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Uncovering Cultural Heritage Buildings in Luwu

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Abstract

This study explores the architectural features and historical significance of selected cultural heritage buildings in Palopo City, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, the research investigates nine heritage structures, including the Istana Datu Luwu, Masjid Jami Tua Palopo, and Gereja Pniel, to uncover their original functions, structural transformations, and cultural symbolism. Data were collected through field observations, interviews, and documentation, providing rich insights into the preservation status and evolving roles of these historical sites. The findings reveal that these buildings serve not only as physical remnants of Luwu's past but also as cultural texts that reflect the region's identity, religious history, and colonial encounters. The study emphasizes the dual function of these sites in promoting local pride and serving as educational tools in English language learning. By integrating cultural heritage with English reading materials, the research contributes to both heritage preservation and language pedagogy, fostering intercultural awareness among younger generations. This approach underscores the importance of safeguarding tangible heritage while enhancing communicative competence through culturally embedded content.

1. Introduction

Cultural heritage is an essential part of human civilization, serving not only as a legacy of the past but also as a foundation for identity, education, and national pride. In Indonesia, which is rich in cultural diversity, preserving and understanding heritage becomes crucial for maintaining both local and national identity. Among the many regions with significant cultural history is Luwu, located in South Sulawesi, which holds valuable architectural heritage rooted in the historical Luwu Kingdom and Dutch colonial influence (Kusuma, 2021).

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Buildings such as the Istana Datu Luwu, Masjid Jami Tua Palopo, and Gereja Pniel are not merely physical structures—they represent the spiritual, political, and social evolution of the Luwu people. Each structure encapsulates cultural values, religious transitions, and colonial encounters, making them essential subjects of study in the broader discourse of heritage preservation and education (Wiryomartono, 2019).

Meanwhile, the role of English Language Teaching (ELT) has evolved beyond mere linguistic instruction. The incorporation of local culture into ELT is increasingly emphasized in the Indonesian curriculum (Kemendikbud, 2020). This aligns with the principle that language and culture are inseparable. Language is not only a communication tool but also a carrier of cultural knowledge and values (Kramsch, 1998). Educating learners about their own heritage in English helps bridge the gap between global communication competence and local cultural identity.

Several prior studies have emphasized the importance of using local wisdom in ELT materials (Hermawan & Noer, 2021; Wahyuni, 2020), showing positive outcomes in student engagement and cultural awareness. However, little attention has been given to architectural heritage as a cultural learning resource. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring the potential of historical buildings as educational tools in teaching English. This approach offers a dual benefit: preserving cultural heritage while enhancing language learning through meaningful and contextual content.

Thus, this study aims to explore the architectural features and historical functions of selected cultural heritage buildings in Palopo City and analyze their relevance as cultural texts that can be incorporated into English learning. The research is guided by the following questions: *What are the architectural characteristics of historical buildings in Palopo City?* and *How do we uncover the history of these buildings?*

By presenting a comprehensive study of these heritage buildings, this research contributes not only to the preservation of cultural knowledge but also to the development of culturally embedded English materials, which may improve students' language proficiency and cultural understanding. Ultimately, this work seeks to support both heritage conservation efforts and innovations in English language education in Indonesia.

2. Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the historical, architectural, and cultural aspects of selected heritage buildings in Palopo City, South Sulawesi. A qualitative method was chosen to provide in-depth insight into the buildings' physical characteristics and cultural significance based on observation and interpretation (Creswell, 2014). The descriptive nature of the research allowed the researcher to present a holistic view of the historical buildings as cultural texts that convey local values, identity, and transformation across time.

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted in Palopo City, focusing on nine culturally significant buildings that have been officially designated as heritage sites by the local government. These included Istana Datu Luwu, Masjid Jami Tua Palopo, Gereja Pniel, Kantor Pos Palopo, Rumah Jabatan Wakil Walikota, Markas Kodim 1403, Mess Kodim, Kantor Legiun Veteran, and Kantor Dinas Kebudayaan. Informants were selected purposively and included traditional leaders, caretakers of the buildings, local historians, community elders, and staff of the local Cultural Department.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using three techniques:

1. Observation: Direct on-site observations were conducted to document the buildings' current condition, architectural features, and renovations.
2. Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were carried out with key informants to gather historical narratives, functional changes, and cultural meanings.
3. Documentation: Photographs, archival materials, books, and government records were reviewed to support and verify field data.

These triangulated methods ensured a comprehensive understanding of the buildings' heritage and their relevance in the present context (Patton, 2002).

Trustworthiness and Validation

To ensure the credibility and validity of findings, this study applied source triangulation and method triangulation. In addition, member checking was conducted to validate the accuracy of interview data. These procedures align with qualitative standards for ensuring trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3. Results

1. Architectural Features

The buildings observed—Istana Datu Luwu, Masjid Jami Tua Palopo, Gereja Pniel, and others—demonstrate a unique blend of local, Islamic, colonial, and European architectural styles. Several elements were consistent across sites:

1. Use of local materials such as ulin (ironwood) and coral stone, particularly in Masjid Jami Tua Palopo and the palace.
2. Tiered roofs (limasan) with symbolic meanings reflecting hierarchy and spirituality.
3. Ornamentation and carvings with traditional motifs, notably seen in wooden pillars, windows, and doors.
4. The preservation of original structural layouts, though some buildings had undergone renovations, such as concrete reinforcement, ceramic flooring, or modern roofing (e.g., Pniel Church's spire and pulpit renovations).

These features highlight the architectural ingenuity of past generations and reflect a fusion of cultural identities over time.

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2. Historical Functions and Transformations

Each building carried a unique historical function rooted in the governance, religious practice, or colonial administration of Luwu:

1. Istana Datu Luwu functioned as the royal palace and center of governance, later converted into a museum.
2. Masjid Jami Tua Palopo, built in 1604, symbolizes the introduction of Islam to the region and served as a central religious site for centuries.
3. Gereja Pniel, constructed in 1924, reflects the Christian missionary movement during the Dutch colonial era.
4. Kantor Pos Palopo and other Dutch-era buildings functioned as administrative offices and have since adapted to modern institutional roles.

The functional transformation of these buildings—from administrative to cultural, from royal to public—illustrates how heritage evolves to meet contemporary needs while retaining symbolic meaning.

3. Cultural and Educational Value

Findings indicate that these buildings are repositories of cultural memory and offer significant educational value:

1. Many artifacts, photos, and architectural features serve as teaching tools for local history.
2. Interviewees expressed that younger generations lack awareness of the importance of these buildings, underscoring the need for educational integration.
3. The incorporation of these sites into English language materials was viewed positively by educators and stakeholders, as it provides dual benefits: promoting language acquisition and cultural preservation.

4. Preservation and Community Engagement

Preservation efforts varied across sites. Some, such as Istana Datu Luwu and Masjid Jami, have been formally recognized and protected under heritage laws. Others, like the official residence buildings and Kodim mess, have undergone renovations that altered original elements, sometimes risking the loss of authenticity.

Despite this, community stakeholders, including traditional leaders and local historians, play an active role in safeguarding narratives and ensuring cultural continuity. Photographic documentation, museum development, and cultural tourism have also contributed to preservation awareness.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the intricate relationship between historical architecture, cultural heritage, and language education. The analysis of selected heritage buildings in Palopo City reveals not only the architectural uniqueness of each structure but also their evolving roles as cultural, religious, and administrative landmarks. These findings support the idea that heritage buildings function as cultural texts symbolic representations of history, identity, and collective memory (Wiryomartono, 2019).

Architectural Identity and Cultural Reflection

The architectural elements identified—tiered roofing, coral stone structures, wooden carvings, and hybrid Islamic-colonial designs—reflect the syncretic nature of Luwu's cultural identity. The Istana Datu Luwu, for example, combines traditional Bugis-Makassar design with European symmetry, embodying both royal authority and colonial adaptation. Similarly, Masjid Jami Tua Palopo showcases Islamic spiritual values through the presence of the sokoguru (main pillar), while retaining indigenous craftsmanship in its materials and layout.

These findings affirm Kramsch's (1998) argument that language and culture are interdependent, and further support the claim that physical environments encode cultural meaning. Just as language expresses cultural beliefs, architectural forms serve as visual and spatial narratives that represent societal values, history, and power relations.

Heritage and English Language Pedagogy

This study contributes to the growing body of literature that integrates local culture into English Language Teaching (ELT). While many previous studies have focused on incorporating folktales, customs, or traditional ceremonies into English learning materials (Hermawan & Noer, 2021; Wahyuni, 2020), this research extends the discussion by focusing on built heritage. These structures offer learners authentic content that connects language to place, identity, and cultural appreciation.

In line with Kemendikbud's (2020) emphasis on local content, the heritage buildings in Palopo can be transformed into contextual reading and speaking materials, enhancing students' engagement and cultural awareness. For example, a descriptive text about Pniel Church not only introduces vocabulary and grammar, but also provides insight into Indonesia's religious and colonial history. Thus, the integration of heritage-based content enriches the ELT curriculum and supports the development of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997).

Functional Transformation and Identity Continuity

The shift in function of the buildings—from royal palace to museum, mosque to community center, or colonial post office to modern government office—demonstrates how cultural memory is preserved and adapted over time. Such transformations, though influenced by modernization, do not erase heritage; instead, they reflect a continuity of identity rooted in space and memory (Lowenthal, 1998).

However, findings also reveal challenges in authentic preservation, as renovations sometimes compromise original materials or design. This highlights the need for balanced conservation strategies that maintain historical authenticity while supporting contemporary relevance. In educational terms, this balance is also necessary—heritage must be presented not just as the past, but as a living part of learners' environment and identity.

Contribution and Novelty

The novelty of this study lies in its interdisciplinary contribution: it bridges heritage studies and English education, an approach that is still limited in Indonesian ELT research. While earlier studies focused on textual or oral traditions, this research positions

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architectural heritage as pedagogical input, emphasizing the visual, spatial, and narrative dimensions of culture.

Furthermore, this study encourages educators to move beyond generic or Westernized content, and instead develop materials that are locally rooted yet globally oriented—a critical step toward educational decolonization and national cultural pride.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the architectural characteristics, historical functions, and cultural values of selected heritage buildings in Palopo City, South Sulawesi, through a qualitative descriptive approach. The findings reveal that buildings such as Istana Datu Luwu, Masjid Jami Tua Palopo, and Gereja Pniel serve not only as physical artifacts of history but also as powerful cultural texts that convey identity, memory, and social values. Architecturally, these buildings demonstrate a unique blend of local traditions, religious symbolism, and colonial influences, reflecting the dynamic cultural history of Luwu. Functionally, many of these buildings have undergone significant transformations while maintaining their symbolic and educational significance. Their continued relevance underscores the role of built heritage in fostering cultural pride and intergenerational transmission of values.

Importantly, this research highlights the pedagogical potential of heritage buildings in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT). Incorporating cultural heritage into English materials enables students to develop linguistic proficiency while deepening their understanding of local culture. It also supports the development of intercultural awareness, aligning with national educational goals and global communication needs.

The novel contribution of this study lies in proposing architectural heritage as a contextual learning resource moving beyond traditional narratives and offering a spatial, visual, and historical approach to language instruction. By localizing content in English classrooms, educators can bridge the gap between global language learning and national cultural preservation.

6. Acknowledgment

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Finally, the author acknowledges the importance of preserving cultural heritage in Indonesia and hopes that this study can contribute positively to both English language education and cultural preservation efforts. State the contributing parties or institutions which help your research. It is important to acknowledge those who help you in funding, research facilities, or meaningful suggestions in improving your article. If your article has been presented in a seminar or conference, you can also mention them in this section.

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