



Tradition and Modernity of Humanity (TMH)

Journal homepage: <https://talenta.usu.ac.id/tmh>



Jawa Deli Festival: Performance of Javanese Cultural Identity in North Sumatra

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 March 2026

Revised 27 March 2026

Accepted 25 April 2026

Available online 23 May 2026

E-ISSN: 2962-1208

P-ISSN: 2807-3118

How to cite:

Pradipta R. Jawa Deli Festival: Performance of Javanese Cultural Identity in North Sumatra. Tradit Mod Humanit. 2026;6(2):71–6.

ABSTRACT

The Javanese ethnic community in Deli, North Sumatra, faces challenges in maintaining cultural practices amid the dynamics of a multicultural society and ongoing social change. These conditions call for revitalization strategies that focus not only on preservation but also on reviving traditions to ensure they remain relevant to younger generations and contemporary society. In this context, cultural festivals serve as vital social spaces for showcasing, negotiating, and transmitting the community's cultural identity. This study aims to analyze the Deli Javanese Festival as a performative arena that both represents and revitalizes the cultural identity of the Javanese community in diaspora. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach within the framework of Performance Studies. Research data was collected through direct observation of performance conceptualizers at the festival, in-depth interviews with organizing community groups and artists, information gathering via social media platforms covering festival activities, visual documentation and event archives, as well as a review of relevant references and literature. Analysis was conducted by interpreting the texts and contexts of the performances to understand how performative practices construct cultural meaning, collective memory, and the process of identity negotiation within a multiethnic society. The research findings indicate that the Jawa Deli Festival serves as a cultural space that facilitates both the expression of traditions and the creative adaptation of Javanese arts such as Kuda Lumping, Wayang, and Reog to ensure they remain relevant to a multicultural audience and younger generations. The performances presented serve not only as entertainment but also as a social mechanism that strengthens community cohesion and fosters cultural pride. These findings suggest that festivals can be an effective strategy for cultural revitalization, where traditions are not only preserved but also creatively and adaptively revived so that they remain relevant and sustainable in modern society.

Keywords: Performance studies; Jawa Deli Festival; Ethnic identity

ABSTRAK

Komunitas etnis Jawa di Deli, Sumatera Utara, menghadapi tantangan dalam mempertahankan praktik budaya di tengah dinamika masyarakat multikultural dan perubahan sosial yang terus berlangsung. Kondisi ini menuntut adanya strategi revitalisasi yang tidak hanya berfokus pada pelestarian, tetapi juga pada upaya menghidupkan kembali tradisi agar tetap relevan bagi generasi muda dan masyarakat kontemporer. Dalam konteks ini, festival budaya berperan sebagai ruang sosial yang vital untuk menampilkan, menegosiasikan, dan mewariskan identitas budaya komunitas tersebut. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis Festival Jawa Deli sebagai arena performatif yang merepresentasikan sekaligus merevitalisasi identitas budaya komunitas Jawa di perantauan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dalam kerangka Studi Pertunjukan (*Performance Studies*). Data penelitian dikumpulkan melalui observasi langsung terhadap pihak-pihak yang merancang pertunjukan di festival, wawancara mendalam dengan kelompok penyelenggara dan seniman, pengumpulan informasi melalui platform media sosial yang meliput kegiatan festival, dokumentasi visual dan arsip acara, serta tinjauan terhadap referensi dan literatur yang relevan. Analisis dilakukan dengan menafsirkan teks dan konteks pertunjukan untuk memahami bagaimana praktik performatif membentuk makna budaya, ingatan kolektif, dan proses negosiasi identitas di dalam masyarakat multietnis. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Festival Jawa Deli berfungsi sebagai ruang budaya yang memfasilitasi ekspresi tradisi sekaligus adaptasi kreatif seni Jawa—seperti



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<https://doi.org/10.32734/tmh.v6i1.26830>

Kuda Lumping, Wayang, dan Reog—agar tetap relevan bagi audiens multikultural dan generasi muda. Pertunjukan yang disajikan tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai hiburan, tetapi juga sebagai mekanisme sosial yang memperkuat kohesi komunitas dan menumbuhkan kebanggaan budaya. Temuan ini mengindikasikan bahwa festival dapat menjadi strategi yang efektif untuk revitalisasi budaya, di mana tradisi tidak sekadar dilestarikan, melainkan juga dihidupkan kembali secara kreatif dan adaptif agar tetap relevan serta berkelanjutan dalam masyarakat modern.

Kata kunci: Studi pertunjukan; Festival Jawa Deli; Identitas etnik

1. Introduction

Culture is the identity of a society that continues to evolve over time. Amid the tide of modernization and globalization, many traditional cultures are experiencing a decline in their practices and very existence, including the culture of the Javanese Deli community residing in North Sumatra. Many traditions and arts that were once an integral part of daily life are now beginning to be forgotten or marginalized. This phenomenon calls for cultural revitalization efforts that is, the revival of cultural values, practices, and expressions through various creative forms, including artistic performances. One such revitalization effort is realized through the Jawa Deli Festival, held on April 12–13, 2025, at the Cipto Budoyo Arts Center in Helvetia Timur, North Sumatra. According to an interview with Panji Suroso from the Department of Performing Arts, “This festival was initiated by the Cipto Budoyo Studio in collaboration with the Ministry, and involves more than 500 participants from the local community, students, and dance studios in the North Sumatra region.” This performance features a variety of traditional arts that represent the acculturation of Javanese culture with local culture, such as Javanese Deli wayang orang, ketoprakdor, jaranan dance, yamong, and other Javanese dances.

This festival not only showcases traditional performing arts but also a fusion of Javanese and Sumatran traditional music, as well as other performance elements such as drama, physical theater, choreography, stone jumping from Nias, and narrative performances based on myths and modern stories. Thus, this festival is not merely an arts performance but also a platform for creating new performing arts capable of strengthening the cultural identity of the Javanese Deli community in their diaspora. The importance of this festival is also evident in the organizers’ stated goal: to revive Javanese culture, which has long been neglected by the Javanese community in North Sumatra. Beyond serving as a medium for cultural preservation, the festival acts as a catalyst for the emergence of a new identity through the fusion of Javanese ethnicity and local culture, thereby fostering cultural acculturation that can be carried forward into other artistic forums and explored within academic contexts.

Thus, the Jawa Deli Festival serves as a concrete example of cultural revitalization efforts through the creation of performing arts, which not only preserve traditions but also foster creative innovation in the arts, while strengthening the social and cultural identity of the Jawa Deli community in North Sumatra. A study of the performances in this festival is essential to understanding how performing arts practices contribute to cultural revitalization and the formation of cultural identity within the local community.

Cultural revitalization is a vital effort in preserving the sustainability of a community’s identity amid the tide of modernization. Among the Javanese Deli community in North Sumatra, this revitalization is evident through the Javanese Deli Festival, a cultural space that revives performing arts, symbolic rituals, traditional cuisine, folk games, and historical narratives tied to the journey of the Javanese community in their adopted homeland. This festival is not merely a spectacle but serves as a social-performative space where traditions are creatively renegotiated to meet the needs of the times.

From the perspective of performance studies, Richard Schechner asserts that performance is not an entirely new act, but rather a form of behavior that is repeated, contextualized, and reconstructed according to the situation. He states that “performance is twice-behaved behavior” that is, behavior that is restored and given new meaning through the process of performance in public spaces. This concept offers an understanding that every element of a festival dance, music, costumes, movement, and even rituals is the result of cultural reconstruction driven by social needs, identity, and collective imagination. Furthermore, Schechner also states that “performances mark identities, bend time, reshape and adorn the body.” This statement underscores that performance is not merely representation but also a process that marks identity, bridges the past and the present, and shapes the body and action as cultural mediums. In the context of the Jawa Deli Festival, performance serves as a means for the Javanese community to revive ancestral memories and strengthen ethnic identity in the public sphere. Within this framework, the festival not only showcases

traditions but also creates a space for negotiation between cultural heritage and contemporary realities. Each performance becomes a process of meaning-making in which cultural actors artists, communities, and organizers actively revive traditions without being trapped in a static repetition of the past. The cultural revitalization that occurs is not merely “preservation,” but a creative transformation relevant to the current social conditions of society. “A festival is an event, a social phenomenon, found in almost all human cultures” (Fallasi, 1987). Meanwhile, the word “festival” in Latin derives from the root word “festa,” which can be translated as “celebration” in Indonesian.

Through a performance studies approach, research on the Jawa Deli Festival is essential for understanding how performative actions function as strategies for cultural revitalization, how ethnic identity is negotiated, and how the festival contributes to building social cohesion, community pride, and the sustainability of traditions. Thus, this study contributes to viewing the festival not merely as a cultural event, but as a performative process that shapes identity, collective memory, and the social dynamics of the Jawa Deli community in the modern era.

Cultural revitalization has become a key issue in the fields of art, anthropology, and performance studies, particularly among communities navigating the currents of modernization and migration. For the Javanese Deli community in North Sumatra a community that has resided for centuries in colonial plantation areas and now lives as an integral part of urban society cultural revitalization is not merely seen as a repetition of tradition, but as a means of preserving collective identity amidst social change. One prominent form of revitalization is the organization of the Jawa Deli Festival, a cultural space that brings back performing arts, rituals, cuisine, traditional games, and the community’s historical narratives into the public sphere.

2. Literature Review

This study is grounded in the Performance Studies paradigm, which views performance as a social practice rather than merely an aesthetic expression. Richard Schechner (2013) defines performance as “restored behavior” that is, actions that are repeated and reinterpreted within a specific social context. This concept is essential for understanding cultural festivals as processes of reconstructing meaning, rather than merely preserving traditions.

Within the framework of performative anthropology, Victor Turner (1982) explains that festivals and rituals create liminal spaces transitional spaces that enable the transformation of collective identity. Cultural festivals serve as arenas for social reflection where communities can negotiate their positions within the broader social structure.

Furthermore, Dwight Conquergood (2002) emphasizes that performance is an epistemological practice through which communities produce and transmit local knowledge. This perspective is relevant for understanding the Jawa Deli Festival as a medium for articulating the identity and historical experiences of the Jawa Deli community.

In classical anthropological studies, Anthony F. C. Wallace (1956) introduced the concept of revitalization movements, which refers to a community’s conscious effort to reconstruct a cultural system perceived to be under pressure. This concept serves as a theoretical foundation for understanding festivals as a cultural strategy for coping with modernization and marginalization.

Contemporary research in journals such as the *Journal of Heritage Tourism* and the *International Journal of Cultural Policy* indicates that cultural festivals often serve as instruments for revitalizing local identity as well as strategies for community-based cultural development (Quinn, 2005; Smith, 2006). These studies confirm that festivals are not merely celebrations, but social practices that foster community cohesion and reinforce narratives of collective identity.

In line with this, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) asserts in her study of heritage that cultural heritage is a contemporary cultural production that refers to the past. In this context, festivals serve as a curatorial mechanism that transforms living cultural practices into publicly articulated symbols of identity.

The discourse on cultural identity in cultural studies is also relevant to the context of the Jawa Deli Festival. Stuart Hall (1990) argues that identity is not a fixed essence, but rather a construction that is constantly in flux. Cultural festivals provide a representational space where identity is negotiated and produced through performance.

In the context of collective memory, Jan Assmann (2011) argues that cultural memory is transmitted through symbols, rituals, and performances. A study in the *Memory Studies Journal* confirms that public cultural

events serve as a medium for the actualization of collective memory in postcolonial and migrant communities (Erll, 2011). This is relevant to the history of the Deli Javanese community, which emerged as a result of migration and cultural interaction in North Sumatra.

Research on festivals in Southeast Asia indicates that cultural festivals often serve as political arenas for the representation and negotiation of local identities within the context of the nation-state (Picard & Robinson, 2006). In the Indonesian context, studies in **Indonesia and the Malay World** show that ethnic festivals function both as a medium for the articulation of local identities and as a strategy for integration within the national discourse.

These studies demonstrate that cultural festivals cannot be understood merely as the preservation of traditions, but as dynamic practices that involve power relations, the cultural economy, and the production of meaning. In this context, the Jawa Deli Festival can be positioned as a performative space that revitalizes traditions while simultaneously establishing the legitimacy of the Jawa Deli identity within the contemporary Indonesian cultural landscape.

Thus, the relevance of the literature review to the empirical data on the Jawa Deli Festival indicates that this festival serves as a socio-performative space that brings together memory, acculturation, creativity, and social cohesion, while also functioning as a concrete strategy for cultural revitalization within the context of contemporary Jawa Deli society in North Sumatra.

3. Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, which emphasizes a deep understanding of socio-cultural phenomena within their natural context and provides a detailed account of how processes unfold, without prioritizing numerical measurements or statistical generalizations. According to Moleong (2017), qualitative research aims to “describe, interpret, and understand complex social phenomena from the participants’ perspective,” thereby enabling researchers to capture the dynamics of social interaction, symbolic meanings, and cultural contexts that cannot be revealed through quantitative methods.

In the context of the Jawa Deli Festival, this approach is highly relevant because the festival is a performative event involving various cultural actors, audiences, rituals, music, dance, and historical narratives. Qualitative descriptive research allows researchers to describe how performative actions (restored behavior), as articulated by Richard Schechner (2006), are employed as strategies for cultural revitalization. Every movement, piece of music, costume, and ritual presented at the festival constitutes a reconstruction of traditions revived within a contemporary social context, thus requiring a research approach capable of capturing meaning, experience, and social interaction holistically.

Furthermore, Creswell (2014) emphasizes that descriptive qualitative research allows researchers to explain phenomena through rich narratives, thematic categories, and relevant contexts, enabling readers to gain a deep understanding of processes, experiences, and social dynamics. Using participant observation, in-depth interviews, and audiovisual documentation, this study maps how the festival functions as an arena for the negotiation of Deli Javanese ethnic identity, a means of transmitting cultural values, and a medium for strengthening social cohesion.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), qualitative research emphasizes the importance of interaction between the researcher and participants, as well as flexibility in capturing complex, ambiguous, and contextual phenomena. This is particularly crucial in performance studies because festivals are multidimensional phenomena that simultaneously involve symbolic, aesthetic, social, and historical dimensions. Thus, qualitative descriptive methods go beyond mere data collection; they delve into the meanings behind cultural practices and analyze how performative actions shape identity, collective memory, and strategies for cultural revitalization. Through an interactive interview with Dr. Panji Suroso, S.Pd., M.Si an academic and cultural revitalization consultant the Jawa Deli Festival highlighted that this art form serves as a symbolic space where the Javanese diaspora can contribute to preserving ancestral culture through adaptive efforts that present Javanese expressions in Deli. This argument was also expressed by the event organizer, Sari Utomo, who stated, “We aim to revive Javanese culture, which has begun to fade in the diaspora of North Sumatra. The event was attended by 500 participants, including artists, students, and cultural practitioners from North Sumatra.”

This festival not only showcases Javanese traditional performances but also provides a space for collaboration across various forms of contemporary art. Through this series of events, we can also see how social spaces are revitalized through a series of performances. Agricultural products become artistic spaces,

and community social relations become the dramatic backdrop of the festival series. Thus, this festival plays a vital role in the pulse of Indonesian culture. This demonstrates that the festival is capable of fostering innovation without closing the door on contemporary aesthetics.

4. Result and Discussion

Research findings indicate that the emergence of Javanese communities in Deli Serdang has not only fostered social diversity but has also shaped an arts and culture ecosystem deeply rooted in Javanese culture. These communities play an active role in preserving traditions through various cultural practices, including dance, music, rituals, cuisine, and traditional games, which are then organized into the Deli Javanese Festival series. The presence of the Javanese community in Deli Serdang is part of the internal migration in Indonesia that occurred during the Dutch colonial period. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, the Dutch colonial government established tobacco plantations and other commodity plantations in the Deli region of North Sumatra. The significant demand for plantation labor spurred voluntary resettlement programs and a contract labor system, resulting in the relocation of thousands of Javanese workers to Deli Serdang. According to Nasution (2004), “Javanese workers were brought to Deli as plantation laborers to meet the labor needs of the rapidly expanding tobacco plantations.” This migration was not merely an economic matter but also brought Javanese culture, traditions, and social systems to the North Sumatra region. Over time, the Javanese community in Deli Serdang evolved into a social group with its own social structure, culture, and traditional institutions, while also becoming part of the local multiethnic society. Sedyawati (2006) notes that “The Javanese community settled in Deli successfully established a social network that preserved their traditions and performing arts, despite being far from Java.”

The presence of the Javanese community in Deli Serdang has also influenced the development of local arts and culture, including wayang performances, traditional dance, gamelan music, traditional rituals, and local cuisine. This community utilizes festivals, traditional celebrations, and social activities as a medium for cultural transmission, ensuring that Javanese traditions are passed on to younger generations. According to Murgiyanto (2016), “Javanese traditions brought to the diaspora are not merely preserved but reconstructed and adapted to the local context, thereby creating a hybrid culture that remains rooted in Javanese identity.”

Thus, the Javanese community in Deli Serdang is not merely present as an economic migrant group but also as cultural actors building a Javanese arts and culture ecosystem in the diaspora, which subsequently serves as a foundation for cultural revitalization through festivals, performances, and collective activities.

Building on the research of Panji Suroso, an academic artist who fostered cultural awareness originating from the Cipto Budoyo Art Center in Helvetia Timur, North Sumatra, an artistic expression was developed and packaged into a festival space. This initiative began in 2022 under the title “Javanese Deli Festival.” This space for expression serves as the articulation of a cultural movement rooted in Javanese art within the Deli community of North Sumatra.

This festival serves as a collective space for cultural regeneration, where older generations pass on cultural values, practices, and knowledge to younger generations. Through performances, music, and rituals, the festival becomes a medium for direct learning experiences that allow the younger generation to internalize Javanese traditions and adapt them to a contemporary context. In other words, the festival not only showcases culture but also serves as an educational and social mechanism, ensuring the sustainability of cultural practices within urban communities.

Furthermore, the festival series creates a collective memory that unites community members. Every element from gamelan music and the Gambang Semarang dance to traditional cuisine functions as a symbolic code reminding the community of its history of migration, struggles, and Javanese social values. This collective memory then becomes the foundation of the community’s identity, strengthening social cohesion, and shaping a cultural narrative passed down from generation to generation.

Research findings confirm that the Jawa Deli Festival is not merely a spectacle, but a living cultural ecosystem. The festival fosters connections among communities, strengthens a sense of togetherness, and revitalizes traditions through structured, repetitive, and creative performative practices. Thus, the festival serves a dual role as both a venue for cultural recreation and a mechanism for the regeneration of identity, affirming the continuity of Javanese culture in Deli Serdang. In terms of performance format, the festival’s structure also embodies the spirit of diverse expression. This is evident in the series of performances presented, which provide space for innovative engagement across various artistic disciplines. This is particularly visible in one performance by students from the Performing Arts Program, who showcased the

art of pantomime. This clearly demonstrates that the festival also serves as a space where diverse ideas, concepts, and cultural spirits converge.

This phenomenon is concretely manifested through the Jawa Deli Festival, which serves as a performative arena for cultural revitalization. The festival brings together various elements of Javanese culture traditional dance, gamelan and keroncong music, symbolic rituals, cuisine, and folk games into a structured series of activities. Each element of the festival is not merely representative but serves as a medium of cultural communication, enabling the younger generation to learn, internalize, and pass on traditions through direct experience (experiential learning).

From a performance studies perspective, the festival functions as a process of cultural reconstruction through performative acts (restored behavior), as articulated by Richard Schechner (2006). The movements, music, and symbols presented at the festival do not merely reenact the past but impart new meanings relevant to contemporary social conditions. In other words, the Jawa Deli Festival serves as a cultural codification that builds a new generation, unites collective memory, and strengthens community identity.

5. Conclusion

The Javanese community in Deli Serdang, North Sumatra, was formed through the migration of workers during the Dutch colonial period, when the region developed into a center for tobacco plantations and other commodities. This migration not only brought labor but also introduced the traditions, cultural practices, and social values of Javanese society. Over time, this culture evolved, forming a strong community and giving rise to an arts and cultural ecosystem in this diaspora. The existence of this community created a social space that allowed traditions to be preserved, passed down, and become an integral part of the ethnic identity of the Javanese community in the region. In this context, the Jawa Deli Festival serves as a cultural space that revives traditions through various forms of performance. The festival brings together dance, music, symbolic rituals, cuisine, and traditional games into a structured series of activities.

Through these festivals, various cultural elements are not only presented as entertainment but also serve as a means of cultural communication that conveys the history, values, and identity of the community to the wider public, including the younger generation.

This festival also serves as a medium for cultural transmission across generations. Every performance, symbol, and cultural practice presented becomes a means of transmitting cultural values, knowledge, and experiences to the next generation. This process builds a collective memory that strengthens community identity, fosters a sense of togetherness, and preserves the continuity of Javanese culture in Deli Serdang.

Thus, the Deli Javanese Festival functions not only as a cultural spectacle but as a living space for evolving traditional practices. Through community participation, the creativity of artists, and the social interactions that take place within it, this festival demonstrates that traditions can endure, adapt, and remain relevant to modern society.

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