



The Legend of Meriam Puntung: Oral Tradition Narratives and the Construction of Collective Memory in the Malay Community

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ABSTRACT

The legend of Meriam Puntung is a significant part of the oral tradition among the Malay community, serving as both a historical narrative and a medium for collective memory construction. This study explores how the legend has been transmitted across generations, its role in shaping historical consciousness, and the extent to which it reflects the identity of the Malay people. Using Jan Vansina's oral tradition theory and Paul Connerton's theory of collective memory, this research examines the dynamics of storytelling, the transformation of the narrative over time, and its function in preserving historical knowledge. Employing a qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with cultural figures, textual analysis of historical sources, and field observations at the Meriam Puntung site. The findings reveal that the legend has undergone adaptations, influenced by sociopolitical changes, while maintaining its core symbolism of resistance and local identity. Furthermore, the study highlights how the site itself serves as a tangible anchor for collective remembrance, reinforcing historical continuity. This research contributes to the discourse on the interrelation between oral tradition and historical consciousness, emphasizing the role of storytelling in shaping collective memory and identity formation within the Malay cultural framework.

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INTRODUCTION

The legend of *Meriam Puntung* stands as a significant cultural heritage embedded with both historical and mythological dimensions within the Malay community, particularly in North Sumatra (Agustono et al., 2021). This narrative is closely linked to the history of Haru Kingdom, an influential political entity in Sumatra prior to the arrival of colonial powers (Sinar, 2006; Sumanti & Batubara, 2019). The legend recounts the story of *Putri Hijau*, a princess of the Haru Kingdom who rejected a marriage proposal from the Sultan of Aceh, ultimately triggering an assault on her kingdom. During the battle, her brother, *Mambang Khayali*, was said to have transformed into a giant cannon, continuously firing until it eventually shattered into two parts (Dwisuda et al., 2022). The front section is believed to have landed in Surbakti, while the rear part remains in Labuhan Deli, where it is now preserved in the courtyard of Maimun Palace (Sinar, 1991).

The *Meriam Puntung* site is not merely a historical tourist attraction but also serves as a symbol of resistance and cultural identity for the local community. Its existence reflects the deep connection between physical artifacts and oral narratives, passed down through generations (Amelia, 2012). However, debates persist regarding whether this legend is purely mythological or holds historical validity. Some scholars argue that it is merely folklore without substantial historical evidence, while others see it as a reflection of actual events that occurred in the past (Purnawibowo, 2018). In historiographical discourse, legends such as *Meriam Puntung* often function as alternative historical sources, particularly within the study of oral history and collective memory (Ricklefs, 2014).

Within Malay historiographical traditions, oral narratives serve purposes beyond mere entertainment; they act as a crucial mechanism for shaping collective identity (Febryani, 2016). This aligns with the perspective of Jan Vansina, who emphasizes that oral traditions can serve as valid historical sources if analyzed using appropriate methodologies (Vansina, 1985). Oral traditions in Malay society follow distinct transmission patterns, wherein stories are conveyed across generations through folklore, historical epics (*hikayat*), and cultural rituals (Adam et al., 2003; Jones, 2013).



Therefore, examining the *Meriam Puntung* legend provides valuable insights into how historical narratives are constructed, preserved, and adapted within local cultural contexts.

Theoretical frameworks related to oral tradition and collective memory are particularly relevant in understanding the role of the *Meriam Puntung* legend in constructing historical narratives and shaping the cultural identity of the Malay community. According to Jan Vansina, oral history can be used to reconstruct the past, but it requires a critical approach to understand transmission patterns, narrative evolution, and source reliability (Vansina, [1985](#)). Vansina asserts that orally transmitted narratives undergo modifications over time, influenced by political, cultural, and social changes. In the context of the *Meriam Puntung* legend, it is crucial to examine how the story has evolved across generations and whether identifiable patterns indicate historical continuity with empirically verifiable facts.

Beyond oral history, Paul Connerton's concept of collective memory is also relevant in exploring how the Malay community preserves and reinterprets the *Meriam Puntung* legend as part of their historical identity. Connerton argues that collective memory is maintained not only through narratives but also through repetitive actions and social customs. He categorizes collective memory into two primary forms: habitual memory, which consists of embedded daily practices, and commemorative memory, which is preserved through rituals and symbolic acts (Connerton, [1989](#)). In the case of the *Meriam Puntung* legend, both forms of memory can be observed in how the story is retold within everyday interactions, cultural rituals, artistic performances, and local belief systems.

The theoretical discussion becomes particularly significant as legends like *Meriam Puntung* often undergo reinterpretation within socio-political dynamics. Over time, oral traditions that were initially purely folklore-based may be recontextualized, taking on new meanings in relation to national and regional identity formation (Connerton, [1989](#)). Therefore, this study is not solely concerned with the historical reconstruction of the legend, but also with how the Malay community sustains, adapts, and imbues the legend with new cultural and historical significance over time.

This research aims to analyze the *Meriam Puntung* legend as an integral part of Malay oral tradition and a reflection of Haru Kingdom's history, using the theoretical frameworks of Jan Vansina and Paul Connerton. The study focuses on exploring the transmission patterns, interpretation, and preservation of the legend within the collective memory of the Malay community. Furthermore, it assesses the role of oral tradition in shaping historical awareness and cultural identity, as well as how the legend has been adapted in various social, cultural, and political contexts over time. Specifically, this research addresses key questions regarding the transmission of the legend within oral traditions, its narrative transformation throughout history, its function as a collective memory instrument in fostering historical consciousness, and its recontextualization within modern discourse, including the arts, culture, and official historiography.

Ultimately, this study aspires to contribute to the academic discourse on oral history, collective memory, and cultural identity, while enriching the understanding of how the Malay community constructs and preserves historical narratives through legend. The *Meriam Puntung* legend is not merely folklore; it is a shared cultural heritage with profound implications for historical studies, identity formation, and oral tradition scholarship. By examining this legend through the lens of oral history and collective memory theories, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how historical narratives are constructed, transmitted, and reinterpreted within Malay society.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach utilizing oral history methods and collective memory analysis to examine how the legend of *Meriam Puntung* has been transmitted within the Malay community and its role in shaping the collective memory of the Haru Kingdom (Ballard et al., [2007](#); Myers et al., [2006](#)). Oral history serves as the primary methodological framework, as it facilitates the exploration of narratives that have been passed down through generations without formal written documentation (Hoopes, [2014](#)). Additionally, collective memory theory provides a lens through which to analyze how the Malay community preserves and reproduces this legend as part of its cultural identity (Connerton, [1989](#)).

To ensure a comprehensive data collection process, this study incorporates primary and secondary data sources. Primary data is obtained through in-depth interviews with local cultural figures, historians, and traditional leaders, aiming to document various oral renditions of the *Meriam Puntung* legend. Furthermore, participant observation is conducted by visiting the *Meriam Puntung* site, recording its physical aspects, and documenting cultural practices,

rituals, and artistic performances that reflect the narrative. Secondary data, on the other hand, is gathered from extensive literature reviews, including Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition as History*, which evaluates the validity of oral traditions as historical sources, and Paul Connerton's *How Societies Remember*, which examines how collective memory is formed and sustained within cultural narratives.

The data analysis process adopts oral source criticism, where different versions of the legend from multiple informants are compared to assess narrative transformations over time (Vansina, [1985](#)). Key narrative elements—including characters, events, and symbols—are identified to evaluate continuities and changes within the historical context. Additionally, this study explores how collective memory of the legend is maintained through habitual memory (ingrained everyday practices) and commemorative rituals (formal remembrance ceremonies). By applying these methodological approaches, this research not only contributes to the field of oral history and collective memory studies but also provides a broader understanding of how cultural identity is constructed within the Malay community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Transmission Patterns and Narrative Transformations of the *Meriam Puntung* Legend in Malay Oral Tradition

The legend of *Meriam Puntung* is an integral part of Malay oral tradition, particularly in North Sumatra. This story has been passed down through generations via multiple mediums, including folklore, historical epics (*hikayat*), and traditional performing arts (Hijjas, [2010](#)). According to Jan Vansina, oral tradition serves as verbal testimony transmitted across generations, functioning as a mechanism for preserving cultural values and local historical consciousness (Vansina, [1985](#)). In this context, the legend of *Meriam Puntung* is not merely an ancestral inheritance but also a reflection of collective values that continue to evolve within Malay society (Azhari, [2017](#)).

The transmission of this legend exhibits rich narrative variations. Different communities or families may present slightly altered versions of the story, influenced by local social and cultural dynamics. For instance, some interpretations emphasize *Meriam Puntung* as a symbol of resistance against colonial forces, while others highlight its supernatural and mythical aspects (Mailin, [2021](#)). This variation aligns with Vansina's assertion that oral traditions are fluid and subject to change over time, shaped by sociopolitical contexts and the way collective memory preserves and retells narratives (Vansina, [1985](#)).

The transformation of this legend has been influenced by historical events such as colonialism, modernization, and social restructuring. During the colonial period, the *Meriam Puntung* story may have been adapted to cultivate nationalist sentiment and resistance narratives (Rahmadi & Pakpahan, [2024](#)). After independence, the legend may have been further adjusted to align with a newly emerging national identity. This evolution demonstrates how oral traditions serve as cultural adaptation tools in response to external changes, reinforcing Vansina's theory that oral narratives are dynamic and evolve in tandem with societal transformations (Vansina, [1985](#)).

The recontextualization of the *Meriam Puntung* legend is also evident in its adaptation into various artistic and media forms. The story has been incorporated into traditional theater performances, dance, and even film. Such adaptations help keep the legend relevant and accessible to younger generations while simultaneously enriching Malay cultural expressions (Soedewo, [2021](#)). Additionally, modern literary reinterpretations contribute to the continuity of the narrative in contemporary settings. In line with Paul Connerton's theory, collective memory is preserved not only through oral narratives but also through cultural rituals and physical symbols that hold historical significance within the community (Connerton, [1989](#)).

In modern historiography, the *Meriam Puntung* legend is frequently utilized as an alternative source for reconstructing local history (Afrinaldi & Hakim, [2024](#)). While it may not be entirely factual, the legend provides valuable insights into how communities perceive and interpret their past. As Vansina emphasizes, oral traditions can serve as valid historical sources if critically examined, considering the transmission patterns and narrative transformations they undergo (Vansina, [1985](#)). Thus, the *Meriam Puntung* legend offers a unique perspective on the values, beliefs, and collective experiences of the Malay people, which are often absent from written records.

Beyond its historical function, the legend also embodies cultural identity and resilience within Malay society (Fajarul et al., [2024](#)). It narrates the tale of Putri Hijau, a princess of the Haru Kingdom, who refused a marriage proposal from the Sultan of Aceh, triggering an attack on her kingdom (Batubara, [2020](#)). In defense of the realm, her brother,

Mambang Khayali, transformed into a cannon, relentlessly firing at the enemy until he shattered into two parts—one remaining in Medan and the other landing in Karo Regency. This legend not only recounts heroic events but also symbolizes resistance and the endurance of Malay cultural identity (Anisa et al., [2025](#)).

The role of oral tradition in historiography is crucial, as legends like *Meriam Puntung* offer alternative historical narratives that challenge dominant, written accounts. While oral traditions are often viewed as less precise than written records, they provide a unique perspective on how communities construct and negotiate their historical identity. The *Meriam Puntung* legend, for instance, reflects the Malay people's interactions with external forces, such as the Acehnesse Sultanate, and their evolving cultural identity within this historical framework.

Using oral traditions as historical sources requires a critical approach. Scholars must consider narrative variations, the social contexts in which these stories are conveyed, and the potential for bias or adaptation over time. For example, the *Meriam Puntung* legend may have been deliberately modified to emphasize particular themes relevant to specific sociopolitical conditions. Conducting such an analysis allows for a deeper understanding of the social and cultural dynamics that influence the transmission and transformation of oral narratives.

Beyond its historical significance, the *Meriam Puntung* legend functions as an educational tool and a reinforcement of cultural identity. Through this story, values such as bravery, loyalty, and resilience are instilled in younger generations. The legend also plays a vital role in fostering social cohesion, providing a shared narrative that unites members of the community. In the era of globalization, where local cultures face increasing threats from cultural homogenization, preserving and promoting oral traditions like this one is essential for safeguarding cultural diversity and local identity.

However, the reliance on human memory makes oral traditions vulnerable to distortion or loss over time. Therefore, systematic documentation and verification efforts are necessary. A multidisciplinary approach, integrating historical, anthropological, and cultural studies methodologies, can help ensure that oral traditions such as the *Meriam Puntung* legend receive the scholarly attention and rigor they deserve.

The significance of the *Meriam Puntung* legend in shaping Malay cultural identity cannot be overlooked. This narrative not only connects communities to their historical roots but also reinforces social cohesion through shared historical consciousness. In the face of cultural homogenization in the modern era, preserving and studying oral traditions like this one becomes even more critical. Connerton, underscores that collective memory serves as a mechanism for maintaining cultural continuity, a principle that is evident in the social practices surrounding the *Meriam Puntung* legend (Connerton, [1989](#)).

Despite its cultural importance, challenges remain in preserving this legend. Demographic shifts, urbanization, and the pervasive influence of digital media have led to a decline in younger generations' engagement with traditional storytelling. Thus, active efforts from communities, educators, and policymakers are necessary to ensure that legends like *Meriam Puntung* remain relevant. Initiatives such as cultural festivals, the integration of folklore into educational curricula, and digital archiving can play a pivotal role in preserving and revitalizing oral traditions. This aligns with Connerton's assertion that collective memory is sustained not only through narratives but also through repeated cultural practices and social rituals (Connerton, [1989](#)).

Ultimately, the transmission and transformation patterns of the *Meriam Puntung* legend highlight the complex dynamics of oral tradition within Malay society. By understanding these processes, we can better appreciate the role of oral traditions in shaping both historical consciousness and collective identity. This study affirms that legends are not merely folklore but integral components of broader social processes, which contribute to the construction, preservation, and reinterpretation of historical memory within the Malay community.

The Role of Meriam Puntung in Legendary Narratives and Collective Memory

The legend of *Meriam Puntung* plays a crucial role in shaping and preserving the historical identity of the Malay community through collective memory construction (Nordholt, [1997](#)). According to Paul Connerton, collective memory is sustained through recurring social and cultural practices, enabling communities to remember and identify with their past (Connerton, [1989](#)). In this context, the *Meriam Puntung* legend is not merely folklore; it serves as a cultural conduit for transmitting historical and societal values to future generations.

The physical remnants of *Meriam Puntung*, housed at Maimun Palace in Medan and in Sukanalu Simbelang Village, Karo Regency, serve as tangible symbols of this collective memory. These artifacts reinforce the narrative and provide a physical space for the community to connect with their historical past. The cannon stored at Maimun Palace is widely believed to be the embodiment of Putri Hijau's brother, who transformed into a cannon to battle the Acehese forces before eventually shattering due to excessive heat. Meanwhile, the cannon fragment in Sukanalu Simbelang signifies the historical relationship between the Malay and Karo communities, demonstrating how the legend has spread across different regions (Mailani et al., [2024](#)).

The legend is also deeply embedded in Malay cultural practices and social rituals (Dhofier, [1990](#)). *Meriam Puntung* is frequently recounted through historical epics (*hikayat*), traditional performing arts, and ceremonial customs, all of which function as vehicles for the transmission of cultural norms and values (Tondang et al., [2024](#)). By repeating these practices, the community not only remembers its past but also reinforces its collective identity. Connerton asserts that such ritualized practices play a fundamental role in maintaining and strengthening social memory, ensuring that historical narratives persist across generations (Connerton, [1989](#)).

Beyond its function as a cultural relic, the *Meriam Puntung* legend shapes local historical consciousness. By commemorating heroic events and legendary figures such as Putri Hijau and her brother, the community constructs a historical narrative centered on resilience, courage, and cultural identity. This historical framework provides a sense of continuity, linking the present community with its storied past, a crucial component in collective identity formation.

The *Meriam Puntung* legend is not only a historical narrative but also a reflection of Malay cultural identity and values (Embong et al., [2016](#)). The story recounts how Putri Hijau of the Haru Kingdom rejected a marriage proposal from the Sultan of Aceh, triggering a military assault on her kingdom. In an effort to defend their sovereignty, her brother, Mambang Khayali, transformed into a massive cannon, continuously firing at the enemy until it finally shattered—one part remaining in Medan and the other landing in Karo Regency. This legend not only portrays heroic resistance but also symbolizes Malay cultural endurance and defiance against external forces (Soedewo, [2021](#)).

In modern historiography, oral traditions such as the *Meriam Puntung* legend play a vital role in reconstructing local history (Rahman, [2017](#)). While oral traditions are often perceived as less reliable than written records, they provide valuable insights into how communities perceive and interpret their historical past (Myers et al., [2006](#)). For instance, this legend illustrates how the Malay community conceptualizes its relationship with external powers, such as the Acehese Sultanate, and how it negotiates its cultural identity within this historical framework.

Using oral traditions as historical sources requires a critical approach. Researchers must consider narrative variations, the social contexts in which stories are conveyed, and potential biases or adaptations over time (Thompson & Bornat, [2017](#)). The *Meriam Puntung* legend, for example, may have undergone modifications to emphasize certain elements relevant to different socio-political conditions. This analytical approach allows for a deeper understanding of the social and cultural dynamics that shape the transmission and transformation of oral narratives.

Beyond its historical significance, the *Meriam Puntung* legend also serves as an educational tool and a means of reinforcing cultural identity. The narrative imparts core values such as bravery, loyalty, and resilience, which are passed down to younger generations. Additionally, the legend plays a crucial role in fostering social cohesion, as it provides a shared historical framework that unites the community. In an era of globalization, where local cultures face increasing pressure from cultural homogenization, preserving and promoting oral traditions like this one is essential for safeguarding cultural diversity and local identity (Suprayitno, [2012](#)).

However, oral traditions remain vulnerable to distortion and loss over time due to their reliance on human memory (Cucuani et al., [2022](#)). Therefore, systematic documentation and verification of these narratives through rigorous academic research are imperative. A multidisciplinary approach, incorporating historical, anthropological, and cultural studies methodologies, can help ensure that oral traditions such as *Meriam Puntung* are analyzed with the scholarly rigor they deserve (Zaharani et al., [2024](#)).

The significance of *Meriam Puntung* in shaping Malay cultural identity cannot be overstated. This legend not only connects communities to their historical past but also reinforces social cohesion through a shared cultural narrative. As global influences increasingly threaten local traditions, studying and preserving oral traditions becomes even more

essential. Connerton emphasizes that collective memory functions as a mechanism for maintaining cultural continuity, a concept that is clearly reflected in the social practices surrounding the *Meriam Puntung* legend (Connerton, [1989](#)).

Despite its cultural importance, preserving this legend faces numerous challenges. Demographic changes, urbanization, and the rise of digital media have led to declining interest among younger generations in traditional storytelling. Therefore, proactive efforts from communities, educators, and policymakers are necessary to ensure that legends like *Meriam Puntung* remain relevant. Initiatives such as cultural festivals, integrating folklore into educational curricula, and digital archiving can play a critical role in safeguarding and revitalizing oral traditions. This aligns with Connerton's assertion that collective memory is not only maintained through storytelling but also through recurring cultural practices and social rituals (Connerton, [1989](#)).

Ultimately, the role of *Meriam Puntung* in constructing collective memory within the Malay community is undeniable. Through physical sites, cultural practices, and historical narratives, this legend helps preserve and reinforce community identity while transmitting collective historical consciousness to future generations. This aligns with Connerton's perspective, which highlights that collective memory is perpetuated through repeated social and cultural practices, allowing communities to remain deeply connected to their historical roots.

CONCLUSION

The legend of *Meriam Puntung* is not merely folklore; it is an integral part of the oral tradition and collective memory of the Malay community, continuously evolving over time. From Jan Vansina's perspective, oral traditions serve as alternative historical sources, preserving narratives of resistance, cultural identity, and historical continuity within a community. Meanwhile, through Paul Connerton's concept of collective memory, the *Meriam Puntung* legend endures not only through verbal narratives but also through cultural practices, physical symbols, and social rituals, all of which shape the historical consciousness of the community. Within the realm of historiography, this legend acts as a mechanism for understanding how the Malay people construct narratives of their past, affirm their collective identity, and safeguard their cultural heritage amid the ever-changing socio-political landscape.

To further deepen this discourse, future research could explore the relationship between the *Meriam Puntung* legend, archaeology, and material culture studies, examining how physical sites reinforce oral traditions in shaping collective identity. Additionally, historical anthropology and digital humanities approaches could be employed to document variations of the legend across different communities, while investigating its representation in modern media, including literature, film, and performing arts. Such studies would not only enrich local historiography but also contribute to broader scholarship on cultural memory and the construction of identity within Malay society in the era of globalization.

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