DOI: 10.29103/mspr.v5i1.12242

Research Original Article

Acehnese Women as Guardians of Cultural Heritage: An Analysis of Their Role in the Conservation of Arts and Traditions

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Abstract

This article explores the central role of Acehnese women in preserving the rich and diverse traditional arts and culture. Acehnese women play a crucial role in maintaining and revitalizing various forms of cultural and artistic heritage, including traditional dance, music, literature, cuisine, religious rituals, and handicrafts. Through interviews, observations, and literature review, this research reveals how Acehnese women not only act as custodians of cultural heritage but also as innovators who adapt to changing times without abandoning their traditional roots. The article highlights the contributions of women in Aceh's art and cultural communities, as well as the challenges they face in maintaining traditions amidst modernization and globalization. Thus, this article provides an in-depth understanding of the dynamics between tradition and change, and the importance of women's roles in preserving ancestral heritage for future generations.

Keywords: Acehnese Women, Acehnese Culture, Traditional Arts and Cultural Preservation

Introduction

Aceh, known as the "Veranda of Mecca," has a rich and diverse cultural heritage that encompasses art, music, dance, and handicrafts. In Acehnese society, women play a significant role in preserving and passing on these cultural traditions. Art and culture are not only integral parts of Aceh's identity but also serve as a means to maintain the sustainability of ancestral values amid the currents of modernization. Furthermore, Aceh has been trapped in prolonged conflicts in the past, which have inevitably affected the growth and development of its culture (Mujiburrahman, 2018).

Acehnese women play a primary role in various aspects of culture. They are actively involved in traditional ceremonies, the teaching of traditional dances such as the Saman Dance and the Seudati Dance, as well as in the creation and preservation of Acehnese handicrafts like weaving and embroidery. Beyond the artistic aspects, Acehnese women are also highly influential in the preparation of traditional foods, which hold cultural significance and symbolize the rich heritage of a region. Acehnese women bear a significant responsibility in preserving traditions and ancestral heritage, ensuring they remain alive amidst the challenges of globalization(Astuti et al., 2023).

One important example is the involvement of women in the preservation of the Saman Dance, which has been recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage. Women have provided moral and material support to encourage the younger generation of Aceh to continue to learn about and cherish their traditional dance. The recognition of the Saman Dance by UNESCO is a result of collaboration among all elements, including women(Asep Supianudin, 2019)

Women often play important roles in various traditional ceremonies in Aceh, such as weddings and religious ceremonies. They are involved in the preparation of traditional food, clothing, and rituals, which are integral parts of these ceremonies. Handicrafts such as weaving, embroidery, and traditional jewelry making are often done by women. These products not only have aesthetic value but also high cultural significance, reinforcing Aceh's identity in the eyes of both local and international communities.

In Aceh, women are often responsible for preparing traditional foods that are integral to various traditional ceremonies. Some of the typical dishes they usually prepare include:

- 1. Keumamah: Dried fish cooked with traditional Acehnese spices.
- 2. Kuah Pliek U: A distinctive Acehnese soup made from grated coconut, vegetables, and spices.
- 3. Timphan: A traditional cake made from glutinous rice flour and bananas, filled with srikaya or grated coconut.

These foods not only serve as dishes but also carry deep symbolic meanings in Acehnese culture. Acehnese women also play a crucial role in preserving their traditional culture, particularly through the transmission of local knowledge and customs across generations. They have been instrumental in enhancing community preparedness, as well as in the preservation and development of cultural practices such as the ranup hantaran in Acehnese wedding customs (Ranup). Despite challenges posed by cultural and political factors, Acehnese women have demonstrated a strong commitment to preserving their cultural heritage(Asna Husin & L. B. Tauris, 2016). Their active participation in society reflects cultural norms and the teachings of equality that are deeply rooted in Islam(Asna Husin & L. B. Tauris, 2016).

However, amidst these efforts to preserve their culture, Acehnese women also face various challenges.

Modernization, urbanization, and socio-economic changes often threaten the continuity of cultural traditions. From a historical perspective, Acehnese women possess a strong instinct and fighting spirit(Abdullah et al., 2023). In the modern era, Acehnese women continue to strive to find a balance between preserving tradition and adapting to modern life.

Concrete examples can be seen in the aspect of craftsmanship. Craftsmen face various challenges, including limited access to markets, changing consumer tastes, and competition with modern products. However, Acehnese women demonstrate strong adaptive abilities by integrating modern designs into their traditional crafts to attract a wider market. This adaptation is a manifestation of the fighting spirit of women in facing modern challenges to preserve cultural existence. The same applies to other cultural dimensions, such as culinary heritage, which is a rich treasure of Acehnese culture(Kamil et al., 2023). Culinary adaptation as cultural heritage is carried out by inheriting knowledge(Mujiburrahman et al., 2024), and adjusting to the rapidly advancing digital era(Chalid et al., 2024).

With this background, this article aims to explore the role of Acehnese women in preserving their ancestral arts and culture. This research will highlight women's contributions in various forms of arts and culture, as well as the challenges they face in the era of globalization. Thus, this article is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the importance of women's roles in safeguarding Acehnese cultural heritage.

Methodology

The approach used in this research is qualitative. Qualitative research involves the researcher, allowing them to understand the context, situation, and natural setting of the phenomenon being studied. The qualitative approach aims to understand the conditions of a context by directing detailed and in-depth descriptions of the actual occurrences in the field of study(Fadli, 2021).

As a study within the humanities and qualitative in nature, the relevant data collection technique considered is the use of social operations. Participant observation, as a form of direct involvement, is utilized to obtain data by observing the research subjects directly, with the researcher actively participating alongside the subjects. In addition to participant observation, in-depth interviews are also employed as one of the techniques for data collection. This data collection technique is intended to reveal unseen aspects or elements that require further explanation. Consequently, the researcher can gain understanding (verstehen) which will later be analyzed to produce meaning. Once the data is collected, relevant field facts pertaining to the research topic are filtered and subsequently analyzed using interpretative techniques, leading to the final conclusions of the study. The analysis of data obtained through observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document studies is conducted using an interactive analysis model.

Firstly, the data reduction phase aims to sort and refine the empirical facts obtained in the field, distinguishing between those relevant to the research topic and those that are not. This phase also involves refining and organizing the data into specific patterns or themes. Secondly, the data display phase is intended to present the data in the form of sketches, synopses, and matrices to facilitate presentation efforts. Thirdly, the conclusion reaffirmation phase aims to obtain a final significant meaning from the analysis by explaining the patterns of relationships among important variable dimensions.

Result and Discussion

The Central Role of Women in Preserving the Arts and Culture of Aceh

Acehnese women play a highly significant role in preserving and conserving the heritage of their region's arts and culture. They are not only the main practitioners in various forms of traditional art but also leaders and innovators who ensure that these traditions remain relevant and alive amidst changing times.

The role of women in preserving the arts and culture of Aceh is crucial and diverse, encompassing various aspects of the rich and complex cultural life in Aceh. They are not only practitioners of arts and culture but also guardians, educators, and developers of valuable cultural heritage. Women preserve and promote their cultural heritage, passing down knowledge from generation to generation (Inayatillah, 2023). Women's efforts in preserving Acehnese culture help maintain the identity and uniqueness of this regional culture amidst the currents of modernization and globalization. Through their various roles, Acehnese women not only ensure the sustainability of traditional arts and culture but also contribute to the development and innovation of culture, ensuring that Acehnese cultural heritage remains relevant and appreciated in the present and future.

Traditional Dance

One form of art in which Acehnese women are very active is traditional dance. Dances like the Saman Dance and the Seudati Dance are often taught and preserved by women's communities. They play roles as dancers, trainers, and even as choreographers, ensuring that every movement and cultural significance behind the dance is well-preserved. The Saman Dance, recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, underscores the important role women play in maintaining the authenticity and sustainability of the dance(Shaumiwaty & Yoga, 2020). This demonstrates that women often take on leadership roles within dance groups and serve as instructors who transmit these skills to younger generations.

Acehnese women who preserve the ancestral heritage of traditional Acehnese dance encompass various aspects, including their roles in education, community, innovation, and the utilization of technology. Acehnese women play a key role in the education and training of traditional dance. They teach dances such as the Saman Dance, Seudati Dance, and Ratoh Jaroe Dance in schools and art studios. Through this training, they ensure that the younger generation is familiar with, appreciates, and can perform traditional dances proficiently.

In addition to preserving the original forms of traditional dance, Acehnese women also play a role in developing new forms of these dances. They integrate modern elements while preserving the essence and traditional values, ensuring that traditional dances remain relevant and appealing to the younger generation (Rangkuti et al., 2021). Indeed, dance has a central element which is the most important. This is the presentation and movement of the human body,

which requires space, time, and energy (Riezal et al., 2020, p. 39). However, the spirit of the times also influences dance as a cultural phenomenon, hence the concept of choreography. This represents a form of transformation and adaptation in dance art. Traditional dances continue to be preserved and develop within the Acehnese community nationally and internationally. The process of change involves both reproduction and transformation processes, evolving over time and following the trends of the era(Yanti, 2017, p. 197).

In terms of promotion to maintain the existence of dance, Acehnese women utilize social media and technology to promote traditional dance. They create tutorial videos, document performances, and share cultural stories on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, thus helping to spread knowledge and interest in traditional Acehnese dance to a wider audience(Utami et al., 2022). Therefore, Acehnese women play a central role in preserving traditional Acehnese dance through various means, including education, performances, innovation, and the utilization of technology. Their efforts not only ensure the continuity of this cultural heritage but also help to disseminate and enrich Acehnese culture within modern society. By utilizing various platforms and modern technologies, they can preserve, introduce, and disseminate Acehnese dance art to a wider audience.

Acehnese women are also involved in creating educational digital content, such as blogs, vlogs, and e-books about traditional Acehnese dance. They provide knowledge about the history, meanings, and techniques of Acehnese dance to the wider community. This content aids in cultural education, benefiting both the Acehnese community and those outside Aceh who are interested in learning about the culture. Their efforts not only impact cultural preservation but also make a significant contribution to the identity and cultural pride of Aceh in the era of globalization.

Traditional Music

Acehnese women also play a key role in traditional music. They are involved in singing traditional songs and playing traditional Acehnese musical instruments such as the rapa'i and serune kalee. Their involvement in music is not only limited to performance but also extends to the preservation and teaching of traditional music to the younger generation, ensuring that this musical knowledge is not lost. Women contribute to the preservation of traditional Acehnese music in the modern era. They not only perform as musicians but also serve as educators, teaching traditional music to children and teenagers(Zulfan & Baihaqi, 2019).

This traditional music is not only a part of cultural heritage that needs to be preserved but also a rich medium of expression with historical and social values. Acehnese women actively participate in various traditional music performances, both locally and internationally. They not only serve as vocalists but also play traditional musical instruments such as the Rapai (a type of tambourine) and Surune Kalee (a type of flute or traditional clarinet). This participation demonstrates that women have an important place in Acehnese traditional music culture.

Traditional music serves as an empowerment tool for Acehnese women. Through involvement in music, they can develop self-confidence, artistic skills, and broader social networks. Many music and art communities in Aceh are established and managed by women, focusing on empowering women through the arts. Through their active roles, traditional Acehnese music can continue to thrive and be appreciated by future generations. One famous female vocalist is Liza Aulia and Safira Amalia.

Traditional Ceremonies

From historical studies, Acehnese women have long played significant roles in the social, cultural, economic, and political systems of Aceh. Many female leaders are found throughout history, such as Queen Safiatuddin, Cut Nyak Dhien, and Admiral Malahayati(Ernita Dewi, 2020, p. 77). Certainly, women's involvement extends to other sectors, including the cultural sector. One cultural sector where women play a significant role is in traditional ceremonies.

Traditional ceremonies are a manifestation of the community's belief system, which holds universal values that support national culture. These ceremonies are considered sacred and are imbued with beliefs. Every human activity always has intentions and goals to achieve, including activities that have religious implications (Muhammad Ansor, 2014, p. 54). Every traditional ceremony or religious ritual has its own meaning or serves specific functions for the community that owns the culture (Muhammad Ansor, 2014, p. 54).

Aceh, with its rich cultural heritage and history, has various traditional ceremonies that reflect deep-seated values, beliefs, and traditions. There are various types of ceremonies found in Aceh, ranging from birth, thanksgiving, to death ceremonies. These include the Peusijuek (Peusijeuk), Khanduri, Laot, Kahanduri Blang, Kahnduri Preh Dara Baro/Linto Baro, and others. Each ceremony holds profound significance and demonstrates gratitude, respect, and supplication to the Divine. By preserving these ceremonies, the Acehnese people not only maintain their cultural heritage but also strengthen social and spiritual bonds within their community.

In the execution of these ceremonies, women have a strategic role. From preparation, organizing rituals, cooking traditional foods for the ceremony to completing the ceremony. For example, in wedding ceremonies, the presence of women is central. Starting from the technical implementation, providing mandatory food for traditional rituals, clothing, to the conclusion.

Characteristics of Ayon Aneuk Oral Tradition and its Preservation

The oral tradition of "Ayon Aneuk" is one of the important traditions in Aceh that often involves women. Ayon Aneuk, which literally means "swinging the child," is a tradition that serves as a way to lull and soothe children using lullabies. This tradition is not only a method of childcare but also a means to convey cultural values and education to

children from an early age. Women are the guardians of folk tales, legends, and other oral traditions passed down through generations. This oral tradition is often observed through the way Acehnese mothers recite verses while putting their children to sleep.

The songs in the Ayon Aneuk tradition usually have lyrics filled with moral messages, advice, and religious teachings. The verses of Ayon Aneuk contain folk tales, myths, and legends that are taught to children through singing. Examples of lyrics may include praise to Allah, messages about the importance of being kind to others, or stories that teach bravery and wisdom. This may also include the spirit of fighting for religion and country (Mirza Fahmi, 2016).

The melodies of Ayon Aneuk songs are usually gentle and soothing, suitable for helping children fall asleep. The rhythm used is often repetitive and calming, creating a conducive atmosphere for sleep. Through the delivery of cultural values through Ayon Aneuk singing, Acehnese women convey cultural values to children. This includes values such as respect for parents, virtue, honesty, and a spirit of hard work. This tradition is also used to introduce children to the local language and dialect, helping to preserve the regional language that may be threatened by globalization.

In the social and family context, this is associated with the tradition of Ayon Aneuk usually being performed by mothers or grandmothers within the family environment. This strengthens family bonds and provides children with a sense of security and love. This tradition also provides opportunities for women to play an active role in nurturing and educating children at home.

Acehnese women play a crucial role in preserving the oral tradition of Ayon Aneuk. Overall, the Ayon Aneuk oral tradition is an example of how Acehnese women play a significant role in preserving and passing on their cultural heritage to the next generation, ensuring that these rich values and traditions remain alive within society. It must be acknowledged that soothing children to sleep is a predominantly female role, with very little involvement from men. Therefore, in this context, the role of women is extremely dominant in nurturing and passing down the tradition of Ayon Aneuk.

Handicrafts

Handicrafts such as weaving, and embroidery are also areas where Acehnese women demonstrate their vital roles. These handcrafted products serve not only as a source of income but also as symbols of Acehnese cultural identity. Through the process passed down from generation to generation, Acehnese women keep traditional techniques and motifs alive while also innovating to meet modern market tastes. Acehnese women play a role in preserving traditional handicrafts, as well as how they face the challenges of modernization by innovating in product design and marketing. Overall, Acehnese women use their creativity and entrepreneurial skills to address the complexities of modernization and positively impact their communities. Similar to the challenges faced by other women engaged in cultural activities, they are confronted by technology and various new media (Goldman, 2007).

Acehnese women play a crucial role in preserving traditional handicraft techniques such as weaving, basketry, and embroidery. They learn these skills from previous generations and pass them on to the next generation through everyday practices and formal training. Education and training are essential aspects of preserving traditional handicrafts. Acehnese women teach these skills in various places, including schools, training centers, and art studios. They also organize workshops and special training sessions for children and teenagers.

Acehnese women often become part of handicraft groups or communities, which serve not only as production centers but also as places for sharing knowledge and techniques. Moreover, handicrafts are a significant source of income for many families, thus contributing to the local economy. Acehnese women play a crucial role in preserving the ancestral heritage of handicrafts in various ways, including preserving techniques, education, product innovation, and utilizing technology. Their efforts not only help preserve cultural traditions but also strengthen the local economy and empower their communities.

Challenges and Adaptations

However, Acehnese women face various challenges in preserving their cultural heritage. Modernization and globalization bring significant changes in lifestyle and cultural preferences, which can threaten the continuity of these traditions. Additionally, limited access to markets and resources also poses constraints. Nevertheless, Acehnese women demonstrate remarkable adaptability. They integrate modern elements with traditional ones in their crafts and performances and leverage social media and digital platforms to promote their culture to a wider audience.

The influence of modernization and globalization can lead to the erosion of traditional cultural values in Aceh. The younger generation may be more interested in global popular culture than local culture, posing a threat to the preservation of traditional culture. The influx of external cultural influences through social media, television, and the internet can erode traditional values. Modernization often brings changes in lifestyle and mindset that may reduce the interest of the younger generation in traditional culture. Facing these challenges, cultural practitioners, especially women, adapt to the challenges they face. Many Acehnese women use technology and social media to promote their culture. This includes creating content on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook to introduce Acehnese traditional dance, music, and crafts to a wider audience.

Reviving traditions that may have started to be forgotten by integrating them into everyday life and community events. For example, holding traditional ceremonies during important celebrations or family ceremonies. Combining traditional cultural elements with modern elements to attract the interest of the younger generation. This could be in the form of clothing, music, or dance that combines tradition with current trends.

Support and Empowerment

The support from both government and non-governmental organizations is crucial in bolstering the cultural preservation efforts undertaken by women in Aceh. Training programs, marketing initiatives, and financial assistance can help strengthen their role as cultural custodians. Furthermore, recognition and appreciation of their contributions

can provide additional motivation Encouraging partnerships with the creative industry to create products that blend traditional cultural elements with modern designs, thus making them more appealing to the global market. Organizing awareness campaigns to enhance recognition of the importance of women's roles in cultural preservation. These campaigns could include seminars, public discussions, and publications. Providing official certification for women who have completed training or demonstrated expertise in specific cultural fields. Building digital platforms to market cultural products online, as well as facilitating digital training to enhance technological skills among women in cultural practices.

Conclusion

Women in Aceh play a crucial role in preserving their ancestral arts, culture, and traditions. Through dance, music, handicrafts, and education, they keep Aceh's cultural heritage alive and relevant. Despite facing numerous challenges, their ability to adapt and innovate demonstrates the strength and resilience of Aceh's culture. Sustained support and empowerment of women in these preservation efforts are vital to ensure that Aceh's cultural heritage can be enjoyed by future generations.

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