ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS AS CULTURAL HERITAGE IN MODERN SOCIETY

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Abstract

Ancient manuscripts are an important form of cultural heritage that preserves knowledge and stories from the past. However, their existence is still not considered important by some members of society. Recently, the public was surprised by the discovery of hundreds of manuscripts in an abandoned house in Boyolali, Indonesia. This discovery shows that ancient manuscripts still receive limited attention, even from their owners. This study uses a qualitative approach to examine modern society's views toward ancient manuscripts. The findings show that ancient manuscripts have significant historical and cultural value because they record the knowledge, experiences, and ways of life of people in the past. Therefore, preserving ancient manuscripts should not be limited to maintaining their physical condition, but should also involve efforts to introduce their value and content to the wider community. In this context, digitization can serve as an important strategy to preserve manuscripts while also expanding public access to this cultural heritage. Through wider access and greater public awareness, ancient manuscripts can continue to function not only as historical objects but also as sources of knowledge for future generations.

Keyword: *ancient manuscripts, cultural heritage, public awareness, preservation*

INTRODUCTION

Ancient manuscripts are a form of written cultural heritage that contain valuable knowledge and cultural values. As part of cultural heritage, manuscripts play an important role in understanding the history and identity of a particular culture. Through manuscripts, various aspects of past societies, including social life, religion, education, traditions, and intellectual thought, can be explored and reconstructed. In recent years, Boyolali Regency has attracted attention following the discovery of several ancient manuscripts. The discovery originated from a manuscript tracing program initiated by the Boyolali Regency Office of Archives and Library Services. Hundreds of unidentified manuscripts were found in the house of Cipto Raharjo, located in Tumang Tempel Hamlet, Cepogo Village, Cepogo District. Cipto Raharjo was known as an intellectual who mastered five languages. His house had remained unoccupied since his death in the early 2000s, leaving its collection of books and manuscripts untouched for a considerable period. The discovered manuscripts comprise various types of texts, including Islamic jurisprudence books (fiqh), *primbon* (traditional Javanese compendia of knowledge and divination),

serat (Javanese literary and philosophical texts), and a handwritten Javanese novel believed to have been written in 1917.

The discovery of hundreds of manuscripts in Boyolali demonstrates that ancient manuscripts continue to exist in private collections. Their presence indicates that a significant portion of written cultural heritage is still preserved and passed down within families, highlighting the important role of communities in ensuring the continuity of manuscript preservation. Ancient manuscripts can enrich local historiography by providing information that may not have been documented in official archives. They also offer alternative perspectives on the history of a particular region. Mulyanto (2022) argues that local manuscripts constitute an important historical source for historical writing, particularly in reconstructing local history.

Many ancient manuscripts remain in family ownership and are passed down from one generation to another. However, this process of inheritance is not always accompanied by adequate knowledge of manuscript preservation and conservation. This can be observed in the collection belonging to Cipto Raharjo, which had been stored in a private residence for decades without receiving proper care or preservation measures. Taufiqurrahman and Hidayat (2022) found that some communities continue to keep manuscripts in their homes, where the manuscripts remain vulnerable to various forms of physical deterioration. Furthermore, manuscripts are not infrequently lost, transferred through sales to private collectors, or simply abandoned when younger generations no longer understand their significance. These circumstances highlight the importance of preserving the contents of manuscripts, as they hold considerable value for understanding the history and social life of past communities and can serve as valuable sources of knowledge (Hendrawati, as cited in Muhaemin, 2024).

Changes over time have also influenced how society perceives and understands ancient manuscripts. One of the main challenges lies in the differences in language and writing systems used in these texts. Ancient manuscripts were commonly written in Javanese script, Arabic Pegon, or other regional scripts. These differences mean that not everyone is able to read and comprehend their contents. Windayanto (2024) notes that the use of scripts that are no longer commonly understood by contemporary society has restricted manuscript reading and interpretation to certain groups, such as philologists and

manuscript researchers. This situation creates a gap between manuscripts and the communities that own them. When the contents of manuscripts can no longer be read or understood, public interest in their preservation may gradually decline.

In addition to differences in language and script, educational patterns and developments in information technology have also influenced the relationship between society and ancient manuscripts. The formal education system, which places greater emphasis on the Indonesian language and the Latin alphabet, has further widened the gap between communities and the manuscripts inherited from their ancestors. Consequently, ancient manuscripts may be regarded merely as obsolete objects with little practical value, particularly when their contents remain unknown. Thus, individuals who possess ancient manuscripts do not necessarily recognize the significance or knowledge contained within them. Their limited ability to read the scripts and understand the languages used in the manuscripts prevents them from accessing the information preserved in these texts. In many cases, manuscripts are regarded primarily as family heirlooms because of inherited beliefs and traditions, rather than being appreciated for their intellectual and historical value.

Therefore, manuscript preservation should not be limited to maintaining their physical condition; it must also involve intellectual preservation through transliteration, translation, and scholarly research. Physical preservation is essential to prevent manuscripts from being damaged or lost, while intellectual preservation ensures that the knowledge contained within them can be understood, accessed, and utilized by society. Without intellectual preservation, ancient manuscripts risk surviving merely as historical artifacts, while the knowledge and cultural values they contain remain unexplored and underutilized.

METHOD

A qualitative approach was employed in this study to gain an in-depth understanding of the relationship between the existence of ancient manuscripts, the process of intergenerational inheritance within families, and public awareness of their historical and cultural significance. This approach enables the researchers to examine manuscripts as an integral part of the social and cultural life of the community. The study focuses on how

manuscripts are passed down and interpreted by subsequent generations. Furthermore, it explores various challenges arising throughout the inheritance process, including limited knowledge of the scripts and contents of manuscripts, changing perspectives across generations, and a lack of understanding of the importance of manuscripts as historical sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ancient Manuscripts as Sources of Knowledge about the Past

Ancient manuscripts are important sources for understanding the lives of past societies, as their contents may relate to religion, literature, and various forms of knowledge that developed within a particular society during a specific period. Chambert-Loir and Fathurahman explain that the manuscript tradition of the Indonesian archipelago encompasses various languages and scripts, covering diverse fields of knowledge, including literature, history, law, and religion. These manuscripts are distributed across different regions and preserved in various collections, both in Indonesia and abroad (Chambert-Loir & Fathurahman, 1999). This demonstrates that manuscripts served as repositories of knowledge in past societies, with information and cultural values transmitted from one generation to another. It also highlights the important role of manuscripts in the historical and cultural development of Indonesian society.

The historical value of manuscripts can be examined through their textual contents. A manuscript can provide insights into how people in the past understood their lives and surrounding environment. For example, manuscripts discussing traditional medicine may offer information about diseases recognized by society, plants used for medicinal purposes, and local knowledge of healthcare. Religious manuscripts can reveal the development of religious thought and practices, while literary works may illustrate social values, norms, relationships, and societal perspectives on life. Fathurahman (2015) emphasizes that manuscript studies play an important role in understanding the history, traditions, civilization, and knowledge of past societies.

In addition to their textual contents, the physical characteristics of manuscripts also hold historical significance. The materials used, types of paper, writing styles, and physical conditions can provide information about the regions in which the manuscripts

were produced. In philological studies, the examination of these physical aspects is associated with codicology, while the study of the forms and development of writing systems is related to paleography (Fathurahman, 2015). Through the examination of these aspects, researchers can gain insights into the historical journey of a manuscript. For instance, the use of particular types of paper may provide clues about the period in which a manuscript was produced and the trade networks through which such materials were obtained. Similarly, the use of specific scripts may indicate the cultural environment or community associated with the manuscript. Therefore, examining the physical characteristics and condition of manuscripts is also essential to understanding their historical significance.

In Indonesian historiography, ancient manuscripts are also valuable as sources for local history. The use of local sources is particularly important because the writing of Indonesian history has not always incorporated different types of historical sources in a balanced manner. Mulyanto (2023), for instance, demonstrates that local manuscripts and archives constitute primary sources that can contribute to the reconstruction of Indonesian historiography. This study also highlights the dominance of colonial archives in Indonesian historical writing and emphasizes the importance of considering sources originating from indigenous Indonesian traditions. Consequently, manuscripts produced and preserved within local communities can provide information about local experiences that may not have been documented in colonial administrative records or official archives. Therefore, the preservation of ancient manuscripts must address two equally important aspects: the physical manuscripts themselves and the knowledge contained within them. Physical preservation can be carried out through appropriate storage and conservation practices, while intellectual preservation can be achieved through digitization, translation, and scholarly research. Fathurahman (2015) specifically identifies cataloguing and digitization as important components of Indonesian manuscript studies. Digitization enables the contents and physical characteristics of manuscripts to be documented, allowing them to be studied without requiring repeated access to the original materials. In the case of manuscripts held by families, digitization can also serve as a means of collaboration between manuscript owners and archival institutions. Through this approach, families can retain ownership of the physical manuscripts, while their

historically significant contents can be documented and made accessible for research and educational purposes.

A Cultural Heritage Paradox

The fact that manuscripts continue to be preserved and passed down from one generation to another indicates that families have an awareness of the importance of safeguarding objects regarded as valuable ancestral legacies. These manuscripts may become part of family history and serve as a connection between past and present generations. However, the inheritance process is not always accompanied by an understanding of the manuscripts' contents and meanings. Successive generations may know that the manuscripts were inherited from their parents or grandparents without knowing what is written in them. This condition creates a paradox in cultural heritage preservation. Edmondson (2002) explains that documentary heritage forms part of humanity's collective memory, as it records the development of people's thoughts, knowledge, and experiences. From this perspective, manuscripts possess two equally important elements: the informational content and the physical medium through which that information is recorded. In other words, preserving the physical integrity of manuscript pages does not necessarily mean preserving the knowledge contained within them. When manuscripts remain physically intact but can no longer be read or understood, a gap emerges between their physical existence and their intellectual contents.

This situation may occur when manuscripts employ scripts and languages that are no longer widely understood by contemporary generations. Manuscripts written in Javanese, Pegon, Jawi, or other regional scripts, for instance, require specific skills to be read. Similarly, the languages used in older manuscripts may differ considerably from those spoken by contemporary communities. As a result, individuals may possess manuscripts without being able to understand their contents. This issue does not necessarily indicate that families lack awareness of their cultural heritage. On the contrary, the act of preserving and passing down manuscripts reflects an appreciation of family heirlooms. However, such awareness remains primarily focused on the physical objects and has not fully developed into an understanding of the knowledge embedded within them.

This phenomenon can be associated with the existence of manuscripts preserved in private collections. Sopian (2011) demonstrates that manuscripts from the Indonesian archipelago are not exclusively preserved in libraries or formal institutions, but are also found in private collections. He further emphasizes that manuscripts are historical legacies containing the values of past societies' creativity, aspirations, and intellectual achievements, making them valuable sources of information about the past. At the same time, manuscripts are physical objects vulnerable to deterioration. The discovery of hundreds of ancient manuscripts in Boyolali is relevant to understanding this issue. The presence of manuscripts in private homes and family environments demonstrates that communities can serve as the first custodians of documentary heritage. The survival of manuscripts for decades, potentially across several generations, indicates that the process of inheritance has taken place over an extended period. However, when owners or inheritors no longer understand the contents of these manuscripts, questions arise concerning the transmission of the knowledge they contain. This illustrates that cultural heritage preservation cannot rely solely on maintaining physical objects but must also involve efforts to preserve their intellectual contents.

These challenges further highlight the importance of archival and cultural institutions, as not every family possesses the necessary knowledge and skills to identify or read the manuscripts in their collections. Identification processes can help owners determine the types, approximate dates, scripts, languages, and contents of their manuscripts. Cataloguing can subsequently provide more systematic information about the collections. Meanwhile, digitization can facilitate manuscript documentation, allowing their contents to be studied without repeatedly handling the original materials. UNESCO identifies preservation, access, and public awareness as three important objectives of the Memory of the World Programme. UNESCO also emphasizes that documentary heritage constitutes an essential part of collective memory and enables humanity to understand the past. Nevertheless, the rights of private collection owners must also be respected. Preservation initiatives should not undermine or transfer ownership of the manuscripts. Instead, they can be carried out through collaboration between manuscript owners, researchers, and archival or cultural institutions. Digitization, in particular, offers an opportunity for such collaboration, allowing families

to retain ownership of the physical manuscripts while making digital copies available for broader research purposes.

Expanding Public Access to Ancient Manuscripts

Ancient manuscripts cannot fully benefit society if knowledge of their existence remains limited to certain groups. As part of cultural heritage, manuscripts need to be introduced to the wider public so that they are not merely regarded as antique objects. Oman Fathurahman (2015) explains that manuscripts from the Indonesian archipelago provide a means of understanding the history and civilization of past societies. However, achieving this requires that the public have opportunities to become familiar with and access these manuscripts. The issue of accessibility becomes increasingly complex when manuscripts remain in private or family collections. As demonstrated by the discovery of hundreds of ancient manuscripts in Boyolali, a significant portion of written cultural heritage is still preserved within local communities. Although keeping manuscripts in private spaces may help ensure their survival across generations, this situation can also limit their visibility and accessibility to the wider public and researchers.

Expanding access to manuscripts does not necessarily mean that all privately owned manuscripts must be transferred to public institutions. UNESCO emphasizes that access to documentary heritage should take into account both the public interest and the legitimate interests of rights holders or collection owners (UNESCO, 2016). Therefore, access can be facilitated through various forms of collaboration. Owners may retain their original manuscripts, while researchers and archival or cultural institutions provide assistance with documentation, digital photography, cataloguing, transliteration, and content analysis. This principle is particularly important for family-owned manuscripts, as preservation initiatives must consider the emotional connections and historical significance associated with family ownership.

One approach to expanding access is through digitization. Digitization enables manuscripts that were previously accessible only through direct physical examination to be reproduced in digital formats. For manuscripts in fragile physical conditions, digitization can also reduce the need for frequent handling of the original materials. Digital copies can serve as preliminary resources for reading, identifying, and comparing

texts. For the general public, meanwhile, digitization can provide an initial opportunity to discover manuscripts that they may never have encountered before. Digitization can also transform the ways in which people interact with manuscripts. Previously, anyone wishing to examine a manuscript had to visit its place of storage or obtain permission directly from its owner. Through digital copies, however, manuscript information can be introduced to the public through digital libraries and online catalogues. People who previously had little or no knowledge of manuscripts can become familiar with their scripts, illustrations, and contents through these platforms.

Nevertheless, providing access to images or digital copies alone is insufficient. One of the major challenges associated with manuscripts from the Indonesian archipelago is the use of scripts and languages that are no longer easily understood by modern society. Therefore, further efforts are needed through transliteration, translation, and explanations of the historical and cultural contexts of manuscripts. These efforts are essential because the primary objective of manuscript preservation is not merely to maintain the physical objects but also to ensure that the information they contain can be understood by society. In contemporary society, these initiatives can also be implemented through exhibitions and educational activities. Ancient manuscripts can be introduced through exhibitions in libraries, museums, and other public spaces. Such exhibitions do not necessarily need to display large numbers of original manuscripts; selected pages representing particular manuscripts may be sufficient. Activities such as public discussions, workshops on reading historical scripts, and the creation of digital content can also help bring manuscripts closer to younger generations. This approach is particularly relevant because contemporary audiences may find it easier to engage with historical materials when information is presented through media that are familiar and accessible in their everyday lives.

CONCLUSION

Ancient manuscripts constitute an important part of cultural heritage, as they preserve records of the lives and experiences of past societies. Their existence enables contemporary communities to gain a better understanding of the history and culture of previous generations. The discovery of hundreds of ancient manuscripts in Boyolali

demonstrates that written cultural heritage can still be found within local communities, including in private and family collections. This situation reflects an ongoing process of cultural transmission from one generation to another. However, the inheritance of manuscripts is not necessarily accompanied by the transmission of knowledge about their contents and cultural significance.

Therefore, manuscript preservation needs to be approached more comprehensively. The preservation of physical materials must go hand in hand with the preservation of their intellectual contents. Expanding public access is also essential to ensure that manuscripts do not remain accessible only to their respective families or to researchers from specific academic communities. Digitization can serve as an effective approach, as it enables manuscripts to be documented, accessed, and studied while allowing their original owners to retain ownership of the physical materials.

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