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**International Journal of Heritage Studies** >  
Volume 26, 2020 - Issue 5

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Pages 469-479 | Received 18 Aug 2018, Accepted 23 Jul 2019, Published online: 11 Aug 2019

[Download citation](#) <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2019.1652923> [Check for updates](#)

## Articles

# Meeting the past in the present: authenticity and cultural values in heritage conservation at the fourteenth-century Majapahit heritage site in Trowulan, Indonesia

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## Abstract

Discourse on heritage conservation has undergone significant changes in both scope and substance since the Nara Document on Authenticity in 1994. Current heritage policy dictates that conservation should be conceived as a complex process, which aims to make use of heritage places whilst retaining their cultural values and authenticity. However, these two latter aspects are critical and need to be carefully interpreted. Authenticity is not only a matter of physical materiality, but also has to do with identifying intrinsic values which sustain the memory of the past.

Taking the Majapahit Houses Programme (MHP) in Trowulan heritage site as a case study, this paper shows how these notions of authenticity and cultural values have come into conflict with present-day conservation practices. Flexibility is the key to the development of balanced heritage policies. One way of achieving this is by giving local communities the chance to mediate their own heritage-related disputes and personally participate in the practice of heritage conservation. Only then will a common policy be achieved and heritage experts and local communities find a way of working together to achieve sustainable outcomes.

KEYWORDS: [Heritage conservation](#), [cultural values](#), [authenticity](#), [Trowulan](#), [Majapahit Houses Programme](#)

'Heritage wasn't only about the past – though it was that too – it also wasn't just about material things – though it was that as well – heritage was a process of engagement, an act of communication and an act of making meaning in and for the present.' (Smith [2006](#), 1)

Table 1. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in Bejijong Village, Trowulan, 26 November – 18 December 2017.

[CSVDisplay Table](#)

The present paper contains a critical discussion of heritage conservation at Trowulan, the former capital of the Majapahit empire which flourished between 1293 and the early sixteenth century. It focuses on a programme, launched in 2014, to enhance the site by constructing 'authentic' façades on existing residences of the local community. Most of the several hundred residences in the programme are now deserted and unused. The authors argue that the failure of this programme stems from both its design and its application. In particular, the programme adopted a very simple view of 'authenticity' without paying attention to the cultural values of the site and the locality. This mistake was a result of the top-down design which made no attempt to involve the local community. The authors argue that these two aspects of the failure are closely related. The importance now attached to cultural values in the approach to heritage conservation demands that local communities that understand the values of their site and have a vested interest in its past and future must be intimately involved in projects of heritage conservation.

The first section of the paper reviews recent developments in the theory of heritage conservation, concentrating on the importance of intangible elements, cultural values, and the new definition of authenticity. The second section briefly introduces the Trowulan-Majapahit site. The third describes the Majapahit Houses Programme and presents the results of a field survey conducted by the authors in 2017. The final section draws conclusions as a cautionary tale for projects elsewhere.

## Trends in heritage conservation: cultural values and authenticity

Early theory and practice of heritage conservation in the West concentrated on the physical fabric and a concept of authenticity that was equivalent to originality, so conservation meant 'restoration.' The adoption and adaptation of these ideas and practices in the East paid more attention to intangible aspects of a site or artefact, and accepted change as an intrinsic part of history, resulting in a paradigm shift, reflected in such documents as the Hoi An Protocol of 2009 and *Nara + 20 on Heritage Practices, Cultural Values, and the Concept of Authenticity* (2014). This new paradigm has three important consequences for conservation practice.

First, fabric-based heritage consists not only of physical and material things but also the discourses which simultaneously construct and reflect time-hallowed practices (Smith [2006](#)). Heritage values are not self-evident and are not inherent in physical objects or places *per se*. Objects give tangibility to the cultural values that underpin different communities, and the conservation of these objects as heritage in turn affirms these values (Green [1998](#); Chung [2005](#); Wells [2010](#)). Heritage conservation is a process of integrating three key components of heritage sites, namely, their physicality, fabrics, and the individual character of the local communities who live in and around the site (Jivén and Larkham [2003](#)).

Second, change is an inherent aspect of heritage. Sites and artefacts may have undergone many cycles of decay and restoration, and these cycles are now part of their value. Further change in physical structure may be compatible with their heritage value. In the aftermath of the devastating tsunami of 26 December 2004, for example, the Baiturrahman Mosque in Banda Aceh was rebuilt in a style which incorporated several key architectural changes. The local communities did not dispute these changes since they understood that the authenticity of the mosque architecture is not merely a matter of physical appearance, but extends to the activities and functions which it permits (Dewi [2017](#)).

Conservation is thus not about recovery of some original form but about the management of change, including efforts to shape and control the future (Ashworth [1991](#); Orbaşlı [2008](#)). This is dramatically demonstrated at the great Shinto shrine at Ise in Japan, which is torn down and rebuilt every twenty years, precisely to ensure its survival in spite of the natural decay of timber. This process of continuous regeneration requires that the knowledge of architecture, construction, and related skills be preserved alongside, passed down from generation to generation. Tradition in this sense implies a cycle of dynamic change involving not only the physical fabric of the shrine but also the intangible heritage of knowledge and skills, and the values which lie

behind the effort by the community to preserve both the fabric and the knowledge (Pendlebury [2009](#); Orbaşlı [2008](#)).

Third, the concept of authenticity needs to be understood with reference to cultural values (Jokilehto [2006](#), 314; Lennon and Taylor [2012](#), 21; Martokusumo [2015](#), 4). Values are of fundamental significance to heritage conservation today (Avrami *et al.* [2000](#)). These values include people's sense of identity, belonging, and place, as well as forms of memory and spiritual association (Jones [2017](#), 1). Values and the communities that produce them are often fluid, transient and contested (Robertson [2009](#), 153–62). Social value is thus highly dependent on how local residents perceive their specific cultural heritage. If perception of heritage is weak in a local community, then it nearly always has a negative impact on conservation efforts directed towards preserving that cultural heritage. The definition of social and cultural values has become the focus of a continuous debate amongst conservationists. It might, therefore, be preferable to conceive of social value as a *process of valuing* heritage places rather than a fixed category that can be accurately defined and measured.

Authenticity is associated with originality, but is not limited to original material, and may include the layers and traces of changes to that material over time. A proper assessment of a heritage object should take all of this into account (Hubel [2011](#) as cited in Martokusumo [2017](#), 4). Authenticity may also be conferred by a community that recognizes a monument as part of their local historic heritage and understands that such a site contains values which were once the norm (Cuetos [2018](#), 285). Local traditions and knowledge need to be taken into account when preserving heritage sites (Larkham [1996](#), 26).

Criteria for the assessment of authenticity should be flexible and dynamic, and always reference local values (Bandarin [2011](#)). In the West over the past two decades there have been concerted efforts to move beyond nineteenth and early twentieth century conservation ideologies which tended to focus solely on materiality, and to acknowledge that a variety of values can inform the conservation movement (Gutschow and Weiler [2017](#), 1–68). Present-day conservation approaches attempt to marry Western and Eastern strategies. The assessment of authenticity is now similar in projects in both East and West, for example at Honryu-Ji and Kinkaku-Ji in Japan on the one hand and the Walter Gropius' Kandinsky/Klee Meisterhaus in Germany on the other. The priority in each case has been to bring out the original vision of the values of these sites despite all the transformations the buildings have undergone over the years (12).

The key point of the concept of authenticity is the understanding of the values that underpin heritage objects the world over. It is important that the way in which conservation is practiced, should be predicated on *beliefs* and on the ways such beliefs are conceived and constructed by local communities. The

implication of this line of thought is that local people should always be included in heritage conservation.

## The Majapahit-Trowulan site and the local community

Majapahit-Trowulan is an important heritage site because it was the former royal capital of the powerful Majapahit empire from the late 13th to early 16th century. However, it is a problematic site for several reasons.

Trowulan is situated approximately 50 kilometres southwest of Surabaya, the capital city of East Java province (see [Figure 1](#)). Since its dissolution as a royal city in the early 16th century, the Trowulan site has been progressively degraded (Gomperts, Haag, and Carey [2008](#), 411). Today, most of the archaeological remains are either incomplete, ruined or buried underground. Furthermore, important artefacts and sites of major historical importance, including the area of the former royal court, have been compromised by decades of insensitive urban development and demographic pressure. In recent years, there have also been several development plans by both the government and private and local enterprises, which have been detrimental to Trowulan's survival as a major heritage site. Thus, the main challenge at present is how to protect and conserve these surviving architectural remnants.

Figure 1. Map of Java showing the location of Trowulan. Source: Topographical Map of Indonesia 2000, Geospatial Information Agency (Indonesian: Badan Informasi Geospasial, abbreviation: (BIG) formerly named National Coordinator for Survey and Mapping Agency (Badan Koordinasi Survei dan Pemetaan Nasional, abbreviation: Bakosurtanal).



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Since the early New Order regime period (1966–1998), the Indonesian government has undertaken several conservation initiatives at the Majapahit heritage site in Trowulan, focusing on the restoration of the major temples and archaeological masterpieces, such as the Wringin Lawang and Brahu temples, the Bajang Ratu entrance gate (said to be cursed), and the Kedaton temple (Candi Kedaton) complex (Mundardjito and Tim Proyek Pemugaran dan Pemeliharaan Peninggalan Sejarah dan Purbakala [1986](#)). At the same time, however, the gradual economic development in the area poses a threat to the large number of minor sites and to the many remnants which currently are still hidden (artefacts and sites such as wells are constantly coming to light). These threats climaxed in 2012, when a proposal was launched to erect a steel factory in the core heritage area. The construction would have severely compromised a number of key archaeological sites. Following protests and local opposition, the proposal was shelved, and in the following year the site was officially recognised as a National Heritage District by the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, Muhammad Nuh (in office 2009–2014). The protected zone includes 49 villages (*desa*)<sup>1</sup> and is located within two regencies or *kabupaten*, Mojokerto and Jombang, in the Indonesian province of East Java. Despite this recognition, it is significant that The World Monument Fund, a global organization based in the US, declared Trowulan as one of the world's Most Endangered Sites in 2014. This Most Endangered status is rarely given and reflects the Fund's deep concern about the current state of the Trowulan site.

The government's conservation efforts have often been criticised by the local Trowulan communities. Most of the present-day inhabitants of Trowulan are not themselves direct descendents of the population of the royal capital in its fourteenth century heyday. We can surmise that most of these original inhabitants would have been forced to leave the city following the fall of Majapahit empire in the early sixteenth century. The current inhabitants are mainly descendents of immigrants from surrounding places in East Java who were attracted to the Trowulan-Mojokerto area because of new opportunities for employment in the sugar industry which developed during the era of the Cultivation System (1830–1870) and subsequent Liberal Economic period (1870–1900). They have thus lived for at least four or five generations on the Trowulan site. This 150-year span has made them familiar with the culture of ancient Majapahit. For instance, rituals, processions, and ceremonies related to Majapahit are still performed today – and not just for the benefit of those few foreign tourists who make it to the site of the former Majapahit capital.

These local communities feel that their voice has been ignored in the discussion over conservation of the Trowulan site. In reaction against the government's neglect and its often misguided attempts at conservation, the local communities have come to see themselves as guardians of their heritage-rich environment.

## Majapahit houses programme

In 2014 government launched the Majapahit Houses Programme (MHP), with the objective of enhancing Trowulan's appeal as a heritage site. Under this programme, villagers were offered grants to construct a 5 x 4 square metre wood and red-brick façade on their existing residential dwellings. The design of the façade and the materials were purported to be 'authentic' to Majapahit's fourteenth century heyday, based largely on research by Oesman (1999) can be seen on [Figure 2](#). He is an architect who graduated with a doctorate in archaeology from the University of Indonesia (UI), and who made his name by researching Majapahit house styles from images found on local stone reliefs in a number of Central and East Javanese temples dating the ninth to fourteenth centuries (see [Figure 3](#)).

Figure 2. Catrini P. Kubontubuh, *Prototype of a Majapahit House based on 1999 research by Oesman, 2017*.



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Figure 3. Catrini P. Kubontubuh, *Reliefs on archaeological findings from Candi Menakjinggo show the shape of historical Majapahit houses dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth century (Trowulan Museum Inventory No 1339/bta/trw/pim), 2017*.



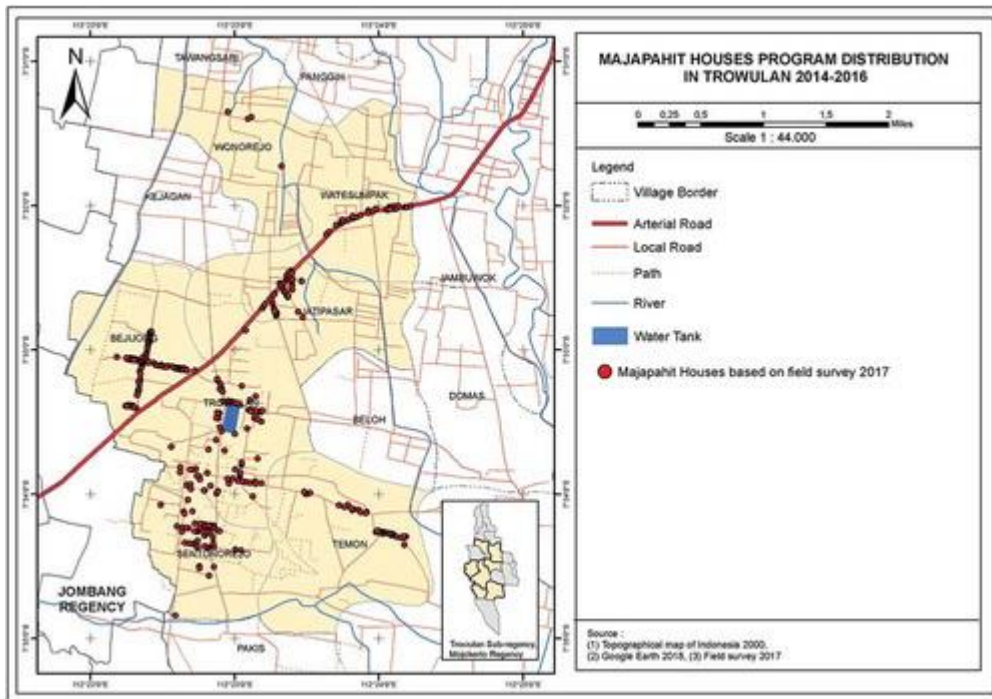
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The programme to build 600 facades was funded by the provincial and regency governments in the ratio of 85:15 (local decree by the Regent of Mojokerto numbers 36/2014 and 27/2015). Villagers were free to opt into the scheme. In 2014–2015, the first batch were constructed on 296 private dwellings, with 200 of those units in Bejijong Village, 46 in Jatipasar Village, and 50 in Sentonorejo Village, site of the original Majapahit *kadaton* (royal palace). A second batch of 300 facades was constructed in 2015–2016 at Trowulan, Temon, and Watesumpak Villages. The field survey conducted on 2017 mapped the distribution of Majapahit Houses Programme as seen on [Figure 4](#). The programme fell four short of the target of 600 because some local people refused to participate for a variety of reasons.

Figure 4. Majapahit Houses Programme distribution in Trowulan 2014–2016. Source: (1) *Peta Rupa Bumi Indonesia*, lembar 'Mojokerto' 2000, (2) Citra Google Earth 2018, and (3) Kubontubuh field Survey 2017.

(1) *Peta Rupa Bumi Indonesia*, lembar 'Mojokerto' 2000, (2) Citra Google Earth 2018, and (3) Kubontubuh field Survey 2017





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Figure 5. Catrini P. Kubontubuh, *Row of empty and uninhabited Majapahit houses, 2017.*



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Figure 6. Catrini P. Kubontubuh, *Another row of empty and uninhabited Majapahit houses among local dwelling, 2017.*



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With some 596 units of Majapahit houses constructed to date, fundamental questions associated with the concept of cultural values and authenticity have begun to emerge.

At present, the vast majority of 'Majapahit houses' stand as empty silent witnesses to a failed government programme. Most have yet to be used by their owners as can be seen in [Figure 5](#) and [6](#). There are signboards for sale or rent in front of several houses. Supriyadi, a local resident in Bejjong Village, reported that around 90 percent of all recently constructed Majapahit houses in his village are empty. During our field survey, we found only twenty units, ten percent out of the 200 built, used for economic purposes, including six homestay/overnight units, four art shops, six groceries, two food stalls, and two others.

The present authors conducted a field survey independent of local or national government through interviews with community members and six Focus Group Discussions (FGD) involving a representative sample of a hundred local residents, carried out from 26 November to 18 December 2017 as figured in Table 1. Each FGD group was varied by gender (men and women), occupation (farmer, local trader, small industry, civil servants, and others), and age (over the range 15 to 64 years). At the FGDs, which were attended by at least half the Bejjong community who had received Majapahit houses, villagers voiced strong criticisms of the MHP program. The villagers criticised the programme from two main angles.

First, a quarter of the participants criticised the limited budget and lack of follow-up after the construction. Due to the limited budget allocated for local building subvention grants, the participants could not afford to instal toilets and other necessary facilities. This meant that the houses could not be rendered functional, still less optimal. At our FGDs, the local community articulated a strong desire to receive guidance from local and national government to enable them to make the best possible use of their Majapahit houses.

Second, 70 of the 100 participants criticised the programme for its top-down design, lack of participation, and failure to appreciate local cultural values. The MHP programme is not a form of reconstruction. Rather it is a totally new construction based on a supposedly 'authentic' house design. Although the programme was conceived as a 'local' project, it was implemented top-down with no community participation. The supposedly 'authentic' design ignores the views of local residents regarding the cultural values of their current home, and the former royal city. The residents dispute the program's authenticity on grounds that the streets of the ancient city were unlikely to have been lined with houses with a uniform façade. There is no visual harmony between the Majapahit façade and the present-day Trowulan houses. The facades seem to have been stuck on to local dwellings with no attempt to create an aesthetically pleasing architectural relationship between the two

The programme planners had shown no interest in the residents' perception of the historic and cultural values of the site. The fact that the original MHP design had supposedly been based on rigorous academic research was almost totally irrelevant for them. Never once did they receive any explanation regarding the 'authenticity' claimed in the design. This resulted in a sense of apathy, with the majority of the local community becoming steadily alienated and unwilling to support the program. How could these values be expressed in the design process, these critics asked, if the local Bejjong community had not been involved at any stage in the program?

Interviews with local government officials in Trowulan in December 2017 revealed another side of the picture. For some 90 percent of government interviewees, the principal concern was to complete the project on time and on budget. Issues such as cultural values and authenticity scarcely surfaced. Furthermore, non-physical aspects of the project played no part in the planning, execution, monitoring or evaluation. Ensuring that the houses embodied Majapahit values was an irrelevance for them. This almost complete lack of understanding on the part of the officials involved created the conditions under which the 'Majapahit houses' were used for purposes far removed from recreating the vanished glories of fourteenth century Majapahit. Some became food stalls, garages, and homestays, while the majority became empty monuments to misguided approaches to conservation.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

'If the meaning of authenticity can include reliability, the situation will become more flexible. Thus, the definition of authentic should not be strict but should be flexible and changeable.' (Winter [2014](#), 3)

It is clear that the 'Majapahit houses' programme flouted existing concepts of authenticity and cultural values in heritage conservation. Every basic protocol appears to have been ignored by local and national government actors

involved. No attempt was made, for example, to establish a transparent process and provide members of the local community with an opportunity to express their opinions, still less to debate the programme in open meetings with other stakeholders. This flies in the face of nearly all current heritage protocols.

The lack of attention to authenticity and cultural values lies at the heart of the problem of heritage conservation as manifested in current practices at Trowulan. Authenticity and cultural values, along with the involvement of the local community, are all key to the success of any heritage conservation project. But time and again the present authors' field observations in Trowulan underscored the fact that none of the contemporary requirements for heritage conservation have been met. If done correctly – and that is a very big 'if' given current Indonesian government conservation practices – the Majapahit Houses Programme might have had the potential to achieve a skilful interface between the past and the present. In this fashion, one of the core goals of heritage conservation would have been met.

The Trowulan local community has a flexible perception of authenticity at the Majapahit site. Architecture and construction should not strive to reproduce an 'original' Majapahit house, but can compromise with contemporary Majapahit house design. As in the case of tsunami-damaged Baiturahman Mosque in Bandar Aceh, the local building culture in Indonesia allows for continuous changes of built form and architectural structures. In Khalaf's formulation ([2017](#), 263), such reconstructions are neither falsified, nor forged, nor a pastiche. However, authenticity also depends on how far the residents apply current heritage values in the utilisation and *mise-en-valeur* of their houses. To rescue the Majapahit National Heritage site from this failed project, the houses should be reconfigured to accommodate the revival of traditional activities, not only religious and cultural activities, but also culturally sensitive economic enterprises and local production projects. As the local community is central to conservation, plans for protecting the heritage of the Trowulan-Majapahit site should aim to upgrade the capacity of both the local economy and the local community. Besides physical development, non-physical interventions are also necessary.

Cuetos ([2018](#), 284) has recently reiterated the necessity of reconstructing historical monuments, not only on the basis of their material aspect, but also in their capacity to reconstruct the memory of the past. This amounts to a restatement of inherent values. At Majapahit-Trowulan, this will require cooperation between the local community and the local-national government of Indonesia. The overall goal is to develop an understanding of the plurality of Majapahit's local values.

A number of preliminary conclusions can be drawn. Traditionally, conservation initiatives have prioritized the archaeological or fabric-based approach. This approach generally took no account of the broad socio-cultural and values-

based context of a particular heritage site. But a shift has now taken place in the heritage conservation paradigm due to recent socio-cultural dynamics and environmental concerns. This has refocussed conservation initiatives away from a quest for originality and authenticity of materials, towards values systems, a shift summarised below:

‘As the concept of cultural heritage has broadened, we have understood that it consists of more than just matter.’ (Cuetos [2018](#), 283)

The failure of the Majapahit Houses Programme stems from the lack of appreciation on the part of local and national government agencies in Indonesia of the importance of cultural values in shaping the authenticity of a heritage site. This lack of appreciation arose from the agencies’ exclusion of the local Trowulan community from any role in planning and executing the programme.

The lesson is clear. Any future project should involve the local community, government agencies, and other related parties such as heritage NGOs and civil society pressure group at every stage from the initial conceptualisation of the project through to the details of implementation. Only in this fashion will a project be able to achieve heritage conservation goals and improve the quality of life of the local communities who live in and around heritage sites.

The effort to redefine our understanding of authenticity and cultural values should be based on the local community’s ownership of their own heritage. Such an informed acknowledgement of cultural values in living traditions adds an authentic spirit to the physical form of a given heritage site. A sense of place can arise from a connexion between the physical and non-physical aspects of a site. But there must also be room for flexibility in expanding the way in which the concept of authenticity and cultural values is interpreted among stakeholders. It is our hope that this study will stimulate a more wide-ranging debate and invite broader arguments on how to manage such heritage conservation by integrating the twin prisms of authenticity and cultural values. Based on our experience at Trowulan, we can conclude that meeting the past in the present can be achieved only through a form of conservation which successfully integrates authenticity and cultural values, as well as a skilful marriage of a site’s physical and non-physical aspects.

## **Acknowledgments**

The writing of this research paper was supported by Prof. Peter Carey, Fellow Emeritus of Trinity College, Oxford and Adjunct Professor at Faculty of Humanities, University of Indonesia, and Dr. Chris Baker, Honorary Editor of the Journal of the Siam Society, for their assistance in polishing the original English text, and for their extensive input into the material presented here. We would also like to place on record our appreciation for Supriyadi, Akub, and all

the local community in Trowulan for sharing their time with us. We also thank the IJHS Editor, Prof. Laurajane Smith, and the two anonymous IJHS reviewers for their valued comments which greatly improved the quality and focus of our original manuscript. We also thank our assistants: Aria Bagiasa, Rizky Bolang, Tri Abrianti, and Fiqi K. Malik for assisting with data collection and its presentation, and Widya Amasara for brainstorming during the writing process of this manuscript.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes

1. According to Ramelan et al. (2015, 65), the correct figure is 42 villages. Five villages were double-counted and two are unnamed.

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