

Cultural Performance and Religious Nationalism: A Theoretical Model of Value Internalization through Wayang Aji Narantaka

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of Wayang Kulit, particularly the Aji Narantaka episode, as a medium for the internalization of religious nationalism within rural communities. The study focuses on a community service program conducted in Temengeng Village, Blora Regency, where wayang performances had been absent for more than a decade despite previously functioning as an important collective cultural tradition. Guided by the Religious-Cultural Nationalism Internalization (RCNI) Model, this study employed the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach involving community leaders, local residents, village officials, audience participants, and the university service team. Data were collected through participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, and were analyzed qualitatively through thematic interpretation. The findings reveal that the revitalization of the wayang performance strengthened cultural loyalty, collective solidarity, moral-religious responsibility, and community commitment toward sustaining local cultural traditions. The symbolic values embodied in the Aji Narantaka episode also fostered emotional engagement and collective awareness regarding social responsibility, cultural preservation, and national identity. These findings demonstrate that traditional cultural performances can function not only as cultural preservation activities, but also as a form of social pedagogy capable of strengthening religious nationalism through collective cultural experiences in rural community life.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary era of globalization, the crisis of collective identity and the weakening of nationalism have become serious challenges faced by societies around the world, including Indonesia (Zhexembekova et al., 2025). The rapid growth of information technology, social mobility, and global cultural homogenization has transformed the mindset and value orientation of modern society (Syakhsyiyah et al., 2025). Although globalization has encouraged civilizational progress, it has also distanced younger generations from local culture, historical roots, and moral values that traditionally shaped communal life (Aimie, 2024). As a result, national belonging, social solidarity, and appreciation for cultural heritage have gradually declined, particularly among youth who are more closely connected to global popular culture than to local traditions. In Indonesia, this issue is especially important considering the nation's rich cultural heritage, including Wayang Kulit, which has long functioned as a medium for transmitting ethical, philosophical, and social values (Sapphira, 2023). UNESCO has officially recognized Wayang as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, affirming its importance as a cultural legacy that must be preserved and transmitted across generations (Solichin, 2012). However, the growing influence of global culture has led to a declining interest in such traditions, especially among rural youth. This decline reflects a broader gap between

formal educational efforts in character building and the lived cultural experiences of local communities, where value internalization often occurs more effectively through informal and symbolic practices (Syakhsyiah et al., 2025). Wayang Kulit performances featuring the Aji Narantaka episode represent an epic narrative of the struggle between virtue and evil, centered on Gatotkaca's journey to obtain the sacred power of Aji Narantaka in order to defeat Dursala from the Kurawa lineage (Wayang, 2010). Etymologically, the term "aji" refers to noble knowledge, sacred power, or a highly valued form of strength, while "Narantaka" is derived from the words "nara", meaning human, and "antaka", meaning destroyer or conqueror (Wikipedia, 2026). Traditionally performed as shadow puppet theatre and accompanied by gamelan music, sinden vocals, and dramatic narration by the dalang, the performance commonly lasts throughout the night and combines visual, literary, oral, and spiritual elements within a communal cultural setting. Beyond its artistic form, the performance provides audiences with cultural and philosophical experiences related to moral struggle, patience, courage, and the ethical use of power in defending truth and social harmony (Permana, 2017). Within rural Javanese society, wayang also functions as a medium of moral education, cultural transmission, and communal gathering, often presented during village ceremonies, cultural celebrations, and collective social events where community members interact, share experiences, and reinforce social solidarity (Reza, 2018). In this context, wayang is not merely understood as entertainment, but as a living cultural practice that integrates symbolic meaning, collective emotion, and social values within community life.

Considering the potential of Wayang Kulit, wayang holds significant promise as a medium for the internalization of religious nationalism values. The internalization of religious nationalism is understood as the process through which love for the homeland, national responsibility, social solidarity, and respect for national identity become embedded within the consciousness of individuals and communities, while simultaneously being perceived as part of moral and religious responsibility (Mubarok et al., 2025). This process may be identified through several key indicators, namely the growth of a sense of belonging to the nation and local culture, increasing awareness of preserving tradition as a shared heritage, stronger social solidarity and mutual cooperation among community members (Parepare, 2025), the emergence of the view that safeguarding unity and culture constitutes a religious value, and the collective desire to sustain cultural traditions in the future so that they do not fall into decline (Triyanto, 2016). Therefore, religious nationalism is not merely understood as an ideological discourse, but is manifested concretely in attitudes, social participation, and the collective commitment of communities to preserve local culture as an integral part of national identity. Previous studies have generally positioned traditional performances primarily within the framework of cultural preservation or have examined character education within formal institutional settings. The scholarship by Afdhal Dzikri, et. Al, emphasized that traditional culture functions as a system of values transmitted across generations to maintain the social identity of communities (Dzikri et al., 2026). Likewise, Clifford Geertz viewed cultural practices, including symbolic performances, as representations of collective meaning that shape social structures and systems of belief (Firdaus, 2025). In the field of education, Thomas Lickona developed the concept of character education through the integration of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, which has been widely applied in formal schooling systems (Lickona, 1992). Meanwhile, Ki Hajar Dewantara emphasized the importance of culture-based education as a means of cultivating moral character and national personality (Andrian et al., 2025). More recent studies over the last decade have shown that Wayang Kulit continues to be positioned mainly as a medium of cultural preservation, cultural diplomacy, the creative industry, and educational entertainment (Desriyanti, 2017). Several studies have also highlighted the transformation of wayang into digital media as an adaptive response to contemporary change; however, these discussions have remained focused on the sustainability of the performing art rather than on the deeper mechanisms of social value formation (Sapphira, 2023).

Although these studies have made important contributions, they still reveal several conceptual limitations. First, most studies view traditional culture as an object of preservation rather than as an active instrument of social transformation. Second, research on character education has been largely oriented toward schools and formal curricula, thereby overlooking the dynamics of value internalization that occur informally within communities. Third, studies on traditional performance have generally remained at a descriptive level without adequately explaining how cultural symbols, emotional engagement, collective participation, and religious values interact in shaping social awareness and national consciousness. These limitations become more apparent within rural communities, where the formation of values often develops through participatory and experience-based cultural interactions rather than through formal educational mechanisms alone. As a result, previous studies have not fully represented the social reality that traditional performances still possess strong vitality as community-based media for moral education and collective identity formation. This issue becomes increasingly urgent amid the weakening of communal cultural spaces, the declining continuity of local traditions, and the growing disconnection of younger generations from cultural practices that historically functioned as sources of social cohesion and national values. Therefore, understanding traditional performances not merely as cultural heritage, but as participatory mechanisms for strengthening religious nationalism and collective consciousness, has become academically and socially important within the context of contemporary rural society. Based on these conditions, a significant scholarly gap remains, namely the absence of a conceptual model that integratively explains how traditional cultural performances function as mechanisms for internalizing nationalism rooted in religious values within community life. In the Indonesian context, nationalism often grows not only through formal state discourse but also through cultural experiences intertwined with spiritual values and local identity. Therefore, this study offers novelty through the development of the Religious-Cultural Nationalism Internalization Model, which positions wayang performance, particularly the Aji Narantaka episode, as a strategic medium for integrating cultural, religious, and national values through symbolic, emotional, and collective processes. This model not only explains the function of wayang as cultural heritage but also affirms its potential as a pedagogical and social instrument for strengthening national character in contemporary rural communities. Based on this premise, the central problem addressed in this study concerns how the process of internalizing religiously grounded nationalism unfolds through traditional performance in rural communities. It also seeks to understand why such culturally embedded approaches remain effective in shaping collective awareness and social attitudes in comparison to more formalized educational methods. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it offers a novel framework that integrates local wisdom, religious values, and nationalism into a coherent model of character formation. Practically, it provides insights into how community-based cultural activities can be utilized as effective strategies for strengthening national identity. More broadly, this research highlights the potential of revitalizing traditional culture as a transformative medium for sustaining social cohesion and fostering meaningful engagement with national values in contemporary society.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) design, which positioned the community not merely as participants but as active collaborators in understanding, interpreting, and reconstructing cultural experiences through collective participation and reflection (Khasanah et al., 2024). The approach was selected because the issues faced by the community were related not only to the decline of cultural activities, but also to the weakening of collective cultural spaces through which social identity, national awareness, and shared cultural

meanings had historically been formed. In this context, PAR was considered particularly appropriate, as cultural values and social meanings emerge through collective participation, lived community experience, and collaborative reflection (Siswadi & Syaifuddin, 2024). The program was conducted in Temengeng Village, Sambong District, Blora Regency, a rural community with a strong Javanese cultural background where wayang performances had not been held for more than a decade despite previously being organized regularly to commemorate Indonesia's Independence Day. Therefore, the program was implemented from 8 July 2025 to 23 August 2026 as a collaborative effort to revitalize local cultural traditions through a wayang performance as a medium for strengthening nationalism and social cohesion. The participants involved included village leaders, religious figures, youth organization representatives, village officials, local residents, audience representatives, and a community service team consisting of one supervising lecturer and sixteen university students, including one student who served as the puppeteer in the performance. This study followed five stages within the Participatory Action Research (PAR) process: problem identification, needs and potential mapping, collaborative planning, participatory action, and reflection. These stages were conducted collaboratively with community members to identify cultural issues, revitalize wayang performance practices, and evaluate their contribution to strengthening social cohesion and national values. Cultural data in this study were derived from three interconnected sources: cultural performances, social actors, and lived community experiences surrounding the wayang tradition. These sources included the Aji Narantaka wayang performance, narrative symbolism embodied in characters such as Gatotkaca, the dalang's narration and dialogic expressions, communal cultural practices, as well as community interpretations and emotional responses expressed by local leaders, audience participants, and village residents. To capture these cultural dynamics, data were gathered through participatory observation during the preparation and enactment of the wayang performance, semi-structured interviews with community leaders, organizing members, audience representatives, and the service team, as well as supporting documentation in the form of photographs, video recordings, and field notes.

The data were analyzed using an interpretive-cultural approach that focused on the symbolic interpretation of wayang narratives, the construction of thematic meanings, and the socio-cultural contextualization of community experiences related to religious and national values. The analytical process involved identifying cultural symbols embedded in the Aji Narantaka performance, interpreting their moral and social meanings through community responses and collective participation, and examining how these meanings contributed to the formation of religious nationalism within the local context. The Religious-Cultural Nationalism Internalization (RCNI) Model was developed through an iterative synthesis between theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, particularly those related to nationalism, religious values, cultural internalization, and participatory learning within community settings. This synthesis was conducted through continuous comparison between symbolic meanings identified in the wayang performance, community interpretations and cultural experiences, and theoretically informed indicators, enabling the formulation of a conceptually and empirically grounded model of religious nationalism internalization. This method generated positive outcomes, including increased community participation, the revival of interest in local culture, and strengthened social cohesion (Afandi et al., 2022). Its strengths lie in its collaborative nature and its grounding in community needs, while its limitations include the requirement for considerable time, intensive coordination, and sustained collective commitment (Abdul & Mira, 2019).

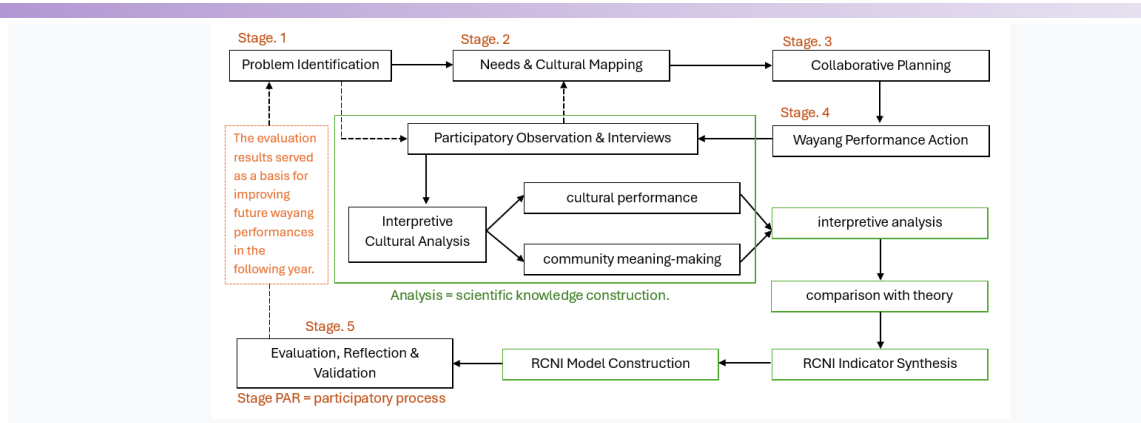


Figure 1. Research Methodology Flowchart

Program success indicators included community participation, public enthusiasm, the successful implementation of the wayang performance, the re-emergence of interest in local cultural traditions, and community expectations for future performances. To ensure validity, this study applied source triangulation, methodological triangulation, and member checking. Ethical principles were maintained through voluntary participation, respect for local cultural values, and transparency throughout the research process. Through the application of the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, this study sought not only to generate academic findings, but also to strengthen local culture and national values within rural community life.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Process of Wayang Revitalization through the Participatory Action Research (PAR) Approach

The revitalization of Wayang Kulit in Temengeng Village was carried out not merely as a ceremonial activity or a form of cultural entertainment, but as a participatory social process that involved the community in every stage of its implementation. The Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach was employed to foster collective community engagement, beginning with problem identification, cultural needs mapping, collaborative planning, and concluding with shared reflection following the performance (Khasanah et al., 2024). In this context, the community was not positioned as the object of the program, but as an active subject that contributed to determining the direction of cultural revitalization according to its social needs. The wayang performance served as a medium for reviving the collective cultural space that had previously experienced a long period of absence, while also strengthening social relationships among community members through shared cultural experiences.

Table 1. PAR Stages in the Revitalization of Wayang Performance

PAR Stages	Implemented Processes	Emerging Social Impacts
Problem Identification	Dialogues were conducted with community members regarding the absence of wayang performances and the decline of village cultural activities.	Collective awareness emerged regarding the importance of reviving cultural traditions.
Needs and Potential Mapping	Community needs, social support, and the potential for organizing a wayang performance were identified and mapped.	Community enthusiasm and expectations for the continuity of cultural traditions were identified.
Collaborative Planning	Discussions were held between the service team, village officials, and	A sense of collective ownership and community

	community members concerning the concept, schedule, and technical aspects of the program.	involvement was strengthened.
Action Implementation	A wayang performance featuring the Aji Narantaka episode was organized as a form of cultural revitalization.	Community participation, social interaction, and pride in local culture increased.
Observation and Reflection	Community responses were observed, and joint evaluations were conducted after the activity.	A collective desire emerged to continue organizing wayang performances in the following years.

The participatory process in the revitalization of wayang reflects more than community involvement in a cultural activity it signifies the reactivation of collective ownership over cultural meaning and communal identity. Within participatory cultural settings, revitalization becomes socially meaningful when cultural practices are reconstructed through shared awareness, mutual responsibility, and collective engagement rather than external intervention alone (Jackson & Kassam, 1998). In this context, participation functioned as a mechanism through which local culture was repositioned from a passive cultural memory into an actively negotiated social space, enabling residents to reconnect with shared values, strengthen communal belonging, and reaffirm the social relevance of wayang within contemporary rural life (Zou et al., 2025).



Figure 2. Wayang performance action

The wayang performance functioned as a mechanism of social reconstruction through which fragmented communal relations and cultural memories were symbolically reactivated. Rather than merely serving as a performative event, the shared cultural space enabled residents to renegotiate collective meanings, strengthen emotional attachment to local traditions, and reaffirm communal identity through a common symbolic experience (Fadhila et al., 2025). In this sense, wayang operated not only as cultural expression but also as a socially embedded medium through which moral values, collective memory, and social cohesion were continuously reproduced, reinforcing Clifford Geertz's perspective that cultural symbols sustain shared meaning and social integration within community life (Firdaus, 2025). The revitalization of wayang signifies more than the restoration of a discontinued cultural activity; it reflects the symbolic reactivation of collective identity and cultural continuity within rural community life. The renewed public aspiration for future performances suggests that wayang was no longer perceived as a temporary ceremonial event, but as a socially meaningful cultural space through which communal values, shared memory, and collective belonging could be sustained across generations. In this regard, cultural revitalization may be understood as a process of re-legitimizing local tradition within contemporary social life, demonstrating that traditional culture continues to possess transformative potential for strengthening social cohesion, cultural awareness, and collective responsibility in rural communities.

3.2 Religious-Cultural Nationalism Internalization (RCNI) through the Aji Narantaka Wayang Performance

The Aji Narantaka episode in the Wayang Kulit performance embodies symbols of heroism, courage, and moral responsibility that are capable of fostering collective awareness regarding the

importance of preserving culture and social unity. Through the community's emotional engagement during the performance, cultural and religious values underwent a process of internalization within rural social life. Based on these findings, this discussion is organized into four integrated sections, namely: The Aji Narantaka Wayang Performance as a Medium of Internalization. During the Aji Narantaka performance, Gatotkaca was portrayed in a scene of reverence before Resi Seta while receiving guidance concerning the sacred power of Aji Narantaka, visually emphasizing humility, obedience, and moral preparation prior to the use of strength. Through the dalang's narration, the scene highlighted that power should be exercised not for personal ambition, but for protecting society and upholding justice, positioning Gatotkaca as a moral guardian rather than merely a heroic warrior. Audience responses during and after the performance suggested that this portrayal was interpreted as a representation of collective responsibility and social devotion, strengthening emotional attachment to values of communal protection and moral exemplarity embedded in the wayang tradition (Wardono, 2014).



Figure 3. Gatotkaca Receiving Moral Guidance from Resi Seta on the Aji Narantaka during the Wayang Performance

The value of courage was concretely represented during the confrontation scene between Gatotkaca and Dursala, in which Gatotkaca was visually portrayed through firm gestures, an unwavering posture, and decisive movements symbolizing determination in confronting threats to social order. Through the dalang's narration, courage was framed not merely as physical superiority, but as a moral commitment to defend justice and collective welfare, as reflected in expressions such as, "*Strength shall not be used to oppress, but to protect truth and safeguard the people.*" This portrayal encouraged audience members to interpret courage as ethical steadfastness grounded in responsibility rather than individual power, reinforcing the understanding that defending truth and protecting communal harmony constitute essential moral obligations within rural social life (Latifah & Kristiana, 2021). The value of dharma was reflected in the performance through the scene in which Gatotkaca respectfully received guidance from Resi Seta before accepting the responsibility associated with the Aji Narantaka, symbolizing moral discipline and devotion to the common good. Through the dalang's narration, dharma was emphasized as an ethical obligation to exercise power responsibly, as illustrated in messages such as, "*True strength is fulfilled not through domination, but through devotion to justice and the welfare of others.*" Audience responses suggested that this scene was interpreted as a moral reminder that social harmony depends upon responsibility, self-restraint, and commitment to collective wellbeing, reinforcing the understanding of dharma as a socially embedded moral obligation rather than an abstract ethical principle (Permana, 2017). The morality of knighthood was reflected through the symbolic portrayal of Gatotkaca as a protector who exercised strength with restraint and moral responsibility rather than domination. During key scenes of confrontation, Gatotkaca was visually presented through a firm yet controlled posture, protective positioning, and disciplined gestures that emphasized his role as a guardian of communal order rather than a figure driven by personal ambition or vengeance. Audience responses suggested that this portrayal was understood as an ethical representation of leadership grounded in service, sacrifice,

and collective protection, reinforcing the belief that strength acquires legitimacy only when directed toward social welfare and moral responsibility. In this sense, the morality of knighthood functioned not merely as heroic symbolism, but as a form of socio-cultural religiosity that strengthened ethical commitment and the internalization of religious nationalism within community life (Wayang, 2010).

Manifestation of RCNI Indicators within the Community. The revitalization of Wayang Kulit through the Aji Narantaka performance demonstrated that the internalization of religious nationalism was manifested not only at the symbolic level, but also through concrete social attitudes within community life. The process of cultural engagement during the performance gradually strengthened public awareness regarding the importance of preserving local traditions as part of collective identity and social responsibility (Samongilailai & Utomo, 2024). The first manifestation appeared in the form of cultural loyalty, became visible through the community’s sustained engagement during the wayang performance, where residents remained present throughout the overnight event and groups of spectators from neighboring villages also gathered to attend the performance. Beyond physical attendance, informal conversations following the performance frequently revolved around memories of earlier wayang traditions, reflections on the cultural atmosphere that had long been absent, and collective aspirations for similar performances to be organized regularly in the future. These forms of emotional attachment, communal participation, and nostalgic reflection indicate that the performance reactivated the community’s sense of connection to local cultural heritage, which may be interpreted as the emergence of cultural loyalty toward the preservation of wayang tradition across generations. The second manifestation was reflected through collective solidarity among community members during the implementation of the wayang performance. The involvement of village officials, religious leaders, local residents, and the service team demonstrated that cultural activities functioned as a communal space that strengthened social interaction and collective participation. The shared experience created through the performance reinforced social cohesion and revived the spirit of togetherness within rural society (Qodim, 2023). Furthermore, the manifestation of moral-religious responsibility emerged through the community’s understanding that preserving cultural traditions was not merely a social activity, but also part of a moral responsibility toward maintaining harmony, social values, and collective welfare. In this context, local culture was interpreted not only as artistic heritage, but also as a medium for strengthening ethical awareness and social responsibility within community life. The strongest manifestation appeared in the form of civic continuity intention, which was reflected in the collective desire of community members to continue organizing wayang performances in the coming years. Several residents expressed their hope that similar performances could be held regularly so that local cultural traditions would not disappear again. This finding demonstrates that the internalization process did not stop at emotional appreciation (Djumat & Hayun, 2021), but developed into a collective commitment to sustaining cultural traditions as part of social identity and national consciousness.

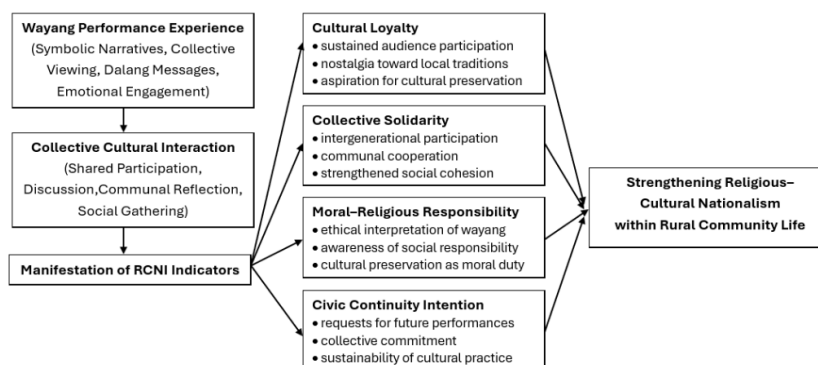


Figure 4. Manifestation Process of RCNI Indicators within the Community

Construction of the Religious-Cultural Nationalism Internalization (RCNI) Model. The construction of the Religious-Cultural Nationalism Internalization (RCNI) Model demonstrates that the internalization of religious nationalism within rural communities is formed through a gradual socio-cultural process rooted in collective cultural experience. In this model, Wayang Kulit functions not merely as a traditional performance, but as a cultural medium that transforms symbolic narratives into social consciousness. The symbolic values embedded in the Aji Narantaka episode such as heroism, moral responsibility, social devotion, and communal protection operate as cultural symbols capable of shaping collective meaning within society. Through emotional engagement during the performance, these symbolic values are socially interpreted, emotionally experienced, and collectively negotiated by the audience. This process reinforces contemporary socio-cultural perspectives that view culture not as a passive heritage, but as an active social mechanism capable of constructing identity, emotional attachment, and collective awareness within community life (Adnan et al., 2024). Based on this process, the RCNI Model is constructed through an interconnected sequence consisting of cultural performance, symbolic interpretation, emotional engagement, collective awareness, and the internalization of religious nationalism. In this framework, emotional involvement becomes the central bridge that transforms cultural symbols into social values embedded within communal consciousness. Consequently, nationalism is not internalized through formal ideological instruction, but through participatory cultural experiences that integrate social solidarity, moral values, and cultural religiosity within everyday life. This model also offers a theoretical contribution by positioning traditional culture as a form of social pedagogy capable of strengthening national identity and collective cohesion in contemporary rural society. Therefore, the RCNI Model affirms that the revitalization of traditional culture possesses strategic potential not only for cultural preservation, but also for reconstructing religious nationalism through collective cultural engagement.

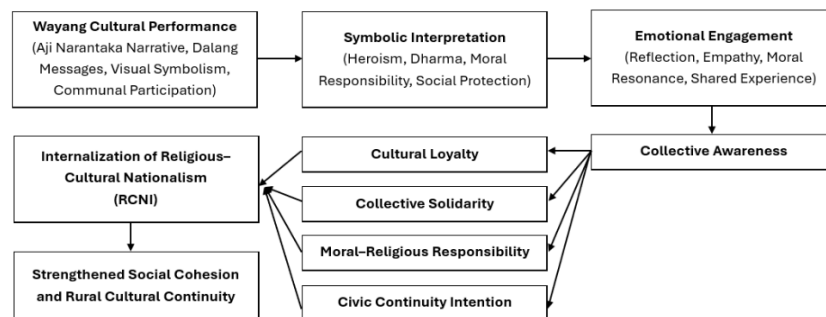


Figure 5. Conceptual Construction of the Religious-Cultural Nationalism Internalization (RCNI) Model Based on Cultural Participation

4. CONCLUSION

The Wayang Kulit performance of the Aji Narantaka episode in Temengeng Village proved to function not only as a form of local cultural revitalization, but also as a medium for the internalization of religious nationalism through the community's collective cultural experience. The Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach successfully revived cultural activities that had long been absent, strengthened social solidarity, and encouraged the emergence of a collective commitment to sustain the wayang tradition in a continuous manner. The revitalization process reactivated communal cultural spaces, strengthened social solidarity, and encouraged collective aspirations to sustain wayang traditions as part of local identity and shared moral responsibility. In contemporary society, where globalization and digital culture increasingly weaken communal attachment and cultural continuity, wayang may be repositioned not simply as a traditional heritage

to be preserved, but as an adaptive form of cultural pedagogy capable of transmitting ethical, social, and national values through lived collective experience. The construction of the Religious-Cultural Nationalism Internalization (RCNI) Model contributes theoretically by offering an empirically grounded framework explaining how cultural symbolism, emotional participation, and collective awareness interact in shaping socio-religious nationalism, while practically providing an alternative strategy for community-based character strengthening and cultural sustainability in rural contexts. Future studies are encouraged to examine the applicability of the RCNI Model across other local cultural traditions and broader socio-cultural settings.

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