCO World Heritage Site. The findings demonstrate that cultural literacy serves as both an educational tool and a governance instrument, bridging philosophical values, community participation, and sustainable urban management. By integrating Javanese philosophical principles (*Sangkan Paraning Dumadi*, *Hamemayu Hayuning Bawana*, and *Manunggaling Kawula lan Gusti*) into communication and policy, heritage managers have successfully fostered broader public awareness, pride, and engagement.

The results further reveal that top-down strategies, although effective during the initial formalization stage, are insufficient for ensuring long-term sustainability. Instead, dialogical and participatory approaches, such as rembukan forums and digital platforms like the @sumbufilesofi Instagram account, can serve as alternative solutions for promoting inclusivity and intergenerational transmission of cultural values. These strategies align with UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach, which emphasizes community-based governance and the integration of cultural narratives with spatial management.

Practically, the integration of cultural literacy has been shown to mitigate resistance to policies, encourage collective ownership, and transform heritage from static monuments into living, dynamic cultural identities. Ultimately, the sustainability of the Cosmological Axis of Yogyakarta will be measured by the integrity of its physical attributes and the vitality of the cultural consciousness surrounding it. Strengthening cultural literacy thus provides a strategic pathway to safeguard heritage while promoting inclusive and sustainable governance.

LIMITATIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study is limited by its qualitative scope and single-case focus on the Cosmological Axis of Yogyakarta, which may restrict the generalizability of its findings to broader heritage contexts. The data primarily rely on stakeholder narratives and document interpretation, without longitudinal tracking of how media literacy and communication strategies shape sustained community behavior. While the study demonstrates the potential of cultural literacy and digital media—particularly through the @sumbufilesofi platform—as tools for participatory governance, it does not quantitatively measure communication effectiveness or media engagement outcomes. Future research could employ a mixed-methods or comparative design to examine how media literacy and communication ecosystems support inclusive governance and cultural sustainability across various heritage sites. Integrating quantitative approaches such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) or social network analysis (SNA) would allow for the testing of causal relationships among cultural literacy, communication practices, stakeholder collaboration, and heritage preservation effectiveness.

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