



# Participatory Recontextualization of *Wayang Serok Baros* for Contemporary Relevance

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## ABSTRACT

Rapid media transformation and fast-paced changes in youth preferences become the main challenge for community-based cultural practices. In Desa Baros, West Java, *Wayang Serok* becomes one of the representations of a living tradition with high potential as a medium of inspiration for cultural heritage activation. This study explores other approaches in safeguarding a heritage – to translate cultural narratives into contemporary forms that are relatable for younger generation (Generation Z). The research combines a Participatory Learning Action framework by integrating Design Thinking process as co-creation in character and merchandise design inspired by *Wayang Serok* symbolism. Data gathered from field observation with local cultural representatives was analyzed alongside a survey to design an engaging merchandise suitable for Gen Z's preferences and cultural consumptions. The findings suggest that design intervention – stylized character interpretation and accessible personalized trinkets – can function as mediators between traditional narratives and contemporary youth identity expression. Exhibitions, feedback, and digital engagement indicate that narrative-driven accessories can build emotional attachment and curiosity toward the topic. This study also proposes a participatory design approach that may potentially broaden other inclusive approaches as strategies to recontextualize many intangible heritages in the economic and creative ecosystem.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

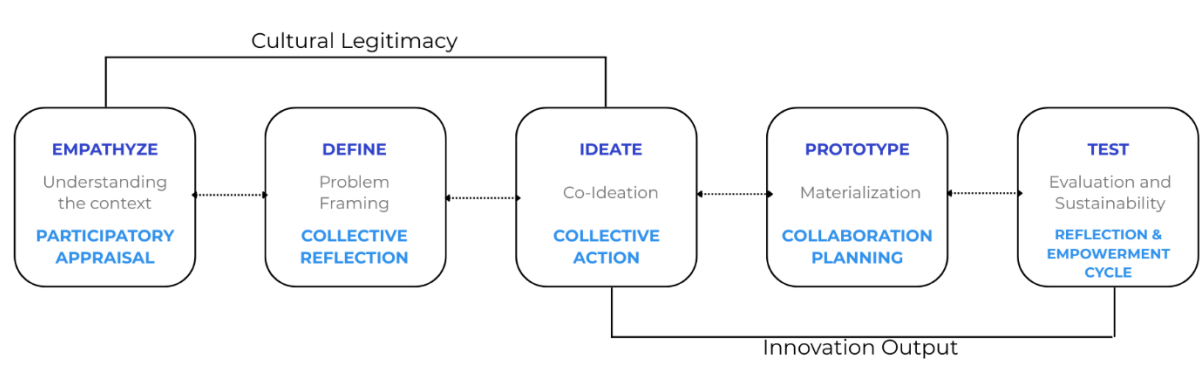
Rapid media transformation and shifting trends in youth preferences have become one of the challenges of community-based cultural practices. This impacted how traditional sectors need to grow alongside the demands of a fast-paced lifestyle to stay relevant and relatable to current generations. Thus, many initiatives – such as locals and governments have made new approaches to contribute by collaborating and recontextualizing traditional values and local identity to preserve cultural heritage. This approach is believed to maintain the original meaning according to the history and to support the heritage's sustainability (Alam, 2025; Baswarani & Novianto, 2025)

Desa Baros is one of the traditional villages in West Java, Indonesia, that also faces this condition. The village relies on its rich cultural assets and sense of community as its main strengths, such as its natural environment and hospitality. The assets are heavily influenced by the villagers' strong belief and respect for their local folklore - which becomes their cultural identity. Some examples are in the

form of legends of their sacred water springs and mythical water creatures, which are heavily involved in the residents' agricultural practices, life-cycle rituals, and art forms. (Kurnia et al., n.d.)

One of the art forms that holds Desa Baros's cultural heritage and local trademark is Wayang Serok. *Wayang* is commonly known as a traditional puppet in Indonesia, with distinct regional features and cultural roles. This puppetry is often performed as a means of communication to convey communal values, particularly during periods of social transformation or disruption (Hidayat et al., 2025). Desa Baros's own version of puppet - Wayang Serok becomes a medium that functions as an existing archive of the local narratives, philosophies, and aesthetic expression.

Regarding the generation gap and the dominance of modern media in this digital era, some sustainability challenges are addressed, to meet younger generations' interest in cultural appreciation. The inclusive community strategies are important to bridge the origin cultural assets are revitalized and accessible to current audiences (Andri et al., 2025; Nirmala et al., 2025).



**Figure 1. Research Model used in this study**

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is conducted by Design Thinking Framework approach combined with Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) framework to guide researchers in

navigating the case and formulating innovative solutions (Figure 1). The concepts of community and heritage serve as the foundation of this community service initiative, aligning closely with the project's key objectives. PLA is a qualitative

methodology, combining researcher and community participation to spark insight and ideas translating into practical action and foster empowerment (Allaham et al., 2022).

Design thinking is often used and known as an approach with human-centered, iterative, and flexible problem-solving method that drives innovation through in-depth user insights based on challenges (Brown, 2016). The design thinking process consists of five stages: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test. The data collected from PLA constitute the empathize stage, during which researchers and designers engage with the community of Desa Baros (shown in **Figure 2**) through interviews, field observations, documentation, and an analysis of the village's cultural assets and values that are identified as potential attractions in Desa Baros.

Desa Baros is particularly characterized by its natural environment like their traditional water springs, local arts and crafts, and the community's commitment to cultural preservation. Featuring the local community, we were introduced to Abah Adang, a representative of the Desa Baros residents who is dedicated to preserving a local tradition called Wayang Serok. To introduce these values effectively, it is necessary to determine which elements are most suitable for representation. Wayang Serok and other traditional musical instruments have transformed from main source of inspiration into personas to promote public acknowledgement and relatability.



**Figure 2. Introduction of Wayang Serok by the community**

Once the group has discovered the potential of assets to be developed, the definition stage proceeds to identify the challenges faced by traditional cultural practices to adapt to contemporary settings.

A concerning trend involving declining awareness and engagement among younger generations emerges as the primary issue, further influenced by globalization and media exposure toward modern forms.

Generation Z prefers authenticity, emotional interaction, and personal cultural expression, which increases their interest in connecting cultural heritage with their own tastes (Cheng et al., 2026). This perspective can serve as a benchmark for bridging traditional cultural heritage with the interests of younger generations. Therefore, this research proposes representing the persona of Desa Baros through character design and various forms of merchandise as potential solutions.

The collected data and initial solutions inform the ideate stage, which involves gathering references, sketching concepts, and developing a mood-board that reflects both the cultural values of Desa Baros and the interests of Generation Z. Survey findings show that over 93.4% of respondents are willing to spend their allowance on products that express their identity and personality. The rapid use of social media intrigues Generation Z to combine local cultural symbols and global trends to negotiate and express their cultural identity (Fatikh, 2025)

This ideation stage is divided into two phases; First, designing characters that represent Wayang Serok persona and developing merchandise. The first phase begins with collecting references for character assets and addressing the challenge of integrating modern aesthetics

with traditional design. By reframe identified problems and questions derived from pain points into possibilities that emphasize empathy (Razzouk & Shute, 2012). Additional influences such as environmental folklore, mythical creatures, and *sacred* water springs, further enrich the design direction.



Figure 3. Sketch Process for developing musical instruments shape



Figure 4. Sketch Process for developing Hand Drawn

The process begins with rough sketches (Figures 3 and 4), followed by refinement of color schemes and stylistic elements, resulting in six characters which are Cepot, Gatot Kaca, Srikandi, Dawala, Larasati, and Sembadra (Figure 5). Each character's color palette, ornamentation, and associated musical instrument correspond to and complement the characteristics of Wayang Serok. As seen in Figure 5, the instruments are drawn with accurate proportions, and the wayang design is stylized, adapted into more contemporary style. From a design theory

perspective, stylization helps preserve cultural symbolism while adapting it to contemporary visual communication practices (Liu, 2022). As an example, the character of Gatot Kaca is depicted in pink and yellow to symbolize its energetic trait. Kendang - as its chosen instrument - is used to represent the character's persistence. Another one can be seen in the character Cepot, designed and covered in the spectrum of red to yellow to convey the character's sense of humor.



Figure 5. Color Symbolizing

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Prototype Phase

The prototyping phase begins by finalizing designs using asset development. This phase focuses on transforming conceptual sketches into refined visual assets and potential merchandise. The character and visuals were designed from rough sketches and developed digitally using Adobe Illustrator. This software – which supports digital refinement – enables the creation of clear, vector-based, and stylized designs, ensuring visual consistency and reproducibility across multiple applications (Al-Nawaiseh et al., 2025)

Some additional visual assets were inspired by the legends, such as mythical creatures related to the environments around Desa Baros – monkeys, goldfish, and the water spring (see **Figure 6**). The elements are essential to complement the narrative and world-building of the character design. According to cultural design theory, collaboration with local stakeholders is essential to maintain authenticity and avoid cultural misrepresentation (Arnaboldi & Spiller, 2011). Therefore, this development process must be also under Abah Adang's guidance to ensure the visual representation is aligned with traditional values, terminology, and local beliefs.

The finalized visual assets were applied across various supporting media, including interactive trivia quizzes, website, social media for promotional strategies, and merchandise design (see **Figure 7**). This will allow the project's visual identity to remain consistent across physical and digital spaces. Based on the previous research of trinkets, personalized accessories and culturally relatable visuals can be easily understood and have a higher chance of reliability in public. Trinkets function as an accessible form of self-

expression and a personal performative culture. This also refers to cultural memory theory - which holds that art and merchandise, as everyday objects, are turned into a media that embody both cultural narrative and personal memories. (Wang & Ge, 2025).



**Figure 6. Supporting Characters**



**Figure 7. Characters Revealed in Social Media**

The personalized keychain was made from a combination of printed acrylic, beads, and cords (see **Figure 8**). The materials are chosen for some variations in texture, color, and form to maintain visual unity despite distinct character identities. Color variation and size were specifically designed to correspond with each character, based on the color psychology (Jue & Ha, 2022).



**Figure 8. Character – Sembradra in a personalized keychain as merchandise**

In addition to the keychain, a printed paper collateral – photocards, stickers, name cards, and packaging – was also part of the design’s visual identity. The final visual assets were printed on a 260 gsm doff-textured paper, maintaining the durability and quality of the product. The photocards were printed double-sided on 310 gsm paper – following the photocard standard – featuring the character’s illustration on the front side and information on their strength and personality on the other (see **Figure 9**).

Photocards are part of the supporting media due to the recurrence of the 2022 trend of high interest in fandom and merchandise culture – photocards function as collectible narrative artifacts and trends (Kitra Desnika & Shuri Mariasih Gietty Tambunan, 2023). Beyond their aesthetic value, photocards also serve an educational purpose to deepen the audience’s engagement and emotional attachment to the characters.

The third one – the packaging consists of a designed pillow-shaped box and a background to secure the keychain and the photo card. The name card is also included to hold information about the collaborative project, with its own social media accounts and e-commerce access. The packaging design aims to create an atmospheric representation of Desa Baros’s imaginative world-building. However, the overall design composition is controlled without overshadowing the



**Figure 9. Supporting Printed Collateral**

The combination of visual assets and merchandise is intended to foster community building by highlighting the story of Desa Baros. Through character-based storytelling and introducing tangible artifacts, the project aim to increase cultural awareness and educational engagement through the village’s folklore, values, and traditions in an accessible and contemporary format.

### **3.2. Testing Phase: Exhibition and Feedback**

The prototype was presented in two exhibition sites (see **Figure 10**). The first one took place in Desa Baros as part of the *Mulang Ka Sarakan* event – led by a local community program that supports cultural preservation. The event is conceived as an open-air gallery that featured creative works inspired by the village’s ecosystem; natural and socio-cultural environment. This exhibition enabled visitors to directly engage with Desa Baros’s local landscape and community, deepen audiences’ understanding of the community’s everyday life. The second exhibition was held at Laswi Heritage venue, alongside other projects as part of the Bandung Design Biennale – to bring the prototype to wider engagement in design, heritage, and innovation



**Figure 10. Documentation from exhibitions**

The exhibition functioning as primarily a public presentation and encouragement moment. The audiences responses and feedbacks were captured and documented by direct observation and spontaneous feedback after the process behind were explained.

Positive feedback was observed during the interaction, as the audience showed curiosity and engaged with the explanation of the design process behind the stylized character. Particularly, narratives explanation about wayang serok were translated by participatory consultation and design thinking stages. Appreciation from audiences expressed for the obvious effort to maintain cultural tradition while adapting to contemporary relevances.

Most of all, the interaction suggest that relevance for Generation Z may not only focus on visual adaptation but also on clarity of the story behind. The merchandise became a discourse of conversation, enabled heritage storytelling in a compact and accessible form. Another function of the merchandise founded not only as a commercial work, importantly as a mediating tools that facilitating dialogue about wayang serok in younger generations.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This study shows how an intangible cultural heritage like Wayang Serok, can be recontextualized in a new design to

become more relevant to younger generation, in this case to Generation Z. Suggested by findings, the relevance not only can be achieved by the effort of stylistic to the modern relate, but through transparent process and connection between the cultural legitimacy and innovation output.

By combining the PLA and Design Thinking frameworks, this study ensured that the reinterpretation of the Wayang Serok character was grounded in community validation before being applied to contemporary visual forms. Stylized personas of Wayang Serok maintained symbolic references to the original version narratives while adopting simplified and relatable aesthetics.

Observations during the exhibition revealed that the audience's excitement grew as they understood the effort behind the design process, which increased their appreciation and recognition of the importance of cultural continuity. This suggests that Generation Z engages more strongly when reinterpretation is presented as a respectful and inclusive process rather than as superficial modernization.

Making cultural heritage more relevant to younger generations, in this case Generation Z, requires participatory cultural legitimacy, thoughtful symbolic translation, and transparent communication about the design process. This research shows that visible effort in recontextualization can positively influence perceptions of and sincerity toward intangible heritage.

Further research may explore the continued development of merchandise as a way to support long-term engagement and sustainability across broader contexts.

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