

Local Cultural Heritage Preservation Strategy: A Case Study of the Designation of the Lima Laras Palace as a Cultural Heritage Site in Batu Bara Regency

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the preservation strategy and the process of designating the Istana Niat Lima Laras as a district-level cultural heritage object in Batu Bara Regency, North Sumatra. This palace is a historical heritage of the Kedatukan Lima Laras built by Datuk Muhammad Yuda Sri Diraja in the early 20th century and has important value as the center of Malay traditional government and a symbol of resistance against colonialism. The research approach used is descriptive qualitative with a case study method. Data collection techniques include in-depth interviews, participatory observation, documentation, and literature studies, which are analyzed using the cultural preservation theory of R.M. Sedyawati (2007) which emphasizes physical, social, and functional preservation. The results of the study indicate that the Istana Niat Lima Laras fulfills three dimensions of cultural preservation value: (1) historical value, because it is related to important events in local history; (2) socio-cultural value, because it is still used in community traditional activities; and (3) architectural value, because it combines Malay, Chinese, and European styles. This study concludes that value-based preservation strategies, community

participation, and synergy between institutions are the keys to the success of preserving local cultural heritage. The recommendations put forward are strengthening cultural revitalization programs, local history education, and adaptive preservation to ensure the sustainability of this cultural site.

Keywords: cultural preservation, Istana Niat Lima Laras, cultural heritage, local heritage, cultural strategy

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's multicultural heritage faces significant preservation challenges in the era of globalization. The country boasts a rich tangible and intangible cultural heritage, including artifacts, traditional arts, oral traditions, and craftsmanship, yet faces obstacles in intergenerational knowledge transfer, lack of recognition, and claims of foreign appropriation (Asfina & Ovilia, 2016). Cultural preservation serves not only as a historical preservation but also as a means of social cohesion and intergenerational learning. Teachers recognize the importance of integrating local culture into basic education but face barriers to knowledge and skills, even though training can strengthen school-community relations and increase students'

cultural pride (Mulyani et al., 2024). Local cultural preservation strategies emphasize youth engagement in learning about ancestral heritage to maintain social solidarity, with recommendations for curriculum integration (Suryani & Purnama, 2020). Multicultural education is crucial for preserving local Nusantara values against the homogenizing effects of globalization, requiring intensive strengthening of cultural values among the younger generation to counter moral deviations caused by the dominance of modern values (Suradi, 2018). However, in an era of intensifying globalization and modernization, traditional values and local cultural artifacts are facing intense pressure from urbanization, commercialization, and shifting social values. As a result, many cultural sites are experiencing physical degradation and losing their social function, including the Istana Niat Lima Laras (Five Laras Palace) located in Batu Bara Regency, North Sumatra Province.

The Lima Laras Palace is an important historical legacy of the traditional Malay coastal government system in East Sumatra. Founded by Datuk Mad Yudha (also known as Datuk Muhammad Yuda Sri Diraja), the eleventh king of the Lima Laras Kingdom, the palace was constructed between 1907 and 1912 (Meylani et al., 2023). The palace served a dual function as a royal residence and the center of political, social, and economic power for the Lima Laras community. Architecturally, the palace demonstrates a remarkable cultural acculturation, combining elements of Chinese, Malay, and European architecture. The building displays traditional Malay characteristics such as stilt-like construction and distinctive decorative patterns, while also adopting Chinese symmetrical design concepts and roof shapes. This architectural fusion reflects a broader pattern in traditional Malay architecture in Sumatra, adapting to local environmental conditions while maintaining cultural identity (Zain et al., 2020).

The palace's unique architecture, blending Malay, Chinese, and European styles, makes it a cultural heritage site with high aesthetic value. Furthermore, cultural activities such as customary deliberations, coronation rituals, and traditional dispute resolution continued to take place within the palace grounds into the early 21st century, further strengthening its position as a center of living culture.

However, the existing condition of the Niat Lima Laras Palace shows worrying signs of physical degradation, such as damage to the wooden structure, a rotting roof, and the loss of original artifacts. Furthermore, weak historical documentation, both in terms of archives and academic studies, has prevented the palace from being fully recognized as a legally and administratively valid cultural heritage site. This process is often suboptimal due to weak inter-agency coordination, budget constraints, and minimal local community participation.

In this context, this research is significant in examining how local cultural heritage preservation strategies can be implemented through the process of cultural heritage designation, by taking the case study of the Palace of Niat Lima Laras. The purpose of this research is to systematically describe the process of designating the palace as a district-level cultural heritage object, as well as to analyze the preservation strategies used based on the theoretical framework of cultural preservation by R.M. Sedyawati (2007), which includes the physical, social, and functional preservation of cultural objects.

This research is scientifically novel because: It fills the gap in scientific documentation related to the process of determining cultural heritage at the district level for Malay palaces which has not been widely discussed in preservation studies in East Sumatra., It offers a preservation approach that not only focuses on the physical structure, but also the social and symbolic dimensions of cultural objects, as proposed by Sedyawati (2007) and is in line with the holistic approach of community-based

cultural heritage management., It integrates field data from TACB meetings, interviews with traditional leaders, and ethnographic observations which have previously been rarely used in research on determining cultural heritage in the region., and It emphasizes the importance of the role of local government in preservation, which can be a replication model for determining other cultural objects in areas with a surviving traditional kedadukan system, such as in Asahan Regency, Serdang Bedagai, or Langkat.

It is hoped that the results of this research will not only contribute to the development of local cultural history studies, but also provide input for cultural preservation policies at the regional level, especially in responding to the challenges of modernization which are increasingly eroding the roots of community traditions.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study method to deeply understand the dynamics of the preservation of the Istana Niat Lima Laras (Lima Laras Palace), as part of the local cultural heritage that is currently being designated as a district-level cultural heritage. This approach was chosen because it is in accordance with the characteristics of the research object, which is complex, contextual, and rich in cultural and historical meaning. Qualitative research has proven effective in exploring symbolic values and the process of cultural preservation in society. Reconciliation (2020) shows that qualitative methods enable researchers to understand the cultural values embedded in Dayak society through symbols and beliefs that regulate social behavior. Farhanaldi et al. (2025) Using a qualitative approach to explore the cultural and spiritual meanings of the High Cemetery in Barus, demonstrating the site's role in maintaining the community's cultural identity. Dhani et al. (2024) applied descriptive qualitative methods to understand the meaning and efforts to

preserve the Larung Sesaji tradition, identifying the challenges of modernization and the role of institutions in preservation. (Panjaitan & Sundawa, 2016) used a qualitative case study to analyze the symbolic meaning of ulos in Batak Toba wedding ceremonies, showing how civic culture values are preserved through cultural symbols and community and government efforts in building cultural heritage.

The research location is Lima Laras Village, Nibung H Angus District, Batu Bara Regency, North Sumatra, in the area where the Intentions of Lima Laras Palace stands. This site is the primary object of the study because it represents a significant Malay architectural and cultural heritage with significant historical, architectural, and social value. This study highlights how the local government, traditional leaders, the community, and the Cultural Heritage Expert Team (TACB) were involved in the process of establishing and preserving the palace.

Data collection was conducted using several complementary techniques. First, in-depth interviews with traditional figures and descendants of the Kedadukan Lima Laras were used to explore the historical narrative and symbolic values of the palace not recorded in official documents. Interviews were also conducted with officials from the Batu Bara Regency Cultural Office and members of the Cultural Heritage Agency (TACB) to obtain information regarding the formal procedures for cultural heritage designation and the administrative challenges encountered.

Second, participatory observation was conducted directly at the palace site to observe the physical condition of the building, ongoing cultural activities, and community involvement in preservation efforts. This observation provided important empirical data for understanding how the cultural site functions socially in the community's daily lives.

Third, a documentation study was conducted on various archives and official documents, such as minutes of TACB

meetings, regent's decrees, cultural heritage object inventory reports, as well as photographs and other visual records. These documents were useful in tracking the formalization process for designating the palace as a cultural heritage site.

Fourth, a literature review was conducted on academic references and cultural policies, particularly those related to R.M. Sedyawati's (2007) theory of cultural preservation. This theory was used as an analytical framework because it emphasizes the importance of preservation not only from the physical aspect, but also from the social aspects, cultural values, and historical functions inherent in cultural objects.

Data analysis was conducted inductively through data reduction, categorization, and interpretation of findings based on a cultural preservation theory approach. Triangulation techniques were used to increase the validity of the results by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and documentation.

Through this method, the research is expected to provide a holistic picture of local cultural heritage preservation strategies based on values and community participation, while also contributing to strengthening cultural preservation policies at the regional level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a. A Brief History of the Five Laras Palace of Intentions

The Niat Lima Laras Palace is an important cultural and historical relic of the Malay community in the eastern coastal region of Sumatra, particularly in Batu Bara Regency, North Sumatra Province. This palace was built as a symbol of local power and sovereignty, as well as serving as a center of customary government and a forum for diplomacy between the indigenous Malay community and the Dutch East Indies colonial government. In the context of colonial history, the construction of this palace can be read as a form of cultural and diplomatic resistance to colonial power that began to establish its power through the

forced cultivation system and colonial administration. Datuk Muhammad Yuda Sri Diraja utilized the palace's position not only as a center of customary administration, but also as a negotiating space in maintaining local autonomy for the Malay community under the pressure of colonialism.

Architecturally, the Palace of Niat Lima Laras displays a distinctive aesthetic character and reflects a harmonious cultural acculturation between traditional Malay elements, Chinese influences, and touches of European colonial architectural style. The building was constructed using high-quality ironwood and meranti wood as its primary materials, and is designed as a stilt house suited to the tropical coastal climate. One prominent aspect of the palace's physical structure is the presence of 28 doors, 66 windows, and 4 anjungan (front terraces) distributed symmetrically on the sides of the main building. The number of doors and windows not only indicates the size of the building, but also reflects the concept of openness and spaciousness that are important in Malay culture, namely the principles of deliberation and transparency in customary governance (Sedyawati, 2007). The carved ornaments inside and outside the palace feature distinctive Malay motifs such as flora, Arabic-Malay calligraphy, and auspicious symbols influenced by Chinese aesthetics. Meanwhile, the large windows with folding wooden shutters reflect European colonial architectural styles that prioritize cross-ventilation and natural lighting. This combination of elements makes the Palace of Niat Lima Laras a clear example of acculturative architecture in the Indonesian archipelago that developed in the early 20th century.

To this day, the palace building still stands, despite experiencing physical degradation due to age and lack of maintenance. However, its historical, cultural, and architectural value remain strong, making it a worthy object of recognition and preservation as a district-level cultural heritage site. This heritage not only preserves the collective memory of the Batu

Bara Malay community but also serves as a silent witness to how local culture has adapted, negotiated, and survived amidst waves of colonialism and modernity.

b. Cultural and Historical Values

The designation of the Istana Niat Lima Laras as a cultural heritage site cannot be separated from the three main dimensions of cultural heritage preservation as formulated by R.M. Sedyawati (2007): historical, cultural, and aesthetic values. These three elements provide a valid argumentative basis for considering the importance of preserving this site as part of the cultural identity of the coastal Malay community in Batu Bara Regency.

1. Historical Value

Historically, the Niat Lima Laras Palace represents the existence of the traditional Malay Kedatukan government system that developed in East Sumatra from the 18th to the early 20th centuries. Built by Datuk Muhammad Yuda Sri Diraja around the 1900s, this palace served as the center of traditional government, serving administrative, political, and social functions. In the context of local history, this palace also symbolizes the autonomy of the Malay community, which was able to maintain its own social system amidst the penetration of Dutch colonial power (Lubis, 2019).

This historical function is reinforced by the genealogical structure of the chiefdom, which still persists today and plays a role in community social activities. According to Koentjaraningrat (2009), this type of heritage falls within the tangible-intangible socio-cultural system, where material artifacts (palaces) serve as symbols of the continuity of traditional social institutions.

2. Cultural Values

From a cultural perspective, the Istana Niat Lima Laras is still used for various traditional activities such as deliberations, coronations, and other ceremonial events. This makes the palace not only an inanimate

object, but also a living heritage that still has a social function in the local community (Putra & Siregar, 2020; Poullos, 2014).

This cultural value reflects the concept of social preservation as proposed by Sedyawati (2007), which emphasizes the importance of maintaining the social meaning and original function of cultural sites.

Cultural practices around the palace are also a vehicle for the transmission of coastal Malay values such as the custom of consensus, the spirit of mutual cooperation, and respect for traditional leaders, which are passed down from generation to generation through rites, language, and social structure.

3. Aesthetic Value

In terms of aesthetics, the Palace of Niat Lima Laras has a distinctive architectural character with a stilt house structure made of ironwood, carved main pillars, and geometric and floral ornaments that reflect the traditional Malay style. Interestingly, the building design also shows cultural acculturation through the influence of Chinese architecture (in the roof and carved motifs) and European colonial (in the windows and room layout), as also found in other Malay palaces in the coastal areas of Sumatra such as the Maimun Palace in Medan and the Serdang Palace in Lubuk Pakam (Widodo, 2015).

This aesthetic richness makes the Istana Niat Lima Laras an object of high artistic value and worthy of conservation as part of the regional cultural landscape. In conservation theory, aesthetic aspects are crucial for maintaining a visual identity that represents local cultural values.

c. Process of Determination as Cultural Heritage

The designation of the Istana Niat Lima Laras as a cultural heritage site at the Batu Bara Regency level is the result of a systematic, regulation-based preservation process involving various cultural stakeholders at the local level. This process demonstrates the synergy between local

government institutions, cultural experts, and the indigenous communities that are the inheritors of this cultural heritage.

The first step began with an inventory of suspected cultural heritage objects (ODCB) conducted by the Batu Bara Regency Tourism, Culture, Youth, and Sports Office. This inventory aims to identify and record the existence of historic buildings or structures with potential cultural value. In this stage, the Istana Niat Lima Laras was recognized as an important Malay heritage building, due to its high historical value and continued use within the context of local customs. This process involved collecting secondary data from historical archives, interviews with traditional leaders, and visual documentation of the palace's condition.

After the identification process is complete, the next step is verification and assessment by the Batu Bara Regency Cultural Heritage Expert Team (TACB). The TACB is an independent institution consisting of historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and academics with expertise in cultural preservation. Verification is carried out through on-site visits, a review of the building's physical aspects, and an assessment of its historical, social, and architectural significance. During the verification process, the Niat Lima Laras Palace was declared to have met the three main criteria for cultural heritage designation as stipulated in Law No. 11 of 2010 concerning Cultural Heritage, namely:

- a) Age of the Building - This palace was built between 1907 and 1912 by Datuk Muhammad Yuda Sri Diraja, which means it is more than 100 years old.
- b) Cultural Importance – This palace is a symbol of power and the center of Malay Batu Bara traditional diplomacy as well as a place where cultural traditions and traditional deliberations take place.
- c) Authenticity and Integrity of the Building – The main structure of the palace is still intact with original elements such as 28 doors, 66 windows,

and 4 pavilions that reflect the typical architecture of a blend of Malay, Chinese, and European.

This designation provides legal status to the palace and simultaneously opens up opportunities for protection and revitalization through regional cultural preservation programs.

By designating this palace as a cultural heritage site, the local government has the legal basis to maintain, restore, and empower cultural values through education, cultural tourism, and scientific research. Furthermore, this designation strengthens the position of indigenous communities as subjects of preservation, not merely objects, in maintaining the continuity of local cultural values amidst the challenges of modernization.

d. Implemented Conservation Strategies

The preservation of the Istana Niat Lima Laras, a coastal Malay cultural heritage site in Batu Bara Regency, is not solely focused on protecting the physical structure, but also emphasizes the importance of strategies that address social, participatory, and functional aspects. The conservation strategy implemented demonstrates a multidimensional approach that emphasizes the values of togetherness, education, and cultural continuity. This effort also reflects progressive conservation practices as suggested in R.M. Sedyawati's (2007) theory of cultural preservation, namely integrated physical, social, and symbolic preservation.

1. Community-Based Participatory Approach

The primary strategy adopted is community-based heritage management, where local communities, particularly the heirs of the Lima Laras dynasty, are actively involved in various aspects of preservation. This involvement is achieved through customary deliberations, community meetings, and the involvement of local residents in cultural activities within the palace grounds.

The participation of local communities is crucial because they are not only the

genealogical owners of heritage but also the guardians of cultural values that are still alive in everyday social practices. In this context, preservation is not understood as a mere technocratic intervention, but rather as a social process that positions the community as the subject of preservation (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). This participatory approach also creates a sense of ownership that strengthens the collective commitment to maintaining the palace's continued cultural function.

2. Gradual Physical Revitalization and Restoration

Physically, a gradual restoration of the palace's main structure was carried out, particularly on parts damaged by age, such as the main pillars, platforms, and roof elements. This restoration prioritized the principle of authenticity of materials and form by maintaining the original architectural style, which combines Malay, Chinese, and European elements.

The restoration was carried out in stages due to local government budget constraints, but was still supervised by the cultural department and involved traditional craftsmen familiar with local heritage construction techniques. This aligns with the preservation principle of adaptive reuse, where heritage buildings are adapted to current needs without losing their historical value (Widodo, 2015).

3. Utilization of the Palace for Cultural Education and Historical Tourism

The next strategy is to transform the palace into a cultural education facility and an inclusive historical tourism destination. In recent years, the palace has been used for student visits, cultural seminars, and local wisdom programs in education. This educational function supports the preservation of the palace's social significance as a medium for cross-generational learning about the history, customs, and identity of coastal Malays.

Meanwhile, from a tourism perspective, the palace has been included in Batu Bara

Regency's cultural tourism map and is beginning to be developed as a tourist attraction based on local historical narratives. This initiative combines the dimensions of preservation with the creative economy, where cultural preservation also provides economic benefits to the surrounding community.

4. Synergy Between Government, Cultural Communities, and Academics

The successful preservation of the palace is also supported by the synergy between three main actors: the local government, the cultural community, and academics. The government plays a role through regulation, funding, and administrative facilitation of cultural heritage designation. The cultural community serves as the guardian of values and the perpetrator of traditions, while academics play a role in documentation, scientific studies, and the development of research-based preservation strategies.

This collaboration reflects a triple helix approach to cultural preservation, combining the strengths of the state, civil society, and scientific institutions to build a sustainable preservation system (Setiawan, 2020). This strategy has been proven to strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of preservation because it is inclusive and based on local needs and values.

e. Challenges and Solutions

While designating the Istana Niat Lima Laras as a district-level cultural heritage site represents a strategic step in preserving local cultural heritage, implementing this preservation policy faces a number of structural and technical challenges. These challenges relate not only to the physical aspects of preservation but also to institutional aspects, human resources, and the use of technology in cultural heritage conservation.

1. Limited Conservation Budget and Expert Human Resources

One of the main challenges in palace preservation is the limited conservation

budget. The local government, particularly the Batu Bara Regency Cultural Office, has limited fiscal space to fund restoration, maintenance, and the development of supporting facilities for cultural sites. As a result, the restoration process is carried out in stages and slowly, resulting in some parts of the building suffering further damage before they can be restored.

Besides budget constraints, limited conservation expertise is also a significant obstacle. Restoring historic buildings such as traditional palaces requires expertise in conservation architecture, knowledge of local materials, and traditional construction techniques, all of which are increasingly scarce. The lack of licensed conservators at the district level means the preservation process is suboptimal and risks losing the structure's authenticity.

2. Lack of Documentation and Digitization of Cultural Archives

Another challenge is the limited historical documentation and the suboptimal digitization of cultural archives related to the palace. Much of the history of the Lima Laras Datukan remains oral tradition, lacking systematic written documentation. This complicates scientific verification, particularly in proving historical significance and legitimating customary genealogy.

The lack of documentation also impacts public access to local cultural information, both in education, research, and history-based tourism development. In the digital age, the existence of digital archives is crucial for enhancing the connection between local heritage and the younger generation through interactive media.

3. Strategic Solutions and Recommendations

In facing these challenges, several strategic recommendations need to be implemented by local governments, academics, and cultural communities, including:

a) Strengthening local regulations: The Batu Bara Regency Government needs

to strengthen the legal basis for preservation by drafting a Regional Regulation (Perda) on the Preservation of Cultural Heritage, which regulates authority, budget allocation, community involvement mechanisms, and incentives for cultural preservers.

b) Submission for provincial cultural heritage status: To enhance its protection status and gain greater access to preservation funds, the Niat Lima Laras Palace should be submitted for provincial cultural heritage status. This upgrade would potentially allow the palace to be included in priority regional cultural preservation programs.

c) Human resource capacity building and academic partnerships: Local governments need to collaborate with higher education institutions on conservation training, historical documentation, and cultural archive digitization programs. A collaborative approach between government, local communities, and academics can foster a sustainable conservation ecosystem that is responsive to technological developments.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that the designation of the Istana Niat Lima Laras as a cultural heritage site at the Batu Bara Regency level represents a significant achievement in the preservation of local cultural heritage. The designation process reflects not only administrative success but also demonstrates effective synergy between indigenous communities, local government institutions, and academic actors in implementing values-based and participatory preservation. The conservation approach implemented reflects progressive, inclusive conservation practices, where indigenous communities, as owners of values, are involved in decision-making and management of cultural sites.

The preservation strategy applied to this palace is in line with the concept of cultural preservation according to R.M. Sedyawati

(2007) which emphasizes three main principles: (1) physical protection of cultural objects, (2) preservation of historical and social values inherent in these objects, and (3) sustainable utilization of cultural heritage for the benefit of education, tourism, and the collective identity of the community. The involvement of heirs in customary deliberations, gradual physical restoration efforts, and the use of the palace as an educational space and historical tourism destination are concrete evidence that the preservation strategy is implemented in a multidimensional manner. However, preservation efforts still face challenges, including limited conservation budgets, limited cultural documentation, and a shortage of conservation experts. Therefore, strategic and integrated follow-up measures are needed to ensure that palace preservation goes beyond administrative designations and encompasses functional and educational aspects in a sustainable manner.

SUGGESTION

To strengthen the sustainability of the preservation of the Palace of Intentions of the Five Laras, several strategic suggestions can be put forward:

- a. Integration between physical preservation and preservation of social functions

Palace preservation should not stop at mere physical restoration. It needs to be integrated with the preservation of socio-cultural functions, such as reactivating traditional activities, cultural discussions, and involving the younger generation in programs to pass on historical values and narratives.

- b. Official registration in the national cultural heritage database

The Niat Lima Laras Palace needs to be officially registered with the National Cultural Heritage Registration System (SIREGAR), managed by the Directorate General of Culture, Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of

Indonesia. This is intended to ensure the palace gains national recognition and access within the integrated national preservation system, including opportunities for technical and budgetary support from the central government.

- c. Strengthening institutional capacity and human resources

Ongoing training and mentoring is needed for local government officials, indigenous communities, and the younger generation in technical conservation, digital documentation, and community-based cultural site management. Partnerships with universities and cultural institutions are crucial in this regard.

Overall, the preservation of the Istana Niat Lima Laras (Five Laras Palace) exemplifies local cultural preservation practices that focus not only on physical protection but also on preserving meaning, community involvement, and sustainable values. This model deserves to be replicated for other local cultural objects across Indonesia.

Declaration by Authors

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