

BEBALAM ARTS STUDIOS' EFFORTS IN PRESERVING LONG SONG AS A MALAY CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Abstract. This research aims to analyze the efforts and strategies undertaken by Sanggar Seni Bebalam in preserving Nyanyian Panjang as Malay cultural heritage in Pelalawan Regency, Riau. Nyanyian Panjang is a traditional Malay oral art form containing historical, philosophical, and moral values that faces extinction due to globalization and lack of intergenerational transmission. This qualitative study employed a case study approach with data collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The findings reveal that Sanggar Seni Bebalam implements four integrated preservation strategies: (1) structured intergenerational learning through master-apprentice programs, (2) systematic digital documentation and archiving, (3) strategic collaboration with customary institutions and educational organizations, and (4) adaptive performance innovations for contemporary contexts. These community-based approaches have effectively increased youth participation and strengthened local cultural identity while maintaining the authenticity of the tradition.

Keywords: Cultural preservation, Nyanyian Panjang, Sanggar Seni Bebalam, intangible cultural heritage, Pelalawan

I. INTRODUCTION

The preservation of intangible cultural heritage in Indonesia faces complex challenges alongside the acceleration of modernization and globalization. In Pelalawan Regency, Riau Province, one of the endangered cultural heritages is Nyanyian Panjang, a Malay oral tradition that functions as a medium for transmitting historical values, customs, and local wisdom [1]. Nyanyian Panjang is not merely a performing art, but a knowledge system that records the historical journey of the Pelalawan Malay community, life principles based on "customs rooted in religious law, religious law rooted in the holy book," as well as social norms that have been constructed over centuries [2], [3]. However, preliminary surveys indicate that only seven active Nyanyian Panjang speakers remain in Pelalawan, with an average age above 65 years, while regeneration has practically ceased due to minimal interest from the younger generation [4].

This condition reflects a broader phenomenon of the crisis in preserving local culture in Indonesia. According to UNESCO data [5], approximately 30% of regional languages and oral traditions in Indonesia are threatened with extinction within the next two decades. In Riau specifically, the pressure of natural resource-based economic development has transformed social structures and community lifestyles, which has implications for the fading of traditional cultural practices [6]. Previous studies by [1] on oral traditions in Riau identified three main factors causing extinction: (1) shifting cultural values among the younger generation, (2) limited spaces for expression amidst the dominance of popular culture,

and (3) weak intergenerational transmission systems. Nevertheless, their research has not specifically examined the role of community institutions such as art studios in addressing these problems.

Bebalam Arts Studio, established on February 28, 2023, in Pangkalan Kerinci City, Pelalawan, offers an alternative preservation model worthy of study. Unlike conventional preservation approaches that are often top-down and focus solely on documentation, Bebalam Arts Studio develops a holistic and participatory community-based preservation strategy. This studio functions as a cultural broker [7] that bridges tradition with contemporary contexts, while also serving as a cultural incubator [8] that nurtures creativity within the preservation framework. The uniqueness of this approach has not been extensively explored in previous academic studies, despite its potential to become a more sustainable preservation model.

Theoretically, this research departs from UNESCO's concept of intangible cultural [9], which emphasizes that the preservation of intangible cultural heritage must involve the culture-bearing community as active subjects. This concept is reinforced by cultural sustainability theory [10], [11] which views cultural preservation as a dynamic process requiring creative adaptation to social change. Additionally, agency theory in cultural preservation [12], [12] helps explain how local cultural actors can transform traditions according to contemporary contexts without losing their cultural essence. An interdisciplinary approach combining perspectives from anthropology, sociology, and arts education is necessary to

understand the complexity of cultural preservation phenomena at the community level.

Based on the identification of research gaps and academic urgency, this study aims to: (1) identify and analyze the Nyanyian Panjang preservation strategies developed by Sanggar Seni Bebalam, (2) evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies within Pelalawan's socio-cultural context, and (3) formulate a community-based preservation model that can be adapted for similar traditions in Indonesia. The findings of this research are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of more participatory and sustainable cultural preservation concepts, as well as practical contributions for art studio managers and policymakers in the cultural sector.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

A. Approach and Research Design

This research uses a qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study design. The selection of a qualitative approach is based on the research objective to deeply understand socio-cultural phenomena in their naturalistic context [13]. The case study design was chosen because it allows researchers to comprehensively explore the cultural preservation strategies developed by Sanggar Seni Bebalam as an integrated system. This intrinsic case study focuses on a single case that has its own uniqueness and significance, namely Sanggar Seni Bebalam as a pioneer in preserving Nyanyian Panjang in Pelalawan.

B. Research Location and Time

The research location was purposively determined at Sanggar Seni Bebalam, Pangkalan Kerinci City, Pelalawan Regency, Riau Province. The selection of this location was based on the consideration that this studio has the most consistent track record in preserving Nyanyian Panjang over the past several years and is recognized by both the community and local government as the primary reference for preserving Malay oral traditions in the region. The research was conducted over six months, from June to December 2025, with details of two months for preparation and field introduction, three months for intensive data collection, and two months for preliminary data analysis.

C. Participants and Sampling Techniques

Research participants were selected using purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques to ensure representation of various stakeholders. There were 15 key informants involved in this study, consisting of: (1) founders and managers of Sanggar Seni Bebalam (2 people), (2) trainers and maestros of Nyanyian Panjang (4 people), and (3) program participants from various age groups (11 people). Inclusion criteria for program participants were having participated in studio activities for at least one year and being willing to actively participate in the research.

D. Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was conducted through method triangulation to ensure data validity and reliability. First, participatory observation was carried out in various studio

activities, including regular training sessions (24 observations), preparation and execution of performances (8 observations), management meetings (6 observations), and documentation and archiving activities (4 observations). Field notes were systematically made using a structured format covering activity descriptions, social interactions, and researcher reflections.

Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with all key informants. The interview guide was developed based on research objectives and covered four main domains: (1) understanding of Nyanyian Panjang and its values, (2) preservation strategies implemented, (3) challenges and opportunities in preservation, and (4) socio-cultural impacts of preservation efforts. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes, was recorded with informant consent, and transcribed verbatim for further analysis.

Third, document studies were conducted on various written and audiovisual sources. Documents analyzed included: (1) Nyanyian Panjang lyric manuscripts in the studio's collection, (2) audio and video recordings of performances, (3) photographic documentation of activities, (4) administrative archives and studio work programs, (5) publications about Nyanyian Panjang and Pelalawan Malay culture, and (6) local government policies related to cultural preservation.

E. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, [14] involving three interrelated stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction stage, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were analyzed through open coding and axial coding processes using NVivo 12 software. Initial codes were then grouped into thematic categories based on similarity of meaning and conceptual relationships.

The data display stage was conducted by organizing reduced data into analytical matrices, relationship diagrams, and descriptive narratives. Analytical matrices were used to compare different perspectives among informants, while relationship diagrams helped visualize relationships between concepts and themes. Descriptive narratives were developed to present findings coherently and contextually. The conclusion drawing stage was carried out through an abductive process integrating empirical findings with theoretical frameworks. Source and method triangulation were used to validate findings, while member checking was conducted by confirming researcher interpretations with key informants. Research ethics were observed through informed consent processes, protection of informant identity confidentiality, and the principles of benefit and non-maleficence throughout all research stages.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Profile and Historical Context of Sanggar Seni Bebalam

Sanggar Seni Bebalam was established in 2023 by a group of Pelalawan cultural practitioners and artists concerned about the increasingly rare Nyanyian Panjang speakers. The name "Bebalam" is taken from the Pelalawan Malay language meaning "to gather" or "togetherness," reflecting the studio's

philosophy as a collective space for cultural preservation [15], [16]. Over its 3-year journey, the studio has grown from a small group practicing on house porches to a formally recognized community cultural institution. Currently, the studio has 42 active members ranging from 6 to 18 years old, with an organizational structure consisting of training, documentation, performance production, and public relations divisions.

Historical contextualization shows that the establishment of Sanggar Seni Bebalam cannot be separated from the socio-cultural dynamics of post-reform Pelalawan. According to a key informant who is a studio founder, the 2000s became a critical period when only three active Nyanyian Panjang speakers remained, all elderly [17]. "We realized that without systematic efforts, within a decade Nyanyian Panjang would become extinct along with its last speakers," expressed one founder. This awareness motivated the establishment of the studio with a specific mission to save and revitalize this oral tradition.

B. Preservation Strategies Developed

Based on data analysis, Sanggar Seni Bebalam developed four main preservation strategies for Nyanyian Panjang that are interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

1) Intergenerational Education through Master-Apprentice Program

The first strategy is structured intergenerational education through a master-apprentice program. The studio organizes two types of learning programs: (1) regular classes for children aged 6-8 years, and (2) intensive training for adolescents aged 9-18 years. The learning method follows authentic oral transmission principles, where participants learn directly from maestros through processes of listening, imitating, and practicing. This process typically takes 2-3 years to master one Nyanyian Panjang repertoire comprehensively.

The uniqueness of this approach lies in the integration of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. Besides learning vocal techniques and memorizing lyrics, participants are also invited to understand the historical context, philosophical values, and social functions of each Nyanyian Panjang repertoire [18], [19]. As expressed by an adolescent participant, "Initially I joined because the school asked me to, but the deeper I learned, the more I realized that this is not just singing, but a story about who we are as Pelalawan Malays."

2) Systematic Documentation and Digitalization

The second strategy is systematic documentation and digitalization of Nyanyian Panjang collections. The studio has built a documentation system that includes: (1) high-quality audio recordings of all surviving repertoires, (2) documentary videos of learning processes and performances, and (3) archival photographs recording the studio's development over time. All materials are digitalized and managed in a structured database accessible to studio members for learning purposes [20].

3) Strategic Collaboration with Multiple Parties

The third strategy is building collaborative networks with various stakeholders. The studio actively establishes partnerships with: (1) the Pelalawan Kingdom as customary authority holders, (2) the Pelalawan Malay Customary Institution (LAM) as program partners, (3) the Education Office for curriculum integration, (4) schools for extracurricular programs, (5) universities for collaborative research, and (6) local media for publications.

Collaboration with the Pelalawan Kingdom has special significance because it provides cultural legitimacy and access to traditional events that serve as authentic contexts for Nyanyian Panjang performances [13], [14], [21]. According to a kingdom figure, "Sanggar Bebalam has become our right hand in preserving oral traditions. Every kingdom traditional event, they prepare the Nyanyian Panjang performances." Meanwhile, collaboration with the education sector has resulted in the integration of Nyanyian Panjang material into local content curricula in Pelalawan schools.

4) Performance Innovation and Creative Adaptation

The fourth strategy is performance innovation and creative adaptation to maintain the tradition's relevance. The studio develops three performance formats: (1) traditional format for customary events, (2) educational format for schools and campuses, and (3) festival format for public events. Innovations include duration simplification, addition of introductory narratives, and more attractive visual packaging without altering the essence of the lyrics and melodies [22].

This creative adaptation has sparked interesting discussions about the boundaries between preservation and transformation. Some traditional elders worry that excessive adaptation could alter the original meaning of the tradition. However, according to studio managers, "We hold the principle of 'substance remains, form adapts'. The core lyrics and melodies we do not change, only the presentation methods we adjust to the audience context." This approach aligns with the living heritage concept, which emphasizes that cultural heritage must remain alive and relevant in its owning community [23].

C. Impacts and Social Transformation

The implementation of these four strategies has produced significant impacts at various levels. At the individual level, there has been an increase in the number of young Nyanyian Panjang speakers from only 3 people in 2023 to 10 people in 2025. Surveys of program participants show significant increases in understanding of Malay culture (87% of respondents), pride in local identity (92% of respondents), and commitment to preserving the tradition (78% of respondents).

At the community level, Nyanyian Panjang has returned to various social and customary events. Data shows an 89% increase in requests for Nyanyian Panjang performances for wedding ceremonies, traditional events, cultural festivals, and datuk inaugurations in the last five years. At the institutional level, this tradition received formal recognition as an Indonesian Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2025 and became part of the local content curriculum in Pelalawan schools.

However, the preservation process also faces various challenges. Funding limitations remain a structural obstacle, with 70% of the studio's budget still dependent on member

contributions and sporadic donations. Resistance from some community members toward adaptation of performance formats creates internal tensions that need to be managed wisely. Additionally, competition with popular culture and digital content remains a significant challenge in attracting young people's interest.

D. Community-Based Preservation Model

Research findings lead to the formulation of a community-based preservation model consisting of four main pillars. The first pillar is intergenerational education that combines traditional methods with contemporary pedagogy [19]. The second pillar is dynamic documentation that functions as a collective memory system. The third pillar is collaborative networking that builds a supportive ecosystem. The fourth pillar is contextual innovation that maintains the tradition's relevance [24].

This model offers an alternative to conventional preservation approaches that are often state-centric and focused on cultural monumentalization. Instead, this model places the community as active subjects who have agency in determining the future of their own traditions. This concept aligns with cultural agency theory [21], which emphasizes the capacity of local actors to transform their culture according to contemporary contexts.

The success of Sanggar Seni Bebalam also confirms the importance of a holistic approach in cultural preservation. It is not enough to focus only on the technical aspects of skill transmission, but also necessary to pay attention to the social, economic, and political aspects that shape the cultural ecosystem. As expressed by a cultural observer, "Sanggar Bebalam succeeded because they understand that preserving culture is not just about saving old manuscripts, but about creating living spaces where tradition can breathe and develop."

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This research concludes that Sanggar Seni Bebalam has developed an effective Nyanyian Panjang preservation model through the integration of four main strategies: intergenerational education, systematic documentation, multi-party collaboration, and performance innovation. The success of this model is supported by a community-based approach that places culture bearers as active subjects and agents of change in the preservation process. Research findings reinforce the theory that the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage depends on the community's ability to develop adaptive strategies that maintain the essence of tradition while responding to changing social dynamics.

The theoretical implication of this research is the development of the "dynamic preservation" concept, which emphasizes that cultural preservation is not a static process of freezing traditions, but a dynamic process of maintaining relevance through creative adaptation. This concept offers an alternative perspective to the preservation versus change dichotomy that often dominates discussions about cultural heritage.

Practical implications include three main recommendations. First, the development of a national collaborative platform for knowledge exchange among art studios in Indonesia. Second, capacity building training for studio managers in organizational management, fundraising, and digital documentation. Third, reform of regional cultural policies that provide structural incentives for community-based preservation.

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