



Representation of Multicultural Identity Through Old Houses and Displays: Case Study of Lasem, Indonesia

Virliany Rizqia Putri

Graduate School of Socio-Environmental Studies, Kanazawa University
Kakuma-machi, Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture, Japan 920-1192
E-mail: virlianyr@gmail.com

Abstract. Lasem, located in Central Java, Indonesia, is an area where diverse cultural and religious groups, such as Javanese, Chinese, and Muslim communities coexist. In recent years, old houses that are considered heritage in Lasem have been revitalized and opened as commercial spaces such as guest houses, restaurants, and/or museums, displaying their collections to the public. This paper discusses cultural representation through the display of heritage buildings or artifacts. Employing qualitative methods with purposive sampling, three specific old houses located in Lasem were chosen as case studies: Rumah Oei, Rumah Merah, and Nyah Lasem. Similarities can be drawn between the three houses, in that they displayed old and new objects, combined to construct and represent the values, ideas, and meanings that are wanted to be exhibited by the exhibitors. Further research is needed to analyze the actual selections and curatorial system for the displays in each house.

Keywords: *contemporary use of heritage; cultural representation; display; Lasem; multiculturalism.*

1 Introduction

Lasem, located in Central Java, Indonesia, is an area with a complex history where diverse cultural and religious groups coexist. Influences from different groups such as Javanese, Chinese, and Muslim communities continue to shape today's Lasem. While the cultural diversity in Lasem's society is a form of multiculturalism [1], Lasem can also be understood as a product of transculturalism, a result of the long process of mixing different cultures that causes a transition to a 'new' culture in the present [2]. The process of transculturalism is evident through the visual expressions of surviving arts and architecture [3] and this is particularly applicable to Lasem's situation.

In modern-day Lasem, numerous artifacts and remains in the forms of old objects, buildings, and structures, are spread within the sub-district. Old houses which used to be residential houses from the 18th century in Lasem, although they have strong characteristics of Chinese architecture, also have been studied to be seen

as a form of acculturation because they have a distinct influence from Chinese, Javanese, and Indies (Dutch) architectural styles combined [4-6]. Some of these houses, along with other remains and structures, are subject to registration as cultural heritage (*cagar budaya*) following the Indonesian law on heritage conservation. There is also the ongoing process and effort to propose Lasem as *Kawasan Cagar Budaya Nasional* (KCBN – National Cultural Heritage Area).

The abundance of heritage and remains associated with historical accounts has managed to garner interest and attract visitors from outside Lasem. Whether they are scholars looking for research subjects or tourists looking for pleasure, nowadays they can visit houses that used to be private spaces in the past but are now open to the public. In recent years, some of these old houses that are considered heritage have been revitalized and opened as commercial spaces such as inns, restaurants, shops, and/or museums. Visitors – both from inside Lasem and from outside Lasem – gather in these spaces. Putting commercial and economic purposes aside, in opening their houses, the owners also set up the layout, ambiance, and display of the houses to match the theme of culture and history of Lasem that they would like to introduce to the visitors, or in other words, to try to represent their cultural identity.

According to Hall (1997), culture is a shared meaning. The meanings, concepts, ideas, and feelings in the context of culture can be represented through a diverse range of mediums, such as language, images, objects, and others. When we use, think, and feel about a particular thing, meanings are given to it, and that meaning is conveyed, produced, and shared with others [7]. A representation of a certain cultural group or identity may be conveyed through various mediums, including but not limited to document archives in the form of texts, images, or videos; exhibition materials and their explanations; or oral presentations of the group being represented [8].

Displaying objects as materials to be exhibited is also a form of representation, because, as Baxandall (1991) has argued, to put any item forward in a display is to deliberately give a statement, not only about the physicality of the item but also about the culture it comes from. When a display is set up, there are always three groups involved: the makers of the displayed objects, the exhibitors of the made objects, and the viewers of the exhibited objects. The three groups always actively influence the display and meaning constructed from the display, as the exhibitors may only influence the meanings conveyed by setting up the conditions, while the interpretation is up to the viewers [9]. The practice of exhibiting produces meanings through the separate yet similar components of the exhibition [10]. In addition, in the context of museums and exhibitions, displays can never just be a neutral representation or a way to merely promote knowledge, as they are always imbued with cultural, social, and political values [10-12]. For example, findings

from Prianti and Suyadnya's research in 2022 concluded that most public museums in Indonesia use their collection to build and strengthen national identity, which is a practice adopted from colonial era museums [12].

This paper does not specifically discuss museums as an institution that exhibits collections, yet I use some of the theoretical concepts from the discipline, because the practice of display and exhibitions are often found within museum practices. Indeed, as stated by Lidchi (1997), museums are systems of representation, and the objects being displayed are considered important because of their ability to represent certain forms of cultural values [10]. In the particular context of houses, there is a special category of 'historic house museums', in which a dwelling or a place of residence which is considered historically and/or culturally important is conserved – ideally in original condition, complete with its original layout and furniture – and opened to the public. The house may be left as it is, restored, or recreated with appropriate materials, to properly create the desired ambiance [13-14]. However, displaying cultural objects or artifacts today does not always have to take place in museums, galleries, or venues specifically authorized for exhibitions. Dicks (2003) argues that cultural meanings can be found in landscapes, objects, furniture, buildings, and artworks, among others, and that displays take the form of 'visitable sites' or 'material environments' [15].

Discussions about antique, old, and/or heritage objects are often inextricably linked with discourses about authenticity and originality. This paper does not attempt to question the authenticity of the houses highlighted as case studies, however, it is worth noting that as Smith (2006) argues, authenticity is negotiated. Material objects, artifacts, buildings, and landscapes alike are one aspect but not the whole of what constitutes 'heritage'. The objects should be able to invoke memories and feelings for the visitors or viewers to 'connect' with the heritage, constructing meanings and values in the present times, even when using objects from the past [16].

This paper intends to add to the previous discussion regarding cultural representation through the display of heritage or artifacts. Using case studies in Lasem, the discussion focuses on a society that has multicultural elements and abundant heritage resources. It also highlights the trend of opening old heritage houses as commercial spaces, in which objects are put on display for the visitors to see, which will be elaborated further below.

2 Methodology

The methodology employed in this research was a qualitative approach with purposive sampling. Three specific houses were chosen as case studies: Rumah Oei, Rumah Merah, and Nyah Lasem. These all used to be old houses where

residents resided and lived; they were passed down through different generations and recently have been renovated and opened to the public commercially. These cases fit the research theme because they present a house to the public, where objects, ornaments, and items are exhibited, either on display or as decorations, and seen by visitors.

The primary data gathered in this research was accumulated during my fieldwork in Lasem in June-July of 2022, with additional complementary information from a shorter trip in August 2023. The results presented in this paper were heavily drawn from my observations during the fieldwork. During the data collection process, I adopted an ethnographic approach and visited several houses, observed the environment and activities surrounding the houses, and joined several tour sessions with different groups of tourists and visitors. I had conversations and conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with various informants with a total of 26 people, including several community members, house owners, tour guides, and heritage conservation NGO members, all of whom have their own knowledge and perceptions about Lasem's cultural heritage and identities. However, due to the time limits and the availability of the informants to be interviewed, secondary data was also obtained through existing literature, news, and the Internet.

3 Case Study: Old Houses Opened to the Public

3.1 Rumah Oei

Established in 1818 and opened to the public in 2018, Rumah Oei is now dedicated to being a center of education for the arts, culture, and culinary aspects of Lasem, particularly for Peranakan heritage, as is written on the sign placed in front of its gate. When visitors enter through the gate, the first area they see is the 'cafe' or eating area located in the front yard of the house. Walking through the outdoor eating area there is a door to enter the main house where there are rooms that display the owner's personal collections and collectibles. Behind the main house, there is another gate that leads to Wisma Pamilie, a guesthouse offered by Rumah Oei for visitors or tourists from outside Lasem who wish to stay the night. The 'cafe', however, is often visited by locals to eat or to just hang out in groups. This place sometimes becomes a meeting point for tour guides to meet their clients.

Inside the main house, there are spaces for visitors to walk around and observe the collections displayed (see Figure 1). Some of the objects being shown include old pieces of furniture and an altar, which can normally be found inside a house. Several wooden cabinets with glass doors are placed adjacent to the walls, showing various items of antiques and collectibles ranging from ceramic

tableware and figurines, vintage cassette tapes, and old typewriters, all neatly lined up inside the cabinets (see Figure 1). Another mundane or ‘daily’ object displayed in an eye-catching manner is an old *kebaya encim* (a type of woman’s clothes) that was put on a frame and hung on the wall, where other pieces of clothes presumed to also have been worn in the past, are displayed in a glass cabinet. There are also samples of batik fabric and old sewing machines on display. On the walls, visitors can see photographs of various sizes of the Oei family members from different generations. The rooms are set up in an orderly manner, welcoming visitors to take a look. The gallery area is decorated neatly, inviting visitors in. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the main door was left closed and will be opened only when visitors directly inquire with the staff. Even when the door is closed, the large windows facing the cafe area are open during the day, letting the customers take a peek at some of the display collections from the outside.



Figure 1 (a) View upon entering the main house of Rumah Oei; (b) one of the cabinets filled with collections; (c) a poster of ‘Dayung Sampan Ke Lasem’ song lyrics.

Other than the gallery area, the guest house area and cafe area also have some displays and decorations worth noting, because they support the ambiance of the whole place. Around the Wisma Pamilie guest house area, various calligraphies or large writings using Chinese characters were put on the walls, which are supposed to give great energy, inspiration, or good morale. Decorations that look newer (as opposed to the antiques or old objects mentioned before) can be observed to have many colors of red, yellow or gold, black, and some brown. In addition, large posters have also been put up, images that spell out quotes from presidents of Indonesia along with their photos, with the quotes promoting tolerance and harmony in Indonesia.

Other posters can also be seen stuck around the cafe area (see Figure 1). The displays mainly highlight the theme of Lasem's and Peranakan's history, culture, and language. Narratives of Lasem's history, verses, or lyrical rhymes that are related to Lasem, were written on these posters, accompanied by supporting images. There are also informative graphics about Hokkien dialects, and decorations featuring the theme of the Chinese zodiac.

3.2 Rumah Merah

This house was built in the year 1860 and has now become a designated tourism destination, targeted mainly at visitors from outside Lasem, and has acquired awards and titles from tourism-related competitions or awards. Many of the achievements are exhibited on the outside of the house, along with pictures of rather famous or respectable visitors during their visit to this house. Like Rumah Oei, Rumah Merah also offers rooms for guests as a homestay, however, they also have facilities such as a large space to be used for meetings or events. To enter the main part of Rumah Merah, visitors are required to pay a fee of Rp5000 (around USD 0.3).



Figure 2 (a) Batik fabrics displayed across the wall; (b) distinct lampshade design; (c) poster of before-and-after the renovation of the house.

Once visitors enter the house area, they are able to see a mini gallery of batik, with the walls covered with batik fabrics of various patterns (see Figure 2). Unfinished batik fabrics are also displayed to show the step-by-step process of creating batik. These are only for display, as opposed to the batik displayed for sale in the shop next to Rumah Merah. Decorated with red lanterns hanging on the ceilings, the small room also has a glass cabinet where various natural materials used in the dyeing process of batik making are introduced for the visitors to see, accompanied by labels of the material's name. At the end of the

room, some photographs show people, places, and events in various sites of Lasem, as well as photos of temples and ceremonies from other cities in Indonesia.

In a different, larger aula, other objects are also exhibited and put forward for visitors to see. Some items displayed include a tall statue resembling a deity or God figure, old-style beds made from wood, and wooden wardrobes with detailed ornaments and paintings of images on their surfaces. The lanterns and a particular style of lampshade used also contribute to the feel and ambiance of the room (Figure 2). In addition, it is visible that this house was repaired, renovated, and repainted with red and yellow color mainly to welcome visitors. The owners also put up a large ‘before and after’ photo compilation of the house, showing side by side comparisons (Figure 2).

As mentioned before, next to Rumah Merah, there is a batik store Oemah Batik Tiga Negeri that sells batik, which works under the same management as Rumah Merah. Among their numerous batik fabrics and ready-to-wear goods for sale, they have also put objects on display that are not for sale to decorate and support their display, such as old sewing machines, old unused batik stamps, as well as cabinets filled with dolls. There are also altars and photographs being exhibited. On the outside of the house, there are large informative posters about batik that can be seen and read by passersby even when they do not enter the shop. During my visit, the batik craftswomen were seen doing their job just across the street where both Rumah Merah and Oemah batik Tiga Negeri are located, precisely on a house’s veranda. This way, their works and their process of making are visible, and passersby may also take a look. In other words, they are also ‘on display’.

3.3 Nyah Lasem

Nyah Lasem is a house located in Karangturi Village and is now open to the public as both a *warung* (a place to eat, like a cafe or a restaurant) and a museum. Visitors may enter from the front gate or side gate and directly enter the warung area in the front yard and the front veranda of the house. The owner of the house purposely made this house into a ‘museum’, as he wanted to show and display his personal collections, which mostly consist of old stamps and papers. Eventually, the collection has grown, as the owner collaborated with various community groups.

The museum is located inside the main house, protected by the house’s wooden walls and closed doors. During most of my visit in 2022, the doors were mostly left closed and were only opened when there were visitors who wanted to enter. Entering the main house, there are many displays with different themes for each room, but most of them are tied back to the theme of Lasem’s history and culture.

However, sometimes visitors may notice some objects placed in a room that do not correspond to the ‘thematic’ topics imposed on the room. For example, a woven bag was placed in the same room that displayed pictures and evidence of archaeological findings and items with prehistoric nature, that were discovered in Lasem and surrounding areas.

Another room inside the house is filled with objects, equipment, and items related to batik, as Lasem is famous for its particular style of batik. There are samples of batik patterns, old and traditional equipment to craft batik fabrics, old batik company signposts, and old documents of the batik trade that took place in Lasem (see Figure 3). There is also a newly made historical timeline of batik in Indonesia, an infographic timeline filled with textual information illustrated with images. On the walls, throughout different rooms, a display made up of pieces of text and images creates a historical timeline of Lasem, which was put side by side with events that happened in the same era, seen from the more general context of the history of Indonesia (Figure 3). Further in the back of the house, there are more collections of photographs and stamps, old coins, and other philatelic collections of the owner, not necessarily related or collected from Lasem. The collections seem to be varied in nature and category, however, the name ‘Nyah Lasem’ aims to highlight the persona of a ‘Lasem Lady’ (*nyah* was a way to address older ladies in the past). Therefore, the theme of batik and related objects, sewing machines, as well as pots and kettles, were put under that particular theme (Figure 3).

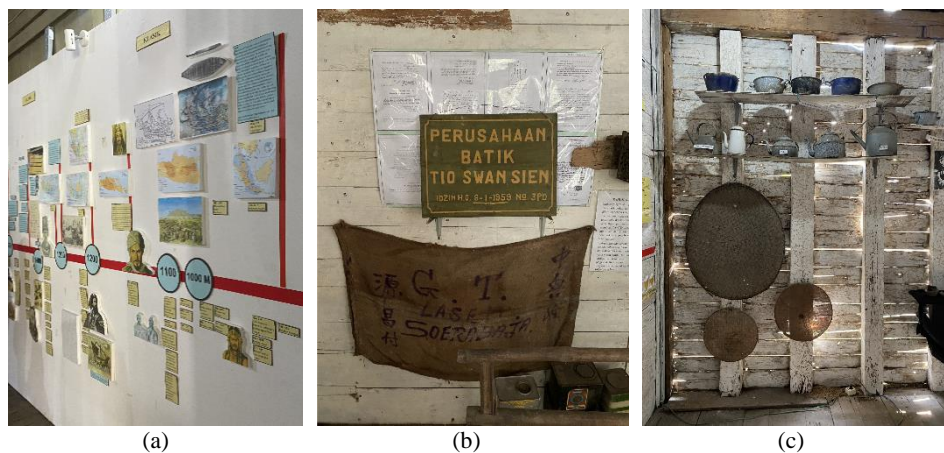


Figure 3 (a) Historical timeline of Lasem; (b) old signposts of batik companies and other documents; (c) pots, kettles, sieves.

In addition, outside the museum space, around the dining area, there are collections such as old black and white photographs on the walls. Some photos

do not have any explanations as to who are the people pictured in the photos, or where they came from. Unlike the previous houses explained, not all the photos were taken inside this particular house. They may have been received or bought from other old houses in Lasem or other places.

Nyah Lasem is also a place where many events take place. There have been several exhibitions, including photography and art exhibitions, that used this house as the venue, which were projects of collaboration between local community members and other expert groups or institutions. Some of the artworks and pieces from those previous exhibitions were left in this house and became part of its permanent display, although with different or seemingly random themes.

4 Discussion

These three old houses have had changes applied to their physical state to some degree, to accommodate the users and visitors as well as for aesthetic purposes. Utilized in an ‘adaptive reuse’ manner [17], old houses subject to heritage legislation are renovated with minimum or small intervention in the process. Today, they are open as a restaurant, guest house, and/or museum. Similarities can be drawn in the way that other than the main functions of a house, they intentionally showcase material objects, whether with or without text or images accompanying the object. Despite the collections being displayed, except for Nyah Lasem, these houses did not claim themselves to be a ‘museum’. Even if they have no clear curatorial direction like conventional museum exhibits commonly do, similar underlying themes connecting the displayed objects can be identified. In the case of Rumah Merah and Rumah Oei, the displays are ‘curated’, selected internally by members of the families that own the houses, there are no clear statements as to who set up the displays. As for Nyah Lasem, the growing collection of the house was a combined effort of the owner of the house collaborating with local community groups, who in turn also collaborated with groups and experts from outside Lasem.

On the other hand, regardless of the mentioned similarities, one of the differences between these houses and most public ‘museums’ in Indonesia is that these are privately owned by lay citizens. It is up to them to decide what to put and exhibit in their houses, and they may not feel an obligation to comply with any criteria or standards to be a ‘museum’. Discussions about museums often highlight their intentions to represent *other* cultures, whereas, in the case of these houses, it is a little bit more complex. The house owners, through the objects displayed, represent themselves and their (Lasem’s) culture, presenting how they want to be portrayed or perceived. After all, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1991) has stated, “self-representation is representation nonetheless” [18]. However, it also cannot

be denied that there may have been influences, both directly or indirectly, from outside (such as from visitors, tourists, experts, and others) on the objects' selection and presentation.

Regarding the objects and the ornaments on display, there are differences between what is old, aged, or antique (for convenience, these terms are interchangeably used in this paper) and rather new. Viewers of the objects can decide for themselves and make distinctions based on the physical condition and style of the objects, as the showcased objects are not specifically labeled as old or new. Regardless of which ones are newer and which ones are older, these objects are combined to construct and represent the values, ideas, and meanings the exhibitors wanted to convey. Older objects may have been kept and treasured for a longer time, whereas 'newer' objects and signs were deliberately designed and displayed along with the existing objects and the house itself. Sometimes people would be mistaken about which is which, but what I would like to emphasize here is how by utilizing and 'reactivating' older, antique objects from the past in the present time, community members are actively enhancing and producing cultural value of 'heritage' [16]. Nonetheless, because of the mixing of newer and older objects on display, these houses may not fit the category of a 'historical house museum', especially if the criteria of those museums specify that they should only display objects found originally from inside the house. [14]

Moving on from the house as the site where the display takes place, I will discuss further the different elements that make up the display. Borrowing Baxandall's (1991) terms, I will elaborate on the 'makers', the 'exhibitors', and the 'viewers' of the displays described above [9]. Most of the makers of the objects may be unknown or unnamed. For example, who exactly remembers who took and produced the vintage photographs? Or, from where did the owners acquire or buy the antique furniture, sewing machines, and accessories? There are chances that the items have been passed around further from the maker until those objects were showcased in these houses. It is the decision of the owners (sometimes involving other community groups) as exhibitors to put forward the items to be displayed and later observed by visitors. The objects displayed may be shown by themselves or accompanied by texts, influencing the viewers to create their own interpretation.

Here, I would like to argue that there is another role that would add a different layer of influence on the viewers: the role of tour guides as interpreters. When visitors come accompanied by tour guides, guides can give their explanations, which can be different (although in various degrees) from the exhibitors' intentions or values. The meanings, values, and stories that come with the objects are not solely controlled by the owner or exhibitor of the house, as another party may also give explanations and layered stories regarding the object. In the

'tourism' scene of Lasem, tour guides often work individually with their own skill sets. Visiting the same place with a different tour guide may give different impressions and understandings. There may be multiple meanings, although not always contrasting, being given to the same object. But then again, in the end, how the viewers may perceive a display is up to them and their knowledge and background (in this context, culturally).

In addition to the physical and material objects being displayed in these houses, one of the houses also displayed human beings and their activities (batik craftswomen working on their crafts) for visitors to observe. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1991) has argued, live displays are also representations, even though the representers are the people themselves [18]. Even when the batik craftswomen are essentially working on their batik and are located in a place where visitors' eyes may gaze upon them, they are also a fragment in a whole display of culture.

5 Conclusion

In line with the objective of the research reported, the present paper discussed the role of the display of artifacts in representing certain multicultural identities in Lasem. By opening old houses to the public and displaying particular objects that seem to fit the overall theme of the house, the hosts have tried to represent their identity and cultural background, conveying their ideas through the display to the outside visitors. They selected and utilized the objects, artifacts, and antiquities that they own to be displayed for others to see, especially if the artifacts are perceived to be old, antique, and/or show specific visual characteristics of their cultural identity. This is not limited to old or 'authentic' artifacts, newer objects or designs have also been added to the display to complement or enhance it, in which the style and design are deemed to complement a certain feel and/or celebrate the multicultural identity that has become their local pride.

The findings elaborated in this paper illustrated how old houses in Lasem are open for public visitors, along with the material objects put on display. However, this is thus far an initial observation. Limitations of the study include the limited time to conduct the field research, in which I did not have a chance to talk with every stakeholder involved. Further research is needed to analyze the actual selections and curatorial system for the displays of each house more deeply and use more houses to be highlighted as case studies, as there are more than just three old houses in Lasem being utilized and opened to the public in the present. As illustrated above, each house has different kinds of objects and displays, even though they all have similarities in that they show cultural objects that tie back to Lasem. This paper heavily focused on the material and physical characteristics of the objects displayed, however, the interactions and perspectives of the different elements involved (makers, exhibitors, and viewers) may also be further studied.

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