International Journal of the Malay World and Civilisation 14(2), 2026: 53 – 67
(https://doi.org/10.17576/jatma-2026-1402-05)

Water, Heritage, and The Cultural Memory of Malin Kundang in Minangkabau Society

Air, Warisan dan Pembentukan Ingatan Budaya Terhadap Malin Kundang Dalam Masyarakat Minangkabau

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Received: 30 January 2026 ; Accepted: 7 April 2026

ABSTRACT

The legend of Malin Kundang at Pantai Air Manis, Padang, Indonesia, has long been framed as a moral tale of filial disobedience. Yet such a reading is reductive and obscures the deeper complexities of heritage, the symbolic force of water, and the politics of memory-making. This article adopts a predominantly conceptual and theoretical approach, drawing on critical heritage studies, cultural memory, and postcolonial perspectives to reinterpret the legend beyond its conventional moral framework. It argues that the so-called "stone of Malin Kundang" is not the naturalised residue of a curse, but rather a man-made monument deliberately constructed to stabilise an oral tradition in material form. This process of heritage-making reveals a paradox of authenticity. An artificial artefact is legitimised through its intimate geographical placement by the sea, where water itself functions to authenticate and sacralise the narrative. In this context, water is not merely a scenic backdrop but an active moral and cosmological agent. The sea is imagined as a site of both mobility and estrangement. It opens routes of social ascent while at the same time signifying betrayal of origin. Waves and storms emerge as instruments of the sacred, materialising the curse and positioning water as a medium that traverses the boundaries between myth and reality. The deliberate emplacement of a fabricated monument upon the shoreline sustains this symbolic power and underscores the role of water as both protector and validator of constructed heritage. While supported by selective field observation, the study prioritises theoretical interpretation to illuminate how authenticity is produced, negotiated, and performed. It challenges the moralistic reduction of Malin Kundang and reveals instead how popular heritage is manipulated and commodified within the apparatus of cultural tourism. Ultimately, the article demonstrates how postcolonial Southeast Asian societies negotiate the intersections of myth, water, and the politics of representation. Malin Kundang is therefore not merely a folktale but a critical site where water, heritage, and power converge in the shaping of identity and the collective imagination of the Nusantara.

Keywords: Malin Kundang; Minangkabau; cultural memory; water; heritage; Southeast Asian.

ABSTRAK

Legenda Malin Kundang di Pantai Air Manis, Padang, Indonesia, sekian lama ditafsirkan sebagai naratif moral tentang penderhakaan anak terhadap ibu. Namun, pembacaan sedemikian bersifat reduksionis dan menutup kompleksiti yang lebih mendalam berkaitan warisan, kekuatan simbolik air dan politik pembentukan ingatan. Artikel ini mengaplikasikan pendekatan yang bersifat konseptual dan teoritikal, dengan memanfaatkan kerangka kajian warisan kritikal, ingatan budaya, dan perspektif pascakolonial untuk mentafsir semula legenda tersebut melampaui kerangka moral konvensional. Hujah utama artikel ini ialah bahawa apa yang dikenali sebagai "batu Malin Kundang" bukanlah residu semula jadi daripada sumpahan, sebaliknya merupakan monumen buatan manusia yang secara sengaja dibina bagi menstabilkan tradisi lisan dalam bentuk material. Proses pembentukan warisan ini memperlihatkan suatu

paradoks keaslian. Artifak yang bersifat artifisial diberikan legitimasi melalui kedudukan geografinya yang intim di pesisir laut, di mana air berfungsi sebagai agen yang mengesahkan dan mensakralkan naratif tersebut. Dalam konteks ini, air tidak sekadar latar visual, tetapi bertindak sebagai agen moral dan kosmologikal yang aktif. Laut dibayangkan sebagai ruang mobiliti dan keterasingan serentak, ia membuka laluan mobiliti sosial, namun pada masa yang sama melambangkan pengkhianatan terhadap asal-usul. Ombak dan ribut muncul sebagai instrumen sakral yang mematerialkan sumpahan, sekali gus memposisikan air sebagai medium yang merentasi sempadan antara mitos dan realiti. Penempatan sengaja monumen rekaan di garis pantai memperkukuh kuasa simbolik ini serta menegaskan peranan air sebagai pelindung dan pengesah kepada warisan yang dibentuk secara konstruktif. Walaupun disokong oleh pemerhatian lapangan terpilih, kajian ini mengutamakan interpretasi teoritikal bagi menyingkap bagaimana keaslian dihasilkan, dirundingkan, dan dipersembahkan. Artikel ini mencabar reduksi moralistik terhadap kisah Malin Kundang dan sebaliknya memperlihatkan bagaimana warisan popular dimanipulasi dan dikomodifikasikan dalam kerangka pelancongan budaya. Secara keseluruhan, kajian ini menunjukkan bagaimana masyarakat Asia Tenggara pascakolonial merundingkan persilangan antara mitos, air, dan politik representasi. Malin Kundang, bukan sekadar cerita rakyat, tetapi sebuah tapak kritikal di mana air, warisan, dan kuasa bertemu dalam pembentukan identiti serta imaginasi kolektif Nusantara.

Kata kunci: Malin Kundang; Minangkabau; ingatan budaya; air; warisan Asia Tenggara.

INTRODUCTION

The legend of Malin Kundang has long occupied a central place in the oral and cultural imagination of the Minangkabau people in West Sumatra, Indonesia (Junus 2001; Nasution et al. 2022). At its most familiar level, it recounts the fate of a young man who, having acquired wealth and prestige through maritime trade, returns to his village and refuses to acknowledge his mother. Her curse transforms him into stone, making the tale a moral parable about filial disobedience and the dangers of pride (Permatahati et al. 2022). As an oral tradition, the tale of Malin Kundang cannot be traced to a precise historical origin. It emerged from the maritime culture of the Minangkabau, whose engagement in inter-island trade across the archipelago dates back to at least the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, during the height of the Malay world's commercial networks. Rather than standing in opposition to the Minangkabau tradition of *merantau*, these maritime elements represent one of the primary historical and material modalities through which *merantau* was enacted, particularly within the commercial networks of the early modern Malay world (Siregar et al. 2022). The motif of the disobedient son appears in parallel forms across the region, including in the Malay version known as Si Tanggang, and in the Bruneian tale of Nakhoda Manis (Salleh 1979; Ahmad 1990; Skeat 2020).

The modern circulation of the story further illustrates how intangible heritage is reconfigured for new audiences. The 1971, Indonesian film Malin Kundang dramatised the tale for a national audience, while school textbooks integrated the legend into a framework of moral education (Hidayat et al. 2021; Sinta 2024). A further transformation occurred in the 1980s, when the tale was materialised as a physical monument at Pantai Air Manis, near Padang, by Dasril Bayras dan Ibenzani Usman (Kumparan 2024). The so-called "stone of Malin Kundang" is not a natural formation but a sculpted monument. Constructed during the New Order era, it was intended both to stabilise the oral tradition in material form and to attract domestic tourism (Lukito 2022).

The monument itself illustrates the paradox of authenticity. While fabricated in concrete during the late twentieth century, its placement on the shoreline lends it an aura of legitimacy. The sea's presence naturalises the monument, aligning it with the cosmological role of water in the legend. Here, water is not a backdrop but an active agent. It is the medium of mobility, the site of estrangement, and ultimately the executor of the curse. By situating the monument at the edge of the ocean, local authorities embedded the story in an environment where water continues to perform its symbolic role (MacCannell 1973; Linton & Budds 2014). This article, therefore, treats Malin Kundang not simply as folklore but as a case study in the politics of heritage and cultural memory. It examines how oral tradition is transformed into material form, how authenticity is constructed through environment, and how water operates as a legitimising force in these processes. By critically situating the Malin Kundang monument within these debates, the article argues that the legend represents more than a story of filial disobedience. It emerges as a prism through which to explore how Southeast Asian societies

negotiate authenticity, identity and representation in postcolonial contexts. Water, heritage and power converge at Pantai Air Manis, producing a cultural site that is simultaneously local, national, and global in its resonance.

Figure 1: The contemporary ambience of Pantai Air Manis, Padang, Indonesia.
(Source*:* Field work 2025)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on heritage has long emphasised that heritage is not a neutral preservation of the past but an active process of selection, representation, and power. Lowenthal (2015) argued that heritage constructs usable pasts, often reshaping memory to meet contemporary needs rather than reflecting historical truth. Smith (2006) extended this by introducing the concept of the "authorised heritage discourse", which privileges materiality, monumental forms, and state-sanctioned narratives at the expense of oral and intangible traditions. These theoretical insights are essential for understanding the Malin Kundang monument. The transformation of a fluid oral narrative into a fixed, concrete structure illustrates how heritage operates less as historical continuity and more as cultural invention, produced under the authority of state institutions. Critical heritage studies also highlight the politics of authenticity. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) contends that authenticity is often staged, produced through performances and environments rather than inherent in the object itself. This resonates strongly with the case of Malin Kundang. Although the monument at Pantai Air Manis is a fabrication of the 1980s, its placement by the sea lends it a performative authenticity. The waves and tides imbue the site with symbolic force, allowing visitors to suspend disbelief and accept the monument as a legitimate representation of the curse. This echoes broader debates in heritage studies, which emphasise that authenticity is not discovered but negotiated, a product of cultural expectations and sensory environments.

Within Southeast Asia, scholarship has increasingly interrogated how folklore and myth are mobilised within heritage and tourism economies. Drawing on studies by Sulaiman et al. (2025) of Si Tanggang (Malaysia), Malin Kundang (Indonesia), and Nakhoda Manis (Brunei), researchers have identified similar processes of cultural adaptation. While each of the three legends centres on a disobedient son cursed by otherworldly forces, their present-day representations vary. In Brunei, the tale of Nakhoda Manis is linked to Batu Sapu, a natural rock formation near the Brunei River, which is interpreted as material evidence of the legend. In Malaysia, Si Tanggang has been incorporated into moral education, but has not been monumentalised in the same way as in Padang. These contrasts underscore the diversity of heritage-making practices and point to the role of local governments in shaping the materialisation of myth.

The symbolism of water within heritage discourses also requires attention. Scholars such as Andaya (2016), Helmreich (2023) and Strang (2020) emphasise that water is not only a resource but a cultural medium through which societies articulate cosmologies, moralities, and social order. In many Southeast Asian contexts, water functions simultaneously as an enabler and threat, embodying prosperity and destruction. The Malin Kundang legend exemplifies this duality: the sea enables his economic ascent while simultaneously becoming the medium of his downfall. Yet heritage scholarship has often neglected water as a critical agent in heritage-making, focusing instead on architecture, monuments, and landscapes. By analysing Malin Kundang through the lens of water symbolism, this article contributes to an underexplored dimension of heritage studies, positioning water not as background but as an active force in legitimising narratives of authenticity.

Another strand of scholarship considers the relationship between heritage and the state. The New Order government in Indonesia actively promoted folklore as cultural capital, incorporating myths into national identity while encouraging their commodification for tourism (Pemberton 1994). Heritage sites were not merely preservations of local tradition but instruments of political authority,

shaping collective memory in ways aligned with state ideology. The Malin Kundang monument exemplifies this dynamic. It reflects the state's role in transforming intangible oral tradition into a tangible heritage commodity. This mirrors global trends in which governments mobilise heritage to balance local pride, national cohesion, and economic imperatives. Yet critics argue that such processes flatten complex traditions, reducing them to consumable objects for external audiences while neglecting the lived practices of local communities.

Finally, heritage studies have increasingly problematised the commodification of myth in tourism. Greenwood (1989) famously critiqued the "culture by the pound" model, where intangible practices are repackaged for economic gain. In the case of Malin Kundang, the staging of the monument illustrates precisely this commodification. The monument attracts domestic tourists, generates revenue, and circulates the legend within popular consciousness, yet it simultaneously freezes a dynamic oral tradition into a fixed material form. The monument functions less as evidence of the past than as an artefact of contemporary cultural policy. This tension between living tradition and staged heritage lies at the heart of critical debates in heritage studies and underscores the paradoxical role of tourism in sustaining yet transforming folklore.

In sum, the literature provides a set of critical tools for analysing the Malin Kundang monument. From Lowenthal's and Smith's theories of heritage as discourse and invention, to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's insights on authenticity, to Southeast Asian studies on folklore adaptation and water symbolism, a clear picture emerges. Heritage is never neutral. It is shaped by state policy, economic imperatives, and cultural expectations, while authenticity is produced through environmental and symbolic cues rather than intrinsic qualities. The Malin Kundang monument thus epitomises the ways in which oral tradition is transformed into a heritage commodity, where water functions not only as a narrative element but as an agent that legitimises and sacralises the constructed site. By engaging critically with these debates, this article situates Malin Kundang within broader questions of heritage-making, commodification, and the politics of cultural memory in Southeast Asia.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study proposes a conceptual framework that brings together water, heritage, and cultural memory as mutually constitutive domains in the making of the Malin Kundang site at Pantai Air Manis. Rather than treating these elements as separate analytical categories, the framework conceptualises Malin Kundang as a relational cultural assemblage in which narrative, environment, and power intersect. As illustrated in Figure 2, the monument is positioned at the centre of this assemblage, not merely as a physical object, but as a cultural site where meanings are continuously produced, negotiated, and stabilised.

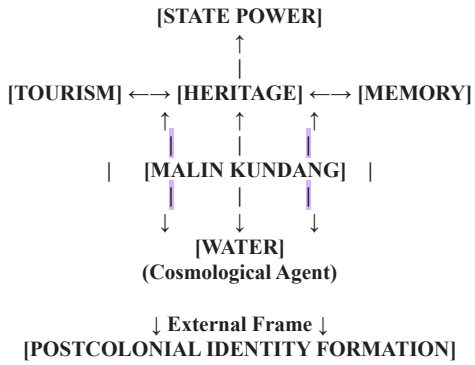

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of Hydrosocial Heritage-Making: Interrelations between Water, Heritage, and Cultural Memory in the Malin Kundang Narrative within Postcolonial and Tourism Contexts.

At the first level, the framework identifies three core domains: water, heritage, and cultural memory. Water is conceptualised not as a passive environmental backdrop, but as a hydrosocial and cosmological agent that enables mobility, enacts moral punishment, and legitimises narrative meaning. Heritage, in turn, is understood as a process of materialisation, through which fluid oral traditions are transformed into fixed and institutionalised forms, reflecting what Smith (2006) terms the "authorised heritage discourse". Cultural memory operates as the narrative dimension of this assemblage, shaping how the legend is remembered, transmitted, and reconfigured across generations, in line with the distinction proposed by Jan Assmann between communicative and cultural memory.

At the second level, the framework emphasises the processes that mediate these domains. The transformation of oral tradition into a monument represents the materialisation of narrative, while the coastal emplacement of the monument produces what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) describes as performative authenticity. In this context, water plays a crucial legitimising role: the sea does not merely surround the monument but actively reinforces its

credibility by enacting the curse through waves, tides, and storms. This process may be understood as hydrosocial legitimisation, whereby environmental dynamics confer authenticity upon an otherwise artificial artefact.

At the outer level, the framework situates these interactions within broader structures of power, namely state authority, tourism economies, and postcolonial identity formation. The construction of the Malin Kundang monument during Indonesia's New Order exemplifies how the state appropriates folklore as cultural capital, transforming it into a tangible and governable heritage object. Simultaneously, tourism commodifies the legend, reconfiguring it as a consumable spectacle that generates economic value while narrowing its narrative complexity. These dynamics reflect wider postcolonial processes in Southeast Asia, where cultural identity is negotiated through the interplay of local traditions, national agendas, and global heritage discourses.

Importantly, the relationships depicted in this framework are not linear but reciprocal and dynamic. Water legitimises heritage, heritage stabilises memory, and memory reinforces the cultural meaning of water, while all three are shaped by state and market forces. The Malin Kundang monument thus emerges as a site of continuous negotiation, rather than a fixed representation of the past. By integrating these dimensions, the framework provides an analytical lens through which the article examines how authenticity is produced, how folklore is materialised, and how water functions as an active agent in the politics of heritage and cultural memory in postcolonial Southeast Asia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this article is designed to move beyond a descriptive or generalised qualitative approach by articulating a clearly structured, multi-layered analytical framework that integrates discourse analysis, spatial interpretation, and comparative regional inquiry within the field of critical heritage politics. First, the study adopts a critical-interpretive qualitative design grounded explicitly in the theoretical traditions of Critical Heritage Studies, Cultural Memory Studies, and Postcolonial Theory. These frameworks are not merely cited but operationalised as analytical tools. For instance, Smith's (2006) concept of the "authorised heritage discourse" is used as a coding lens to identify how state narratives are embedded in the material form of the monument, while Assmann's (2007) distinction between communicative and cultural memory structures the temporal analysis of the legend's transformation. This theoretically anchored design ensures that the study does not treat data descriptively, but interrogates it through clearly defined conceptual categories, thereby addressing the reviewer's concern regarding analytical depth.

Second, the data collection strategy is deliberately triangulated across three empirically distinct yet analytically connected datasets: textual sources, comparative regional cases, and field-based observations. The textual corpus includes historical writings, folklore documentation, policy narratives from the New Order period, and contemporary tourism representations. These texts are analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA), specifically focusing on how language, narrative framing, and visual representation construct legitimacy and authenticity. Coding procedures were conducted thematically, identifying recurring discursive patterns such as "moralisation," "naturalisation through environment," and "heritage commodification." This approach allows the study to systematically trace how the Malin Kundang narrative is rearticulated across time and institutional contexts, rather than relying on general textual interpretation.

Third, the selection of Pantai Air Manis as the primary case study site is not incidental but theoretically and methodologically justified. The site represents a rare convergence of three critical variables central to this research: (i) the materialisation of intangible heritage into a state-sponsored monument, (ii) the presence of a dynamic coastal environment where water actively interacts with the artefact, and (iii) its institutionalisation as a tourism node within Indonesia's cultural economy. Unlike other regional parallels such as Si Tanggang or Nakhoda Manis, which remain either textual or loosely spatialised, Pantai Air Manis provides a fully operationalised heritage assemblage in which narrative, monumentality, environment, and state intervention intersect. This makes it an analytically strategic site for examining the politics of authenticity and the role of water as a legitimising agent. The choice of site is therefore purposive (not random), guided by its capacity to illuminate broader

theoretical questions in heritage politics rather than merely representing a localised case.

Fourth, the fieldwork component (2025) is methodologically structured using an ethnographically informed observational protocol, rather than general site description. Data were collected through systematic visual documentation, spatial mapping of the monument's relation to tidal zones, and detailed field notes capturing sensory interactions (sound of waves, visitor movement patterns, performative engagements such as photography and storytelling). These observations were analysed using symbolic and spatial analysis, treating the site as a "heritage assemblage" in which meaning emerges through the interaction between material object (monument), environment (sea), and human practice (tourism and memory performance). The analysis specifically examines how tidal rhythms, wave movement, and shoreline positioning contribute to what is conceptualised as "environmental authentication", a key analytical category developed in this study.

Fifth, the study incorporates a comparative methodological layer involving regional cases (Si Tanggang in Malaysia and Nakhoda Manis in Brunei) to avoid single-case overgeneralisation. These cases were selected based on shared narrative structure (the "ungrateful son" motif) but differing modes of heritage representation (textual, natural landscape, and monumentalised forms). The comparative analysis follows a most-similar systems design, enabling the study to isolate how different state and cultural regimes produce divergent heritage outcomes from a common narrative base. This strengthens the external validity of the findings and situates the Malin Kundang case within a broader Southeast Asian heritage politics framework.

Finally, the analytical procedure integrates all datasets through a multi-scalar interpretive synthesis, moving from micro-level site observations to macro-level discussions of state power and global heritage discourse. Data are not treated in isolation but are cross-read to identify convergences between discourse (texts), materiality (monument), and environment (water). This integrative approach enables the study to develop a central argument: that authenticity in heritage is not inherent but produced through the interaction of narrative authority, spatial emplacement, and environmental performance. By explicitly detailing the analytical techniques, data sources, site justification, and comparative logic, the methodology provides a rigorous and transparent framework that aligns with high-impact scholarship in heritage politics and directly addresses the reviewer's critique regarding lack of specificity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

HERITAGE-MAKING AND THE PARADOX OF AUTHENTICITY

The transformation of the Malin Kundang legend from oral tradition into a physical monument exemplifies what critical heritage scholars describe as heritage-making: the active process by which narratives of the past are curated, institutionalised, and materialised for contemporary purposes. Smith (2006) argues that heritage should not be understood as an inert inheritance from the past but as a discourse of power, one that privileges certain forms and voices while marginalising others. In the case of Malin Kundang, the construction of the monument at Pantai Air Manis in the 1980s reflects precisely this dynamic. The state selected one version of the story, froze it into a material form, and promoted it as authentic heritage, thereby transforming a living oral tradition into a fixed object aligned with broader cultural and economic agendas.

The notion of authenticity has long been contested within heritage studies. Lowenthal (2015) observed that heritage rarely reflects historical accuracy; rather, it produces a usable past tailored for present needs. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) similarly contends that authenticity is often staged, created through sensory environments, performances, and narrative framings rather than intrinsic to the object itself. The Malin Kundang monument illustrates these insights. Although sculpted from concrete in the late twentieth century, its emplacement by the shoreline allows it to be perceived as authentic. Visitors encounter the monument against the backdrop of waves, tides, and the coastal horizon, which together create a performative authenticity that masks the monument's artificiality. In this sense, water is not incidental but central: it functions as a legitimising agent that naturalises a fabricated object within a cosmological and symbolic order (Abdullah 2025).

Figure 3: The contemporary ambience of Pantai Air Manis, Padang, Indonesia.
(Source: Field work, 2025)

This paradox of authenticity is not unique to Malin Kundang. Heritage sites across the world often involve acts of fabrication that are then authenticated through symbolic or environmental cues. In Angkor, reconstructions undertaken by colonial archaeologists were presented as the "original" temples, even though they were products of restoration (Winter 2007). In Bali, staged cultural performances have long been marketed as timeless traditions, despite their adaptation for tourist audiences (Picard 1996). Malin Kundang fits within this global pattern, but with the distinctive feature that water plays the crucial role in securing authenticity. The monument is credible not because of its material origin but because the sea surrounding it performs the curse on a daily basis, producing an aura of inevitability and continuity.

The privileging of materiality in the Malin Kundang monument also exemplifies the "authorised heritage discourse" (Smith 2006). By fixing the story into a monument, state authorities elevated the physical representation above the oral tradition. This decision reflects a broader bias within heritage regimes that favour tangible forms, such as monuments, museums, and artefacts, over intangible practices such as storytelling, ritual, and oral performance. The consequence is a narrowing of cultural meaning. Whereas oral traditions allowed for multiple versions of the legend, reflecting diverse moral and cosmological emphases, the monument enshrines a single narrative: that of a son cursed into stone. The multiplicity of voices that once animated the tale is thus subordinated to the authority of the state and its material production.

Critics argue that such acts of heritage-making risk erasing local agency. Pemberton (1994) noted how Indonesian state policies often restructured local traditions into fixed forms that aligned with national ideologies of unity and modernity. The Malin Kundang monument reflects this process. It was not the product of community initiative but of government intervention, designed to package folklore for tourism and identity politics. While local communities may embrace the monument as a source of pride, their role in shaping its form and meaning was limited. This tension highlights the asymmetrical power relations embedded in heritage-making, where state institutions define and control cultural memory.

Figure 4: Stone of Malin Kundang, Pantai Air Manis, Padang, Indonesia-shoreline setting that materialises the oral legend; present condition.
(Source: Field work 2025)

At the same time, the monument cannot be dismissed merely as a top-down imposition. Its endurance as a popular site of visitation suggests that it has been integrated into the lived experiences of local communities. Tourists and residents alike engage with the monument not only as an object of state heritage but as a site where myth, memory and environment converge. This points to the double life of heritage: as a tool of governance and commodification, but also as a resource appropriated and reinterpreted by communities. The paradox of authenticity is therefore not only a matter of fabrication versus genuineness but of negotiation between state authority, local memory and environmental symbolism.

Crucially, the Malin Kundang monument demonstrates how water itself becomes a participant in heritage-making. The waves, tides, and storms of Pantai Air Manis are not passive scenery but active agents that reinforce the legend's moral logic. Visitors do not merely view a static sculpture; they experience it within an environment where water performs the curse. This convergence of fabricated monument and natural seascape complicates the dichotomy between authentic and inauthentic. It suggests that authenticity is less about material origin than about the interplay of narrative, environment, and performance. By foregrounding water, this case contributes to broader debates in heritage studies,

challenging the tendency to focus exclusively on monuments and landscapes while neglecting fluid and dynamic elements of the environment.

In sum, the Malin Kundang monument embodies the paradox of authenticity at the heart of heritage-making. It is an artificial creation, yet it is experienced as authentic through its entanglement with the sea. It exemplifies how state institutions authorise certain versions of culture while sidelining others, how material forms are privileged over oral traditions, and how tourism commodifies myth. At the same time, it reveals the agency of natural elements in producing authenticity, suggesting that heritage must be understood not only as a cultural construct but as an assemblage of human, institutional, and environmental forces. By interrogating these dynamics, the analysis of Malin Kundang contributes to critical heritage studies by highlighting the intersection of fabrication, authenticity, and water in the making of postcolonial cultural identity.

Figure 5: Present condition of the 'Stone of Malin Kundang' monument at Pantai Air Manis, Padang, Indonesia. (Source: Field work 2025)

WATER AS COSMOLOGICAL AGENT AND CULTURAL MEDIUM

Water has long been central to the cultural cosmologies of Southeast Asia. Scholars such as Strang (2020) and Helmreich (2023) emphasise that water is never simply a physical resource but a medium of meaning through which societies articulate cosmological order, social morality, and cultural identity. In the legend of Malin Kundang, water plays this role precisely. The sea is not merely the backdrop of the story but its constitutive agent, shaping the protagonist's journey, his estrangement, and his ultimate punishment. The monument at Pantai Air Manis, therefore, cannot be understood in isolation from the coastal environment. The waves and tides are integral to its legitimacy, enacting the curse and reinforcing the moral force of the legend.

From a cosmological perspective, the sea represents both mobility and danger. Historically, the Minangkabau were a people deeply engaged in maritime trade, with young men encouraged to seek fortune abroad in a practice known as *merantau* (Drakard 1993). The sea thus embodied opportunity, the promise of wealth, and the expansion of horizons. Yet it also symbolised separation from kin and community, raising the spectre of betrayal and disobedience. Malin Kundang's journey captures these dualities. The sea enables his success, but his estrangement from his mother is also made possible by the distance that maritime mobility creates. The eventual storm that destroys him underscores the sea's role as cosmological arbiter: the very element that allowed prosperity becomes the instrument of divine justice (Nasution et al. 2022).

In heritage terms, water functions here as a medium of authenticity. The monument itself might otherwise be dismissed as an artificial fabrication. Yet its placement at the shoreline entwines it with the performative power of the ocean. Visitors encounter the site not only visually but sensorially, with the sound of waves and the presence of tides creating an embodied experience of the legend. This aligns with Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (1998) argument that heritage is often staged through environment and performance. The sea continuously performs the curse, naturalising the monument and investing it with authenticity. The monument thus draws its authority less from its material composition than from its integration into a seascape that symbolically validates the narrative.

Water's role as a cosmological agent is also evident in comparative Southeast Asian legends. In Brunei's Nakhoda Manis, the disobedient son is turned to stone in the middle of the river, the water literally encasing him as punishment. In the Malaysian tale of Si Tanggang, the storm at sea is central to the climactic curse, with water destroying the ship and sealing his fate. These parallels indicate a regional cultural logic in which water serves as the medium through which moral justice is enacted. Yet only in the case of Malin Kundang has this cosmological symbolism been monumentalised through state-driven heritage-making, embedding the narrative within a coastal site where water

continues to animate the story (Salleh 1979; Ahmad 1990; Skeat 2020).

Despite its centrality, water has often been marginalised in heritage discourse, which tends to privilege monumental architecture, landscapes, and tangible artefacts (Abdullah 2025). Water itself is rarely acknowledged as heritage, even though it underpins many cultural practices and cosmologies (Andaya 2018). This neglect is evident in the case of Malin Kundang, where scholarly and touristic attention focuses on the monument while overlooking the role of the sea in authenticating the site. By foregrounding water, this analysis contributes to a more expansive understanding of heritage as an assemblage that includes not only human and institutional actors but also environmental forces.

Water also complicates the binary between local and global heritage. For local communities, Pantai Air Manis is imbued with spiritual and moral significance, a place where the curse of Malin Kundang is continuously remembered. For the state and tourism industry, the coastal setting enhances the site's attractiveness, offering both scenic beauty and cultural symbolism. For global visitors, the sea situates the legend within familiar tropes of maritime mythology, resonating with cross-cultural imaginaries of the ocean as a liminal and dangerous space. In each case, water functions as the common medium that bridges different scales of meaning, making the site legible simultaneously as local heritage, national culture, and global tourism destination.

Figure 6: The 'Stone of Malin Kundang' at Pantai Air Manis, Padang: a man-made sculptural monument created in the 1980s, shown in its current state.
(Source: Field work 2025)

The cosmological role of water further unsettles heritage's reliance on fixity. Monuments are typically understood as static representations of the past, fixed in stone or concrete. Yet at Pantai Air Manis, the monument is never static. Its meaning is continually re-enacted through the dynamics of the sea. High tide submerges parts of the sculpture, storms batter its surface, and the rhythmic waves remind visitors of the legend's climactic curse. The monument is thus not simply a fixed object but part of a dynamic assemblage in which water ensures that heritage remains performative and alive. This challenges conventional heritage frameworks and suggests that water must be recognised as an active participant in the making and remaking of cultural memory.

In conclusion, water in the Malin Kundang legend functions as more than scenery; it is a cosmological agent and cultural medium. It enables mobility and prosperity, enacts estrangement and punishment, and legitimises heritage through performative authenticity. Its role extends beyond the narrative to the monument itself, where the sea naturalises a fabricated structure and invests it with symbolic force. By situating Malin Kundang within broader debates on water symbolism, heritage, and authenticity, this analysis highlights the need to re-centre water in heritage discourse. Doing so not only enriches our understanding of Southeast Asian folklore but also challenges the disciplinary boundaries of heritage studies, inviting recognition of the environment as an agent in the politics of memory and representation.

STATE, TOURISM AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF FOLKLORE

The construction of the Malin Kundang monument must be situated within the wider political economy of heritage under Indonesia's New Order regime. Suharto's government pursued a cultural policy that simultaneously promoted national integration and stimulated economic development through tourism. Folklore, myths and local traditions were seen as resources that could be appropriated into the state's project of cultural nation-building, while also serving as attractions for the growing domestic tourism market (Jones 2013; Adams 2006).

Scholars such as Pemberton (1994) have shown how New Order cultural politics relied on a dual logic: the domestication of local traditions into forms compatible with state ideology, and the commodification of those traditions within the tourist economy. The Malin Kundang monument illustrates this duality. On the one hand, it fixed the legend into a physical form that could be presented

as "authentic" Indonesian heritage, reinforcing national narratives of morality and filial obedience. On the other hand, it transformed the tale into a visual spectacle, easily consumed by visitors and marketed within the tourism industry. The oral multiplicity of the story was narrowed into a single monumental version, which simultaneously legitimised state cultural authority and generated economic value.

Figure 7: Shoreline setting of the 'Stone of Malin Kundang' monument at Pantai Air Manis; legend materialised in place. (Source: Field work 2025)

This process is consistent with what Greenwood (1989) critiqued as the commodification of culture, in which living traditions are repackaged into consumable heritage products. Oral narratives such as Malin Kundang are inherently dynamic, allowing for variation and reinterpretation across generations and communities. By monumentalising the tale, the state converted a fluid tradition into a fixed artefact that could be standardised, reproduced in tourist brochures, and inserted into the circuits of cultural consumption. The monument became less a representation of community memory than an artefact of state cultural engineering. Tourism played a crucial role in this transformation. Pantai Air Manis was promoted not only for its natural beauty but also for its cultural significance, with the Malin Kundang monument serving as its centrepiece. While comprehensive cumulative statistics on visitor numbers to the Malin Kundang site up to 2025 are not publicly disaggregated, local tourism records indicate that during a single peak holiday period, more than 35,700 visitors were recorded at Pantai Air Manis within one week, generating approximately Rp403 million in revenue from entrance tickets and parking fees alone. These figures illustrate the site's role as a significant node of cultural tourism and local economic activity, even in the absence of consolidated annual data (Harian Singgalang 2023). This reflects what Picard (1996) observed in Bali, where local culture was systematically staged and packaged for tourist consumption. In Padang, the monument anchored the legend spatially and visually, creating a focal point for the touristic experience. Visitors could photograph themselves beside the "cursed son," purchase souvenirs that reproduced the stone figure, and consume a narrative that was simultaneously a moral lesson and a tourist attraction. In this way, folklore became a form of cultural capital, harnessed by the state and market alike.

The politics of representation in this process are significant. By constructing the monument, the state authorised a particular version of the Malin Kundang story, sidelining other variations and interpretations. This reflects Smith's (2006) notion of the "authorised heritage discourse," in which state institutions privilege certain narratives, material forms, and monumental representations while excluding others. The complexity of oral traditions, including local nuances, multiple endings, or alternative moral emphases, was flattened into a singular representation that aligned with state and tourist expectations. The result was both a narrowing of cultural meaning and an assertion of state authority over the production of memory.

At the same time, the commodification of Malin Kundang reveals the entanglement of heritage with economic imperatives. The New Order's development agenda positioned culture as an asset to be mobilised for growth, with tourism promoted as a key sector. Monuments such as Malin Kundang were investments in this cultural economy, designed to attract visitors and generate revenue. Yet this economic logic often came at the expense of cultural complexity. The reduction of oral tradition into a single monumental form illustrates how economic value can dominate heritage processes, prioritising what is marketable over what is culturally nuanced.

The commodification of folklore also intersects with global heritage discourses. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) notes, heritage is frequently produced as a spectacle for consumption, where authenticity is less about historical continuity than about performative effect. The Malin Kundang monument fits this pattern. Its authenticity derives not from its material origin but from its staging within a coastal environment that resonates with the

narrative of the curse. This performative authenticity makes it legible and attractive to tourists, while simultaneously reinforcing state narratives of culture and morality. The spectacle of the monument thus operates at the intersection of state authority, tourist desire, and environmental symbolism. The case of Malin Kundang also underscores the asymmetrical power relations inherent in heritage-making. While local communities may participate in the consumption of the site, the decision to monumentalise the legend was made by state authorities, reflecting top-down cultural policy rather than grassroots initiative. Community voices are present in the continued telling of the story, but the monumental form privileges the voice of the state. This asymmetry reflects broader patterns in postcolonial heritage politics, where state institutions often appropriate local traditions and reframe them within national and global heritage economies.

MEMORY, IDENTITY AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION IN POSTCOLONIAL SOUTHEAST ASIA

The legend of Malin Kundang, when monumentalised at Pantai Air Manis, becomes more than folklore. It is transformed into a site where memory, identity, and political representation intersect. This transformation is inseparable from the postcolonial condition of Southeast Asia, in which states and communities negotiate their cultural legacies within global circuits of heritage and tourism. As scholars such as Anderson (1983) have observed, nations are "imagined communities" constructed through shared symbols and narratives. The Malin Kundang monument functions as precisely such a symbol, one that crystallises local memory while aligning it with national and regional imaginaries of identity.

Cultural memory is central to this process. Assmann (2007) distinguishes between communicative memory, transmitted through everyday oral exchange, and cultural memory, institutionalised through monuments, rituals, and media. The Malin Kundang story historically existed as communicative memory, told across generations in village contexts. Its monumentalisation, however, institutionalised it as cultural memory, embedding it within the material and symbolic landscape of West Sumatra. This shift reflects a broader postcolonial pattern in which oral traditions are appropriated by state and market forces and reframed as heritage, a process that reconfigures memory from fluid storytelling into fixed representation.

At the same time, the politics of representation cannot be overlooked. The decision to monumentalise Malin Kundang privileged a particular version of the tale: the son's betrayal, the mother's curse, and the transformation into stone. Other possible interpretations, such as the anxieties of migration, the risks of maritime trade, or the ambivalence of maternal authority, were sidelined. The authorised narrative aligned neatly with state ideologies of filial piety and social discipline. This illustrates what Smith (2006) describes as the "authorised heritage discourse," in which official institutions dictate which cultural forms are legitimate and how they are represented. In the case of Malin Kundang, this discourse not only framed memory but also constructed identity, positioning the Minangkabau within a moral order that resonated with Indonesian state values.

Figure 8: The Malin Kundang monument at Pantai Air Manis, Padang, viewed at low tide; current surface condition. (Source: Field work 2025)

Identity formation is also deeply entangled with the symbolism of water. For the Minangkabau, the sea has long been associated with *merantau*, the practice of venturing abroad to seek fortune. This practice shaped communal identity, linking mobility to social prestige and cultural resilience (Murad 1978). The Malin Kundang story reflects the darker side of this identity, highlighting the risks of estrangement and betrayal. By situating the monument at the shoreline, state authorities reinforced this ambivalent relationship between sea and self, prosperity and loss. The waves crashing against the monument remind visitors that identity in the Nusantara is inseparable from water, a medium of both opportunity and danger. The sea here is not merely a natural environment but a cultural metaphor, anchoring identity in a fluid yet powerful symbol.

Figure 9: The 'Stone of Malin Kundang' monument positioned at the ocean's edge, Pantai Air Manis, Padang; present condition and context.
(Source: Field work 2025)

Postcolonial theorists such as Bhabha (2012) have stressed the hybridity of cultural identity, shaped by negotiation between tradition and modernity, local and global forces. The Malin Kundang monument exemplifies this hybridity. It is at once a local legend, a national heritage site, and a global tourist attraction. Its memory is simultaneously Minangkabau, Indonesian, and Southeast Asian, shaped by overlapping layers of representation. Yet this hybridity is not neutral. It is structured by relations of power, in which state institutions and global markets play dominant roles in determining how identity is articulated. The monument reveals how postcolonial identities are not only remembered but also staged, performed, and commodified within the heritage economy.

This raises important questions about the ownership of memory. Who controls the story of Malin Kundang? Is it the Minangkabau communities who continue to tell the tale orally? Is it the state authorities who constructed the monument? Or is it the tourism industry that packages the legend for domestic and international consumption? Each actor claims a stake in the narrative, but the monumental form privileges certain voices over others. The politics of representation thus extend beyond what is remembered to how it is remembered, and by whom.

The Malin Kundang monument, therefore, illustrates the entanglement of memory, identity and politics in postcolonial Southeast Asia. It demonstrates how folklore is transformed into heritage, how water anchors identity in both cosmological and cultural terms, and how state authority intersects with community memory and global tourism. By interrogating these dynamics, the case of Malin Kundang reveals the contested nature of cultural identity in the region, where myths are mobilised not only to remember the past but to negotiate the present and imagine the future.

GLOBAL HERITAGE DISCOURSES AND THE FUTURE OF INTANGIBLE TRADITIONS

The case of Malin Kundang is not only significant within the local or national contexts of Indonesia; it also raises critical questions about the position of folklore and oral traditions within global heritage discourses. Since the adoption of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), oral traditions, rituals, and practices have gained formal recognition as heritage. Yet, as scholars such as Hafstein (2018) have argued, the UNESCO framework simultaneously empowers and constrains intangible heritage. It validates traditions by inscribing them within global registers, but it also imposes categories and bureaucratic processes that can narrow local meanings. Malin Kundang exemplifies this tension. While the legend is fundamentally an oral tradition, its most prominent representation today is a state-built monument. This paradox underscores the difficulty of safeguarding intangible traditions within global frameworks that privilege materiality, documentation, and spectacle.

One dimension of this tension lies in the global tourism economy. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) notes, heritage is often produced as a "metacultural" phenomenon, staged for consumption in ways that detach it from its lived context. In Padang, the Malin Kundang monument has become precisely such a staged heritage product. It packages a complex oral tradition into a consumable object for domestic and international visitors. This aligns with wider patterns in which intangible practices are transformed into tangible attractions: dance performances in Bali, shadow puppet theatre in Java, or Songkran in Thailand. While such staging can ensure visibility, it risks reducing living traditions to fixed scripts tailored to tourist expectations. In the case of Malin Kundang, the monument freezes the tale into a single, state-approved version that may crowd out alternative local retellings.

For Malin Kundang, authenticity is performed through its emplacement by the sea, where water symbolically enacts the curse. This environmental staging resonates with global imaginaries of maritime mythology, making the site legible to foreign visitors as well as locals. Yet it also

illustrates the homogenising effect of global heritage discourses, which tend to privilege universal tropes such as the ocean as a liminal, dangerous space over specific local variations. The legend's particular Minangkabau inflections risk being diluted in favour of a version that is easily marketed as "authentic" heritage to global audiences (Andaya 2016; Andaya 2018).

There is also the question of ownership and control. Intangible heritage frameworks emphasise community participation, yet in practice, state agencies and international bodies often dominate decision-making. In Padang, the construction and promotion of the Malin Kundang monument were state-driven, reflecting the priorities of tourism and cultural policy rather than grassroots initiative. This raises critical questions: whose voice defines the heritage, whose version is safeguarded, and what becomes of competing interpretations or dissenting memories? These questions echo wider critiques of the UNESCO system, which scholars argue tends to institutionalise heritage in ways that reflect state agendas rather than the plurality of community voices (Bortolotto 2010).

At the same time, the global heritage framework provides opportunities for reimagining the future of traditions such as Malin Kundang. The inscription of intangible heritage can serve as a platform for communities to reclaim ownership, assert cultural identity, and resist erasure. In West Sumatra, community-led initiatives could revitalise the legend beyond the confines of the monument. Storytelling festivals, theatre adaptations, or digital media reinterpretations might allow the tale to circulate in ways that preserve its dynamism and multiplicity. Such practices would align with Hafstein's (2018) argument that safeguarding intangible heritage requires fostering conditions for transmission rather than freezing traditions in static forms. By foregrounding oral performance, rather than monumental representation, the legend could remain alive within community practice while still engaging with global audiences.

The role of water within these global discourses also deserves attention. Heritage studies have often neglected fluid and dynamic environments, focusing instead on static monuments and landscapes. Yet water is increasingly recognised as central to both ecological and cultural heritage, as seen in global initiatives to preserve river basins, wetlands, and maritime traditions (Andaya 2016; 2018; Abdullah 2025). Malin Kundang contributes to this shift by illustrating how water is not only part of the natural environment but also an active participant in cultural memory. The sea at Pantai Air Manis performs the curse daily, embedding intangible tradition within the environmental process. Recognising water as heritage challenges the static orientation of global frameworks and opens space for a more dynamic, relational understanding of culture and environment.

The future of intangible traditions like Malin Kundang thus depends on negotiating between local agency, state intervention, and global heritage regimes. If left solely to state and tourist agendas, the legend risks being reduced to a commodified monument, stripped of its richness and plurality. If re-engaged through community practices and critical recognition of water's role, however, the legend could continue to live as dynamic heritage, connecting past and present, local and global, intangible and material. The challenge, as critical heritage studies remind us, is to ensure that safeguarding does not become fossilisation, and that global recognition does not erase local meaning.

CONCLUSION

This is study demonstrates that the Malin Kundang site is not merely a preserved tradition, but a constructed heritage assemblage shaped by the interaction of state power, environmental symbolism, and cultural memory. The findings carry three key implications. First, at the theoretical level, the study challenges conventional heritage frameworks that privilege material authenticity. It shows that authenticity can be produced relationally through the interplay between narrative, environment, and performance. In this case, water functions as a legitimising agent that naturalises an artificial monument, suggesting that heritage studies must move beyond object-centred analysis to incorporate dynamic environmental actors.

Second, at the empirical and regional level, the study highlights how postcolonial Southeast Asian states selectively materialise folklore to serve political and economic agendas. The monumentalisation of Malin Kundang demonstrates how oral traditions are stabilised, simplified, and commodified within tourism economies, often at the expense of narrative plurality. This raises critical questions about cultural authority, particularly regarding who defines heritage and whose voices are marginalised in the process. Third, at the policy and future-oriented level, the study underscores

the need to rethink the safeguarding of intangible heritage. Rather than privileging fixed monuments, heritage strategies should prioritise sustaining living practices, including storytelling, performance, and community-led reinterpretation. Recognising water as an active cultural medium further opens new directions for heritage governance, where environmental processes are treated not as background but as integral to cultural meaning. Taken together, these implications reposition Malin Kundang as more than folklore. It becomes a critical case for understanding how heritage, environment, and power intersect in postcolonial contexts, and how the future of cultural memory depends on balancing material representation with the preservation of fluid, lived traditions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author acknowledges the assistance and cooperation of all individuals and institutions who contributed, directly or indirectly, to the completion of this study. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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