

PERFORMING CULTURAL PEDAGOGY IN BALINESE ARJA THEATRE

Komang David Darmawan

Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

daviddarma7plus@students.unnes.ac.id

Abstract

Traditional performing arts are not merely aesthetic expressions but also function as cultural spaces through which social values, norms, and collective identities are transmitted. In Bali, Arja theatre has long served as a popular dramatic performance that integrates dialogue, song, humor, and moral narratives within the social life of the community. However, previous studies have predominantly examined Arja from the perspectives of preservation, aesthetics, and performance structure, while its role as a form of cultural pedagogy remains underexplored. This study investigates how Balinese Arja theatre operates as a medium of socio-cultural education through performative practices embedded in its dramatic representation. Using a qualitative approach grounded in performance studies and cultural pedagogy, the research draws on observation, interviews, and documentation of Arja performances in Bali. The findings reveal that Arja functions as an informal pedagogical space where social ethics, cultural values, and communal norms are articulated and negotiated through characterization, dialogue, humor, and symbolic performance elements. The performative dimension of Arja enables audiences not only to consume cultural narratives but also to participate in processes of social learning and cultural reflection. Furthermore, the study argues that Arja remains relevant within contemporary Balinese society because it continuously adapts to changing social contexts while maintaining its pedagogical function as a medium of cultural transmission. This paper contributes to discussions on cultural pedagogy and performance studies by positioning traditional theatre as an active site of socio-cultural learning beyond formal educational institutions.

Keywords: Arja Theatre, Balinese Traditional Performance, Cultural Pedagogy, Performance Studies, Socio-Cultural Education

Introduction

Traditional performing arts are fundamentally not only artistic expressions but also social media that record, convey, and reproduce the cultural experiences of communities (Dilfa et al., 2026). In many traditional societies, performances serve as spaces where values, ethics, and social perspectives are transmitted through collective lived experiences (Sarjoko et al., 2026). Through stories, dialogues, music, symbols, and interactions between performers and audiences, performing arts function as cultural practices that shape society's understanding of its social life (Putranto et al., 2025). Therefore, traditional performances cannot be

understood merely as entertainment, they also serve as informal spaces for social learning within community life.

In the Balinese context, Arja dance-drama is one form of performing art that maintains a strong connection with social dynamics within the community (Serati et al., 2025). Arja developed as a dance-drama that combines elements of vocal singing, dramatic performance, humor, improvisation, and direct communication with audiences. Its communicative nature makes Arja accessible to various social groups, as it is capable of bringing everyday social issues into the performance space. Dialogues and humor in Arja frequently contain social criticism, moral advice, and

reflections on interpersonal relationships within the communal life of Balinese society (Gunarta, 2021). This condition demonstrates that Arja functions not only as a form of entertainment but also as a medium of cultural communication that bridges traditional values and the social experiences of Balinese people (K. D. Darmawan & Liska, 2021).

The significance of Arja lies in the fact that cultural values are not conveyed through formal and instructional teaching methods but through aesthetic and performative experiences (Danaswara et al., 2024). Audiences comprehend social values not through lectures but through storylines, character conflicts, language choices, humorous expressions, and performance symbols that emerge throughout the performance. In this situation, the performance becomes an arena where cultural knowledge is collectively produced and negotiated (Arhon Dhony et al., 2025). Thus, watching Arja is not merely an act of entertainment consumption but also a process of reading and interpreting social realities through performative representations (Greaves et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, most studies on Arja dance-drama still tend to position this performance within the frameworks of aesthetics, historical development, and the preservation of traditional arts (Darmawan et al., 2024). Such studies generally focus on dramatic structures, musical forms, performance characteristics, and Arja's position as a cultural heritage of Bali (Ayu Desiari et al., 2022). While these approaches are important for the documentation and conservation of traditional arts, they have not fully examined how Arja operates as a cultural practice that generates social learning processes within society. As a result, the pedagogical dimension of Arja performances has often not been a primary concern in Balinese performing arts research.

In fact, as a folk performance deeply rooted in community life, Arja possesses the ability to establish direct cultural communication with its audiences (Ariani et al., 2021). The flexibility of its dialogues and improvisations enables the performance to continuously adapt to social changes occurring in Balinese society. Issues related to family relationships, social ethics, character education, lifestyle transformations, and the dynamics of younger generations can all emerge within Arja performances through humorous and dramatic approaches closely connected to the audience's everyday experiences. This adaptive capacity demonstrates that Arja not only preserves tradition but also actively responds to contemporary socio-cultural developments (Ariani et al., 2021).

Within this framework, Arja dance-drama can be understood as a practice of cultural pedagogy. Cultural pedagogy views learning as a process that occurs not only in formal educational settings but also through everyday cultural experiences, including media and performing arts (Serati et al., 2025). Through its performative practices, Arja facilitates the transmission of cultural values, the formation of social awareness, and collective reflection on the lives of Balinese people (Sarjoko et al., 2026). Audiences are not positioned as passive recipients of messages but are actively involved in interpreting the social meanings presented on stage.

Furthermore, the relationship between performers and audiences in Arja creates a dynamic space of interaction. Audience responses to humor, dialogue, and improvisation often influence the rhythm and direction of communication throughout the performance. This situation indicates that cultural meanings in Arja are not singularly produced but are constructed through the performative relationship between the performance and its audience. Consequently, Arja functions as a social space where cultural values are exchanged, negotiated, and continuously renewed in

accordance with the societal context surrounding it (Sariada et al., 2025).

Based on this background, this study aims to examine the practice of cultural pedagogy in Balinese Arja dance-drama through its dramatic representations and performative dimensions. The study focuses on how Arja transmits social and cultural values through characters, dialogues, humor, and performance symbols within the context of Balinese society. By employing the perspectives of performance studies and cultural pedagogy, this research seeks to demonstrate that traditional performing arts are not merely aesthetic spaces but also active sites of socio-cultural learning that remain vibrant and relevant in contemporary society.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive-interpretative orientation to understand the practice of cultural pedagogy in Balinese Arja dance-drama (Thorne, 2025). A qualitative approach was selected because the research focuses on meaning-making, performative experiences, and the process of cultural value transmission embedded within Arja performances (Sarjoko et al., 2026). Through this approach, the study not only observes the visual aspects of the performance but also interprets the social and pedagogical meanings embedded in dramatic practices and performance interactions.

The study is grounded in the perspectives of performance studies and cultural pedagogy (Schecner, 2006). The performance studies perspective is used to examine performance as a social and cultural practice that produces meaning through performative actions, interactions, and audience experiences. Meanwhile, cultural pedagogy is employed to understand how social values, cultural norms, and communal ethics are transmitted through performance

as a medium outside formal educational settings (Putra et al., 2024).

The research was conducted at several Arja performance venues in Bali where the tradition continues to be actively performed within community life. The selection of research sites was carried out purposively, taking into account the continuity of performance activities, community involvement, and the relevance of the performances to the research focus (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Research participants consisted of Arja artists, performers, audience members, and other individuals involved in performance practices.

Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation involved directly examining Arja performances, including their dramatic structures, dialogues, characterizations, use of humor, performance symbols, and audience responses throughout the performances. These observations were conducted to understand how cultural values and social learning are articulated through performative practices (Denzin, 2003).

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with Arja artists, performers, and audience members (Kallio et al., 2016). The interviews were designed to gain an understanding of the meanings attributed to the performances, the social functions of Arja, and participants' experiences regarding the cultural values conveyed through the performances. The semi-structured format allowed for greater flexibility in data collection, enabling participants to explain their experiences and perspectives in greater depth (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

In addition, this study utilized documentation in the form of performance photographs, video recordings, performance scripts, archival materials, and field notes related to Arja dance-drama. Documentary data were used to support and

strengthen the findings obtained through observation and interviews, particularly in interpreting symbols, performance structures, and cultural representations that emerged during the performances.

Data analysis was conducted interactively through the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). Data obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation were classified according to themes related to cultural pedagogy practices, such as representations of social values, communal ethics, humor as a learning medium, and performative interactions between performers and audiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Subsequently, the data were analyzed interpretatively to understand how Arja functions as a socio-cultural learning space within Balinese society.

The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through source triangulation and methodological triangulation (Patton, 2002). Triangulation was conducted by comparing findings from observations, interviews, and documentation, as well as by comparing perspectives among participants to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Through this process, the study provides an in-depth portrayal of cultural pedagogy practices in Balinese Arja dance-drama.

Findings and Discussion

Arja Dance-Drama as a Space of Cultural Pedagogy

An Arja artist stated that performances are not intended solely to entertain the community but also to convey moral messages concerning social life and Balinese customs.

“Masyarakat datang bukan hanya untuk tertawa, tetapi juga untuk mendengarkan nasihat yang disampaikan melalui cerita dan

dialog.” (Wawancara dengan seniman Arja, 12 April 2026).

The findings of this study indicate that Arja dance-drama serves a broader function than merely providing traditional entertainment. Across the various performances observed, Arja emerged as a social space through which cultural values and social learning processes are communicated to the community. The performances not only present dramatic narratives but also represent a wide range of issues closely related to the social experiences of Balinese society, including family relationships, social ethics, social responsibilities, and the harmony of communal life. The close connection between the themes of the performances and the social realities of the community enables Arja to remain widely accepted and culturally relevant within contemporary Balinese society.



Figure 1. Advice Scene in Arja Dance-Drama (Darmawan, 2026)

The figure above illustrates a scene in which a mother character provides advice to her child. The research findings reveal that the pedagogical function of Arja emerges through its dramatic structure and communicative performance practices. Dialogues between characters not only serve to develop the storyline but also function as a medium for conveying social values and the cultural perspectives of the community. In several performances, messages concerning politeness, respect for parents, the maintenance of social

relationships, and the importance of ethical conduct in communal life are communicated contextually through interactions among characters. These values are conveyed implicitly through narrative conflicts and dramatic dynamics, allowing social messages to be more readily understood and accepted by the audience.

Furthermore, the characterization of figures in Arja reflects the social values of Balinese society. Protagonist characters are generally portrayed as polite, responsible, and capable of maintaining social harmony, whereas antagonist characters represent behaviors that are considered contrary to communal norms. This pattern of representation demonstrates that Arja performances do not merely provide dramatic entertainment but also facilitate a process of cultural learning through the construction of meanings regarding behaviors that are regarded as ideal, as well as those perceived negatively within the social life of the community.

Table 1. Characterization of Characters in Arja Dance-Drama

Character	Representation
Mantri Manis	Politeness
Limbur	Wisdom
Penasar	Moral Guidance
Liku	Social Criticism

From the perspective of cultural pedagogy, this condition indicates that the learning process within Arja occurs through performative experiences rather than through formal educational mechanisms. One audience member stated:

"I enjoy Arja because it contains many valuable lessons. Sometimes it is humorous, but there are always messages that can be taken home and reflected upon."

Thus, the process of cultural transmission takes place through audience engagement in the aesthetic and social experiences that unfold during the performance. These

findings demonstrate that traditional performing arts can function as a living medium of social learning within the community.



Figure 2. The Liku Character in an Arja Dance-Drama Performance Arja (Darmawan, 2026).

In one scene, the character Liku satirizes the habit of younger generations who are more occupied with their mobile phones than with interacting with their families. The dialogue evokes laughter from the audience while simultaneously delivering a critique of changing patterns of social communication.

The findings also indicate that humor plays a significant role in establishing the pedagogical function of Arja performances. Humor is not merely employed as a form of entertainment; it also serves as a strategy for conveying social criticism and cultural reflection. In several performances, humor is used to address particular social behaviors, changes in community lifestyles, and the dynamics of younger generations. By delivering criticism through humor, social messages become more approachable and communicative, allowing audiences to receive cultural messages without feeling lectured. This situation demonstrates that Arja functions as a space for social reflection, enabling communities to re-examine the realities of their lives through performance.

This discussion demonstrates that Arja dance-drama functions as a space of cultural pedagogy that transmits social values, communal ethics, and the cultural identity of Balinese society through performance practices. This pedagogical

function is not conveyed through direct instruction but rather through dramatic representations, performative communication, and the collective experiences created during the performance. Therefore, Arja serves not only as a form of traditional cultural expression but also as an active space for socio-cultural learning within the everyday life of Balinese society.

Performative Practices and Cultural Pedagogical Mechanisms in Arja Dance-Drama

The findings indicate that cultural pedagogy in Arja dance-drama operates through performative practices that involve dramatic elements, dialogue, humor, performance symbols, and interactions between performers and audiences.

Table 2. Elements of Cultural Pedagogy in Arja Dance-Drama

Element	Representation
Dialogue	Transmission of Social Values
Humor	Critique of Youth Culture
Symbols	Family Power Relations
Interaction	Active Audience Engagement

The process of cultural learning in Arja does not occur through formal or instructional methods; rather, it emerges through the performance experience, enabling audiences to understand social values within their contextual settings. In this regard, the performance serves as a medium that produces cultural experiences while simultaneously fostering social awareness through the dramatic representations presented on stage.

One of the mechanisms of cultural pedagogy in Arja can be observed through characterizations and dramatic conflicts developed throughout the performance. The characters in Arja function not only as narrative elements but also as representations of particular attitudes, behaviors, and social positions within Balinese society. Protagonist characters are generally portrayed as figures who uphold

ethics, politeness, and social responsibility, whereas antagonist characters represent behaviors that contradict communal norms. Through these conflicts between characters, audiences are guided to understand the moral consequences of the social actions undertaken by each character.



Figure 3. Antagonist Character (Darmawan, 2026)

Furthermore, cultural pedagogy in Arja operates not only through characterization but also through the use of communicative dialogues that are closely connected to the everyday lives of the community. Dialogues in Arja frequently contain advice, social satire, and reflections on the dynamics of Balinese society. One example of such dialogue is:

“Nak, sing dadi anak nu nyapain bapa ibune”

“Do not become a child who forgets his or her parents”

The transmission of cultural messages through dialogue makes the performance feel more contextual, as the language used is easily understood and closely related to the audience’s social experiences. In several performances observed, issues concerning family relationships, the behavior of younger generations, and changing social patterns within the community emerged through conversations between characters that were presented in dramatic and humorous ways.

Humor is one of the key elements in the practice of cultural pedagogy within Arja. The findings reveal that humor functions not only as a source of entertainment but

also as a strategy for delivering social criticism in a more open and accessible manner. Through humor, performances are able to address social issues without creating an impression of judgment or moralizing. This situation allows audiences to more readily accept the messages being conveyed, as social criticism is presented within an atmosphere that is engaging, fluid, and communicative. Therefore, humor in Arja serves as a medium for social reflection that strengthens the process of cultural learning embedded within the performance.

The improvisational practices employed by performers also demonstrate how cultural pedagogy in Arja continuously adapts to the context of society. Improvisation enables performers to respond to current issues emerging within the community, allowing the performance to remain relevant to the social experiences of its audience. In several performances, performers incorporated issues such as changing lifestyles, the use of social media, and the dynamics of younger generations into the dialogue. The inclusion of these contemporary issues indicates that the process of cultural transmission in Arja is not static; rather, it continues to evolve in response to the social changes occurring within Balinese society.

Furthermore, cultural pedagogy in Arja is also shaped through the performative interaction between performers and audiences. Audiences do not occupy a passive position; rather, they are emotionally and socially engaged throughout the performance. Audience responses, such as laughter, comments, and spontaneous reactions, often influence the rhythm and dynamics of the performance. These interactions create a two-way communicative space that enables the collective construction of cultural meanings. From a performance studies perspective, this condition demonstrates that the meaning of a performance is not produced solely by the performers but is

also shaped through audience participation in the performative experience.

This discussion demonstrates that cultural pedagogy in Arja dance-drama operates through the social and aesthetic experiences created during the performance. Cultural values are not transmitted directly as doctrines; rather, they are presented through character representations, dramatic conflicts, dialogue, humor, improvisation, and performative interactions. Consequently, Arja serves as a space of cultural learning that enables communities to understand, reflect upon, and negotiate social values through collective experiences within traditional Balinese performances.

The Relevance of Cultural Pedagogy in Arja Dance-Drama within Contemporary Balinese Society

The findings indicate that Arja dance-drama continues to maintain its relevance in contemporary Balinese society due to its ability to adapt to social changes without losing its cultural character and pedagogical function. Amid the rapid development of digital media, popular culture, and changing patterns of public entertainment, Arja remains a form of performance that is capable of fostering emotional and social connections with its audience. One audience member remarked that Arja continues to be engaging because the stories and dialogues presented remain closely connected to the realities of contemporary social life.

"Arja is still relevant to watch today because it addresses many aspects of everyday life. Sometimes it presents stories about families, young people, and even contemporary social habits."
(Audience Interview, 2026).

This capability is evident in the way Arja integrates contemporary social issues into its dialogues, humor, and improvisational

performances, allowing it to remain closely connected to the experiences of present-day society.



Figure 4. Liku Performance on Stage (Angkat W, 2026)

The findings reveal that the flexibility of the performance is one of the key factors contributing to the continued survival of Arja. The performance structure, which provides space for improvisation, enables performers to respond to social issues that are currently developing within the community. According to an interview with one of the Arja performers, improvisation is often employed to adapt the performance content to issues that are widely discussed by society at a given time.

"When there is an issue that is widely discussed in society, we usually incorporate it into the dialogue. This helps the audience feel more connected to the story being presented." (Interview with an Arja Performer, 2026)

In several performances that were observed, the dialogues addressed not only traditional issues but also topics such as changing lifestyles, the use of social media, communication patterns among younger generations, and the dynamics of social relationships in modern society. The inclusion of these themes enables audiences to perceive Arja as a performance that remains relevant to the realities of their everyday lives.

Furthermore, the use of humor in Arja strengthens the connection between the performance and contemporary society.

Humor functions not only as a form of entertainment but also as a communicative and easily accepted medium for social criticism. Observational findings revealed that in one performance, the character Penasar satirized the habit of younger generations who are more occupied with their mobile phones than with interacting with family members. The dialogue was delivered humorously and elicited laughter from the audience.

"Sometimes the messages delivered are humorous, but when you think about them more deeply, they also contain valuable advice. That is what makes Arja so appealing." (Interview with an Audience Member, 2026).



Figure 5. Performer–Audience Interaction in Arja Dance-Drama (Imago, 2026)

The findings also indicate that the relevance of Arja is closely linked to its ability to preserve Balinese cultural identity amid increasingly complex social changes. Although adjustments have been made to its themes and styles of communication, Arja continues to maintain its core performance elements, including traditional songs (*tembang*), dramatic characters, traditional communication patterns, and the communal values of Balinese society. An Arja artist explained that renewing performance themes does not mean abandoning the cultural identity that constitutes the defining characteristic of the performance.

"The stories may evolve with the times, but we continue to preserve the songs"

(tembang), characters, and values that form the foundation of Arja." (Interview with an Arja Artist, 2026).

This condition demonstrates that the process of adaptation within Arja does not diminish its cultural identity; rather, it serves as a strategy for ensuring the sustainability of the performance, allowing it to remain vibrant and relevant within contemporary society.



Figure 6. Arja Characters (Darmawan, 2026)

From the perspective of cultural pedagogy, Arja's ability to continuously adapt demonstrates that the process of cultural transmission is not static. Cultural values within the performance are continually negotiated in accordance with the changing social context of the community. Arja not only preserves tradition as a form of cultural heritage but also creates a space for social reflection that enables society to re-examine contemporary life issues through performance.

Direct interaction between performers and audiences also serves as an important factor in sustaining Arja. Observational findings indicate that audiences do not merely watch the performance passively; rather, they provide spontaneous responses in the form of laughter, comments, and verbal reactions to the dialogues delivered by the performers. On several occasions, these responses even influenced the rhythm of the improvisations performed on stage.

"When the audience responds, the performers usually expand the dialogue. As a result, the performance feels lively and dynamic rather than rigid." (Interview with an Arja Performer, 2026).

This situation creates a collective experience that cannot be fully replaced by digital forms of entertainment. It is this interactive closeness that enables Arja to maintain its important role as a social and cultural space within the lives of Balinese communities.



Figure 7. Audience Interaction (Imago, 2026)

This discussion demonstrates that the contemporary relevance of Arja dance-drama is determined not only by efforts to preserve tradition but also by its ability to respond to social changes within society. Its adaptation to contemporary issues, the use of communicative humor, and the active involvement of audiences enable Arja to continue functioning as a space of cultural pedagogy in modern Balinese society. Therefore, Arja endures not merely as a form of traditional performing art but also as a living medium for social learning and cultural reflection that remains responsive to the evolving context of the times.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that Balinese Arja dance-drama functions not only as a form of traditional entertainment but also as a space of cultural pedagogy that transmits social values, communal ethics, and the cultural identity of Balinese society. The

practice of cultural pedagogy in Arja operates through performative elements such as characterizations, dialogue, humor, improvisation, and interactions between performers and audiences, which facilitate informal processes of social learning. Furthermore, Arja's ability to adapt to contemporary issues without abandoning its local cultural character enables it to remain relevant in present-day Balinese society. Therefore, Arja can be understood as a socio-cultural learning space that plays an important role in sustaining cultural values while simultaneously responding to the social dynamics of contemporary society.

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