European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2026, pp. 471-489

Reclaiming indigenous learning in adult education: An ethno-andragogical perspective from the traditional art community

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Abstract

This study explores how cultural practices function as informal learning environments for adults, focusing on a kuda kepang community in Pal Tiga Puluh village, North Bengkulu, Indonesia. It examines how local knowledge, adult learning, and cultural continuity are connected through participation in traditional performance. Using a qualitative case study, data were collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with community members. Thematic analysis identified four interrelated learning domains: embodied practice, oral transmission, communal participation, and spiritual experience. These domains were associated with the development of technical skills, cultural identity, social cohesion, and perceived emotional empowerment. The findings suggest that the sanggar functions as a community-based learning environment in which knowledge is acquired through observation, repetition, dialogue, ritual participation, and intergenerational relationships. The study contributes to adult education by showing how culturally situated learning can broaden predominantly individual and cognitive understandings of adult learning.

Keywords: ethno-andragogy, adult learning, cultural learning, experiential learning, kuda kepang

Background

In many indigenous and rural communities, adult learning is deeply embedded in cultural practices and local knowledge systems. However, dominant adult learning models tend

ISSN 2000-7426
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http://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.6125
www.rela.ep.liu.se

to be rooted in assumptions of individualism and cognitive rationality, thereby marginalising the spiritual, communal, and embodied learning processes that are central to indigenous ways of life (Aikman & Robinson-Pant, 2019; Rhodes, 2021). Among Ethiopian pastoralists, for instance, adult learning occurs through oral traditions and spiritual practices that resist formal schooling norms (Seyoum & Basha, 2017). When programmes ignore such culturally situated knowledge, they result in disengagement and reproduce educational inequities (Regmi, 2019). Similar dynamics appear in remote Australia, where literacy programmes designed as neutral technical skills overlook literacy as a cultural process, causing Indigenous youth to reject irrelevant learning (Kral & Schwab, 2017). Thus, the dominance of instruction-focused adult education models continues to marginalise learning practices rooted in culture, spirituality, and community, which are fundamental characteristics of indigenous communities around the world.

Studies show that ignoring culturally situated forms of knowledge results in disengagement, lack of sustainability, and the reproduction of educational inequities (Regmi, 2019; Seyoum & Basha, 2017). In Ethiopia, for instance, indigenous knowledge contributes to sustainable development through accessible traditional medicine, win-win conflict mediation systems, and cultural tourism that generates local income (Moges et al., 2024). Similarly, in remote Australia, community-led learning centers that integrate indigenous cultural practices have proven more effective than formal literacy programmes (Kral & Schwab, 2017). According to recent data from Statistik Indonesia 2023, over 36% of rural adults in Indonesia engage in cultural activities such as traditional dance, music, and ritual as a form of community participation, yet these practices remain largely excluded from formal and non-formal education frameworks (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2023). This signals a critical disconnect between national educational strategies and the lived realities of adult learners. In response, there has been a growing call for ethno-andragogy, a culturally responsive adult learning paradigm that integrates indigenous values, collective learning, and embodied practices (Clancy et al., 2023). Ethno-andragogy acknowledges that learning in many indigenous and non-Western settings is not an individual pursuit but a relational, spiritual, and community-based process (Gainsford & Evans, 2021).

Kuda Kepang is a traditional Javanese dance involving trance states, ancestral rituals, and collective performance, where adults engage not only in artistic expression but also in intergenerational knowledge transfer. Sanggar Samudra Jaya, a locally initiated community group, serves as an informal learning hub where adult learners ranging from dancers and musicians to pawang (ritual facilitators) learn through participation, observation, spiritual discipline, and oral tradition. Although *Kuda Kepang* was originally identified with Javanese people, its development has made it accepted by all levels of society. It is no wonder that *Kuda Kepang* performance groups now include many members from the Rejang ethnic group in Bengkulu. It is not only popular among adult men but also among children, adolescents, and women.

Despite the pedagogical richness of traditional arts, the educational potential of *Kuda Kepang* communities remains under-researched. Existing studies identified in this manuscript have primarily examined *Kuda Kepang* and related Jaran Kepang practices as cultural, artistic, or community-transfer phenomena, while less attention has been given to their functioning as adult learning environments.

As non-Indigenous researchers, we acknowledge that conducting research within an Indigenous cultural community involves ethical and epistemological challenges. Neither of us belongs to the Javanese *Kuda Kepang* tradition, and we recognise the risk of reproducing extractive representations of Indigenous knowledge. Throughout this study, we sought to engage collaboratively with community members, maintain reflexive

awareness of our positionality, and ensure that participants' voices remained central to the interpretation of findings. A more detailed positionality statement is provided in the methodology section. To address this gap, the present study raises four research questions: (1) How do adult learners engage in learning within the cultural setting of the *Kuda Kepang* art community? (2) What are the motivations, lived experiences, and values that shape their learning processes? (3) In what ways do ritual, bodily practice, and social interaction facilitate knowledge transmission? and (4) How can these processes inform the development of a culturally grounded framework namely, ethno-andragogy for adult education?

Literature review

Repositioning adult learning: Toward an ethno-andragogical framework

For decades, the fields of edult education has prioritised learner autonomy, reflective reasoning, and a pragmatic orientation toward solving real-life problems, as reflected in major theoretical frameworks such as as Knowles' andragogy (Knowles et al., 2005), Mezirow's transformative learning (Mtika & Kistler, 2017), and Brookfield's critical reflection (Brookfield, 2009). These models have provided a strong foundation for adult education practice, particularly in formal or institutionalised settings. However, they tend to privilege cognitive over emotional, individual over collective, and secular over spiritual dimensions of learning.

While these paradigms offer valuable insights, their limitations become increasingly apparent when applied in indigenous contexts in Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asian traditional societies, learning is deeply embedded in social relationships, cultural rituals, and shared communal responsibilities. The focus on individual progress and rationalist outcomes fails to capture the relational and symbolic dynamics that characterise learning in such settings (Merriam & Ntseane, 2008). This disjuncture has prompted scholars to question the universal applicability of adult learning theories and to seek frameworks that are more contextually grounded. For instance, transformative learning theory emphasises critical reflection and perspective transformation as the pinnacle of adult learning (Mezirow, 1997). While valuable, this approach often neglects communal, embodied, and spiritual forms of transformation prevalent in indigenous settings. In contrast, Romm (2015) argues that indigenous learning is grounded in relationality, spirituality, and collective experience, elements that are absent from coventional adult education learning theories.

A growing body of literature now calls for the development of culturally responsive adult education models. These include the acknowledgment of indigenous knowledge systems, which value experiential, embodied, and intergenerational ways of knowing (Chilisa, 2012; Guo, 2017). Learning, in these contexts, often takes place through oral traditions, sacred performances, communal labor, and participation in rituals that reinforce collective identity. The knowledge transmitted in such forms is not abstract or decontextualised, but deeply connected to lived experience, social function, and spiritual meaning. This tension reflects what Mignolo terms *epistemic disobedience*, a call to delink from dominant Eurocentric logics of knowing and to reclaim the validity of non-Western epistemologies (Mignolo, 2009). Within this framework, indigenous knowledge is not alternative but foundational, challenging the asymmetrical power structures embedded in global knowledge production. These critiques signal the need for a paradigm shift in how adult education is theorised and practised. Rather than attempting to adapt

Western models to local cultures, there is a movement toward centering indigenous epistemologies as the starting point for theory building. This repositioning reframes adult learning not as a neutral or universal process, but as one that is shaped by power, history, and context. It also challenges the colonial legacy of education systems that have long devalued traditional knowledge from academic discourse. In their landmark work, Tuck and Yang (2012) caution against metaphorising decolonisation, urging scholars and educators to resist the tendency to integrate indigenous practices superficially into existing frameworks. Instead, they advocate for a complete reorientation of educational logic one that honors sovereignty, self-determination, and epistemic integrity.

Furthermore, recognising the diversity of adult learning practices is essential for achieving epistemic justice in global education. Education systems that marginalise or ignore culturally situated ways of knowing perpetuate inequality and disempowerment. In contrast, embracing pluralism in adult education theory validates alternative epistemologies and supports more inclusive, relevant, and transformative learning experiences. This shift paves the way for frameworks like ethno-andragogy, which seek to restore the legitimacy of local culture and spirituality as central to the learning process. By rethinking adult learning through the lens of cultural epistemologies, educators and researchers can begin to dismantle the universalist assumptions that have long dominated the field. This opens the door to more nuanced, community-based models of education that reflect the real experiences of learners in the Global South. It also contributes to the broader decolonisation of knowledge, asserting that no single model of learning can adequately capture the full range of human educational experiences. Gouthro and Holloway (2023) argue that a critical social theory perspective in adult education must go beyond piecemeal equity concerns to interrogate the broader structural and epistemological frameworks within which learning takes place. Their call for a '*pedagogy of hope*' grounded in Freirean tradition resonates with the *ethno-andragogical* insistence that education must affirm, rather than override, learners' cultural and communal identities. Similarly, von Kotze (2024) demonstrates through a South African popular education programme that the body itself is a site of knowledge: the gut, as a mediating organ between inside and outside, between self and world, functions as a teacher. This embodied pedagogy parallels the role of trance and ritual movement in the *Kuda Kepang* community, where the body becomes the primary vehicle for transmitting ancestral knowledge. Notably, Maksimovic (2024) in her exploration of place-based art education and adult learning argues that spaces of cultural production including community arts studios and alternative learning environments carry epistemic value that formal education systems consistently overlook. The community of *Kuda Kepang* is precisely such a space: a site where place, art, memory, and community intersect to generate culturally meaningful adult learning. These contributions provide an international theoretical foundation for the ethno-andragogical argument advanced in the present study.

Ethno-andragogy: An alternative approach to adult learning

Ethno-andragogy offers a theoretical and practical framework that foregrounds local culture, traditional practices, and indigenous knowledge in the learning process. It rejects the notion that adult learning must occur in structured, formalised settings and instead recognises informal, everyday contexts such as ritual spaces, communal gatherings, and cultural performances as legitimate and powerful sites of education. This perspective is rooted in the understanding that knowledge is not solely transmitted through cognitive instruction but is also embodied, lived, and experienced through cultural participation (Loeng, 2018; Zulkarnain et al., 2023).

In this framework, learning is inherently communal and spiritual. Rather than positioning the learner as an isolated actor, ethno-andragogy situates them within a web of relationships that include elders, ancestors, community members, and natural or spiritual forces. Learning becomes an act of engagement with these interconnected realms, often expressed through storytelling, ceremonial practices, and symbolic gestures. Unlike Western models that separate knowledge from belief, ethno-andragogy embraces a holistic view where learning and being are intertwined.

A compelling manifestation of ethno-andragogy can be found in traditional performance arts such as *Kuda Kepang*, *Wayang Kulit*, and *Gamelan*. In these traditions, adults acquire knowledge through participation in music, dance, and trance, guided by ritual specialists (*pawang*) and community elders. These acts are not merely performative they are pedagogical. The learner internalises cultural values, develops technical skills, and experiences emotional and spiritual transformation through embodied ritual. Knowledge is passed not through written texts but through observation, imitation, and communal practice over time (Geertz, 1999; Lansing, 2012).

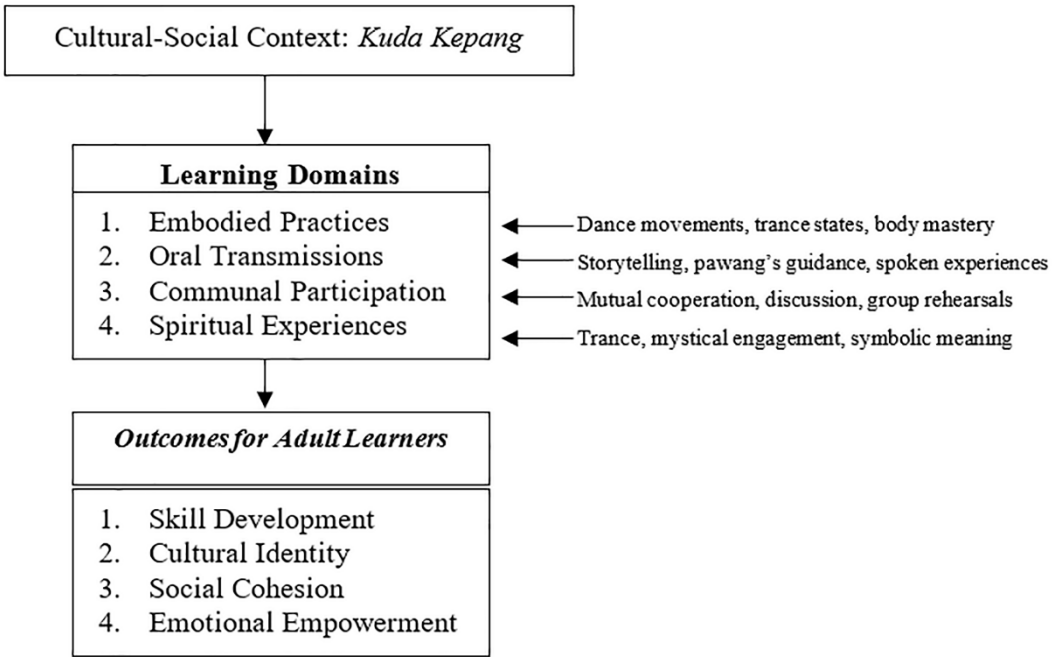
Another key aspect of ethno-andragogy is its recognition of the affective and symbolic dimensions of learning. As Hammond and Tisdell argue, adult learning is not just about thinking but also about feeling, moving, and relating (Hammond & Collins, 2013; Tisdell, 2003). In many indigenous contexts, learning is inseparable from song, rhythm, gesture, and physical space. These elements function as both content and method, carrying meanings that resonate at emotional, social, and spiritual levels. Ethno-andragogy thus reclaims the full range of human expression as central to education.

Importantly, this model also redefines the role of the educator. In contrast to the facilitator role popularised in Western adult education, ethno-andragogy emphasises the position of elders, spiritual leaders, and cultural practitioners as transmitters of wisdom. Their authority is derived not from formal qualifications but from lived experience and community recognition. The learning relationship is relational and often hierarchical, but grounded in trust, respect, and shared values. Ultimately, ethno-andragogy presents a powerful challenge to the homogenisation of adult learning theory. It affirms that culturally rooted practices are not peripheral but central to education, especially in indigenous and marginalised communities. By legitimising local knowledge systems and recognising embodied, symbolic, and spiritual dimensions of learning, ethno-andragogy expands the boundaries of what counts as education. In doing so, it contributes to a more inclusive, just, and pluralistic future for adult learning globally.

Theoretical framework

This study proposes a conceptual model of ethno-andragogical learning grounded in the cultural and social practices of the *Kuda Kepang* art community. The model demonstrates how the unique cultural environment of *Kuda Kepang* functions as an informal yet highly structured educational setting for adult learners. Learning transpires organically through lived experience, communal participation, and culturally embedded rituals. This framework comprises three primary components: the cultural-social context, the learning domains, and the outcomes for adult learners. The development of this framework was rooted in grounded theory principles, where recurring themes, meanings, and learning processes emerged inductively from extensive field observation and interview data. Rather than being imposed deductively from pre-existing theories, the model reflects patterns of learning as they naturally occur within the cultural practices of the *Kuda Kepang* community (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Framework ethno-andragogical learning from *Kuda Kepang* activity



Cultural-social context: Kuda Kepang

Before elaborating on each component, it is important to situate this framework in relation to existing adult learning theories. Dominant Western paradigms principally Knowles' andragogy (Knowles et al., 2005), Mezirow's transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997), and Brookfield's critical reflection (Brookfield, 2009) have made foundational contributions to adult education theory by foregrounding learner autonomy, reflective reasoning, and self-directedness. However, these frameworks share a common limitation: they prioritise the cognitive, individualistic, and secular dimensions of learning while marginalising the communal, spiritual, and embodied aspects that characterise learning in indigenous communities (Merriam & Ntseane, 2008). The ethno-andragogical framework proposed in this study extends rather than dismisses these paradigms. Specifically, it reinterprets Knowles' concept of self-direction not as individual autonomy but as collective agency where adults actively choose to learn in order to sustain and transmit cultural identity. It deepens Mezirow's notion of transformative learning by including spiritual and bodily transformation alongside cognitive perspective shifts: trance states in *Kuda Kepang*, for example, represent a mode of transformative experience that cannot be captured by rational discourse alone. And it radicalises Brookfield's critical reflection by extending it to include communal critical consciousness the collective recognition and resistance of cultural marginalisation. In doing so, the ethno-andragogical framework contributes a pluralistic, decolonial lens to adult education theory, one that is enriched by the Southern epistemologies embedded in the *Kuda Kepang* tradition (Gouthro & Holloway, 2023; von Kotze, 2024).

At the heart of this framework lies the *Kuda Kepang* performance tradition a Javanese folk art involving dance, music, trance states, and ritualistic practices. The sanggar (community arts studio) serves as a space where adults gather not only to perform but also to learn through active participation and mutual engagement. The *Kuda Kepang* community operates as a cultural microcosm wherein values, skills, and worldviews are

transmitted intergenerationally. This context situates learning within a dynamic ecosystem of local knowledge, collective memory, and spiritual involvement.

Learning domains

Within this cultural milieu, four interrelated learning domains are identified, reflecting the holistic ways in which adults acquire knowledge and develop:

a) *Embodied practices*: Learning is facilitated through bodily engagement. Participants partake in choreographed dance movements, navigate trance states, and cultivate control over their physical expressions. These embodied practices serve not only aesthetic and ritual functions but also pedagogical roles, enabling the internalisation of rhythm, discipline, and resilience. This aligns with Tisdell's assertion that knowledge in adult education is often embodied transmitted through lived, sensory, and symbolic experiences that carry cultural and spiritual significance (Tisdell, 2003).
b) *Oral transmission*: Knowledge is conveyed through storytelling, informal dialogue, and verbal instruction. Elders or ritual specialists, such as the *pawang*, provide mentorship, share historical narratives, and guide novice members. Oral transmission ensures the preservation of cultural wisdom and reinforces social norms.
c) *Communal participation*: Learning is inherently social. Activities such as rehearsals, group discussions, and collaborative performances foster reciprocal learning and cooperation. Through the principle of *gotong royong* (mutual aid), members cultivate social responsibility, empathy, and leadership. This domain underscores that learning is a shared, communal experience rather than an isolated act. This reflects the principles of 'situated learning' as described by Lave and Wenger (1991), in which learning occurs through participation in culturally meaningful social practices, and novices gradually move from peripheral to full participation within a community of practice.
d) *Spiritual experiences*: Ritual and symbolism play critical educational roles. Trance states, mystical interpretations, and symbolic gestures transcend mere performance, facilitating emotional transformation and deepening participants' sense of meaning, purpose, and connection to tradition (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Ritual-based group learning in the *Kuda Kepang* community



Outcomes for adult learners

Engagement within these domains leads adult learners to develop not only technical and performative skills but also profound personal and communal capacities:

a) *Skill development*: Participants gain proficiency in dance, music, coordination, and ritual enactment. Additionally, leadership and organisational competencies emerge through active group involvement.
b) Cultural identity: Involvement in *Kuda Kepang* reaffirms cultural roots, fostering pride, belonging, and continuity with ancestral traditions. This engagement serves as a countermeasure against cultural erosion and social marginalisation.
c) *Social cohesion*: Collective learning participation strengthens communal bonds. Trust, collaboration, and solidarity are nurtured, contributing to the group's overall resilience.
d) *Emotional empowerment*: Through spiritual engagement and expressive practices, learners often experience personal growth, healing, and empowerment. This emotional dimension equips individuals with confidence and inner strength to navigate life's challenges.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to investigate the ethno-andragogical learning processes within the *Kuda Kepang* art community (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Yin, 2018). The case study approach is particularly suitable for exploring complex cultural phenomena in their natural contexts, allowing for an in-depth, holistic understanding of the social and educational dynamics that underpin adult learning in this traditional setting. We conducted this research at Sanggar Samudra Jaya, a community arts studio in Pal Tiga Puluh village, North Bengkulu, Indonesia. The sanggar consists of 49 members, including dancers, musicians, pawang (ritual facilitators), and elders. To obtain diverse perspectives on learning processes and cultural transmission, purposive sampling was used to select 15 participants. The distribution of participants based on their roles within the sanggar is presented in Table 1, while their demographic characteristics are summarised in Table 2. This purposive sampling ensured that diverse perspectives related to the learning processes and cultural transmission were captured.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Category	Number of participants
Elders	3
Pawang (ritual facilitators)	2
Active adult learners	10
Total participants	**15**

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of participants

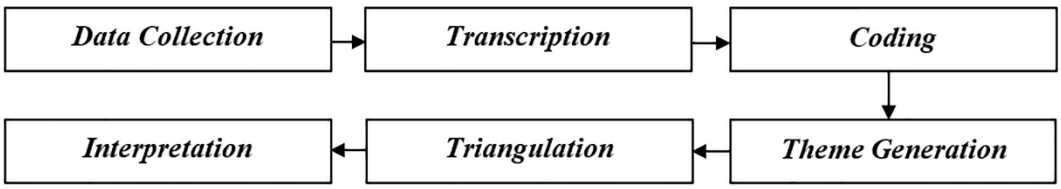
Characteristic	Description
Sampling technique	Purposive sampling
Population (sanggar members)	49 members
Sample size	15 participants

Age range	32-65 years
Male participants	9
Female participants	1
Participant groups	Elders, pawang (ritual facilitators), active adult learners

Fieldwork was conducted over a period of nine months, from August 2024 to April 2025, allowing for sustained engagement and immersion in the daily routines and ceremonial cycles of the sanggar. We collected data through two complementary qualitative methods: participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Through participant observation, we observed rehearsals, ritual preparations, performances, and informal gatherings, taking detailed field notes and writing reflexive memos after each session. Special attention was given to embodied practices (dance movements, trance states), oral transmissions (storytelling, *pawang* instructions), communal interactions (rehearsals, discussions), and spiritual experiences (rituals, trance inductions). While semi-structured interviews, we conducted in-depth interviews with all 15 participants. Interview protocols explored the four learning domains (embodied practices, oral transmission, communal participation, spiritual experiences) and their perceived outcomes. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian or local dialects (Bengkulu Malay, Rejang), audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Translations into English were checked by bilingual research assistant familiar with the cultural context.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach involving iterative coding and categorisation to identify patterns and themes relevant to the study's research questions and conceptual framework (Figure 3). The process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Figure 3. The thematic analysis process applied in this study



Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and provided informed consent. The researcher remained sensitive to cultural protocols and the spiritual significance of the practices observed, ensuring respectful and ethical engagement throughout the research process.

Positionality statement

We are non-Indigenous researchers. Both authors are academic scholars in adult education and ethnography affiliated with Universitas Bengkulu and Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Indonesia. Neither author was born into the Javanese *Kuda Kepang* performance tradition. We acknowledge the risk of reproducing extractive or colonial representations when researchers interpret cultural knowledge from an outsider position.

Trustworthiness was addressed through prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checking, reflexive documentation, and an audit trail. Credibility was supported by nine months of field engagement, comparison of interview and observational data, and member checking. Transferability was supported through contextual and descriptive detail. Dependability and confirmability were strengthened through reflexive memos and documentation of analytical decisions.

The findings indicate that adult learning within the *Kuda Kepang* community is situated, multisensory, and closely embedded in cultural practice. Participants' accounts and field observations point to the interaction of embodied practice, oral transmission, communal participation, and spiritual experience.

Findings

Learning processes within the Kuda Kepang community

The learning processes observed within the *Kuda Kepang* community were predominantly informal and embedded in cultural practice. Rather than relying primarily on textbooks or formal curricula, participants described learning through rehearsal, performance preparation, ritual participation, observation, and interaction with more experienced members.

Embodied learning is central to this process. The transmission of skills occurs through the body's interaction with rhythm, movement, and sensory experiences. Participants internalise knowledge by repeatedly practicing dance sequences and mastering trance techniques, which facilitate the synchronisation of physical expression with symbolic meaning. This embodied knowledge is difficult to articulate verbally and is best understood through practice and repetition in social contexts. The sanggar, as the physical and social locus of learning, operates as both a studio and a community hub. Here, adult learners do not merely perform but engage in continuous social exchanges, including peer mentoring and collaborative problem-solving. This environment fosters horizontal learning relationships where novices learn from elders and more experienced peers through observation, imitation, and constructive feedback. Such intergenerational interaction is essential for sustaining the continuity of the art form (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Spiritual preparation phase before performance



Further, learning in this community is non-linear and adaptive. It incorporates cycles of practice, reflection, and communal discussion that enable participants to refine their skills and deepen their understanding over time. This process is situated within the rhythms of daily life and community events, highlighting the embeddedness of learning within social and cultural rhythms rather than being confined to isolated sessions. The role of oral instruction remains significant, particularly in transmitting historical narratives, ritual protocols, and symbolic meanings associated with each movement and musical cue. However, oral teaching is often interwoven with practical demonstration, creating a multisensory learning environment that accommodates diverse learning styles and preferences among adult learners. Moreover, emotional and affective dimensions permeate the learning process. Participants often describe feelings of connection, belonging, and motivation as intrinsic parts of their educational journey. This affective engagement enhances retention and fosters a commitment to collective cultural preservation.

Participant narratives gathered during fieldwork offer direct evidence of these affective and educational dimensions. One senior dancer (male, 54 years) reflected on his involvement: 'Saya tidak pernah belajar dari buku semua yang saya tahu tentang Kuda Kepang, saya pelajari dari orang tua dan dari tubuh saya sendiri. Di sini, kita belajar dengan hati, bukan hanya dengan pikiran.' ['I never learned from a book everything I know about *Kuda Kepang*, I learned from my elders and from my own body. Here, we learn with the heart, not only with the mind.']. This account speaks directly to the embodied, relational, and non-cognitive dimensions of learning that characterise the ethno-andragogical model. Oral tradition is a cornerstone of ethno-andragogical learning. Instead of relying on written texts, knowledge is conveyed through storytelling, informal dialogue, and direct verbal instruction from elders and ritual specialists (Chilisa, 2012; Guo, 2017). The *pawang* (ritual facilitator) and senior members act as custodians of history, ritual protocols, and symbolic meanings. The community's *pawang* (male, 67 years) explained: 'Kalau saya tidak mengajarkan ini kepada generasi muda, pengetahuan ini akan hilang. Ini bukan hanya seni ini adalah cara kami menjaga leluhur tetap hidup.' ['If I do not teach this to the younger generation, this knowledge will disappear. This is not just art it is how we keep our ancestors alive.'] This oral transmission is not a one-way delivery of information. It is interwoven with demonstration and dialogue, allowing learners to ask questions and receive immediate corrective feedback within the context of rehearsals and rituals.

In ethno-andragogy, learning is inherently communal, situated within a web of relationships that include elders, peers, ancestors, and the wider community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Merriam & Ntseane, 2008). The *sanggar* (community arts studio) operates as a *community of practice* where novices learn by observing, imitating, and gradually taking on more complex roles. Activities such as group rehearsals, mutual assistance (*gotong royong*), and collective decision-making foster horizontal learning relationships. Such testimony underscores the urgency and cultural weight of transmission practices within the community, affirming that learning here is simultaneously an act of cultural preservation and intergenerational responsibility (von Kotze, 2024). A younger adult learner (female, 29 years) added: 'Waktu saya pertama kali ikut latihan, saya malu dan tidak tahu apa-apa. Tapi lama-lama saya merasa seperti bagian dari keluarga besar. Saya belajar bukan karena disuruh, tapi karena saya ingin menjaga budaya ini.' ['When I first joined rehearsals, I was shy and knew nothing. But gradually I felt like part of a large family. I learn not because I am told to, but because I want to preserve this culture.'] This statement reveals how social belonging and collective responsibility become powerful motivators for learning, contrasting with individualistic

notions of self-direction. Participation is not merely instrumental but identity-forming, as learners gradually move from peripheral to full membership in the community of practice. This voluntary, identity-driven motivation confirms that adult learning in this context is fundamentally self-directed, though its orientation is toward collective rather than individual goals a distinction that differentiates ethno-andragogy from Knowles' Western model of self-directed learning (Gainsford & Evans, 2021).

In summary, the learning process in the *Kuda Kepang* community exemplifies a dynamic interplay between embodied practice, oral transmission, social participation, and emotional engagement, creating a rich, culturally grounded model of adult education. The study also does not yet address how gender roles or intergenerational power dynamics influence access to learning roles, such as becoming a *pawang* or performance leader. These dimensions may affect how knowledge is transmitted, who controls ritual authority, and how status is negotiated within the sanggar.

Motivations, lived experiences, and cultural values in adult learning

Kuda Kepang learning within the community is not motivated by certificates, artistic employment opportunities, or income generation. Rather, it is driven by a commitment to preserving ancestral heritage and fulfilling intergenerational responsibilities. This orientation differs significantly from the practical needs and individual problem-solving focus emphasised in Knowles' theory of adult learning. Participants are motivated by a strong sense of belonging and collective identity, as many engage in learning *Kuda Kepang* to affirm their cultural identity and become part of a meaningful social group.

Many community members remain actively involved because the learning process provides them with a sense of peace, purpose, and spiritual connectedness. These experiences are cultivated through trance states, ritual practices, relationships with ancestors, and processes of emotional healing. Participants reported that during trance experiences, they often do not feel physical pain; instead, they experience profound emotional relief and spiritual fulfilment that they believe cannot be achieved through modern medical treatment alone. These findings suggest that adult learning within the *Kuda Kepang* community is motivated not only by cultural preservation but also by the pursuit of emotional wellbeing, spiritual transformation, and collective belonging.

Cultural significance and meaning

Kuda Kepang transcends its existence as a mere performing art, embodying a vital repository of Javanese cultural heritage and identity. It acts as a living archive of collective memory, where ancestral histories, moral values, and social norms are encoded within ritual performances and transmitted through generations. The cultural significance of *Kuda Kepang* is thus inseparable from its educational functions. Participants articulate a profound sense of cultural pride and belonging, recognising their role as custodians of a tradition that has withstood colonial disruption, modernisation pressures, and cultural homogenisation. This cultural engagement is experienced not only as preservation but as active reinvention and affirmation of identity within a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape.

The symbolic dimensions of *Kuda Kepang* performances serve as a medium through which the community negotiates meanings of power, spirituality, and social order. Each element the horse effigy, the trance state, the music functions as a semiotic signifier that conveys complex cultural narratives about human-nature relationships, ancestral

reverence, and cosmological beliefs. Through ritual enactment, community members reinforce social cohesion and articulate shared values such as mutual respect, harmony, and communal responsibility. These values are not merely abstract ideals but are concretely embodied in cooperative behaviors during rehearsals and performances, highlighting the inseparability of culture and social practice (Figure 5). Moreover, the cultural meanings embedded in *Kuda Kepang* act as a form of resistance and resilience. By engaging with these traditions, participants counteract cultural marginalisation and assert their right to cultural continuity and recognition. This resistance is particularly poignant in contexts where indigenous knowledge systems are undervalued or threatened by dominant national narratives.

Figure 5. *Pawang*-guided trance learning and emotional empowerment



The interplay between tradition and modernity is also negotiated within this cultural framework. While rooted in ancestral practices, *Kuda Kepang* performances have adapted to contemporary audiences and contexts, incorporating new musical instruments or performance venues, thus ensuring relevance and vitality. In conclusion, the cultural significance of *Kuda Kepang* extends beyond performance into realms of identity formation, social cohesion, and cultural sustainability, serving as a powerful site for the intergenerational transmission of values and knowledge.

Spiritual engagement in learning

Spirituality emerged as an important dimension of learning for participants who described ritual and symbolic practices as meaningful parts of their participation in *Kuda Kepang*. The data indicate that spiritual experience was intertwined with emotional, social, and cultural meanings rather than functioning as a separate learning activity.

Participants described ritual experiences as helping them connect symbolic meanings with bodily practice and collective memory. Elders and pawang were reported to guide participation in these practices within the community's established cultural protocols (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Communal practice and intergenerational collaboration



Spiritual engagement within *Kuda Kepang* transcends individual experience, fostering a collective sense of purpose and belonging. The shared ritual participation strengthens communal bonds and reinforces social cohesion, as individuals recognise their interconnectedness within a larger cosmological and social order. Furthermore, spiritual practices within the community provide mechanisms for coping with life's challenges. Participants report that engagement with *Kuda Kepang* rituals promotes emotional healing, offers solace, and nurtures psychological empowerment, enabling them to navigate adversity with renewed strength and confidence. The integration of spirituality into the learning process highlights the inseparability of cognitive, emotional, and spiritual dimensions in this ethno-andragogical model, challenging reductionist notions of education that prioritise only intellectual development. These dynamics are echoed in other cultural settings. For example, research article highlights how Balinese Gamelan communities integrate spiritual leadership and social organisation into musical learning, indicating that similar ethno-andragogical patterns may be observed across Southeast Asian traditional arts.

Learning outcomes

Participants described several outcomes of participation in *Kuda Kepang*, including technical learning, cultural identification, social connection, and perceived emotional empowerment. These outcomes were derived from participants' narratives and the researchers' observations rather than from standardised outcome measures.

Cultural identity outcomes are significant. Engagement in *Kuda Kepang* reinforces participants' connection to their Javanese heritage, fostering a sense of pride and continuity. This cultural affirmation acts as a counterbalance to the disorienting effects of modernisation and cultural assimilation, supporting the preservation of indigenous worldviews and practices. Social cohesion is another salient outcome. Learning within the community promotes mutual trust, cooperation, and solidarity. Through the principle of *gotong royong* (mutual aid), members experience enhanced social responsibility and collective efficacy, which extend beyond the sanggar into broader community life. Emotional empowerment is a profound and often understated outcome. The spiritual and

expressive dimensions of *Kuda Kepang* foster personal growth, healing, and confidence (Figure 7). Participants report increased resilience and an ability to confront life's adversities with greater emotional strength, indicating that the learning process has significant psychosocial benefits.

Figure 7. Public performance as cultural resistance and identity assertion



Moreover, the learning outcomes reflect a synthesis of individual and collective gains. While technical skills and personal empowerment benefit the individual, cultural identity and social cohesion serve the community's collective wellbeing, illustrating the reciprocal relationship between personal development and social integration. In sum, the learning outcomes observed affirm the efficacy of ethno-andragogical models rooted in indigenous cultural practices. They underscore the potential of traditional arts not only to transmit knowledge but also to nurture holistic adult development that integrates cognitive, social, emotional, and spiritual dimensions.

Discussion

Drawing on the voices of community members themselves, based on our interpretation of participants' experiences and narratives, we argue that the *Kuda Kepang* community exemplifies a distinct ethno-andragogical model of adult learning, one that integrates cultural, social, and spiritual dimensions in ways that diverge from dominant Western educational paradigms. This model situates learning within the lived experience of communal participation and ritual engagement, emphasising the embodied, oral, social, and spiritual transmission of knowledge. However, the study has not provided a comparative discussion with similar traditional art-based learning communities in Indonesia or Southeast Asia such as Wayang Kulit in Central Java, Reog in Ponorogo, or Balinese Gamelan ensembles. Such a comparison could highlight both the unique and shared features of ethno-andragogical learning across regional contexts.

To address this gap, the following comparative analysis is offered. In the *Wayang Kulit* tradition of Central Java, adult learners (dalang apprentices) acquire intricate knowledge of Javanese cosmology, philosophy, and narrative through decades of immersion under master practitioners (Geertz, 1999). The learning is non-linear, relational, and deeply spiritual patterns that mirror the *Kuda Kepang* model. Similarly, in

Reog Ponorogo a trance-based performance tradition from East Java the transmission of skills, spiritual discipline, and cultural values occurs through communal ritual and intergenerational mentorship, with no formal curriculum or examination. Research on Balinese *Gamelan* communities further corroborates these parallels: learning within *Gamelan* groups integrates spiritual leadership, collective rehearsal, and social organisation into a cohesive educational ecosystem, indicating that ethno-andragogical patterns are not unique to *Kuda Kepang* but represent a broader Indigenous Southeast Asian pedagogy (Lansing, 2012). What distinguishes *Kuda Kepang* is its particularly intense integration of trance as a pedagogical mechanism a feature less prominent in Wayang or Gamelan and its location in a diaspora Javanese community in Bengkulu, where cultural identity maintenance takes on additional urgency in the face of regional assimilation pressures. These comparisons enrich the ethno-andragogical framework by demonstrating its applicability across diverse indigenous performing art communities while also highlighting context-specific variations that future research should address. The convergent findings across traditions reinforce the argument that place-based, community-led arts environments constitute a distinct and powerful modality of adult learning in the Global South.

This approach challenges reductionist views of education that privilege formal, cognitive, and individualistic learning, highlighting instead the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy that honors the diversity of learning modes and contexts. The *Kuda Kepang* model affirms the value of informal learning spaces as critical sites for cultural preservation, identity formation, and community resilience.

Furthermore, We contribute to broader academic discussions by showing how by illustrating how indigenous cultural practices can serve as vehicles for adult education that foster both individual growth and collective wellbeing. It offers practical implications for educational practitioners, policymakers, and cultural preservationists seeking to support culturally grounded learning initiatives. Ultimately, the integration of spirituality, communal solidarity, and embodied knowledge within the *Kuda Kepang* learning environment offers a compelling example of how education can be reimagined to be more inclusive, holistic, and culturally attuned, thereby enriching the global discourse on adult learning and development.

These findings not only demonstrate the richness of culturally situated learning in indigenous communities but also provide empirical grounding for ethno-andragogy as a transformative pedagogical paradigm. The model evidenced here transcends reductionist understandings of adult education and challenges scholars and practitioners to expand their frameworks to include the deeply spiritual, affective, and symbolic dimensions of learning. This calls for the reconfiguration of adult learning theories to embrace pluralistic, culturally embedded, and socially responsive approaches.

Conclusion and implications

Drawing on participants' lived experiences, embodied practices, and accounts of ritual participation, this study argues that traditional cultural communities can function as meaningful sites of adult learning. In the *Kuda Kepang* case, learning was organised through embodied practice, oral transmission, communal participation, and spiritual experience.

This study demonstrates, within the limits of a single qualitative case, that *Kuda Kepang* functions as a rich community-based environment for adult learning embedded in cultural, social, and spiritual practices.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the growing body of literature that seeks to decolonise adult education by integrating non-Western epistemologies into mainstream discourse. It challenges the dominance of cognitive, individualistic, and secular paradigms by foregrounding the centrality of culture, spirituality, and social connectedness in adult learning. The ethno-andragogical model developed through this study offers an alternative framework that is more attuned to the realities of learners in indigenous and rural communities. Our position as non-Indigenous researchers also enabled us to make a specific contribution that may not have emerged from within the community itself. While community members naturally understood *Kuda Kepang* primarily as a cultural, spiritual, and artistic practice, we were able to interpret these practices through the lens of international adult education scholarship. This outsider perspective allowed us to identify and articulate *Kuda Kepang* as a coherent ethno-andragogical learning system composed of embodied learning, oral transmission, communal participation, and spiritual transformation. We do not claim that this interpretation is superior to community understandings; rather, it complements insider knowledge by translating local educational practices into concepts that can participate in global scholarly conversations about adult learning and decolonial education. Practically, the study has implications for educators, policymakers, and community organisers. It suggests that adult learning programmes should be designed to support, not replace, local cultural practices. Institutions must recognise and actively collaborate with community leaders, cultural bearers, and ritual specialists to co-create learning environments that honour local identity, language, and spiritual practice. Based on the findings of this study, three concrete and actionable policy recommendations are proposed. First, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of Indonesia (Kemendikbudristek) should formally recognise sanggar budaya (community arts studios) as legitimate Community Learning Centers, making them eligible for public funding, facilitator training programmes, and inclusion in non-formal education frameworks. This formalisation should be designed carefully to avoid imposing bureaucratic constraints that may undermine cultural authenticity recognition should enhance, not regulate, indigenous learning processes. Second, facilitator training programmes under the Directorate of Community Education should integrate modules on ethno-andragogy, sensitising adult educators to the epistemic value of indigenous cultural practices and preparing them to work collaboratively with community knowledge holders rather than supplanting them. Third, a national registry or database of indigenous learning ecosystems should be established, documenting the pedagogical practices, knowledge systems, and community facilitators of traditional performing arts communities across Indonesia's diverse regions. Such a registry would serve as both a policy tool and a cultural heritage resource, enabling evidence-based integration of indigenous knowledge into broader adult education curriculum development and research (Gouthro & Holloway, 2023). This study also acknowledges its contextual limitations. As the research is deeply rooted in one cultural setting the *Kuda Kepang* community in Bengkulu the findings may not be easily generalisable across Indonesia or Southeast Asia. Cultural specificity, while a strength, also constrains broader applicability without further comparative research. This is especially critical in contexts where formal education has historically marginalised indigenous voices.

For future research, this study opens pathways for further exploration of other indigenous learning ecosystems in Indonesia and beyond. Comparative studies across regions or performance traditions could deepen understanding of how ethno-andragogical principles manifest in different cultural contexts. Moreover, longitudinal studies could examine how participation in cultural learning spaces impacts adult learners' personal

development and community leadership over time. For instance, the Ministry of Education and Culture should recognise sanggar budaya (community arts studios) as legitimate Community Learning Centers (CLC), eligible for public support, training programmes, and curriculum inclusion. This would formalise their role in adult learning ecosystems without undermining cultural authenticity. In sum, we call for a reimagining of adult education not as a universal toolkit to be applied indiscriminately, but as a pluralistic field that must be grounded in the diverse ways humans create, transmit, and live knowledge. These directions are essential in constructing a robust, pluralistic adult education discourse that is rooted not in the universal application of Western paradigms, but in the contextual authenticity of indigenous learning systems. In this way, adult education becomes a vehicle for epistemic justice, cultural resilience, and social transformation.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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