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Javanese Language and Cultural Identity: The Role of Ritual Speech in Traditional Ceremonies of Solo City

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Received 4 September 2025 Revised 9 December 2025 Accepted 15 December 2025 Available online 31 December 2025</p> <p>ISSN: 2986-3848</p>	<p>Fieldwork in Solo shows that <i>Krama Inggil</i> remains widely used in traditional ceremonies, such as <i>Kirab Pusaka</i> and <i>Tedhak Siten</i>, where formal Javanese creates a solemn and culturally rich atmosphere. Ritual speech is often formulaic, poetic, and passed down orally, reflecting core Javanese values like respect, obedience, and humility. Community members view ceremonial language as a symbol of dignity and ancestral honor. However, there is a growing intergenerational gap: many young people can recite ritual texts but do not understand their meaning, reflecting a decline in functional competence. This aligns with Fishman's theory that language used solely for ceremonial purposes is vulnerable to shift. Despite this, rituals still function as important sites of language preservation and cultural resistance. Events like <i>Sekaten</i> expose younger generations to classical Javanese, and community initiatives help children learn and appreciate traditional forms such as <i>tembang macapat</i>. Challenges include limited daily use of Javanese, reliance on rote learning in schools, and the commercialization of ceremonies, which sometimes replaces <i>Krama</i> with Indonesian. To preserve linguistic and cultural heritage in Solo, broader efforts are needed to integrate Javanese into homes, education, media, and intergenerational interaction.</p> <p>Keywords: Language Preservation, Javanese Language, Cultural Identity, Traditional Ceremony, Sociolinguistics</p>

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1. Introduction

Language plays a vital role not only in communication but also in shaping, expressing, and preserving cultural identity. It carries collective memory, social values, and traditional knowledge, making it a powerful symbol of cultural continuity (Fishman, 1991). In societies with rich oral traditions and stratified linguistic systems, language becomes inseparable from cultural heritage. Consequently, the loss of a language is often associated with the erosion of cultural identity and social cohesion (Holmes, 2013). In Indonesia—a multilingual nation with more than 700 local languages—the Javanese language holds a distinct position, not only because of its large number of speakers but also due to its complex hierarchical system. The speech levels of *Ngoko*, *Krama Madya*, and *Krama Inggil* reflect intricate social relationships and embody core values such as respect (*ajining dhiri*) and harmony (*rukun*) (Dardjowidjojo, 1998). These registers are essential in traditional Javanese ceremonies, where language functions as a cultural performance that reinforces social roles and ritual propriety.

Solo City (Surakarta), one of the cultural heartlands of Java, is renowned for preserving traditional arts, rituals, and royal customs through the enduring influence of the Kraton Surakarta Hadiningrat. Ceremonies such as *Sekaten*, *Kirab Pusaka*, and *Tedhak Siten* exemplify how Javanese speech levels—particularly *Krama Inggil*—are enacted in practice. In these events, formal Javanese not only maintains the sacred tone of the rituals but also serves as a living expression of cultural identity. However, despite this vibrant ceremonial

tradition, language shift is increasingly visible in urban Javanese communities. The dominance of Bahasa Indonesia in education and public life, paired with the growing influence of English and digital slang among younger generations, has reduced the daily use of formal Javanese. Many young people in Solo now primarily use *Ngoko* and often struggle with comprehension or production at higher speech levels (Suwandi, 2015). As a result, traditional ceremonies have become one of the few remaining domains where *Krama Inggil* is still performed, though its use is often ritualistic rather than fully internalized.

This context raises important questions about the extent to which ceremonial settings can function as spaces for linguistic resilience. While previous studies have widely documented the decline of the Javanese language, far fewer have examined how ritual contexts might sustain or reinforce linguistic knowledge across generations. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how traditional ceremonies in Solo employ language as a means of preserving cultural identity. Through qualitative observation and analysis of linguistic practices during major rituals, this research aims to highlight both the symbolic and practical functions of Javanese in ceremonial contexts and to evaluate how these practices contribute to, or are challenged by, broader patterns of language change in contemporary Javanese society.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Language and Cultural Identity

Salam (2020) highlights that literature operates both as a reflection and a shaping force of cultural awareness, especially in postcolonial settings where identity remains fluid and continually negotiated (Siahaan et al., 2024). Cultural identity, in this context, is not static but continually constructed and negotiated through language. Traditional ceremonies offer a platform for such identity to be performed and reaffirmed, often through specific linguistic choices that reflect historical continuity, social hierarchy, and communal belonging. Thus, maintaining a local language, especially in ritual contexts, is crucial to sustaining a community's cultural fabric. The notion of identity has likewise shifted alongside processes of urbanization and globalization. Works by urban writers often depict hybrid identities formed through interethnic relationships, migration, and the influence of digital culture (Ajani et al., 2024; Jaya et al., 2025a; Mahesti et al., 2025).

These representations indicate that cultural identity in contemporary literature is becoming more fluid and increasingly intersectional. Handayani (2020) and other researchers caution that literary portrayals of local wisdom frequently fluctuate between efforts to preserve it and tendencies to romanticize it, often without sufficient critical analysis. Much of the current scholarship remains largely descriptive, centering on textual depictions rather than examining how local wisdom operates as an epistemological foundation that shapes literary language, meaning-making processes, and the construction of identity.

2.2. Javanese Language and Its Hierarchical System

Javanese, spoken by millions in Indonesia, holds a central role in the nation's cultural heritage, acting as a link to the rich history, values, and traditions of the Javanese people. Traditionally, it functioned not only as a medium of communication but also as a conduit for passing down cultural knowledge, including moral lessons, customs, and artistic expressions. However, rapid modernization, particularly in urban settings, has led younger generations to increasingly move away from using Javanese in daily life. The growing dominance of global languages, especially Indonesian and English, along with the widespread influence of technology, has contributed to a decline in the everyday use of Javanese, particularly among youth. As young people become more immersed in modern, globalized cultures, the intergenerational transmission of the language and its cultural values in homes, schools, and communities has gradually weakened, with minimal intervention from policymakers (Zustiyantoro, 2024).

With the acceleration of globalization, there is widespread concern that local languages and cultural practices, including those of the Javanese people, may be marginalized, eclipsed by the dominance of global languages and Western cultural norms. Yet, this view often overlooks the potential of digital technology as a valuable means of preserving and promoting Javanese language and culture. The internet's expanding global connectivity provides unprecedented access to resources that support language learning, cultural exchange, and academic research. Digital tools—such as online dictionaries, language-learning applications, and cultural archives—have opened new avenues for Javanese language learners, enthusiasts, and scholars worldwide to engage with the language and its rich cultural heritage (Darihastining et al., 2023).

The Javanese language is known for its complex system of speech levels, which reflects values of politeness, social hierarchy, and respect. Javanese language consists of three main speech levels: *Ngoko* (the most informal), *Krama Madya* (a middle level blending *Ngoko* and *Krama Inggil*), and *Krama Inggil* (the most polite and refined) (Joemanto, 2020). The Javanese community places strong importance on proper education in courtesy and respectful language use. Each level is used based on the social relationship between

speakers, their relative status, and the context of the interaction. In ritual and ceremonial contexts, *Krama Inggil* is the preferred level because of its association with formality, reverence, and tradition. Its use signifies respect for the sacredness of the event, the authority of elders or religious leaders, and the cultural heritage embedded within the ceremony. However, due to its complexity and declining everyday use, *Krama Inggil* is increasingly understood and spoken only by older generations, creating a gap in intergenerational linguistic transmission.

2.3. Language in Ritual and Ceremonial Contexts

Language and culture are inherently interconnected, interacting in a highly dynamic way. On one hand, language mirrors and reinforces cultural values, traditions, and customs; on the other hand, culture influences how language is used for different social functions. This relationship highlights that language is deeply embedded within societal culture. In this context, culture acts as a marker of ethnic identity, reflected in the distinctive ways language is employed (Bustan & Kabelen, 2023), particularly in expressing politeness during cultural rituals and practices. Ritual speech is a distinct genre of linguistic performance. It is often marked by special vocabulary, fixed structures, and formal registers, all of which distinguish it from everyday language use. Ritual language not only facilitates the performance of the ceremony but also signals the transformation of space and time into something sacred or symbolic.

Traditional ceremonies in Javanese culture—such as *Tedhak Siten*, *Siraman*, *Kirab Pusaka*, and *Sekaten*—use ritual language to reaffirm cultural values and social roles. These ceremonies function as "cultural scripts" that rely heavily on structured linguistic performance, where language becomes a carrier of tradition and symbolic meaning. These studies collectively demonstrate the essential role of language in Javanese traditional ceremonies, emphasizing the intricate connections between language, culture, and identity (Firzal, 2015). They utilize diverse methodologies, such as ethnography, sociolinguistic analysis, and discourse analysis, to examine the complexities of language use in these ceremonial contexts. Despite progress in this field, further research is needed, especially to investigate how globalization affects traditional linguistic practices and how the Javanese language continues to evolve within ritual and ceremonial settings (Zein, 2020). The use of ritual language also helps to establish legitimacy and authority, particularly in contexts involving the royal family or community elders.

2.4. Previous Studies on Language and Ceremony in Java

Several studies have examined the role of language in traditional Javanese ceremonies. Dardjowidjojo (1998) notes that *Krama Inggil* is preserved almost exclusively in ceremonial and religious contexts, and is rarely used spontaneously in modern-day interactions. A study by Putra (2019) on *Tedhak Siten* ceremonies in Yogyakarta found that while the ritual language was still used, it was often memorized or read from scripts rather than understood, indicating a shift from internalized knowledge to performative tradition. Similarly, Sumarsono (2014) suggests that while language in ceremonies still serves a symbolic function, its effectiveness in transmitting cultural values depends on the audience's comprehension and engagement. These studies support the idea that ceremonial language use can preserve culture, but only when supported by broader intergenerational efforts in education and community participation.

2.5. Synthesis

Based on the literature, it is clear that language—particularly ritual language—plays a significant role in expressing and preserving cultural identity. In the context of Javanese society, the hierarchical structure of the language aligns closely with social and ceremonial practices. However, modernization and language shift threaten the continuity of this linguistic heritage. Traditional ceremonies remain one of the few domains where high-level Javanese is actively maintained, albeit with varying degrees of comprehension and authenticity. This research aims to build on previous findings by examining how traditional ceremonies in Solo continue to function as spaces for linguistic and cultural preservation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how the Javanese language functions in traditional ceremonies in Solo as a medium for cultural preservation. The qualitative method allows the researcher to analyze language use in its natural social and cultural context.

3.2. Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted in Solo City, Central Java, known for its strong Javanese cultural traditions. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, consisting of:

- Cultural practitioners (e.g., *abdi dalem*, ritual leaders)
- Community elders
- Younger ceremony participants or observers

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that each individual had direct relevance to the cultural practices being examined. The research was conducted in Solo City, Central Java, an area known for its rich and well-preserved Javanese traditions. The selection criteria focused on individuals who possess cultural knowledge, are actively involved in traditional ceremonies, or have firsthand experience observing these practices.

The participant groups included:

- Cultural practitioners, such as *abdi dalem* and ritual leaders, who hold authoritative roles in traditional ceremonies.
- Community elders, recognized for their deep understanding of customary values and historical contexts.
- Younger ceremony participants or observers, representing the perspective of the younger generation in cultural transmission.

This sampling method ensured that the data reflected a diverse yet culturally relevant range of insights.

3.3. Data Collection

Three main techniques were used:

- Observation. Attendance at ceremonies such as *Sekaten*, *Kirab Pusaka*, and *Tedhak Siten* to document language use (speech levels, context, speakers).
- Semi-structured interviews. Conducted with key informants to explore their views on language choice, ritual meaning, and intergenerational language transmission.
- Document analysis. Review of ceremonial texts, video recordings, and literature to supplement field data.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, involving:

- Transcription of interviews and field notes
- Coding based on themes (e.g., speech levels, function, identity)
- Interpretation using sociolinguistic frameworks (Fishman's domain theory, Duranti's ritual language theory)

3.5. Validity Measures

To ensure data credibility:

- Triangulation was applied across observation, interview, and document sources.
- Member checking was done by validating interpretations with informants.
- Thick description was used to provide cultural and linguistic context for readers.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Forms of Language Use in Ceremonial Contexts

4.1.1. Use of *Krama Inggil* in Ceremonial Domains

Fieldwork in Solo revealed that *Krama Inggil* is consistently used in ceremonial speech, particularly during formal royal and family-based rituals. For example, during the *Kirab Pusaka*, an elder (*abdi dalem*) announced the start of the procession using the phrase:

“*Kagem para rawuh, sumangga sami nyawiji wonten ing pitedahan pusaka dalem.*”

“To all attendees, please unite in witnessing the royal heirloom procession.”

Similarly, in a *Tedhak Siten* ceremony held in a local neighborhood, the ritual leader recited a traditional prayer passed down through generations:

“*Ya Gusti, paringana putra punika lampah ingkang rahayu, mituhu, saha migunani tumraping tiyang kathah.*”

“O Lord, grant this child a safe journey, obedience, and usefulness to others.”\

4.1.2. Interpretation and Theoretical Link

The consistent use of respectful vocabulary, elevated registers, and poetic expressions indicates that ceremonial contexts remain strong domains for the maintenance of *Krama Inggil*. In line with Fishman's domain theory, these rituals function as culturally reinforced settings where high-register language is preserved due to their association with tradition, hierarchy, and cultural identity. The formulaic and highly codified nature of ceremonial speech also reflects the community's efforts to sustain linguistic norms across generations.

4.1.3. Key Insights

Krama Inggil is actively used in both royal and community-based ceremonies.

Ceremonial language tends to be fixed, poetic, and highly respectful in tone.

These domains play an essential role in maintaining high-register Javanese, aligning with Fishman's theory of language use across social settings.

4.2. Symbolic and Cultural Functions of Ritual Language

Findings show that the ceremonial use of language carries strong symbolic significance. Interviewees consistently emphasized that linguistic choice reflects both respect and sacredness. As one ritual leader stated:

"Upacara iku dudu mung laku, nanging kudu nganggo basa sing njaga ajining dhiri lan ajining leluhur."

"A ceremony is not merely an act; it must use language that preserves dignity and honors the ancestors".

4.2.1. Interpretation and Cultural Meaning

The use of *Krama Inggil* in these settings operates as a deliberate performance of cultural identity. The elevated register becomes an integral component of the ritual itself, reinforcing core Javanese values such as obedience, respect, and humility. This linguistic performance aligns with traditional moral frameworks and strengthens communal perceptions of ceremonial propriety. Observations further indicated that audience members responded to ritual speech differently from everyday conversation. Many maintained silence, lowered their heads, or quietly translated phrases for younger relatives. Such behaviors reflect a shared understanding of the sacred function of ceremonial language and its role in shaping collective cultural experience.

4.3. Intergenerational Language Gap

Despite the continued use of formal Javanese in rituals, there is a clear generational divide in both understanding and usage. A 21-year-old student who participated in *Tedhak Siten* shared:

"Aku mung apal teksé, tapi ora paham maknané. Wong saiki luwih seneng nganggo basa Indonesia."

("I only memorized the text, but I don't understand the meaning. People today prefer to use Indonesian.")

This statement illustrates that while the performance of language persists, its functional competence is weakening among youth. In several cases, ceremonial phrases were recited from scripts without real comprehension. A teacher who regularly prepares students for cultural performances noted:

"Anak-anak bisa mbaca teks Krama, nanging kudu ditéri pangertosané. Pancen angel nek ora diajari saka cilik."

("Students can read *Krama* texts, but they need to be guided to understand them. It's hard if they weren't taught from a young age.")

These testimonies confirm Fishman's theory that when a language is limited to ceremonial domains without daily reinforcement, language shift is inevitable.

4.4. Ceremonial Language as a Site of Resistance and Preservation

Despite the declining competence among younger speakers, traditional ceremonies continue to function as important spaces for language maintenance. Even when full comprehension is limited, repeated exposure to ritual language provides opportunities for passive acquisition. For instance, during *Sekaten*, hundreds of attendees—both young and old—listen to *tembang macapat* performed in classical Javanese and accompanied by gamelan. Although many spectators may not grasp every lexical or poetic nuance, the rhythmic repetition supports the retention of linguistic structures and strengthens cultural familiarity.

A youth community leader in Solo described their ongoing initiative:

“*Kita ajari bocah-bocah maca lan ngerti tembangé. Mulaé angel, tapi nek wis seneng, dheweke dadi ngerti nilaié.*”

“We teach children to read and understand the lyrics. It is difficult at first, but once they enjoy it, they begin to understand its value.”

This example illustrates how ceremonial practices, when paired with informal educational efforts, can act as a form of cultural and linguistic resistance against erosion. By integrating traditional arts such as music and dance with contemporary interests and media platforms, communities can create meaningful pathways for younger generations to reconnect with heritage language. This approach reinforces not only linguistic exposure but also a sense of cultural continuity.

4.5. Challenges and Implications

The data reveal several key challenges related to the sustainability of Javanese ceremonial language. First, many young participants have limited exposure to Javanese in daily communication, particularly its formal registers. Even within households where Javanese is spoken, interactions frequently shift to Indonesian, reducing opportunities for natural acquisition. Second, formal education tends to emphasize rote memorization rather than culturally grounded learning, resulting in limited functional understanding of ritual language. Third, the commodification of traditional ceremonies—especially for tourism—sometimes leads to simplification or alteration of linguistic elements. In several public performances, for example, *Krama* was replaced with Indonesian to improve audience accessibility, thereby diluting the authenticity of ritual expression.

A cultural observer noted this concern:

“*Yen basa diganti mung kanggo wisatawan, kuwi iso ngilangaké makna sejatiné upacara.*”

“If the language is changed just for tourists, it can erase the true meaning of the ceremony.”

4.6. Implications

These challenges highlight the need for strategies that extend beyond ritual performance alone. Strengthening the presence of Javanese in homes, schools, and local media, along with fostering intergenerational dialogue, is essential for ensuring long-term preservation. Such efforts support not only linguistic competence but also reinforce the cultural values embedded in ceremonial practices, helping maintain the integrity of Javanese heritage in Solo.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the role of high-register Javanese (*Krama Inggil*) in sustaining cultural identity through traditional ceremonies in Solo City. The empirical findings indicate that ceremonial language continues to serve as a significant marker of Javanese identity, despite the broader shift toward Indonesian in everyday interactions. In rituals such as *Kirab Pusaka*, *Tedhak Siten*, and *Sekaten*, the presence of ritual expressions, poetic forms, and elevated registers constructs a linguistic atmosphere that is both culturally symbolic and socially meaningful. The use of *Krama Inggil* within these settings extends beyond literal communication: it embodies inherited values, conveys authority, and reflects collective memory, thereby reaffirming cultural norms and social relationships.

The study also identifies a clear intergenerational disparity in comprehension and functional proficiency. Younger participants frequently engage with ceremonial language through memorized texts rather than through meaningful understanding. This pattern suggests that while ceremonial practices remain linguistically rich, the deeper competence needed for sustained language vitality is weakening, particularly among youth. Nevertheless, the findings show that traditional ceremonies continue to operate as important domains of exposure and cultural reinforcement. Even when the understanding is partial, participation in ritual activities introduces younger generations to linguistic structures and cultural expressions that may otherwise be absent from daily life. When supported by community-driven initiatives, these ceremonies have the potential to contribute to broader cultural and linguistic preservation efforts.

6. Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, strengthening the vitality of the Javanese language requires coordinated efforts across multiple social domains. This includes:

Integrating culturally grounded approaches to Javanese instruction within formal education.

Encouraging sustained use of Javanese within family settings, particularly in early childhood.

Utilizing digital platforms, creative media, and youth-oriented content to enhance the relevance of Javanese for younger speakers. These measures would help ensure that the language remains a lived cultural practice rather than being confined to symbolic ritual functions

7. Limitations and Future Directions

This study is limited by its focus on a single regional context (Solo City) and by the scope of its participant sample. Future research may extend the analysis to other Javanese communities to offer comparative insights into ceremonial language use. Further investigation into emerging domains—such as digital communication, educational practices, and youth cultural spaces—would also enrich the understanding of language maintenance across a wider range of social settings.

8. Final Reflection

Overall, the study underscores that while ceremonial language remains a vital expression of cultural identity in Solo, its preservation depends on sustained intergenerational transmission and institutional support. Strengthening Javanese across both ritual and everyday domains will be essential for ensuring its continuity as a dynamic component of cultural life.

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