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LOCAL WISDOM IN HERITAGE PRESERVATION: A REFLECTION ON QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

ABSTRACT

Academic perspectives on cultural heritage preservation are shifting from the focus on institutional and material aspects to methods that outline narrative legacy, contextual sensitivity, and participatory engagement. This shift has positioned megalithic monuments as powerful anchors of memory, fostering a deep connection between humans, sacred spaces, and the enduring presence of ancestors through the mediation of mythical legacy. Therefore, this study aims to examine how myths and local wisdom shape cultural structures. The process led to the analysis of the structures that validated the ancestral ties between communities and megalithic sites in Bada, Behoa, and Napu Valleys of Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. The aspects that connected local people to prehistoric megaliths, alongside the subsequent impact on preservation practices, were analyzed by adopting a qualitative method. A total of 39 informants with different demographics and backgrounds were selected using the snowball method. Moreover, data were collected through observation and semi-structured interviews as well as subjected to thematic analysis. The main themes included the process of myth dissemination, knowledge and beliefs associated with megaliths, and the functions of the numerous sites, as well as the integrated values of local wisdom. These were used to design the model for meaningful community-based preservation. The qualitative method adopted contributed to cultural heritage, anthropology, and archaeology, as well as enabled both policymakers and practitioners to preserve the proposed model. Additionally, methodological reflection on how reflexivity, triangulation, sampling, oral narration, translation, and coding strengthened qualitative inquiry in culturally specific contexts was also analyzed. These methodological insights enhanced the transferability of qualitative methods to reviews on indigenous knowledge, community-based preservation, collective memory, and intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords
Cultural heritage; Local wisdom; Methodological reflection; Myth; Qualitative study.

1. Introduction

Central Sulawesi was officially declared "the Land of a Thousand Megaliths" on October 3rd, 2023, by Indonesian Vice President due to the recognition of the immaterial cultural and extensive archaeological heritage. The declaration was associated with the fact that Bada, Behoa, and Napu Valleys had the highest number of megalithic ruins, including stone statues, dolmens, stone vats, and perforated stones. These ruins validate the technological skills, religious beliefs, structures, and spiritual bond of prehistoric societies with nature. The relevance of the sites has been recognized as universal by the World Heritage Convention (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2025) which cautiously mentioned the megalithic landscape of Central Sulawesi.

The three valleys contain ancient archaeological relics in the form of scattered megaliths which are important to the social and spiritual aspects of the local communities. This setting raises an essential question: "How do communities around megaliths establish a sense of connection to a cultural history that dates back thousands of years?" The connection is strengthened by a structure rooted in myths and local wisdom. This shows megaliths as a primal archetype, an unconscious symbolic structure that communicates collective meanings about life, death, and cosmic order across generations (Colman, 2021). Therefore, megaliths are a basic model that influences the meaningful interpretation of the relationship to the cultural bearers of time.

Cultural heritage preservation has shifted from an institutionally and materially based paradigm to a method characterized by narrative, contextual sensitivity, and participatory engagement. For example, Bradley (1998) reported that megalithic monuments anchored collective memory through the myths connecting humans with sacred spaces and ancestral presence. Tilley (2004) reported that the understanding of megaliths required local narratives passed down through generations. In line with a cultural psychological perspective, these myths produce symbolic archetypes that shape the experience of sacred space (Laughlin & Throop, 2001).

Several studies conducted on a regional scale have examined different methods to determine the connection. Janowski (2020) reported that in Southeast Asia, megalithic sacred entities were preserved through rituals and oral traditions, despite the lack of academic documentation. The Subak water management system in Bali has also survived due to sustenance by mythological and spiritual practices (Lansing, 2006). Smith (2006) and Hodges & Watson (2000) criticized conventional conservation models and advocated a new paradigm that defined heritage as a cultural process.

Recent studies have strengthened the relevance of community-based methods in heritage conservation. Nam & Thanh (2024) reported that the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into conservation methods led to the development of sustainable and culturally appropriate solutions. The evaluation of sites such as the USAT Liberty (Lukman, 2020) and Hoi An Ancient Town in Bali and Vietnam (Bui et al., 2020) showed that local participation led to sustainable management.

The enhancement of traditional law frameworks and active community participation protected agricultural traditions in local communities (Handayani & Suparno, 2023). Usmaedi et al. (2024) and Chen & Wang (2024) focused on the importance of emotional components and community self-governance in developing meaningful conservation practices.

Myths are characterized by social and epistemic purposes including the preservation function. Nirzalin et al. (2023) showed that local myths functioned as social and environmental regulation tools in forest management practices adopted by the indigenous communities of Aceh. The conceptualization of megaliths also reflected the instrumental role of myths as a collective institution to govern social conduct, including the legitimization of community-led heritage preservation initiatives.

Following the description above, the economic and tourism dimensions supported the urgency of adopting a culturally grounded method to heritage conservation. This was due to the ability of indigenous-based ecotourism to achieve sustainable development objectives and provide benefits for the local populations (Lara-Morales & Clarke, 2022; Legowo et al., 2024). The dual advantages of cultural heritage preservation and local economic growth tended to be developed when communities actively participated in management practices (Shrestha et al., 2024; Halim et al., 2011). Lyngdoh & Gautam (2024) and Calvi & Hover (2021) proved that the strategic integration of myths in destination narratives led to enhanced place identity and favorable visitor experiences.

Previous studies have established important knowledge on the connections between myths and community preservation of cultural heritage. The integration of the primordial archetype concept into community-based preservation practices particularly concerning megalithic sites in Central Sulawesi was overlooked. Therefore, this study aims to strengthen both theoretical and empirical aspects by establishing myths and local wisdom as fundamental epistemic as well as axiological resources in cultural preservation.

This led to two questions: (1) What roles do myths and local wisdom containing primordial archetypes play in community-based preservation of megalithic heritage sites in Central Sulawesi? (2) What are the contributions of social and epistemological mechanisms integrated in collective narratives to maintaining the continuous existence of the sites?

An integrated management system was developed to preserve cultural heritage sites in “the Land of a Thousand Megaliths". This study focused on designing a meaningful community-based preservation model where myth and local wisdom served as fundamental conservation elements and cultural legitimacy sources for sustainable preservation. The potential of both as components of the cultural heritage preservation model is reviewed in the final consideration section.

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Location and Informants

Bada, Behoa, and Napu Valleys are situated near Lore Lindu National Park, Central Sulawesi Province, Indonesia (Figure 1). The three highland valleys are located at elevations between 800 and 1,200 m above sea level. Furthermore, the entire area contained more than 1,000 megalithic remains in 96 sites (UNESCO, 2025).

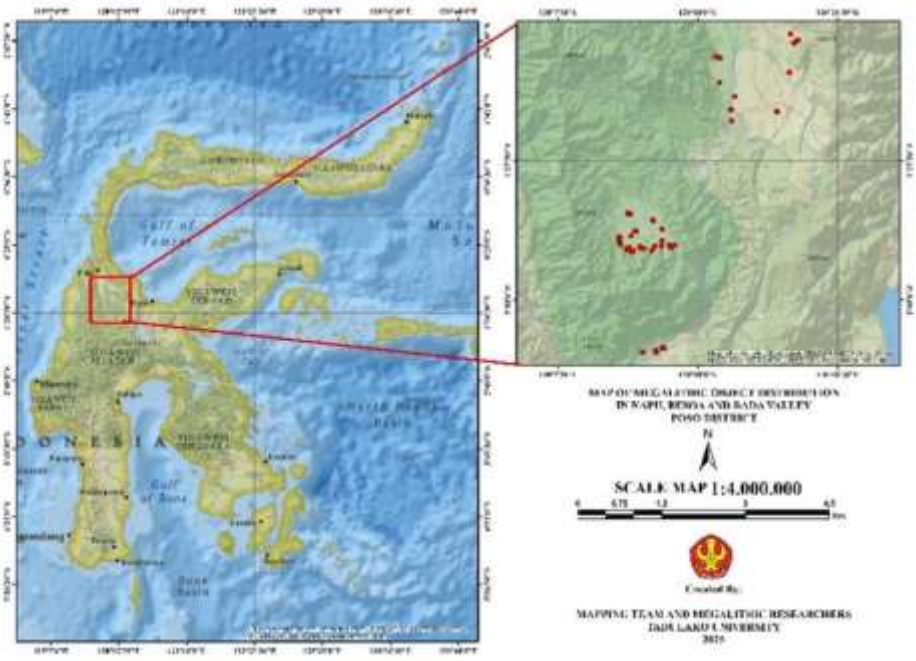

Figure 1. Study site map

The snowball method was adopted to gain adequate information from the community with varying age groups, backgrounds, roles within the community, and levels of participation in activities related to the presence of megaliths. For example, Ezkal and Barry provided information about people with cultural, customary, and local wisdom knowledge. This included students who performed traditional dances at the Palindo statue site during the declaration of "the Land of a Thousand Megaliths". The informants volunteered to participate and were selected only after being fully briefed through a consent form and agreeing to be interviewed. The snowball method led to the selection of 39 informants referred to using pseudonyms, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of study informants

Name (pseudonym)	Age (years)	Gender	Social status, position, or role in the community
Ezkal	56	Male	Community Leader/School Principal
Marten	32	Male	Youth leader
Manna	52	Male	Community Figure
Agnius	70	Male	Cultural figure
Sulan	52	Male	Farmer
Hamlah	56	Female	Female Community Figure
Listy	41	Female	Religious Leader
Deka	54	Male	Community Figure, former village head
Yunar	66	Male	Customary Leader
Abnis	31	Male	Youth Leader
Salson	65	Male	Community Leader
Exram	61	Male	Farmer
Tony	57	Male	Farmer
Alno	61	Male	Farmer
Anklius	58	Male	Community Leader
Terry	84	Male	Community Leader
Adrian	49	Male	Tourism guide, farmer
Barry	52	Male	Site Custodian
Ady	52	Male	Farmer
Alex	54	Male	Farmer
Pardy	53	Male	Farmer
Arken	49	Male	Site Custodian
Barke	56	Male	Site Custodian
Franky	35	Male	Site Custodian
Ical	21	Male	Site Custodian
Matius	52	Male	Community Leader
Karol	51	Male	Traditional Elder
Sudiar	47	Male	Site Custodian
Hendra	79	Male	Retired civil servant
Inal	30	Male	Site Custodian
Idaus	53	Male	Farmer
Ello	49	Male	Honorary Employee
Assen	39	Male	Farmer
Jonny	25	Male	Site Custodian
Jefry	24	Male	Farmer
Kisyin	14	Female	Student
Steffy	14	Female	Student
Shasy	14	Female	Student
Naldys	14	Female	Student

2.2 Ethical Considerations

Approval was obtained from the Ethical Commission of the Board of Research and Community Services of Tadulako University (Approval No. 1680/UN28.16/AL.04/2024) in line with the guidelines of British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024). This study addressed the broader ethical considerations regarding the inclusion of informants. Moreover, formal and written permission were submitted to the sub-district government, relevant local authorities, and all informants.

Ethical issues in naturalistic inquiry were addressed through informed consent procedures, achieved by providing clear explanations regarding the roles of the informants before any further inclusion. Informed consent was obtained from each informant before recording the interview sessions. Additionally, aspects such as identity confidentiality, access to recorded content, intended use of the collected data, and estimated commitment were clarified.

2.3 Study Instruments

The main instruments were a guide and field notes used during semi-structured interviews and observation sessions. The focus was on three main aspects of the knowledge possessed at megalithic sites, mythological significance, and traditional practices for site protection, and the site itself.

Data obtained using audio recorders and cameras were stored on external media such as hard drives. Additionally, all recorded interviews were transcribed after the collection process was completed.

2.4 Data Collection

The two major data collection methods adopted were semi-structured interviews and observations. The semi-structured interviews gathered deep insights from experts who understood megalithic sites with mythological connections as well as cultural wisdom and traditional practices. Based on this perspective, an interview guide was provided before the session. Other probing questions were asked during the interview based on the statements made by the informants.

Insight was gained into the cultural rules of the community while viewing the connection of megalithic sites to social and spiritual values through observation. The data collection methods were used to identify the complex relationships between myths, local wisdom, and cultural site preservation. This was achieved through the application of semi-structured interviews in maintaining a consistent focus on the study objectives. Furthermore, the questions practically ranged from pre-determined to highly open-ended formats. Specific guiding questions were prepared, with unanticipated lines of information and emergent narrative trajectories followed during interviews (Kallio et al., 2016; Kato, 2006). The trend was associated with the consideration of semi-structured interviews as valuable in qualitative studies due to the flexibility in exploring various ideas (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Each informant was interviewed once due to the depth and sufficiency of data required. The duration varied considerably, ranging from 60 to 180 minutes depending on the ability of the informant to provide information and the capacity of the interviewer to probe more deeply into the responses.

Observations were made during the ritual events held by the community around the megaliths and through inheritance myths conveyed by parents to children. These two moments enabled an understanding of the process associated with the inheritance of myths in relation to megaliths. The event was observed seven times for different objects in varying locations. The observation process included the mapping of each object, visiting the area, and recording images for VR (virtual reality) and AR (augmented reality), with megalithic statues regarded as part of the main outputs of the project. A total of 36 mappings and recordings were conducted, as well as supported and combined with an understanding of the various megalithic statues.

The purpose was to constructively provide an in-depth and comprehensive review concerning the character of the rocks in the three valleys.

2.5 Trustworthiness

The quality criteria for the data were trustworthiness and authenticity (Korstjens & Moser, 2018), used to determine validity, including reliability (Cope, 2014; Creswell, 1994; Shannon & Hambacher, 2014; Shenton, 2004). The following criteria were considered: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which reflected the trustworthiness of naturalistic studies. In addition, these were achieved through several methods, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Criteria for maintaining study trustworthiness

Criterion	Method	Procedure
Credibility	Triangulation	Using semi-structured interviews and participant observation.
	Referential adequacy	Collecting holistic data (video recordings and field notes) to test interpretations.
	Peer debriefing	Verifying the analysis, interpretations, and conclusions with the team members.
Transferability	Thick description	Guiding readers into the context through rich descriptions and direct quotations.
Dependability	Audit	Providing an opportunity for an external audit when necessary.
Confirmability	Audit	Providing an opportunity for an external audit when necessary.

Data collection was conducted with interviews and participant observations, resulting in similar results. Although the study was conducted by several individuals from different disciplinary backgrounds, data collection focused mainly on anthropology. This guided the development of the interview protocol, including reflective practices during the collection process. The results of the interviews and observations were analyzed, constructed, and synthesized collaboratively. The recordings and transcripts were available for auditing to ensure dependability and confirmability. The results were also described in depth using contextually appropriate terms, words, and expressions to ensure transferability.

2.6 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis examined the semi-structured interview data following the proposed model (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2014; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The process started with getting familiar with the field phenomena and transcribing recorded interviews before conducting several checklists for each audio file to obtain a detailed extraction of meanings.

The data obtained after the transcription process was then refined by removing the irrelevant and ambiguous statements, including translating the local language and dialects into Indonesian. The coding process was carried out by a combination of deductive and inductive procedures. Following the theoretical and conceptual perspective, the presence of certain concepts, namely ancestors, local wisdom, myths, and collective memory, was deduced.

Simultaneously, inductive coding was carried out iteratively, with the categories and themes evolving from the interview and observational data. The essential themes were identified by examining the respective relevance to the study focus, with statements from informants that mutually supported one another.

The construction of the themes through coding and categorization of the interview data, as part of the thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2014), is shown in Appendix A.

3. Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis identified four interconnected themes: (1) the process of myth dissemination, (2) its knowledge and perceived existence in relation to megaliths, (3) the functions of myths surrounding megalithic sites, and (4) embedded local wisdom values. In all three valleys, Bada, Behoa, and Napu, myths became historical stories, and cultural tools were used to pass on knowledge and build a sense of community to control social behavior, as well as maintain connections with the past.

3.1 The Process of Myth Dissemination

The dissemination of myths was described as follows. The acceptance of ancestral narratives was reflected in Marten's interview:

> "I am aware of what our village elders say about the statues at the [Powalia] site. It doesn't really make logical sense, but we always act according to the messages from the ancestors at Powalia, that indeed, every problem must be resolved together" (Marten, interview, December 09, 2024).

In addition, the initiation of the narratives by parents and elders in childhood was reflected by Manna:

> "When I was a child, whenever I sat with the elders [...], they would tell stories about [...] the statues, including those at Powalia. My parents told me [...] that the spirits of the Bada people from long ago [...] were the first inhabitants of Bada. They did not like any chaos [...], so, as children, we were taught to avoid bad words and bad deeds" (Manna, interview, December 9, 2024).

And Deka:

> "My parents said that we can preserve these heritage sites and appreciate what existed before us. I thought the stories or legends, it could be passed down to future generations. When I was a village head, I always advised teachers, specifically in elementary schools, and the elders to share stories with our children. This can develop an attitude of respect of ancestors. The essence is as a medium to convey important messages" (Deka, interview, December 10, 2024).

Deka's interview referred to community and educational programs that support transmission and continuity across generations. Myths were perpetuated in the family, through oral narration and community education.

In the interview, Ezkal stated that the Palindo statue in Figure 2 is connected to masculinity and strength, showing the way in which a physical monument can serve as a point of reference for ancestral stories.

> "[...] That statue symbolizes masculinity. The statue represents strength. According to the elders, the concept of strength was associated with a practice in which, sometimes before going to war, people would go around the statue seven times" (Ezkal, interview, December 10, 2024).

Therefore, megaliths serve as material traces and places of cultural significance. The meanings are rejuvenated as community members interpret the objects through inherited narratives, connecting tangible remains to intangible knowledge.



Figure 2. Palindo statue, Bada Valley (Source: Authors' collection)

The pattern is consistent with the studies on collective memory and identity (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995) and on oral transmission (Tamm, 2008; Cajete, 2017; Toorn, 2000). Jasanoff's (2012) focus on imagined communities is informative in terms of collective remembering, but the evidence reviewed is related to storytelling, not media.

Continuity of culture is negotiated because families and community members selectively reinterpret or retell inherited narratives. Therefore, preservation requires the maintenance of social contexts that enable the sharing of stories and the ability of younger generations to connect with the present.

3.2 Knowledge and Existence of Myths Related to Megaliths

Knowledge of myths varies; for example, Naldys showed partial knowledge alongside the fear of supernatural consequences. This suggests that a narrative may influence behavior even when the full content is forgotten.

> "The stories, well, I do not know much. It is just something I heard once. The story is about Palindo statue was from my [grandmother], but the important thing is not to say bad things, because I am afraid of being cursed" (Naldys, interview, December 10, 2024).

Matius described the beliefs about Watu Lumu and Peka Sele (Figure 3) and agricultural outcomes, associating megaliths with interpretations of uncertainty and the environment.

> "[...] The megalith was highly trusted. After the villagers converted to Christianity, they gradually stopped the rituals there, although a few individuals continue the practice. Tamadue people used Watu Lumu as a sacred site to predict agricultural success; during the planting season, elders collect stones from the Sele site and place them inside Watu Lumu, a carved stone [*kalamba*]. They believe that if a stone floats, it signifies a bountiful harvest, whereas sinking stones foretold crop failure due to pest infestation" (Matius, interview, January 29, 2025).

The variation enabled myth-related knowledge to be retained as practical caution even when narrative details have declined.



Figure 3. Examples of megaliths in Napu Valley: (a) Kalamba: Watu Lumu, (b) Peka Sele and remnants of offerings by Hindu worshippers (Source: Authors' collection)

Manna connected the holes on Watu Boula shown in Figure 4 to the buffalo story.

> "In the past, there lived a nobleman in Bada who owned many buffalos. One of his buffaloes gave birth to a calf. After giving birth, the mother buffalo died, leaving the calf without a mother. One day, when no one was left to feed it, the buffalo escaped and began disturbing the villagers. The buffalo was then captured, [...]. That is why the buffalo statue has many holes on it, which are said to be marks left by the pestles" (Manna, interview, December 09, 2024).

Meanwhile, Ezkal associated the Palindo statue with culturally meaningful attributes. Barry explained that ritual beliefs such as asking permission before engaging in activities at a site played an important role even when religious practices have changed.

> "We keep the tradition to the next generation. A major challenge is how to connect this culture with [...], such as the rituals performed around megalithic stones. When rituals are conducted there is a feeling or belief that one must seek permission before proceeding with the event [...]. Here, the ritual such as '*mepokomama*,' which is practiced in Sawagindu. This ritual aims to preserve our customs and culture. We must still respect the heritage left behind. This is a part of our ancestors. Even though we have religion, we still honor and respect our customs and culture. This is a part of our identity, we must preserve it as is a part of our historical journey" (Barry, interview, December 11, 2024).

Knowledge here takes the form of partial recollection and of symbolic ritual practice. Based on this perspective, cultural influence is not measured by the ability to tell a complete story. The concept of monuments, place and memory is also in line with the studies by Bradley (1998) and Tilley (2004). Several studies adopted the concept of how narratives maintained intangible heritage and identity (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Cajete, 2017; Tamm, 2008; Toorn, 2000). However, different interpretations were presented by the members of the community. These were viewed as variation in a living knowledge system rather than an indicator that the tradition was lost.



Figure 4. Watu Boula at Tantaduo Megalithic Site, Bada Valley (Source: Authors' collection)

3.3 Functions of Myths Surrounding Megalithic Sites

Myths serve moral, social and regulating functions (as described by Marten in the previous excerpt); the association of ancestral stories with collective problem-solving is outlined, while Deka (in the previous excerpt) showed how storytelling can communicate moral expectations and respect for heritage.

It provides a culturally recognizable basis for cooperation and accountability. The stories serve as collective moral tools that can be accepted or rejected and are infrequently followed by individuals. Adrian suggested the supernatural consequences of behavior around megaliths, including asking for permission. These stories create a sort of "fence" around sacred sites that can deter harm or disrespect.

> "Customary, rice planting traditions are closely related to local wisdom. Before beginning any task, people must first go to megalith to make offerings. There is also a kind of mythical awareness, violating the site, ancestral retribution, such as spirit possession (*kambaroanga*). Therefore, we should ask permission before we are entering or leaving the site" (Adrian, interview, January 27, 2025).

The results position myths in the context of culture as tools for the preservation of moral values and communal order. Carmichael et al. (2013) focused on reviewing sacred places in this context. Hartberg et al. (2014) analyzed supernatural monitoring and social behavior. Customary restrictions tended to have both ancestral and supernatural implications that provided motives for compliance.

The numerous mechanisms were analyzed in view of informal sanctions (Posner, 1996) and collective action on social norms (Bauer & Johansen 2022). Anderson (2013) carried out a study on religion and conservation. In addition, the studies collectively gave insight into the ways community disapproval, customary expectations, and supernatural beliefs function alongside official rules.

3.4 Local Wisdom Values Embedded in Myths

Local wisdom is manifested during rituals, care for the environment, customary institutions, sanctions and collaborative responsibility for preservation. As described by Barry in a previous transcript, Adrian emphasized that:

> "[...] megaliths and other objects may still be touched but must not be defaced. If someone is affected *by kambaroanga*, they can be treated, he should drink water given by a *sando* [a spiritual healer]. There have been visitors who were possessed, and they were treated by a *sando*" (Adrian, interview, January 27, 2025).

Barry and Adrian outlined the importance of ritual beliefs. Ady referred to cleaning associated with the ritual process and suggested that the awareness of preservation is unaffected by the decline of previous offerings or rituals.

> "[...] before the arrival of religion, there was a spiritual event, the elders would go to megalithic statues. The awareness connects to the rituals practiced by community, such as environmental cleaning was performed at the beginning and end of each ritual. There are customary regulations in place during violations. The customary institution has rules and sanctions. Local wisdom plays the most significant role. However, it needs collaboration between the community, government, and site custodians [...]" (Ady, interview, February 06, 2025).

Adrian centered on customary rules as well as working with site guardians.

> "In Napu, there are rules related to the preservation of sites, although they are unwritten, they are quite strict, such as prohibitions against stealing or causing damage" (Adrian, interview, January 27, 2025).

Adrian identified sanctions and unwritten restrictions on damaging megaliths. Ello is referred to as the collective ritual and cleaning activities. The diverse practices show that preservation is a shared responsibility, symbolically expressed in terms of practical rules, and institutional responsibility.

> "[...] before starting cultivation, we go there first. They would clean the area while bringing ritual offerings such as areca nuts, white chickens, eggs, and rice, which were presented while speaking [in Napu language]. For Hindus or Balinese who reside there, they also use the site for rituals, such as during Galungan, Nyepi, or other holy days. Sometimes, they even work together to clean the site" (Ello, interview, January 28, 2025).

The numerous accounts associate spiritual meanings with social values and ecological ethics. Setiyoningsih et al. (2026) studied the ecological and symbolic roles and meanings embedded in folklore.

The study explored how these aspects reflect cultural values, transmit ecological knowledge, and shape the relationship between local communities and their environment. Anderson (2013) contributed to the understanding that religious behaviors transmit moral values. The preservation values are intact despite the modification of specific rituals. Eliade (1954) conducted a study on *illud tempus*, used to explain how myths and rituals maintain the symbolic presence of ancestral time.

Preservation refers to the act of protecting objects and is socially practiced through customary rules, including collective practices. This is in line with the studies by Carmichael et al. (2013) and Bui et al. (2020) on sacred sites and community engagement with living heritage. The process includes customary institutions, custodians, public authorities and residents.

Achille & Fiorillo (2022) reviewed heritage education in schools and youth programs. Orphanidou et al. (2024) reported that digital spaces were regarded as opportunities for youth engagement. Menkshi et al. (2021) found that youth generation played a crucial role in cultural-value awareness.

4. Methodological Reflection

An interpretivist–constructivist model served as the basis for conducting this study with myths and local wisdom understood as systems through which meaning is socially constructed. The epistemological position showed latent subjectivities, with the interpretation of symbolic narratives depending on the analytical acuity of the study team. Assuming that myths function as a coherent epistemic system carries the risk of over-systematization, potentially overlooking fragmentation, contradictions, and inconsistencies in the ways myths are interpreted within the selected communities. Moreover, the positioning of myths as the central explanatory model led to the exclusion of alternative interpretations particularly shaped by religious transformations or younger generations used as informants. This is related to the possibility of perceptions being influenced by experiences obtained from accessing digital information which is available even in relatively remote areas. In this context, the epistemological position and multidisciplinary background of the study will inevitably influence how data are constructed and interpreted. The anthropological background of the first author led to the construction of the interview protocol and field interpretation. Furthermore, differences in academic disciplines and individual backgrounds of the researchers may lead to diverse assumptions in the collaborative analysis process. This reflective process showed that oral narration, symbolic meaning and local wisdom cannot be interpreted independently from the perspective of previous studies. As a result, methodological reflection is required to recognize studies on the construction process and not only finding the meaning.

Snowball sampling, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis were used, which allowed access to culturally embedded knowledge within the community, but it also led to biases and limitations encountered by the team.

Considering the sampling was useful in terms of reaching relevant informants, personal experiences suggested that it led to a homogenous perspective (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018; Noy, 2008) in existing social systems and networks, including traditional leaders, community elders and culturally respected individuals. Different experiences, alternative views or non-dominant narratives can be ignored as effects. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews is recognized as being vulnerable to desirable or socially agreed responses, specifically in contexts where cultural norms focus on respect for tradition (Bergen & Labonté, 2020).

The reliance on orally transmitted information allows for the possibility of memory distortion, narrative bias, and incomplete transmission. Thematic analysis converted these narrative accounts into codes, selected categories, and themes thereby potentially reducing the complexity and hidden ambiguity embedded within cultural experiences (Ozuem et al., 2022).

Hybrid coding proved valuable in bridging theory and field data, and it showed how inquiry-based investigation helps to determine the relationship between local wisdom hidden behind myths and preservation behavior. Based on the aspect of transferability, the results enabled the explanation of preservation behaviors in other contexts such as indigenous knowledge, community-based conservation, and collective memory.

Reflecting on the methodology yielded a lesson about working across disciplines. The specific focus is on understanding the character and quality of the stone used as the megalith material. This awareness initially emerged from the recognition that the stones had begun to show signs of weathering over time, partly due to repeated physical contact by visitors.

Several limitations were identified from the practical and reflective dimensions. For example, the translation from a local language (partial, bilingual) to Indonesian and English has the potential risk of semantic issues where culturally specific concepts do not have a direct correlation with the words or sentences used. The observation was limited due to the remote locations. The visits to the study location did not often coincide with important community events such as traditional rituals which limited data verification through direct observation. The number of mappings and recordings of the objects (for the development of the site map, AR, and VR as a part of the overall project) was insufficient. The methodological experience provided transferable lessons aimed at qualitatively including culture-based knowledge. Snowball sampling required attention on the potentially homogeneous social network. Oral narration and remote fieldwork performed triangulation to accommodate variations in information, limitation of memory, and observation. The translation from local to Indonesian and English languages centered on culturally specific meaning (Choi et al., 2012). However, hybrid coding-maintained traceability between the theoretical concept and meaning evolving from the accounts of the informants (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Another limitation was that the interpretations by the team were not validated or confirmed by the informants. The lessons about indigenous knowledge, community-based conservation and preservation, including collective memory, and intangible cultural heritage were applied in the qualitative study. This was actualized by considering the specific characteristics of the context.

The team conducted data analysis collaboratively to reduce bias, but the process did not eliminate structural influences related to the assumptions of the respective academic disciplines (Barry et al., 1999; Lee et al., 2023). The limitations led to an incomplete understanding and contextual interpretation of the results rather than the perception of a comprehensive representation. This posed a particular challenge for the study, considering the aspects inherently integrated culturally within the knowledge systems.

5. Final Considerations

In conclusion, this study investigated how myths and local wisdom associated with primordial archetypes contributed to the preservation of megalithic heritage in Bada, Behoa, and Napu Valleys of Central Sulawesi. The results showed that heritage protection was not limited to the physical protection of megalithic objects and sites but regarded as part of cultural knowledge, collective narratives, values and social practices through which communities understand and relate to respective heritage. The four themes identified showed that myths and local knowledge were constantly being reproduced by means of intergenerational transmission and daily social interaction. The maintenance of megalithic heritage was considered material, cultural and social. This approach was because cultural values and social relations considered the source of the significance of megalithic heritage were also preserved.

This study conceptually placed myths and local wisdom in the foreground of the preservation of heritage, rather than as stories about archaeological remains. Both were considered sources of cultural validation, defining community identity, passing on ancestral meanings, and shaping social conduct in relation to heritage. This view outlined the interdependence of tangible and intangible heritage. Megaliths gave substance to collective stories, while myths and local knowledge kept megaliths alive, leading to the understanding and preservation of community life. The results contributed to the understanding of community-based heritage preservation, by showing how cultural reproduction processes in the form of myths and local wisdom functioned as an internal mechanism that allowed communities to maintain relationships with heritage over time.

The results have certain implications for heritage preservation policies and practices. Local myths, traditional knowledge, intergenerational transmission, and community participation are important aspects of heritage management that should not be viewed as ancillary cultural information in preservation initiatives. The cooperation between government institutions, heritage authorities, cultural activists, academic institutions and local communities should be focused on enhancing the mechanisms by which knowledge is passed on and understood, specifically among the younger generations. This can supplement archaeological and institutional conservation efforts, as well as associate the safeguarding of physical remains with cultural systems to sustain their meaning and social relevance. However, the results were interpreted as contextually situated interpretations rather than universal claims, as this study was qualitative and interpretive and the communities evaluated were culturally specific.

The methodological reflections on sampling, oral transmission, translation, team positionality, thematic abstraction and lack of direct confirmation of the interpretations with the informants also suggested caution in the transfer of the results to other contexts. The evaluation provided a basis for understanding heritage preservation as an integrated process, in which material heritage, collective narratives, local knowledge, and community practices supported each other.

This view should be adopted for future analyses and preservation studies in other related contexts, where the intangible cultural knowledge is completely connected to the protection and continuity of tangible heritage.

Ethical Approval: This study implemented an ethical protocol and obtained approval from the Ethical Commission of the Board of Research and Community Services of Tadulako University (Approval No. 1680/UN28.16/AL.04/2024) in line with the guidelines of BERA (2024). Special precautions were also implemented to prevent disruption of local community traditions during the study. Moreover, the study team was committed to maintaining respect for local customs and cultural practices.

Informed Consent: Informants were informed about the study objectives, and participation was fully based on informed consent provided before conducting interviews and collecting data. Pseudonyms were also used for the informants for confidentiality purposes.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to the study, authorship, and publication.

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI): Artificial intelligence tools specifically ChatGPT were used to support the linguistic translation from Indonesian to English and refinement of grammar afterward.

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Summary of Thematic Analysis

Verbatim	Excerpt quotation code	Code	Category	Theme	Refined Theme
"**I am aware that what our elders**—those in our village—say about the statues at the [Powalia] site. **It doesn't really make logical sense, but we always act according to the messages from the ancestors at Powalia**, that indeed, every problem must be resolved together" (Marten, interview, December 09, 2024).	mar-1 mar-2	Intergenerational belief adherence	Acceptance of ancestral narratives	Myth dissemination	Process of myth dissemination
"When I was a child, whenever I sat with the elders [...], **they would tell stories about the statues**, including those at Powalia. My parents told me [...] **that the spirits of the Bada people from long ago** [...] were the first inhabitants of Bada. They did not like any chaos [...], so, as children, we were taught to avoid bad words and bad deeds" (Manna, interview, December 9, 2024).	man-1 man-2	Oral storytelling since childhood	Family-based transmission	Myth dissemination	Process of myth dissemination
"My parents said that we can preserve these heritage sites and appreciate what existed before us. I thought the stories or legends, It could be passed down to future generations. When I was a village head, **I always advised teachers**, specifically in elementary schools, and the **elders to share stories with our children**. **This can develop an attitude of respect of ancestors**. The essence is as a medium to convey important messages" (Deka, interview, December 10, 2024).	dek-1 dek-2	Institutional support for storytelling	Formal and informal transmission	Myth dissemination	Process of myth dissemination
"[...] **The children** already have this **understanding because there is a message passed down from our ancestors**, **from a generation to [*the next*] generation**. Therefore, the statue remains intact without any marks or paint scratches [...]" (Salson, December 09, 2024).	sal-1	Generational continuity of messages	Cultural continuity	Myth dissemination	Process of myth dissemination
"**The stories**, well, I do not know much. **It is just something I heard once**. The story is about Palindo statue was from my [grandmother], but the important thing is not to say bad things, because I am afraid of being cursed" (Naldys, interview, December 10, 2024).	nal-1	Partial knowledge and fear-based retention	Youth reception of myths	Knowledge about myths	Knowledge and existence of myths
"[...] The **megalith was highly trusted.** After the villagers converted to Christianity, they gradually stopped the rituals there, although a few individuals continue the practice. Tamadue people used Watu Lumu **as a sacred site to predict agricultural success; during the planting season**, elders collect stones from the Sele site and place them inside Watu Lumu, a carved stone [*kalamba*]. They **believe that if a stone floats, it signifies a bountiful harvest,** whereas sinking stones foretold crop failure due to pest infestation" (Matius, interview, January 29, 2025).	mat-1 mat-2 mat-3	Myth-based predictive belief	Functional myth knowledge	Knowledge about myths	Knowledge and existence of myths

Verbatim	Excerpt quotation code	Code	Category	Theme	Refined Theme
"[...] In the past, there lived a nobleman in Bada who owned many buffalos. One of his buffaloes gave birth to a calf. After giving birth, the mother buffalo died, leaving the calf without a mother. One day, when no one was left to feed it, the buffalo escaped and began disturbing the villagers. The buffalo was then captured, [...]. **That is why the buffalo statue has many holes on it, which are said to be marks left by the pestles**" (Manna, interview, December 09, 2024). "[...] **That statue symbolizes masculinity. The statue represents strength.** According to the elders, the concept of strength was associated with a practice in which, **sometimes before going to war, people would go around the statue seven times**" (Ezkal, interview, December 10, 2024).	man-3 ezk-1 ezk-2	Symbolic meaning of megaliths	Myth-symbol association	Knowledge about myths	Knowledge and existence of myths
"[...] We keep the tradition [...] to the next generation. A major challenge is how to connect this culture with [...], **such as the rituals performed around megalithic stones.** When rituals are conducted **there is a feeling or belief that one must seek permission before proceeding with the event** [...]. Here, the ritual such as '*mepokomama*,' which is practiced in Sawagindu. This ritual aims to preserve our customs and culture. We must still respect the heritage left behind. This is a part of our ancestors. Even though we have religion, we still honor and respect our customs and culture. This is a part of our identity, we must preserve it as is a part of our historical journey" (Barry, interview, December 11, 2024).	bar-1 bar-2	Ritual belief system	Sacred awareness	Knowledge about myths	Knowledge and existence of myths
"I am aware of what our village elders say about the statues at the [Powalia] site. It does not make logical sense, but we always act according to the messages from the ancestors at Powalia, that indeed [...] **every problem must be resolved together**" (Marten, interview, December 09, 2024).	mart-3	Collective problem-solving value	Social cohesion	Functions of myths	Functions of myths
"My parents said that we can preserve these heritage sites and appreciate what existed before us. I thought that stories or legends could be passed down to future generations. When I was a village head, I always advised teachers, specifically in elementary schools and the elders, we share stories to our children. This develops an attitude of respect to ancestors. The essence is as a **medium to convey important *messages***" (Deka, interview, December 10, 2024).	dek-1	Moral communication tool	Ethical instruction	Functions of myths	Functions of myths
"The stories, well, I do not know much. It is just something I heard once. The story is about Palindo statue was from my [grandmother], but the important thing is **not to say bad things, because I am afraid of being cursed**" (Naldys, interview, December 10, 2024).	nal-2	Fear of supernatural sanction	Behavioral control	Functions of myths	Functions of myths

Verbatim	Excerpt quotation code	Code	Category	Theme	Refined Theme
"Customary, rice planting traditions are closely related to local wisdom. Before beginning any task, people must first go to megalith to make offerings. **There is also a kind of mythical awareness**, **violating the site, ancestral retribution, such as spirit possession** (*kambaroanga*). Therefore, we should ask permission before we are entering or leaving the site" (Adrian, interview, January 27, 2025).	adr-1	Supernatural punishment	Social regulation	Functions of myths	Functions of myths
"[...] Therefore, we should **ask permission before we are entering or leaving the site**" (Adrian, interview, January 27, 2025).	adr-2	Ritualized behavior	Norm enforcement	Functions of myths	Functions of myths
"[...] We keep the tradition [...] to the next generation. A major challenge is how to connect this culture with [...], such as the rituals performed around megalithic stones. When rituals are conducted there is a feeling or belief that one must seek permission before proceeding with the event [...]. **Here, the ritual such as '*mepokomama*,' which is practiced in Sawagindu**. **This ritual aims to preserve our customs and culture. We must still respect the heritage left behind. This is a part of our ancestors**. Even though we have religion, we still honor and respect our customs and culture. This is a part of our identity, we must preserve it as is a part of our historical journey" (Barry, interview, December 11, 2024).	bar-3	Ritual as identity preservation	Cultural continuity	Value of myth and local wisdom	Local wisdom values embedded in myths
"[...] megaliths and other objects may still be touched but must not be defaced. **If someone is affected *by kambaroanga*, they can be treated, he should drink water given by a *sando*** [a spiritual healer]. There have been visitors who were possessed, and they were treated by a *sando*" (Adrian, interview, January 27, 2025).	adr-3				
"[...] before the arrival of religion, there was a spiritual event, the elders would go to megalithic statues. The awareness connects to the rituals practiced by community, such as **environmental cleaning was performed at the beginning and end of each ritual**" (Ady, interview, February 06, 2025).	ady-1	Ritual and environmental care	Ecological wisdom	Value of myth and local wisdom	Local wisdom values embedded in myths
"Ritual offerings made to the ancestors by the local community in the past are no longer practiced today due to the arrival of religion, but **the awareness to protect the site remains**." (Ady, interview, February 06, 2025).	ady-2				
"Worship in the past there was a ritual called *bakinang*. This ritual is still exist [to honor] the ancestors, such as before we go hunting, people would stop at megalith, **asking for protection.** They would **place offerings such as betel leaves and areca nuts** there [...]. There, they would ask permission using the phrase [in local language], meaning 'I ask for help, please grant me—even if it is just [a mangy one]" (Arken, interview, December 09, 2024).	ark-1	Offering practices	Spiritual reciprocity	Value of myth and local wisdom	Local wisdom values embedded in myths

Verbatim	Excerpt quotation code	Code	Category	Theme	Refined Theme
"**There are customary regulations in place during violations. The customary institution** has **rules and sanctions**. Local wisdom plays the most significant role. However, it needs **collaboration between the community, government, and site custodians [...]"** [...]" (Ady, interview, February 06, 2025).	ady-3 ady-4	Customary law system	Institutionalized local wisdom	Value of myth and local wisdom	Local wisdom values embedded in myths
"[...] No destruction, but to prevent any such possibilities, there are regulations in the customary institution. **Relocating or damaging** [*a statue*] **will be faced with customary law is punishable by a fine of a buffalo. The customary law enforcers traditional sanctions**. Every visitor must adhere to these rules. Everyone has a responsibility [...]" (Arken, interview, January 28, 2025). "**In Napu, there are rules related to the preservation of sites, although they are unwritten**, they are quite strict, such as prohibitions against stealing or causing damage" (Adrian, interview, January 27, 2025).	ark-2 adr-4	Traditional sanctions	Norm enforcement mechanism	Value of myth and local wisdom	Local wisdom values embedded in myths
"[...] before starting cultivation, we go there first. They would **clean the area while bringing ritual offerings** such as areca nuts, white chickens, eggs, and rice, which were presented while speaking [*in local Napu language*]. For Hindus or Balinese who reside there, they also use the site for rituals, such as during Galungan, Nyepi, or other holy days. **Sometimes, they even work together** to clean the site" (Ello, interview, January 28, 2025).	ell-1 ell-2	Collective ritual action	Communal responsibility	Value of myth and local wisdom	Local wisdom values embedded in myths