

Cultural Resistance: Indonesian Society's Efforts to Maintain Local Identity Amid Colonial Domination

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Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas tentang perlawanan kultural yang dilakukan oleh masyarakat Indonesia dalam menghadapi penjajahan, khususnya Belanda, yang berupaya menggerogoti identitas lokal melalui berbagai kebijakan asimilasi. Dengan latar belakang sejarah kolonial, artikel ini mengulas bentuk-bentuk perlawanan kultural yang terwujud dalam upaya mempertahankan bahasa, tradisi, seni, dan gerakan kebangsaan. Pendidikan lokal dan seni tradisional, seperti wayang dan gamelan, digunakan sebagai alat perlawanan simbolik yang efektif dalam menumbuhkan kesadaran kebangsaan. Pergerakan kebangsaan juga menunjukkan adanya kolaborasi antara budaya dan politik sebagai sarana perlawanan terhadap kolonialisme. Masyarakat Indonesia mengembangkan strategi ketahanan melalui adaptasi dan negosiasi budaya, di mana nilai-nilai lokal tetap dipertahankan meskipun ada pengaruh asing. Artikel ini menekankan bahwa perlawanan kultural tidak hanya mempertahankan identitas, tetapi juga menjadi dasar kesadaran nasional yang berperan penting dalam perjuangan kemerdekaan.

Kata kunci: Perlawanan kultural, kolonialisme, identitas lokal.

Abstract

This article discusses cultural resistance carried out by Indonesian society in facing colonial domination, especially by the Dutch, which attempted to erode local identity through various assimilation policies. With the background of colonial history, this article reviews forms of cultural resistance that are manifested in efforts to maintain language, tradition, art, and nationalist movements. Local education and traditional arts, such as wayang and gamelan, are used as effective symbolic resistance tools in raising nationalist awareness. The national movement also shows the collaboration between culture and politics as a means of resistance against colonialism. Indonesian society developed resilience strategies through cultural adaptation and negotiation, where local values are maintained despite foreign influences. This article emphasizes that cultural resistance not only maintains identity but also forms the basis of national consciousness that plays an important role in the struggle for independence.

Keywords: Cultural resistance, colonialism, local identity.

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INTRODUCTION

During the colonial period, the Indonesian nation faced domination from various aspects, such as politics, economy, social, and culture. Dutch colonialism brought major changes in the social system which included restricting access to education for indigenous people and promoting foreign cultures through various policies. Thus, the Dutch colony not only controlled natural resources, but also tried to replace long-standing local identities and values. For example, Dutch was taught and prioritized in schools, while regional languages tended to be ignored, causing local languages to be marginalized. (Harahap, 2017; Ririn & Ribuwati, 2018).

The history of colonialism in Indonesia not only reflects the political and economic domination of the colonial nation, but also represents a systematic effort to change the social and cultural order of the indigenous people. (Swasti et al., 2019; Irwan et al., 2022); (Sutopo, 2023). Colonialism not only exploited natural resources, but also attempted to hegemonize the way of life, values, and cultural identity of the Indonesian people. In such a situation, local culture became an important field of resistance for Indonesian society in maintaining its identity.

Resistance to colonial cultural domination was not always physical or open, but often took place symbolically and culturally through language, customs, arts, beliefs, and daily life practices. Various cases in Indonesian society show high cultural resilience, both individually and collectively, to maintain their identity from the destructive influence of colonialism. These efforts also encouraged awareness of the importance of cultural identity which then gave birth to a spirit of nationalism. This movement was not just about maintaining cultural elements, but was also a way for society to voice its rejection of foreign domination (Widya Wulandari, Yayang Furi Furnamasari, 2021; (Siska & Supriatna, 2021); (S. Candra et al., 2021).

Amidst the assimilation efforts undertaken by colonial powers, Indonesian society continued to seek ways to maintain and strengthen their identity. The struggle to maintain regional languages, traditional arts, and cultural values became an important foundation that led the Indonesian nation to independence. Cultural resistance became an integral part of building national awareness that later motivated the struggle for independence (Nahak, 2019; Sakman & Syam, 2020; Siska et al., 2021).

In addition, colonial policies such as "ethical politics" had a significant impact on Indonesian society, although in some cases, the community was able to respond by utilizing existing gaps to fight for their cultural and social rights. Intellectuals who received colonial education began to realize the importance of maintaining local culture as a form of resistance to colonial domination (Sutopo, 2023). These colonial policies were one of the driving factors behind the emergence of a cultural resistance movement which later developed into resistance against forced assimilation, because people felt the need to maintain their local identity amidst pressure from foreign cultures (Syahira Azima et al., 2021). Therefore, this study aims to examine how these forms of cultural resistance are manifested by Indonesian society in various local and historical contexts. This article attempts to show that Indonesian cultural identity, especially local culture, is not something passive, but rather the result of a long and complex struggle against colonial domination that seeks to obscure the cultural existence of the nation.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative-historical approach (Santana-Cordero & Szabó, 2019). Historical qualitative research is a research approach that aims to understand, reconstruct, and interpret past events in depth, focusing on the meaning, context, and perspective of the subject at the time. The research method used is the literature study method (library research). Literature study was chosen because this research aims to examine and analyze the concept of cultural resistance in a colonial context based on various written sources, such as books, journal articles, historical documents, and other scientific publications. According to Mestika Zed in Siska et al., (2025) Library research is a series of activities related to library data collection methods, reading and recording and processing research materials. It is a research that utilizes library sources to obtain research data. Library research is also interpreted as a data collection technique by

reviewing books, literature, notes, and various reports related to the problem to be solved (Siska et al., 2024); (Irwan, Zusmelia, & Siska, 2022). The collection technique is a systematic literature search on the identification of relevant keywords, such as cultural resistance, colonialism, local culture, colonial education, nationalism, and traditional arts. Then a selection is made of the collected source articles that are in accordance with the study of this paper. The data analysis technique used from seven stages, in this study only uses content analysis, which includes: Data reduction, categorization, and interpretation according to the needs of the data to be analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Understanding Cultural Resistance in a Colonial Context

Cultural resistance can be defined as the way in which subordinate groups maintain their identity through cultural practices that challenge the hegemony of the dominant culture. (Hafida et al., 2024; Sinambela et al., 2025). Another definition means that cultural resistance is a form of resistance against the domination, oppression, or influence of other cultures, especially more dominant or hegemonic cultures, through the preservation, transformation, or re-creation of local cultural elements (Namah, 2020; Wagiran, 2012). This resistance can emerge in response to globalization, colonialism, capitalism, or processes of cultural homogenization, and is often carried out by groups or communities who wish to maintain their own cultural identity, values, and practices.

Cultural resistance as referred to in this article refers to efforts made by communities to maintain and defend their cultural identity and values from external influences, especially when faced with colonial domination. In the context of colonialism, this resistance involves various forms of resistance aimed at maintaining cultural sovereignty. In Indonesia, cultural resistance is seen through the continuation of regional languages, customs, and traditions as an effort to maintain national identity (Harahap, 2017; Siska & Irwan, 2020).

2. Resistance through Education and Empowerment: Preserving Local Languages and Traditions

During the colonial period, education was often used as a tool to introduce Western cultural values and limit indigenous people's access to education. However, some movement figures used education as a means to strengthen local culture and maintain regional languages. One of the most obvious forms of cultural resistance carried out by Indonesian people against colonialism was by maintaining regional languages and local traditions. Although the colonial government encouraged the use of Dutch as a symbol of status and progress, people continued to use their mother tongue in everyday life, Islamic boarding school education, and local arts. This was a form of symbolic resistance to the assimilation of colonial culture.

Some forms of resistance carried out to maintain local languages and traditions are, Islamic boarding schools in Java continue to teach Arabic yellow books and use Javanese in teaching, which become a cultural fortress as well as the religious identity of the community. Then another example is Ki Hadjar Dewantara establishing Taman Siswa which emphasizes Indonesian cultural values in education, and rejects the assimilation of colonial culture. This educational effort is not only a learning tool, but also a symbol of cultural resistance (Nahak, 2019; Widya Wulandari, Yayang Furi Furnamasari, 2021)

Outside Java, there was also a lot of resistance in the field of education, one example of which was in 1923, Rahmah El Yunusiyah founded the Madrasah Diniyah Putri in Padang Panjang, which is known as the first madrasah for girls in Indonesia. This step was a form of resistance against the colonial education system that did not provide equal access to education for women. Through this madrasah, Rahmah provided opportunities for women to get religious and general education, so that they could play an active role in society as intelligent and faithful individuals. By establishing an educational institution that focused on empowering women and maintaining independence from colonial influence, Rahmah El Yunusiyah has shown that education can be an effective tool in cultural resistance and the struggle for independence.

3. Folk Arts and Culture: Means of Expressing Identity

Traditional arts such as wayang, dance, gamelan music, and various other forms of folk culture are important media in maintaining Indonesia's cultural identity. These traditional arts not only function as entertainment, but also as symbolic means of resistance against colonialism. Through art performances, people convey hidden messages that arouse the spirit of nationalism and awareness of local cultural identity. For example, wayang plays often depict the struggle against oppression that can be identified as resistance to colonialism (Aulia, Dewi, & Furnamasari, 2021).

Addition, in the field of literature, writers such as Marah Roesli, Abdul Muis, and Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana inserted the spirit of nationalism and social criticism in their works. This shows that local cultural narratives are not lost, but instead develop into tools to make people aware of the importance of identity and independence.

4. Nationalism Movement: Collaboration Between Culture and Politics

The nationalist movements that emerged in the early 20th century combined cultural elements with politics to fight colonialism. Movements such as Budi Utomo, Sarekat Islam, and Jong Java are examples of collaboration between cultural and political values to fight for Indonesian independence. The youth and intellectuals in these organizations used cultural symbols as a tool to raise national awareness. This collaboration between culture and politics shows that culture is not only a tradition, but also a political tool that plays a role in the struggle for independence (Azima, Furnamasari, & Dewi, 2021). Marx's theory is that class struggle does not only occur in the economic realm, but also in the realm of ideology and culture, where the dominant class (in this context: the Dutch colonialists) maintains its power through cultural hegemony—namely, ideological influence that appears "natural" or "neutral" but actually oppresses and subjugates the oppressed class.

The paragraph above describes a form of theoretical resistance to colonial hegemony through the use of culture as a tool of struggle. Organizations such as Budi Utomo, Sarekat Islam, and Jong Java show the existence of a class consciousness of the colonized that develops into a collective consciousness to free themselves from the colonial power structure. This is in line with Marx's thinking that class consciousness born from oppression will trigger resistance.

In addition, the national movement was marked by the spirit of the Youth Pledge and made Malay a unifying language that strengthened the spirit of nationalism through local oral culture and literacy. Malay, which was initially used in literature and trade, later became a symbol of resistance to the hegemony of the Dutch language. The use of Malay as a unifying language can be interpreted as a form of resistance to colonial symbolic hegemony, especially the dominance of the Dutch language. According to Marx, language and symbols are part of the ideological superstructure used by the dominant class to maintain the status quo. So, when the colonized people created their own unifying language, they fought the colonial ideological structure and reclaimed identity spaces.

Figures such as Ki Hajar Dewantara, Mohammad Yamin, and Sukarno demonstrate concrete forms of theoretical resistance agents, in which they use local education, art, and literacy as tools to shape national consciousness and challenge structures of domination. In Marx's theory, this is part of the suprastructural struggle, namely the struggle in the cultural and ideological fields to change the oppressive basis of power.

Rejection of colonial lifestyles and the preservation of local cultures such as traditional dances and clothing reflect an awareness of cultural alienation—a condition in which people are alienated from their original identity by the dominant system (colonialism). This resistance is an attempt to return control over the symbolic production of culture to the people themselves, as Marx saw the importance of control over the means of production for true freedom.

5. Resilience Strategy: Cultural Adaptation and Negotiation

Indonesian society not only rejected colonial influence directly, but also carried out strategies of adaptation and cultural negotiation to survive. The concept of "cultural hybridity" in postcolonialism theory shows how Indonesian society selectively adopted foreign elements, but

still maintained their local identity. This adaptation process reflects the flexibility and resilience of Indonesian society in facing foreign cultural pressures. For example, the use of Malay language adapted with Dutch vocabulary shows how local people can adapt without losing their original identity (Yul & Ramadani, 2020; Wulandari et al., 2021).

Social Resilience Theory emphasizes the ability of communities to survive, adapt, and develop collective strategies in the face of external pressures that threaten their social well-being, culture, and identity. In the context of colonialism, this theory focuses on how communities do not just react passively, but actively create social mechanisms to survive and protect their value systems. The paragraph above strongly reflects the principles of this theory. Social resilience is evident in the way Indonesian society forms adaptive and negotiative strategies against colonial domination. Rather than carrying out high-risk open resistance, society chooses cultural adaptation as a form of strategic survival, as seen in the use of Malay language interspersed with Dutch vocabulary. This is a clear example of the integration of external elements without losing local identity, which in the framework of social resilience is referred to as adaptive capacity. In cultural negotiations, local figures and communities play in two worlds: they are able to navigate the colonial system for local benefits, while maintaining and strengthening their own culture. Some examples: Clerics use religious platforms as a space to educate the community and foster a spirit of resistance, without having to confront the colonial rulers directly. Artists and writers insert criticism of colonialism through literary works, wayang performances, and traditional songs, which seem like mere entertainment, but contain messages of resistance. This reflects one of the main characteristics of social resilience, namely the collective ability to maintain the social and cultural functions of the community under stressful conditions, while developing new ways to maintain their existence. This process shows that Indonesian society during the colonial period was not a passive victim, but an active and creative agent in responding to oppressive structures of domination.

CONCLUSION

Forms of cultural resistance in the colonial context show the efforts of society to maintain their identity and cultural values amidst the domination of foreign cultures, especially during the colonial period. This resistance is manifested in four different forms: 1) preservation of regional languages, education based on local culture, to traditional arts which are important media to voice symbolic resistance against colonialism. 2) National movement figures, such as Ki Hajar Dewantara and Rahmah El Yunusiyah, utilize education and empowerment to strengthen local culture and fight against the assimilation of colonial culture; 3) Folk arts and culture, such as wayang, dance, and literature, play a significant role in strengthening national awareness and Indonesian cultural identity. In addition, the nationalist movement in the early 20th century combined cultural and political elements as a strategy to fight colonialism, emphasizing the importance of the Malay language as a symbol of unity and the struggle for independence; 4) Strategies of cultural adaptation and negotiation are also implemented in Indonesian society, which chooses to selectively adopt foreign elements, while maintaining their local identity. This process reflects the resilience and flexibility of Indonesian culture in the face of colonial domination. Overall, this cultural resistance is not only a form of resistance to colonialism, but also a means to strengthen identity and achieve independence. The implication of this study is to show that Indonesian society during the colonial period not only survived physically, but also actively maintained cultural identity through adaptive strategies. This broadens the understanding that local culture has resilience to global or colonial pressures, which can be used as a framework for the study of other marginalized communities.

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