

Critical Reading within the Framework of Kasepuhan Banten Kidul Tradition

Eka Nurul Mualimah¹, Yeti Mulyati², Andoyo Sastromihardjo³, Vismaia S. Damayanti⁴, Agus Salim⁵

^{1,2,3,4} Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, ⁵ Universitas Setia Budhi Rangkasbitung

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Abstract

This research seeks to examine how critical reading practices are embedded within the everyday life of the Kasepuhan Banten Kidul indigenous community. Employing a qualitative approach through an exploratory study design, the study investigates the meanings and critical thinking processes that emerge organically and contextually in the community's sociocultural setting. Data were obtained through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, and subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that the local traditions of Kasepuhan Banten Kidul not only serve to preserve cultural heritage but also function as a discursive space that cultivates critical reasoning, particularly in decision-making, the transmission of moral values, and the interpretation of daily events.

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Corresponding Author:

Eka Nurul Mualimah

Institution: Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

Email: eka88nurul@upi.edu

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is no longer understood merely as the act of recognizing text, but rather as a process of deeply understanding, analyzing, and evaluating meaning [1]. In the context of modern society, critical reading is often associated with formal education systems and text-based academic instruction. However, such approaches frequently overlook alternative forms of literacy that thrive within traditional communities. On the other hand, indigenous groups such as the Kasepuhan community in Banten possess a wealth of knowledge passed down through generations via oral traditions, symbols, and cultural practices. This local knowledge is not only rich in moral and spiritual values, but also encompasses processes of reflective and critical meaning-making. Unfortunately, these traditions are often viewed as inferior to academic literacy, despite containing strong elements of critical thinking [2]. The ability to understand and interpret meanings embedded in folktales, proverbs, traditional rituals, and cultural symbols represents a form of reading practice that is not merely literal, but also deeply contextual. This process demonstrates that indigenous communities, although unfamiliar with the formal term "critical reading," have long practiced its principles in their everyday lives [3]. This insight provides an important foundation for re-evaluating our definitions and approaches to critical literacy.

Research on critical reading has generally focused on students within formal educational settings, using written texts as primary objects of study. However, this approach has yet to significantly engage with traditional communities that possess distinct systems of knowledge. In fact, within communities such as Kasepuhan Banten Kidul, one can find organically developed practices of critical literacy that emerge without institutional intervention. Literacy in indigenous

societies is not shaped by books or curricula, but rather by lived experience and sociocultural interaction [4].

The Kasepuhan community is recognized as an indigenous group that continues to uphold ancestral traditions, including value systems, social structures, and ways of life [5]. Within this community, learning occurs organically through oral narratives, deliberation, and participation in customary activities [6]. Activities such as listening to folktales from elders, attending traditional ceremonies, and engaging in village meetings serve as rich, meaningful learning experiences. It is within these contexts that the practice of critical reading, framed by tradition, begins to emerge. This phenomenon is particularly compelling, as it illustrates that critical thinking skills are not exclusive to those with formal education. Even in conditions with limited access to technology and written information, indigenous communities retain the capacity to evaluate, reflect upon, and interpret information critically [7]. They read reality in their own way through symbols and narratives embedded in their culture.

This study aims to explore how critical reading practices emerge and develop within the everyday life of the Kasepuhan community. The main focus lies in how tradition and local wisdom serve as frameworks for shaping critical thinking skills. Using a qualitative approach, this research seeks to uncover the meanings embedded in the community's cultural interpretation processes, particularly in oral and symbolic literacy practices. Additionally, the study aims to establish a foundational basis for developing a contextualized model of critical literacy that is relevant to indigenous communities. The findings are expected to contribute not only to the advancement of literacy studies but also to serve as a foundation for educational policy-making that is more inclusive of cultural diversity. By recognizing tradition as an integral part of literacy, this research opens up a space for dialogue between modern education and local wisdom. Thus, it is essential to reflect on existing literacy education approaches that remain overly focused on written texts. Local traditions and cultures are not merely remnants of the past, but living sources of knowledge and reflective practice.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with an exploratory research design. This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of critical reading practices within the cultural context of the Kasepuhan indigenous community—practices that cannot be measured quantitatively. Qualitative research allows the researcher to capture cultural meanings, symbols, and oral practices that play a significant role in the community's critical literacy processes [8].

The research was conducted in three Kasepuhan communities in the Banten region: Kasepuhan Citorek, Kasepuhan Ciptagelar, and Kasepuhan Cisungsang. These locations were selected due to their strong preservation of traditional values and their vibrant and active sociocultural structures. The research subjects consisted of: (1) traditional leaders (olot, commonly referred to as adat heads and storytellers), (2) community members actively involved in traditional activities (rituals, deliberations), (3) Kasepuhan youth who serve as the inheritors of tradition, and (4) local cultural observers and educators (Dc Aryadi).

The subjects were selected using purposive sampling, considering their involvement in and understanding of local culture and literacy practices [9]. Data were collected through the following methods:

1. *In-depth Interview*

Conducted with traditional leaders, storytellers, and key community members to explore their understanding of meaning-making processes related to folktales, cultural symbols, and the interpretation of values embedded in tradition.

2. *Participant Observation*

The researcher took part in traditional activities, such as ceremonies, village deliberations, and storytelling sessions, to observe social interactions and how the community “reads” meaning from cultural symbols and narratives.

3. Documentation

This included the collection of folktales, oral recordings, photographs of traditional activities, and field notes. These documents served as supporting sources for data analysis.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis [10]. The procedure included (1) Data reduction This step involved filtering and selecting relevant data related to critical reading practices. (2) Categorization Data were grouped into themes, such as the meaning of folktales, reflection of traditional values, or critical reasoning in deliberations. (3) Interpretation of Meaning This involved understanding the cultural context and linking it to critical reading theory (4) Data Presentation the findings were presented in the form of a rich narrative description, highlighting the contextual elements

3. RESULTS

Oral Tradition as a Reflective and Critical Medium

Folktales, legends, and the wisdom of the elders are integral parts of the cultural life of the Kasepuhan community[11]. In the activities of listening to and sharing stories, the community does not merely passively receive the content of the tales; rather, they engage in a process of meaning-making, reflecting on the values implied within them. Many stories contain symbols, irony, and even social critiques of behaviors that deviate from customary practices. Folktales about characters who violate ancestral rules and face negative consequences encourage the community to reflect on cause-and-effect relationships, justice, and ethical living. This process demonstrates an ability to interpret the meaning behind texts and relate them to social contexts, which is a characteristic of critical reading. Oral tradition plays a central role in the life of the Kasepuhan Banten community. The stories passed down through generations serve not only as entertainment but also as a means of character formation, value transmission, and collective reflection. In each story told by the elders, there are moral messages, ethics, and social warnings conveyed symbolically and narratively.

The interviews with several storytellers and traditional leaders revealed that the process of storytelling is never one-way. Listeners, both children and adults, are often given the opportunity to ask questions or respond to the stories with their own opinions. This interaction demonstrates that the community is accustomed to engaging with information actively, rather than passively receiving it.

One of the frequently told stories is the legend of a character who violates customary laws and then suffers a bad fate. In the telling of this story, the storyteller not only explains the plot but also encourages the listeners to reflect on the consequences of each action and relate them to real life. This process creates a strong reflective space in which the community is invited to think critically about cause and effect, morality, and social responsibility. Interestingly, most of the folktales in the Kasepuhan Banten Kidul community do not have a definitive ending. Some versions of the stories are left open-ended, allowing the listeners to provide their own interpretations. This reveals that the oral tradition in this community does not promote a singular understanding but instead values the diversity of meanings, which is a key characteristic of critical reading. For example, in a storytelling session observed by the researcher in Kasepuhan Ciptagelar, a storyteller ended his tale with the sentence, "That's the story of our ancestors; now it's your turn to judge for yourselves." This sentence reflects an invitation to think and interpret independently, rather than simply receiving the message dogmatically.

Figure. The Story of Kasepuhan Guradog 'Putra Munggul Pawenang

Oral tradition also serves as a medium for delivering social criticism in a subtle manner [12]. Many stories raise themes of injustice, greed, or abuse of power, but are packaged in the form of animal tales or mythical creatures. This technique allows the community to express criticism of real-world conditions without directly confronting the involved parties, representing a form of critical literacy strategy within the context of local culture. Even in humorous stories or anecdotes, the community is able to evaluate characters from a sharp moral perspective. They do not merely laugh at the humor but also understand the irony, recognize the satire, and see reflections of daily life in the story. This indicates the ability to read between the lines, uncover implied meanings, and develop a critical attitude toward reality.

The learning process through oral storytelling also takes place informally and continues throughout time [13]. Stories are not only shared at night but also during farming, while resting, or during family events. This pattern demonstrates that critical reading practices are not limited to the classroom but become an integral part of daily social and cultural life [4].

In many observation sessions, it was found that children are also actively engaged in responding to stories. They often ask about the reasons behind a character's actions and even suggest alternative attitudes or decisions the character could have made. Such responses indicate that critical thinking skills begin to develop early through interactions with stories and the role of parents or elders as facilitators of discussion. In addition to folk tales, proverbs and local expressions also form part of the oral tradition, carrying profound meanings. Proverbs like "ngindung ka waktu, ngabapa ka jaman" are often used to signify an adaptive attitude while still preserving traditional values. The community is invited to interpret this expression contextually, depending on the situation at hand. This shows the ability to adjust meaning, which is also a component of critical reading skills.

The process of meaning-making from stories also occurs collectively. After the story is shared, the community often discusses it in small groups, both formally and informally. These discussions strengthen reflective thinking, as individuals gain perspectives from others and learn to consider various viewpoints. This finding emphasizes that oral tradition is not only a tool for transferring knowledge but also a medium for forming critical and reflective attitudes within the community. Stories not only contain messages but also teach how to evaluate, consider, and respond to life consciously. Furthermore, the presence of cultural leaders and storytellers as cultural educators plays a crucial role in fostering a culture of critical thinking in the community. They are not only narrators but also facilitators of dialogue and guides in the process of

interpreting stories. This positions oral tradition as part of a sustainable and grounded non-formal education system.

Musyawarah Adat as a Space for Collective Critical Thinking

The musyawarah or community deliberation, which is commonly held in traditional decision-making processes, becomes an arena where critical thinking practices actively take place [14]. In this process, every community member, especially cultural leaders and elders, is given space to express their opinions, assess arguments, and evaluate decisions based on traditional values..

Musyawarah adat is one of the important pillars in the social structure of the Kasepuhan community (). In the musyawarah forum, various important decisions related to communal life, such as determining planting times, resolving conflicts, and establishing customary regulations, are collectively decided through long and in-depth discussions. Musyawarah is not only a decision-making mechanism but also an arena where collective critical thinking practices naturally develop.

Picture. of a deliberation to determine the date of Seren Taun



Observations indicate that in traditional deliberations, every individual, be it the customary leader, community figures, or ordinary members has an equal opportunity to express their views. They are invited to assess situations, propose solutions, and critique others' opinions while upholding ethical standards of speech. This reflects a dialogical culture that supports the development of community-based critical thinking skills. A clear example can be seen during the process of determining the rice planting schedule in Kasepuhan Citorek. In this deliberation, the community considers various factors such as weather, the lunar position, natural signs, and past experiences. Every proposal is openly responded to and collectively evaluated. Debate is not avoided but is managed in a respectful and communal atmosphere. This process indicates a natural practice of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of arguments within traditional deliberations.

In addition to considering concrete facts, traditional deliberations also provide space for cultural and spiritual values. However, these values are not accepted unquestioningly; the community often reinterprets the symbolic meanings of tradition to make them relevant to the current context. This indicates that traditional values are also critically interpreted, rather than accepted dogmatically. In deliberations, the ability to listen is also an essential part of the critical thinking process [15]. The community does not only speak, but also trains itself to listen actively, understand others' arguments, and respond proportionally. In some cases, proposals that were initially rejected may be accepted after being clarified or reformulated by other members of the deliberation..

This study found that traditional deliberations function as a space for intergenerational learning. Children and teenagers in the Kasepuhan community often attend these forums as

listeners. Their presence opens opportunities for the early development of critical thinking awareness, as they witness firsthand how their community processes information, engages in healthy debates, and makes collective decisions. Interestingly, traditional deliberations do not use a voting or majority rule system. Decisions are made through consensus, after all arguments have been discussed and a common ground is reached. This creates a lengthy deliberative process, but one that allows for deeper thinking and balanced responses to diverse perspectives. It serves as a real example of democracy rooted in local values, grounded in critical logic and social harmony.

Interviews with several traditional leaders revealed that the community views deliberation not merely as a decision-making mechanism, but also as a space for practicing critical thinking and social responsibility. They refer to it as a “school of life” because it is where people learn to understand cause and effect, risks, and the consequences of their decisions. As an open discussion forum, traditional deliberation also provides room for expressing criticism of certain social conditions. For example, in cases of land conflict or external disturbances, community members voice their concerns using both symbolic and direct language. Criticism is conveyed collectively rather than individually, which strengthens solidarity and a shared sense of responsibility. This reflects the cultivation of critical awareness within a communal framework.

Symbols and Cultural Practices as Texts to Be Read

In the tradition of the Kasepuhan Banten Kidul community, many cultural symbols are an integral part of daily life, such as the structure of traditional houses, ceremonial clothing, village layout, and agricultural rituals. The community not only recognizes these symbols in their physical form but also understands the philosophical meanings embedded within them. For example, the structure of traditional houses—built without nails and oriented in a specific direction—reflects not just architectural technique but conveys messages about harmony with nature and balance in life. This knowledge is passed down through discussions, observation, and intergenerational interpretation, which indirectly trains the community to read and critically interpret cultural texts.

This study found that within the indigenous community of Kasepuhan Banten Kidul, cultural symbols and practices are not merely preserved as ritual forms, but are also deeply understood as part of social communication. Elements such as the architecture of traditional houses, village layout, planting patterns, traditional clothing, and movements in customary ceremonies are perceived as texts that can be read, interpreted, and even critically examined by community members. In other words, cultural symbols function as a medium of cultural literacy rich in meaning.

Picture of the Sedekah Bumi traditional ceremony



One of the most striking examples is the structure of the Kasepuhan traditional house, which is built without using nails and oriented in a specific direction. The house is not merely a place to live, but serves as a symbol of harmony with nature and obedience to ancestral traditions. The community does not only recognize this structure as heritage, but can also explain the philosophical and ecological reasons behind it. This process demonstrates that the community possesses the ability to interpret meaning beyond physical form a key characteristic of critical reading skills.

In addition, traditional ceremonies such as Seren Taun and Sedekah Bumi, conducted as a form of gratitude for the harvest, contain various symbols that are collectively understood by the community. For instance, the act of lifting rice above the head during the procession is seen as a form of respect for Mother Earth and life. These symbols are not taught literally but are passed down through narratives and participation, allowing the younger generation to read spiritual and social values through the cultural practices they engage in. In practice, these symbols are not always accepted dogmatically. Some community members, especially the younger generation, have begun to question or reinterpret the meaning of certain symbols to make them more relevant to the current context. For example, in interviews with indigenous youth in Kasepuhan Cisungsang, some suggested simplifying the ritual without diminishing its meaning. This demonstrates an evaluative process of cultural texts, reflecting critical thinking within the tradition..

Agricultural practices are also part of the process of symbolic interpretation. For example, the prohibition of planting at certain times is not only seen as a customary rule but also interpreted as an ecological calendar system based on experience and natural observation. The community actively links this practice to environmental knowledge, demonstrating that they not only follow it but also analyze and understand the logic behind these traditional habits. The researcher also found that the motifs in the traditional Kasepuhan woven textiles contain symbols that depict the relationship between humans, nature, and ancestors. Each line and shape has its own meaning, which can vary depending on the context. The process of interpreting these motifs is often discussed in informal settings, such as during communal weaving, making this interpretative process an integral part of dialogue among community members, naturally fostering critical cultural thinking.

Beyond the visual symbols, the language practices within the Kasepuhan community in Banten Kidul also carry critical power. Many customary terms or philosophical expressions imply life wisdom, such as "ulah mopoh kana tapak lindeuk" (do not forget the path that has been traveled). Such expressions are not merely slogans but are used as ethical references that require the community to interpret the deepest meaning of life experiences, illustrating the connection between language, thought, and action. Overall, the symbols and cultural practices in the Kasepuhan community are not frozen heritage passed down passively, but rather living texts that are continuously read, reinterpreted, and adapted to the dynamics of the times. This process demonstrates that indigenous communities also have their own ways of developing and practicing critical thinking skills, namely through active interaction with the symbols and meanings in their daily lives.

4. CONCLUSION

Critical reading practices can grow and develop naturally within the cultural traditions of indigenous communities, particularly in the Kasepuhan community in Banten Kidul. Through oral traditions, traditional deliberations, and cultural symbols, the community demonstrates the ability to interpret meanings, evaluate information, and build understanding in a reflective and collective manner. Tradition is not merely heritage, but also a dynamic and meaningful medium for thinking. Traditional deliberations serve as an open discussion space that trains logic, argumentation, and

collective consensus. Oral traditions act as a means of passing down values and social critique in a subtle yet profound manner. Meanwhile, cultural symbols and practices such as ceremonies, architecture, and traditional motifs function as "living texts" that are continuously read and interpreted by generation after generation. Together, these form a critical literacy ecosystem rooted in local context. Critical reading need not always be associated with written texts or formal institutions. Within the framework of tradition, indigenous communities practice it through their own contextual, participatory, and meaningful methods. This opens the opportunity to design a more inclusive approach to critical literacy education, with local culture as the primary foundation.

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