

Kidung Merapi as the Arts-Politics of Memory

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ABSTRACT

Mount Merapi is not merely an active volcano but a living symbol in Javanese cosmology, deeply intertwined with myths of sacred guardians and ritual performances. This study explores the *kidung* (ritual chants) performed during the *Labuhan Merapi* as a form of noble wisdom and a cultural strategy for negotiating human-nature relationships in a disaster-prone landscape. Using Performance Studies and Politics of Affect, this research analyzes how these chants produce affective atmospheres of fear and reverence that sustain collective memory of past eruptions. Ethnographic observation, textual analysis of the *kidung*, and interviews with ritual custodians reveal that the poetic structure encodes ecological knowledge, local cosmology, and the philosophy of *sumeleh* (sincere acceptance) as a mode of living with disaster. The study highlights how ritual music and simple gamelan accompaniment create a sacred soundscape that connects spiritual beliefs with communal resilience. However, the transformation of *Labuhan* into a form of spiritual tourism generates tensions between the sacred and the commodified, raising critical questions about who benefits from this affective economy. This paper argues that the Merapi *kidung* is not merely a static heritage but an affective performance that is constantly renegotiated within the interplay of local agency, state narratives, and the tourism industry. As such, the noble wisdom embedded in these ritual soundscapes offers alternative knowledge for sustaining life amid ongoing threats and the pressures of modern cultural commodification.

KEYWORDS

Kidung merapi, sacred memory, performance studies, politics of affect



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Introduction

Ritual *Labuhan Merapi* is not merely a surviving cultural tradition but a political and affective practice that sustains a form of sacred memory in contemporary Java. Performed annually on the southern slope of Mount Merapi in Kinahrejo, Sleman, this ritual enacts a cosmological relationship between humans, ancestral spirits, and the volatile landscape of one of Indonesia's most active volcanoes. Embedded within the ritual is the Javanese conception of existence, in which the realms of the seen (*kang katon*) and the unseen (*kang ora katon*) are inseparably intertwined. Through the ritual offerings (*ubarampe*), processions, and chanting, the *Labuhan* becomes a performative negotiation of harmony between human life and the cosmic order. Yet beyond its spiritual dimension, the ritual also functions as a cultural inscription of power, since it is performed as part of the commemoration of the ascension (*jumenengan dalem*) of Sri Sultan Hamengkubuwono X to the throne of the Yogyakarta Sultanate. Thus, *Labuhan*

Merapi is not only a spiritual offering to the guardian spirits of the mountain but also a ritual of political legitimacy rooted in the Javanese cosmological order.

On the night before the main ritual is performed, the community gathers in a solemn vigil at Kinahrejo to offer prayers for safety, gratitude, and spiritual protection. During this nocturnal preparation, the atmosphere is thick with quiet intensity. It is here that the *kidung*—sung poetic invocations—play a central role. The chanting consists of Javanese *macapat* and Islamic *tahlil*, two different vocal traditions that fuse into a single ritual expression. The *macapat* verses resonate in pentatonic melodic lines, sung in free rhythm with controlled vocal ornamentation, creating an aura of grounded spirituality; while the collective recitation of *tahlil* introduces a rhythmic pulse of devotional repetition. This synthesis reveals the hybrid religious character of Merapi communities—Javanese spiritualism interwoven with Islam—while affirming the ritual function of sound as a carrier of meaning, memory and emotion.

The continuity of ritual knowledge in Merapi is guarded by the lineage of *juru kunci* (ritual custodians). The late Mbah Maridjan, who perished during the 2010 eruption, remains a powerful figure in the sacred imagination of Merapi. His role was not only to guard tradition but also to serve as a mediator between the Keraton Yogyakarta and the mountain's unseen forces. His successor, Mbah Asih (*Mas Wedana Surakso Hargo*), continues this lineage of ritual authority, embodying a form of historical continuity that ties the ritual to ancestral legitimacy. Through this lineage, the ritual preserves a memory of responsibility—that Merapi is not a passive natural object but a living entity that must be approached with reverence. The *kidung*, performed under the guidance of ritual authorities, becomes a medium of ancestral voice, a sonic path through which cultural wisdom is inherited, embodied, and remembered.

While previous studies have approached the *Labuhan Merapi* from anthropological and historical perspectives, very little attention has been given to the performative role of sound and voice within the ritual—particularly the political function of *kidung* as a practice of memory. Most literature positions the ritual as a form of local wisdom or religious syncretism, but such approaches often overlook the affective force of ritual sound in structuring collective experience. The emotional energy generated by the chanting is not incidental; it binds the community emotionally to Merapi, generating a shared feeling of *sumeleh* (calm surrender), reverence, and vigilance. This study argues that these emotional formations are not merely spiritual responses but affective strategies that sustain cultural continuity in a landscape shaped by disaster, loss, and resilience.

This paper proposes that the *kidung* in *Labuhan Merapi* operates as arts-politics of memory. By this, I refer to the way aesthetic ritual practices—specifically vocal performance—participate in negotiating authority, shaping collective remembrance,

and maintaining cosmological order. The *kidung* gives form to memory not through writing or historical documentation, but through embodied voice—performed, repeated, and inherited within ritual space. Anchored in Performance Studies (Schechner, 2002), Cultural Memory Theory (Assmann, 2011; Connerton, 1989), and the Politics of Affect (Ahmed, 2004), this study examines how ritual sound both reflects and shapes relations of power in Merapi. The framework of arts-politics reveals how ritual sound is entangled with cultural power, state symbolism, local resilience, and even tourism and cultural commodification in recent years.

Through this lens, the study argues that the *kidung* in *Labuhan Merapi* is not a static heritage object but a dynamic affective performance that negotiates between spiritual devotion, political symbolism, and cultural survival. It is an archive of emotion inscribed in sound—guarding the sacred memory of Merapi while contesting the shifting cultural landscape around it.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary framework combining performance theory, cultural memory, affect theory, and cultural politics to understand the *kidung* in Labuhan Merapi as a form of the arts-politics of memory. These perspectives explain how ritual sound operates as an embodied, affective, and political practice that sustains the sacred memory of Merapi and legitimizes the authority of the Keraton Yogyakarta.

a) Ritual Performance and Embodied Knowledge

Performance theory offers a foundation for interpreting Labuhan Merapi not as a static tradition but as a living performative event. Richard Schechner (2002) defines performance as “restored behavior”—a sequence of actions that can be repeated, transformed, and reinterpreted through time. Rituals, in this view, are performances that mediate between the individual and collective, between body and belief. The repetition of *kidung macapat* and *tahlil* during the Labuhan is a form of restored behavior that reproduces cultural meaning through action rather than through text.

Victor Turner (1969) adds the idea of liminality, the transitional moment where participants step outside everyday structures and enter sacred time. In the night before Labuhan, the people of Kinahrejo inhabit this liminal space: through song and prayer, they temporarily suspend mundane life to commune with the unseen forces of Merapi. The embodied act of singing becomes both devotion and transformation—turning fear into faith, uncertainty into harmony. This study adopts an interdisciplinary framework combining performance theory, cultural memory, affect theory, and cultural politics to understand the *kidung* in Labuhan Merapi as a form of the arts-politics of memory. These perspectives explain how ritual sound operates as an embodied, affective, and

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Diana Taylor (2003) distinguishes between the archive (written, material memory) and the repertoire (embodied practices that transmit memory through performance). The kidung belongs to the repertoire; it keeps the past alive through the living body and voice. In this sense, kidung macapat is not merely sung; it remembers. The ritual performance thus acts as an epistemological space where cultural knowledge is performed, embodied, and reactivated.

c) Cultural Memory and Ritual Transmission

Cultural memory theory deepens the understanding of how Labuhan Merapi sustains its meaning over generations. Jan Assmann (2011) conceptualizes cultural memory as the collective storage of identity, preserved through symbolic forms such as rituals, myths, and art. Unlike communicative memory, which depends on living witnesses, cultural memory operates through ritual continuity—by doing what ancestors once did. In this sense, Labuhan Merapi is not only a commemoration but an act of re-presencing the past. The kidung sung today echoes those sung by previous generations, maintaining continuity between the living and the dead.

Paul Connerton (1989) expands this idea through the concept of habitual memory, arguing that societies remember through bodily practices. The gestures, postures, and rhythms of chanting are not arbitrary; they are the means by which memory is embodied. Thus, the chanting of macapat and tahlil functions as a mnemonic ritual that imprints sacred memory in the collective body of the community. The performance of

kidung therefore becomes a cultural technology of remembering—one that fuses emotion, body, and belief.

d) The Politics of Affect in Collective Experience

Rituals are also affective systems that organize emotions. Sara Ahmed (2004) introduces the idea of affective economies, in which feelings circulate and attach subjects to collective values. In the case of Labuhan Merapi, fear of eruption, respect toward the mountain, and devotion to divine power become shared affective experiences that shape communal identity. Through the chanting of kidung and tahlil, these affects are redistributed across bodies, turning individual emotion into collective strength.

Lawrence Grossberg (1992) views affect as a field of energy through which power operates—people are mobilized not only by ideology but by what they feel. The night-long chanting before the Labuhan can be seen as a process of affective alignment, where bodies are synchronized emotionally toward a shared sense of humility and vigilance. This affective dimension transforms the ritual into a politics of feeling, sustaining cultural solidarity amid uncertainty.

e) Arts-Politics of Memory as Analytical Lens

The central analytical concept of this study—the arts-politics of memory—builds upon the intersections of aesthetics, affect, and power. Benedict Anderson (2006) argues that communities are imagined through shared symbols and rituals that create a sense of continuity. In this sense, Labuhan Merapi, under the patronage of the Keraton Yogyakarta, functions as an imagined sacred community, reaffirming the Sultan's symbolic connection with the natural and spiritual realms.

Raymond Williams (1977) contributes the notion of structures of feeling—the lived affective experiences that precede formal ideology. The kidung embodies these structures of feeling, capturing devotion, fear, and reverence in musical form. It is through sound that collective sentiment is made sensible, and through repetition that it becomes tradition.

Finally, James C. Scott (1990) offers the idea of hidden transcripts—cultural expressions that subtly negotiate or resist dominant power. The kidung may appear devotional, yet it also enacts a subtle agency of the local community, asserting spiritual authority that coexists with, and sometimes diverges from, state and royal narratives.

Combining these perspectives, the arts-politics of memory recognizes kidung not as passive heritage but as an aesthetic practice that negotiates meaning, emotion, and authority. It is an art that remembers, feels, and legitimizes—a form of ritual sound that sustains both sacred and political continuity on the slopes of Merapi.

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Methodology

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach to understand the function of *kidung* within the ritual system of *Labuhan Merapi*. Ethnography is appropriate for this research because it focuses on meaning, context, and lived cultural experience (Creswell, 2013). Rather than treating *kidung* as a static musical object, this study views it as a situated cultural practice that is embedded in ritual behavior, cosmological beliefs, and emotional experience.

The ethnographic perspective allows this research to explore how ritual sound operates within a specific cultural world, namely, the Merapi community in Kinahrejo, Cangkringan, Sleman, Yogyakarta. This approach makes it possible to interpret *kidung* from the worldview of the ritual community itself, not from an external or purely textual perspective. Following Spradley (1980), this research adopts an emic orientation by prioritizing local categories, meanings, and symbolic interpretations of ritual participants.

In addition, this study is informed by performance studies (Schechner, 2002), which treats ritual as a performed action that generates meaning through repetition and

embodiment. Therefore, *kidung* is not only analyzed linguistically or musically but also as a performative event that involves gesture, breath, rhythm, and collective participation. By doing so, this study moves beyond descriptive ethnomusicology and situates *kidung* within the broader social and cosmological system that shapes ritual life around Mount Merapi.

The research design is also interpretative, engaging hermeneutical reflection to uncover symbolic and spiritual meanings within the ritual (Ricoeur, 1981). The interpretation focuses on how the community understands *kidung* as a form of offering, protection, prayer, and remembrance. Thus, the overall research design combines ethnographic inquiry, interpretive analysis, and performance theory to reveal how *kidung* functions as a medium of memory, affect, and cultural power within *Labuhan Merapi*.

This research was conducted in Kinahrejo, a village located on the southern slope of Mount Merapi in the subdistrict of Cangkringan, Sleman Regency, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Kinahrejo is historically known as one of the most important ritual centers in the Merapi area and serves as the main site of *Labuhan Merapi*, a royal ritual held annually under the patronage of the Keraton Yogyakarta. The village holds a significant cultural and spiritual position as it is believed to be closely associated with the guardian spirits of Merapi (*penunggu Merapi*) and serves as a symbolic boundary between the human world and the metaphysical domain.

Kinahrejo is also closely tied to the lineage of *juru kunci* (ritual custodians) who hold responsibility for maintaining spiritual communication with Merapi. The late Mbah Maridjan, who became an iconic figure due to his dedication to Merapi tradition, lived and served in this village until the 2010 eruption. His spiritual role has since been continued by his successor, Mbah Asih (*Mas Wedana Surakso Hargo*), who maintains ritual responsibilities including the preparation and performance of *Labuhan Merapi*. This continuity of ritual authority shapes Kinahrejo not only as a geographical location but as a cultural landscape shaped by tradition, memory, and ancestral belief.

The ritual takes place in two main phases: a nocturnal preparation at the residence of the *juru kunci*, where *kidung macapat* are chanted as spiritual invocation, and the main offering ceremony on the slopes of Merapi. The site functions as a sacred performative space where ritual speech, song, and offerings are enacted to maintain cosmic harmony and reinforce cultural resilience against the unpredictable force of the volcano.

Kinahrejo is therefore not only a ritual site but also a repository of cultural memory, where oral tradition, ancestral belief, and royal symbolism intersect. For this reason, it provides a meaningful context for analyzing *kidung* not only as musical expression

but as a ritual practice that reflects the cosmological worldview and collective identity of the Merapi community.

This study employs three qualitative data collection techniques: participant-oriented observation, contextual interview insight, and audio-visual ritual documentation. First, participant-oriented observation was conducted during the Labuhan Merapi ritual cycle in Kinahrejo, particularly during the night prayer gathering (*tirakatan*) preceding the offering procession. Observation emphasized ritual atmosphere, interaction dynamics, sonic texture of the chanting, and the role of *kidung macapat* and *tahlil* as ritual invocations. This method made it possible to understand *kidung* as embodied and situational practice, not simply as musical form.

Second, the study includes contextual insight from informal ethnographic conversations with ritual participants and cultural practitioners familiar with Merapi tradition. These interactions provided background understanding of the function of *kidung* within Merapi cosmology, ritual ethics, and the continuity of the *juru kunci*'s spiritual responsibility. Instead of formal interviews, situational and natural conversations were prioritized to maintain cultural sensitivity and avoid interfering with the sacred nature of the ritual.

Third, audio-visual documentation was used to strengthen observational data. Ritual recordings and photographic documentation originating from community archives and cultural documentation channels were analyzed using performance analysis (Schechner, 2002). These materials were treated as performative data, enabling close examination of vocal expression, collective participation, ritual sequences, and spatial organization during chanting. Importantly, documentation was used not merely as visual evidence but as a trace of ritual practice, revealing how tradition is preserved and transmitted through performance. These combined methods allowed this research to analyze *kidung* as a lived phenomenon—experienced, heard, and felt, rather than as a textual or purely musical object.

This research adheres to the ethical principles of cultural sensitivity, respect for sacred tradition, and informed interpretation. Since Labuhan Merapi is a sacred ritual closely connected to the cosmological and political identity of Yogyakarta, all stages of observation and interpretation were conducted with deep respect for ritual protocols and community values. The researcher's position as a Javanese insider facilitated understanding of implicit cultural codes, yet critical reflection was maintained to avoid romanticization or overfamiliarity.

No intrusive documentation or disruptive questioning was conducted during sacred moments of the ritual. Instead, observation focused on publicly accessible stages of the ceremony and on symbolic interpretations derived from local discourse. Information

obtained from conversations with cultural practitioners and ritual custodians (juru kunci) was treated with confidentiality and contextual accuracy.

In analyzing and presenting the data, special care was taken to represent the community's worldview ethically, ensuring that kidung and ritual practices are not reduced to exotic spectacle or mere folklore. The study acknowledges the authority of local knowledge holders, especially the current juru kunci, Mbah Asih (Mas Wedana Surakso Hargo), and the legacy of Mbah Maridjan. Their spiritual leadership is recognized as part of Merapi's living heritage, and this research aims to contribute to broader understanding and preservation rather than reinterpretation or appropriation.

By maintaining this ethical framework, the study respects both the sacred dimension of Labuhan Merapi and the intellectual responsibility of scholarly analysis—bridging local wisdom with academic discourse in a manner that honors cultural authenticity and human dignity.

Analysis

The analysis of reveals how *kidung macapat* function not only as ritual chants but as affective performances that mediate between sacred devotion, collective memory, and political symbolism. The ritual becomes an arena where art, spirituality, and power converge—where sound becomes a form of remembering, and remembering becomes a form of governance.

a) Kidung as Embodied Memory

The performance of kidung macapat during the night of *tirakatan* embodies a collective act of remembering. As participants sit in silence, listening and chanting together, the rhythm of the macapat verses reactivates ancestral memory of Merapi as both protector and destroyer. The repetition of melodic lines and the slow tempo cultivate a sense of calm surrender (*sumeleh*), producing an affective environment that mirrors the Javanese cosmological ideal of harmony (*rukun*).

In this sense, *kidung* functions as an acoustic archive—a living memory inscribed not in text, but in the shared vibration of sound and emotion. Through the embodied act of singing, participants reaffirm their cultural identity and their spiritual relationship with the mountain.

b) The Sacred Soundscape of Labuhan

The ritual soundscape is shaped by Javanese *macapat*. This coexistence of forms reflects the syncretic nature of Javanese spirituality, where Islam and indigenous cosmology coexist within one performative frame. The layering of voices, gongs, and ambient sounds of the night creates a sacred sonic environment, transforming the ritual

space into a medium of communication with unseen forces. Sound, in this context, is both devotional and territorial—it consecrates the space while reinforcing communal boundaries of belief and belonging.

c) Ritual Power and the Politics of Sacred Memory

The *Labuhan* ritual, as part of the annual commemoration of the Sultan's ascension (Jumenengan Dalem), is not only spiritual but also political. The performance of *kidung* connects the Keraton Yogyakarta, the Merapi custodians, and the local community in a complex web of cultural authority. Through ritual sponsorship, the Keraton reaffirms its symbolic sovereignty over the natural and spiritual realms, while the juru kunci embodies local agency and authenticity.

This shared performance of power aligns with what Assmann (2011) calls cultural memory as legitimization—the ritual functions as a reminder that royal and local authority coexist under sacred mandate. Yet this relationship is not one-sided. The *kidung* performed by the community also reclaims emotional ownership of the ritual, asserting that memory and devotion belong not only to the palace but to those who live with the mountain.

d) Affective Economy and Communal Resilience

The emotional intensity of the *kidung*—the collective hum, the pauses between phrases, the sound of coordinated breathing—creates a circulation of feelings that Sara Ahmed (2004) describes as affective economy. Fear of eruption and reverence toward Merapi are shared emotions that bind the community together. In every repetition of the chant, affect moves through bodies, transforming anxiety into resilience.

Through these affective exchanges, the ritual performs a politics of feeling, in which emotion becomes the means of cultural survival. The chant not only remembers the past but prepares the community to face the future. The sound of *kidung* thus bridges catastrophe and continuity, turning trauma into togetherness.

f) From Sacred Offering to Cultural Display

In recent years, *Labuhan Merapi* has increasingly drawn public attention and tourists, creating a tension between sacred devotion and cultural commodification. The presence of cameras, media coverage, and state tourism programs transforms the ritual into what MacCannell (1976) calls a form of staged authenticity.

While the ritual remains meaningful for participants, its transformation into a public spectacle raises questions about who controls sacred memory and who benefits from its affective value. Nevertheless, rather than reducing its authenticity, this visibility

also demonstrates the adaptability of Javanese ritual culture: the sacred persists by negotiating with modernity.

Through this analysis, *kidung* Merapi emerges as a dynamic practice where art, affect, and authority intertwine. It performs memory by sounding it, transforms emotion into solidarity, and legitimizes both royal and communal identity. It is through this intersection that *kidung* enacts what this study calls the arts-politics of memory—a way of governing emotion and preserving heritage through sound, ritual, and shared remembrance.

Conclusion

The study of *Kidung* Merapi demonstrates that ritual sound is not a mere artistic accompaniment to religious ceremony but a living system of memory, affect, and power. Through the chanting of macapat within the *Labuhan* Merapi ritual, the Merapi community performs a sacred negotiation between the human, natural, and spiritual realms. The *kidung* embodies the Javanese worldview in which harmony, humility, and devotion form the foundation of cosmological balance.

By examining *kidung* through the theoretical lenses of performance studies, cultural memory, and politics of affect, this research reveals that ritual sound operates as an embodied form of remembrance. It preserves ancestral knowledge through repetition and bodily practice rather than through written record. Each performance of *kidung* reactivates the community's collective memory of Merapi—its eruptions, its spirits, and its symbolic role as both guardian and threat. The ritual thus functions as a cultural mechanism that transforms fear into reverence and disaster into devotion.

The study also shows that *Labuhan* Merapi is a site of negotiated authority. Through the performance of *kidung*, the Keraton Yogyakarta, the *juru kunci* lineage, and the local community co-produce a shared sacred narrative that legitimizes both royal power and communal identity. The affective power of the ritual reinforces social cohesion and emotional solidarity, allowing the community to endure within an unpredictable environment.

However, the increasing visibility of *Labuhan* Merapi in media and tourism introduces new layers of meaning. The ritual is no longer confined to sacred space but becomes part of the cultural economy—a process that simultaneously risks commodification and enables the preservation of intangible heritage. Despite these tensions, *kidung* continues to serve as a resilient vessel of sacred memory and cultural adaptation.

In conclusion, *Kidung* Merapi exemplifies what this study defines as the arts-politics of memory—an aesthetic and emotional practice through which culture remembers, negotiates, and survives. By transforming devotion into performance and emotion into

collective knowledge, the *kidung* sustains both the spiritual continuity of Merapi and the cultural vitality of Javanese tradition amid the pressures of modernity.

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