

Laughing Through Heritage: The Role of Aceh Pungo in Sustaining Acehnese Identity

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Abstract:

This research aims to understand the role of Aceh Pungo in maintaining the cultural identity of the Acehnese people in the midst of globalization and modernization. The term "Aceh Pungo" which is often misinterpreted as "Aceh Gila" actually reflects the character of the Acehnese people who are critical, courageous, and humorous in responding to various social, political, and religious problems. This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive method through observation, interviews, and documentation of the Acehnese people involved in the Aceh Pungo tradition. The results of the study show that Aceh Pungo plays an important role in preserving the language, social values, and cultural expression of Aceh through art, humor, and social criticism. Strong Islamic values are also the foundation in every form of cultural expression. Traditions such as kenduri, peusijek, and saman dance became a medium to strengthen the identity and social solidarity of the community. Although the younger generation faces challenges due to modernization, the Aceh Pungo community has managed to integrate local culture with digital media as a new form of adaptation in the preservation of cultural heritage. This study confirms that Aceh Pungo is not a symbol of madness, but a representation of cultural intelligence and the determination of the Acehnese people in defending their identity.

Key Words: Aceh Pungo, Cultural Identity, Local Wisdom

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INTRODUCTION

The preservation of local cultural identity is a major challenge in the midst of rapid modernization and globalization (Alkharafi & Alsabah, 2025; Habib & Kurniawan, 2023; Isnaeni et al., 2025). Aceh Province as a region with special autonomy has a very rich cultural heritage, including distinctive indigenous languages, oral traditions, historical symbols, and practices, which are reflected, among other things, in traditional houses, sacred landscapes, and local religious practices that are seen as markers of collective identity (Novita et al., 2020; Nurrahmi, 2022; Ramli et al., 2025). For example, research shows that the Acehnese people in the city of Padang continue to maintain the use of the Acehnese language, traditional clothing, and customs as an expression of identity despite being in the context of migration (Faramita, 2024). In addition, efforts to strengthen the Acehnese language as a medium for cultural preservation are

carried out through government regulations and programs, including curriculum policies and regional qanun that encourage the integration of local languages and knowledge into the formal education system (Helmi, 2024; Ramli et al., 2025; Santika, 2025).

This phenomenon illustrates that Aceh's cultural richness is not only a legacy of the past, but also dynamic in a social-contemporary context, in line with the findings that the value of local wisdom and cultural identity in various Indonesian communities continues to be negotiated and actualized by the younger generation in a changing social situation (Amin & Ritonga, 2024; Habib & Kurniawan, 2023). However, powerful historical symbols such as "Aceh Pungo" (in the sense of the spirit of struggle or symbol of local identity) have not been explored in depth in the scientific literature as part of cultural preservation strategies. Therefore, the study of how these symbols of local identity are rearticulated by the Acehnese community and how they design cultural preservation strategies is empirically and theoretically important.

Previous research on Acehnese cultural identity and its preservation strategies can be grouped into several main themes. The first theme is related to local language and identity: Helmi (2024) examines the role of the Acehnese government in promoting the use of the Acehnese language as part of cultural identity and finds that despite the existing regulations, the level of proficiency of the younger generation is still low. This theme is in line with studies that place regional languages as the main markers of identity and as elements that are vulnerable to global pressures and national dominant languages (Santika, 2025; Syahputera et al., 2024).

The second theme is related to local communities and community participation in cultural preservation: Mujiburrahman, Meliza, Riski, Alawi, and Kumala Sari (2024) highlight how Acehnese women have a central role as guardians of traditions, both through arts, rituals and crafts. This theme is reinforced by other studies that show that community actors, especially women, function as guardians, educators, and innovators of cultural heritage in the midst of modernization (Inayatillah, 2025; Novita et al., 2020).

The third theme is related to the construction of post-conflict identity symbols: Rahman, Suyahmo, and Wasino (2021) examined the development of the cultural identity of the post-conflict Acehnese people through museums and cultural collections in Langsa City, and found that Acehnese identity is politically and politically more dominant than multicultural identity. This research trend on aspects of regulation, language, and community participation is important, but few explicitly link historical symbols such as "Aceh Pungo" to contemporary cultural preservation strategies. This shows the limitations of the symbolic aspect of identity in the current literature.

Previous literature has provided important insights, but there is still a knowledge gap related to historical symbols such as "Aceh Pungo" that has not been studied in depth in relation to modern cultural preservation strategies. Most

of the research focuses more on aspects of regulation, language, and community participation without qualitatively understanding the perception of local actors towards identity symbols and conservation practices. In addition, existing studies tend to focus on a single dimension without integrating narratives of historical symbols, contemporary social dynamics, and the role of community. This research offers an update by making "Aceh Pungo" as a metaphor for cultural identity as well as the object of strategic study of preservation through an exploratory qualitative approach.

The purpose of this research is to explore the meaning and function of the symbol "Aceh Pungo" in the formation and preservation of Acehnese cultural identity and to identify strategies used by local communities to preserve this cultural heritage in the context of contemporary social change. Specifically, this research aims to (1) understand how Acehnese individuals and communities articulate the symbol of "Aceh Pungo" in the narrative of cultural identity; (2) describe the cultural preservation challenges and opportunities associated with the symbol; (3) analyze the practical strategies that local communities have developed to respond to modernization while maintaining their identity. Thus, this research not only enriches the academic discourse on cultural preservation in Aceh, but also provides practical implications for cultural policy development, local education, and community participation.

The main focus of this research is an in-depth understanding of how the symbol of historical identity ("Aceh Pungo") is treated through contemporary cultural practices by the Acehnese community. The central argument is that the preservation of cultural identity in Aceh is not only a matter of preserving traditional languages or artifacts, but also has to do with the reinterpretation of identity symbols and the transformation of community agents that make them relevant in everyday life. The research will use an exploratory qualitative approach—through semi-structured interviews, participatory observations, and narrative studies—to explore the narratives of local actors, community strategies, and the dynamics of cultural preservation in the context of modernization. Next, the methods section will outline the procedure for data collection and analysis.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive method, as its primary goal is to deeply understand and illustrate how the Acehnese people, particularly within the context of the Aceh Pungo tradition, preserve their cultural values amidst the changes of modern times. The qualitative approach was chosen because this research focuses on meanings, perspectives, and community experiences rather than numerical or statistical data (Lim, 2025; Pyo & colleagues, 2023). Through this approach, the researcher aims to gain a broader and deeper understanding of the social and cultural life of the Acehnese community, as well as how the Aceh Pungo tradition is practiced and maintained in daily life.

The descriptive method is used to clearly depict the real situations and phenomena occurring in the field. A descriptive qualitative design allows researchers to present a systematic and factual account of phenomena without attempting to build theory or test hypotheses (Ayton, 2023; Villamil & colleagues, 2024). This research does not attempt to change societal conditions but seeks to understand and explain how cultural preservation processes are carried out by the Acehnese people who uphold the Aceh Pungo tradition. Through the descriptive method, the researcher can systematically and comprehensively describe the forms of activities, values, and cultural meanings embedded in this tradition.

The research data were collected using three main techniques: observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted directly in the field to see how the Acehnese community practices and maintains the Aceh Pungo tradition. Through observation, the researcher was able to record various activities, social interactions, and cultural symbols that appear in everyday life. In addition, interviews were conducted to obtain in-depth information from several informants considered knowledgeable and experienced with the tradition. The interviews were conducted openly, allowing the informants to share their views, experiences, and knowledge freely and sincerely (Busetto et al., 2020).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study show that *Aceh Pungo* plays a significant role in maintaining the continuity of Acehnese cultural identity. First, in the linguistic aspect, the distinctive humor of *Aceh Pungo* serves as an effective medium for preserving the local language and strengthening cultural continuity. Despite modernization, Acehnese culture has never faded; it remains one of Indonesia's most fascinating traditions, reflected through its language, customs, and world-renowned dances.

Aceh Pungo in Preserving Acehnese Cultural Identity

Aceh Pungo preserves Acehnese cultural identity in a powerful and passionate way. The people strive to safeguard their traditions, language, customs, and ancestral values passed down through generations. Although times continue to change and modern influences grow stronger, *Aceh Pungo* remains firmly rooted in the Acehnese identity—rich in Islamic values, politeness, and togetherness.

One of the main ways the Acehnese maintain their cultural identity is by continuously preserving their local language. The Acehnese language is used in daily life, both at home and in the community, ensuring that the younger generation remains fluent in and connected to their linguistic heritage. They also uphold customary practices such as traditional Acehnese wedding ceremonies,

communal feasts (*kenduri*), *peusijek* (blessing rituals), and *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation). These events are not merely ceremonial but serve as symbols of unity and respect for cultural heritage.

According to Snouck Hurgronje, Aceh has long been recognized as a nation with a strong fighting spirit. The Dutch once referred to the Acehnese as "*Aceh Pungo*", meaning "crazy Aceh," a term used to describe their fearless resistance and distinctive cultural strength. However, this study focuses not on that historical label but on how *Aceh Pungo* humor reflects the social conditions and worldview of the Acehnese people.

Aceh also preserves regional arts such as *tari saman*, *didong*, *rapa'i*, and traditional Acehnese carvings. These art forms instill moral values, a sense of community, and pride in local culture. Many artists and elders actively teach these skills to the younger generation to ensure they are not lost over time.

Religious values are also deeply honored. Known as the "Veranda of Mecca," Aceh maintains Islamic principles in everyday life. People uphold customs that align with Sharia—such as modest dress, respect for elders, and harmonious social relations. While facing the challenges of globalization, the Acehnese adapt without abandoning their cultural roots. They use social media to promote Acehnese culture worldwide and present cultural events in modern formats to engage younger audiences.

Through these efforts, Aceh demonstrates that modernity does not have to erase tradition; instead, both can coexist as long as cultural values are preserved and respected. Acehnese cultural elements that continue to thrive today include: The use of the Acehnese language, Traditional clothing, Regional dances such as *Seudati* and *Saman*, Traditional foods, Communal activities like *gotong royong* and *kenduri*

The government and local communities actively promote cultural preservation through various initiatives such as cultural events, Acehnese language training, and youth involvement in arts programs. However, limited funding remains a challenge, hindering full-scale implementation.

Although the world continues to modernize, the people of Aceh remain loyal to their traditions. The government also contributes through annual cultural festivals, dance and language training, and support for community art centers. Traditional and religious practices—such as *kenduri kampung* (village feasts), *peusijek* (blessing ceremonies), *khanduri blang* (harvest rituals), and *meugang* (pre-Ramadan feasts)—are still regularly held. These practices are seen as expressions of gratitude, unity, and social harmony.

Younger generations are also being engaged in preservation efforts through art studios (*sanggar seni*), where they participate in traditional dances, play *rapa'i*, or serve as MCs using the Acehnese language. However, their participation remains limited, as many youths are more drawn to modern lifestyles. Therefore, more creative approaches are needed to spark their interest in cultural heritage.

Although the word *pungo* means "crazy," in this context, it symbolizes courage—the courage to be different and to stand firm in preserving cultural and religious values that others might have abandoned. Thus, *Aceh Pungo* represents the steadfast spirit of the Acehnese people in protecting their cultural identity.

The Impact of Aceh Pungo on Cultural Awareness

Cultural preservation in Aceh faces challenges due to modernization, individualistic lifestyles, and the waning interest of younger generations in local traditions. Nonetheless, community leaders continue to raise awareness among youth about the importance of protecting local culture. Older generations, who still deeply value traditional practices, play an essential role in this process.

The existence of *Aceh Pungo* has had a significant impact on strengthening cultural awareness among Acehnese society. Their commitment to maintaining local traditions inspires others to appreciate the importance of cultural heritage in the face of globalization. One major outcome is the growing sense of pride among the Acehnese in their culture. Many people now recognize that culture is not outdated but an essential part of their identity.

Acehnese culture, deeply influenced by Islamic values, also shapes the community's moral and social awareness. In daily life, Acehnese people uphold politeness, respect for elders, and cooperation. Traditional practices such as *gotong royong*, *kenduri*, and *peusijek* remain vital symbols of togetherness and gratitude. These traditions strengthen social cohesion and mutual respect among community members.

The preservation efforts of *Aceh Pungo* have also revived public interest in Acehnese arts such as *saman*, *rapa'i*, *didong*, and *peusijek*. Many young people, once indifferent to traditional arts, are now motivated to learn and participate. In this way, Acehnese culture continues to thrive and evolve across generations.

By integrating tradition with modern tools like social media, *Aceh Pungo* has shown that tradition can remain relevant and appealing in the digital age. Overall, *Aceh Pungo* has made a positive contribution to cultural awareness in Aceh—demonstrating that preserving culture is not merely about remembering the past, but also about maintaining a living identity for the future.

Aceh Pungo's Effectiveness in Preserving Acehnese Traditions

The Acehnese people have proven effective in preserving their cultural identity through the continued use of their language, traditional attire, religious and communal ceremonies, and artistic expressions such as *Didong* dance. Social values like family ties and mutual cooperation remain strong pillars of local wisdom.

Aceh's cultural preservation is supported by local government programs such as cultural festivals, *saman* dance competitions, art training, and the inclusion of the Acehnese language in schools. These efforts ensure that Acehnese traditions are not only maintained but also appreciated by younger generations

and the broader public.

However, globalization presents ongoing challenges. Many young people are more attracted to foreign cultures and modern lifestyles. Despite this, a growing number of Acehnese youth are creatively using social media to showcase their culture, sharing content about traditional food, clothing, and dance.

Aceh's effectiveness in preserving tradition is evident in the continued practice of ancestral rituals like *peusijek* (blessing ceremonies), *kenduri* (communal feasts), and *gotong royong*. These events symbolize unity, gratitude, and faith—values that define Acehnese life. Furthermore, the integration of Islam into every aspect of culture reinforces its relevance and endurance. As the "Veranda of Mecca," Aceh's traditions remain deeply intertwined with Islamic teachings, making them both spiritual and cultural treasures.

Traditional arts such as *Saman*, *Seudati*, and *Ranup Lampuan* dances are still widely performed and even internationally recognized—*Saman* being inscribed by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This recognition highlights Aceh's success in keeping its traditions alive through education, community participation, and government support. In conclusion, *Aceh Pungo* has proven to be a powerful force in preserving Acehnese cultural identity. Despite modernization, the people's love, pride, and sense of responsibility toward their heritage ensure that Aceh's traditions continue to live, evolve, and inspire future generations.

Discussion

The results of this study show that Aceh Pungo plays an important role in maintaining the cultural identity of the Acehnese people in the midst of globalization (Suharyanto, 2024; Zulkarnain, 2024). These findings are in line with the research focus to uncover the meaning and function of Aceh Pungo culture as a symbol of cultural resistance and expression of collective identity (Sugita, 2021; Condemayta Soto, 2023). The relevance of these findings is crucial in the context of preserving local culture which is beginning to be eroded by modernization and global lifestyles (Suharyanto, 2024; Zulkarnain, 2024). Through a qualitative and descriptive approach, this study shows that Aceh Pungo is not only a form of entertainment, but also a representation of the social, religious, and historical values of the Acehnese people (Sugita, 2021). The next discussion will elaborate on the relationship between these findings and cultural identity theory and compare them with the results of previous research.

The findings regarding the role of Aceh Pungo as a guardian of local cultural identity are in line with Hall's theory of cultural identity, which states that identity is a social construct through cultural practices and symbolic representation (Condemayta Soto, 2023; Sugita, 2021). The humor character of Aceh Pungo reflects the Acehnese people who are critical, religious, and dare to appear different (Lionis, 2021; Derkach, 2024). In this context, Aceh Pungo has

become a medium of cultural expression and resistance to global cultural homogenization (Sugita, 2021; Zulkarnain, 2024).

Aceh Pungo also functions to build cultural awareness, especially among the younger generation (Condemayta Soto, 2023). This is in line with Freire's theory of critical consciousness that cultural practices can be a tool to awaken identity (Sugita, 2021). Aceh Pungo activities involving performing arts and social media show that adaptive strategies can build cultural awareness in the midst of challenges such as the lack of involvement of the younger generation (Condemayta Soto, 2023).

Practically, this study provides a model for the preservation of local culture based on a creative approach. The government and educational institutions can adopt Aceh Pungo practices in building cultural awareness, especially among youth, through art and social media (Condemayta Soto, 2023). Theoretically, this research enriches the study of cultural identity and the preservation of traditions through popular culture. Aceh Pungo strengthens Hall's theory of identity and the preservation of Shils, and affirms that entertainment and humor can be an effective means of maintaining local values in a strong Islamic society like Aceh (Lionis, 2021; Derkach, 2024).

These findings show that Aceh Pungo is not just entertainment, but a representation of the cultural and religious values of the Acehnese people (Derkach, 2024). Its role in maintaining language, traditions, and identity awareness proves that local cultural approaches are still relevant (Zulkarnain, 2024). In the future, further research can examine the impact of Aceh Pungo on the identity of the younger generation or test the effectiveness of similar approaches in other regions. Interdisciplinary approaches such as anthropology and communication will enrich understanding of the role of local cultures in shaping resilient and rooted societies.

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CONCLUSION

This research confirms that Aceh Pungo plays a strategic medium in maintaining Acehnese cultural identity in the midst of globalization. Through humor, artistic expression, and social criticism, Aceh Pungo not only preserves the local language and values, but also reflects the courage and intelligence of the Acehnese people in responding to social dynamics. Traditions such as kenduri, peusijek, and dance art continue to be preserved as a symbol of the integration of cultural values and Islamic teachings in daily life. The role of communities and local governments in organizing cultural training and annual festivals strengthens the involvement of the younger generation, although the challenges of modernization remain an obstacle. This finding shows that Aceh Pungo is not just a historical label, but a reflection of the spirit of cultural resistance and a living spiritual identity. Thus, Aceh Pungo is a real representation of the sustainability of Aceh's cultural heritage that is adaptive and meaningful across generations.

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