

Collective Memory and Local Civic Identity: Reinterpreting the Rengasdengklok Event for Strengthening Historical Consciousness in Karawang

Reksi^{1*}, Triyanto², Dewi Gunawati³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Sebelas Maret, Indonesia

Abstract

This study aims to examine how the people of Karawang collectively interpret the Rengasdengklok event and how such interpretations can be leveraged to enhance historical awareness and construct a reflective, locally grounded civic identity. The Rengasdengklok incident, which played a pivotal role in Indonesia's struggle for independence, holds significant symbolic value for the local community. However, its transformative potential remains largely untapped in civic education and public discourse. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis involving educators, youth, community leaders, and cultural actors in Karawang. The findings show that the collective memory of the Rengasdengklok event is shaped by historical narratives, emotional attachment, and shared experiences. Values such as civic courage, responsibility, and national awareness are reflected in local interpretations of the event. Nevertheless, these values are not yet systematically integrated into formal education, cultural policies, or everyday civic practices. The study also reveals that public engagement with the historical site is often ceremonial, with limited opportunities for critical reflection and intergenerational dialogue. This research highlights the importance of reviving and contextualizing local historical narratives as tools for building civic awareness and fostering a stronger sense of belonging. It recommends incorporating local history into participatory civic education, encouraging community-based historical storytelling, and designing inclusive cultural programs to connect historical memory with civic identity development in postcolonial societies.

Keywords: collective memory; historical consciousness; local identity; civic awareness; public history.

Introduction

History has played a pivotal role in shaping the collective identity and civic character of nations. Through historical narratives, societies have understood the roots of their struggles, civic values, and the foundational principles of statehood. In the context of civic education, history has functioned not only as a record of the past but also as a learning space for values such as solidarity, civic courage, and social responsibility. UNESCO (2015) affirmed that meaningful history education strengthens civic values, fosters empathy, and reinforces social cohesion in pluralistic societies. Thus, critically contextualized historical learning has

been essential for cultivating collective civic consciousness.

In the digital era, however, the ways in which young generations access and interpret history have changed significantly. The rapid spread of fragmented and sometimes inaccurate information through digital platforms has weakened historical interest among youth. The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS, IEA 2022) documented a decline in students' engagement with history education across various countries, including Indonesia. Popular culture and infotainment have rendered history seemingly irrelevant to everyday life. Similarly, Barton and Levstik (2008) showed that young people often perceive history as a

collection of facts to be memorized rather than as a reflection of collective identity. A recent survey by Indikator Politik Indonesia (2023) found that only 46.8% of Indonesian youth expressed interest in national history, with most respondents stating that it had little relevance to their daily lives.

Within this landscape, local histories such as the Rengasdengklok Incident have provided an important but underutilized civic resource. The event, occurring on 16 August 1945 when nationalist youth urged Sukarno and Hatta to proclaim independence, reflected civic courage, youth initiative, and collective responsibility. According to Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory, shared historical narratives serve as crucial foundations for collective identity and solidarity. Yet despite its symbolic value, the Rengasdengklok Incident has often been reduced to a minor entry in formal curricula and ceremonial commemorations. Data from the Karawang Department of Culture and Tourism (2023) showed that only 28% of Rengasdengklok residents had visited the historic house in the past five years. Participation in recent local heritage programs such as a short video competition (2022) and a history webinar (2023) was also limited, involving mainly teachers and civil servants. These patterns suggest a weak connection between local heritage and civic consciousness among the wider community.

Educationally, the weak engagement with history reflects broader pedagogical challenges. Studies in Indonesia (Wibowo & Santosa, 2021; Rahardjo & Sulastri, 2020) demonstrated that rote-based, textbook-centered teaching suppresses student interest, while project-based and dialogical approaches increase motivation and relevance. Astuti (2017) similarly found that integrating local history into civic education strengthens national identity and social responsibility. Yet in Karawang, the integration of technology and community-based storytelling into history education has remained limited.

Conceptually, collective memory as theorized by Halbwachs (1992) and Assmann (2011) is not static but socially constructed, negotiated, and transmitted through interaction, symbols, and community practices. Civic disposition, defined by

Sherrod, Flanagan, and Youniss (2002), encompasses values and orientations toward active civic participation, shaped by education and lived narratives. In this light, the Rengasdengklok Incident holds potential to serve not merely as heritage but as a living civic resource for identity formation, if its memory is collectively reinterpreted and transmitted across generations.

This study therefore explored how the people of Karawang have constructed collective meanings of the Rengasdengklok Incident and how these meanings have contributed to civic disposition. Using a phenomenological approach, the research examined personal narratives, collective experiences, and cultural practices surrounding the Rengasdengklok site. The novelty of this study lies in linking local historical and cultural dimensions to contemporary civic identity formation. The findings aim to enrich theoretical discussions of citizenship education grounded in collective memory, while also offering practical insights for revitalizing local history as a civic resource. Ultimately, this study provides a basis for designing more contextualized history education and inclusive cultural strategies that integrate schools, communities, and local government in fostering historical consciousness and civic identity.

Literature Review

Collective Meaning-Making

Collective meaning-making is a social process in which communities construct shared interpretations of significant events or symbols. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued that reality is socially constructed through interaction, while Swidler (1986) emphasized the role of cultural "toolkits" such as values and narratives. In historical contexts, collective meaning-making functions as a mechanism for identity-building, as communities reinterpret past events in light of present values (Olick & Robbins, 1998; Assmann, 2011). In Karawang, the Rengasdengklok Incident is remembered not only as a national milestone but also as a source of local pride, reinforcing values of

courage, nationalism, and solidarity (Nugroho & Suyadi, 2021).

The Rengasdengklok Incident as Local Heritage

The event of August 16, 1945, when nationalist youths pressed Sukarno and Hatta to proclaim independence, holds symbolic significance as both national history and local heritage. However, community engagement remains limited (Karawang Department of Culture, 2023). Public history perspectives suggest that history becomes meaningful when citizens feel emotionally connected to it (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998). As Kammen (2015) noted, local history framed through narratives, cultural practices, or public spaces can function as a tool for civic education. Strengthening collective interpretations of Rengasdengklok thus offers a pathway to foster civic disposition.

Civic Disposition in Citizenship Education

Civic disposition refers to values and attitudes that encourage responsible civic participation, including responsibility, tolerance, solidarity, and respect for law (Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Winarno, 2013). It links private virtues (self discipline, moral responsibility) with public virtues (law-abidance, willingness to deliberate) (Banks, 2008). Research indicates that civic dispositions develop through both internal factors such as personal experiences and empathy (Damaianti & Lestari, 2022; Saputro & Rachmadtullah, 2020) and external factors such as schools, communities, and media (Handayani & Yamin, 2019; Fitriani & Santoso, 2021). Within this framework, the Rengasdengklok Incident serves as a civic resource, transmitting historical values into democratic participation at the community level.

Collective Memory and Identity

Halbwachs (1992) emphasized that memory is socially framed, while Assmann (2011) proposed cultural memory as embedded in rituals, texts, and monuments. These frameworks help explain how historical

events are remembered beyond individual experiences.

In comparative perspective, Priwati and Sanitioso (2024) found Indonesians recall more positive historical events and feel stronger pride than French respondents, underscoring the salience of collective memory in civic identity formation.

Civic Education and Local History

Integrating local history in civic education has been shown to enhance civic engagement and critical reflection (Knowles, 2018). In Indonesia, however, local events like Rengasdengklok are often reduced to ceremonial commemorations without deeper pedagogical meaning (Wiratama, 2023).

Politics of Memory

The manipulation of history under Suharto's New Order regime illustrates how memory politics can silence alternative voices (Purnomo & Kurniawan, 2025). This makes reclaiming local historical narratives crucial for democratic civic education.

Method

Setting and Participant

This research was conducted in Karawang, West Java, with a focus on the Rengasdengklok Incident as a historical and civic phenomenon. Participants consisted of 25 individuals, representing diverse backgrounds, namely educators, youth activists, local historians, cultural actors, and community leaders. Their varied perspectives provided a comprehensive understanding of how the Rengasdengklok Incident is collectively interpreted and how such interpretations shape civic dispositions in the community.

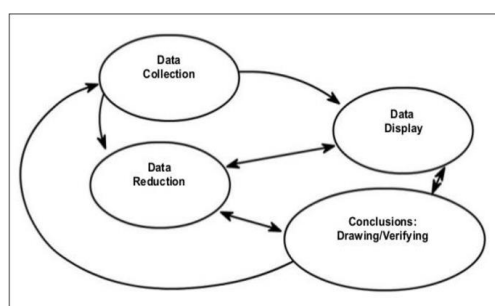
Data Collection

Data were obtained using three complementary techniques:

1. In depth interviews were conducted to explore participants' personal and communal interpretations of the Rengasdengklok Incident.

2. Non participant observations were carried out during commemorative events and at the Rengasdengklok Monument to capture lived practices and cultural expressions related to the incident.
3. Document analysis was performed on local curricula, museum narratives, and archival sources to contextualize participants' accounts and strengthen the triangulation of findings.

In this study, data analysis employed the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman (1992), which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The analysis was carried out simultaneously and continuously throughout the data collection process, as is common in qualitative research. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), data analysis is a systematic process of searching and organizing data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation in order to enhance the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon under study and to present the findings in a clear and meaningful way. This analytical technique was applied to explain the collective meaning constructed by the people of Karawang regarding the Rengasdengklok Event and to explore how such meanings shape their civic disposition in social and civic life. The schema of Miles and Huberman's interactive model of qualitative data analysis is illustrated in the following figure:



Result and Discussion

Historical Narratives as Civic Anchors

The community interviews show a strong anchoring function of the Rengasdengklok

narrative. Twelve of fifteen community participants defined the event as a source of local pride that binds Karawang to the national struggle, while three positioned it as an ancestral legacy requiring stewardship. Transmission patterns bifurcate: communicative memory circulates in families (10 participants learned the story from parents/grandparents), whereas cultural memory is encountered via school content and annual ceremonies (5 participants), particularly among youth.

This distribution maps neatly onto Assmann's (2011) distinction: communicative memory (short range, interpersonal, emotionally inflected) and cultural memory (long-range, objectified in institutions/monuments). It also corroborates Halbwachs' (1992) claim that memory is socially framed: family networks and school rituals furnish the "cadres sociaux" that stabilize what is remembered and how. At the same time, the town-level pride observed in the interviews aligns with Kahin (2003) and Anderson (1972), who situate Rengasdengklok within the broader repertoire of independence narratives; locally, that repertoire is rescaled to elevate Karawang's agency in national history. In short, the event functions as a civic anchor because it is simultaneously intimate (family talk) and institutional (school/commemorations), allowing residents to locate their civic selves within a shared historical script.

From a Social Identity Theory perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), Rengasdengklok operates as an in group prototype a condensed symbol of "who we are" (courageous, urgent, nationally consequential). As identity salience is triggered (e.g., during August commemorations), the prototype enhances in group pride, which interviews show in statements like "Karawang is known because of this history." Thus, the narrative's anchoring power is not merely mnemonic; it is identity-regulative, shaping how residents evaluate themselves as citizens of Karawang and Indonesia.

Emotional Attachment and Civic Virtues

Fourteen of fifteen community members explicitly linked the event to civic pride, and teachers across PPKn and history emphasized the cultivation of nationalism, responsibility, solidarity, and moral courage. Community practitioners reframed the event as a template for present-day civic action (e.g., anti-corruption, environmental stewardship), while the caretaker's account framed the house as a living memory space that can evoke affective responses when visits are dialogical rather than touristic.

These patterns resonate with Priwati and Sanitioso (2024), who show that emotional attachment to national history strengthens civic pride; our data refine this by demonstrating the local pathway through which such attachment is generated. The activation of pride and virtue can be read through Tajfel & Turner's self categorization: when Rengasdengklok becomes the salient identity frame, civic norms (courage, responsibility) are normatively prescribed to in-group members. Halbwachs' notion of affective framing helps explain why family told stories (often emotive) have outsized influence on virtue talk. Finally, by embedding the event in place-based experience (site visits, local festivals), the case mirrors Assmann's claim that cultural memory objects (sites, rituals) stabilize emotions over time, turning them into repeatable civic dispositions.

The youth activists' move from memory to issue-oriented action indicates that affective attachment can generalize beyond historical content to contemporary problems i.e., memory as a normative resource. This suggests a design principle for civic programs: mobilize the emotional grammar of the event (urgency, courage, solidarity) to scaffold present civic engagement.

Limits of Educational Integration

All five teachers affirmed symbolic importance but reported curricular marginality: Rengasdengklok appears as descriptive content rather than as a platform for critical inquiry. Constraints include limited local resources,

time pressure, and student preference for digital media. Teachers responded with workarounds (storytelling, project-based tasks, digital mapping, site visits), but these remain teacher-initiated rather than systemically supported.

The gap echoes Wiratama (2023), who documents under-utilization of the site in PPKn learning. Knowles (2018) helps explain the instructional variation we observed: teachers' civic-education ideologies (e.g., duty-based vs critical) shape their strategy choices (e.g., ritual transmission vs inquiry projects). Under Assmann's terms, schools are poised to transform communicative memory into durable cultural memory, yet the current descriptive pedagogy rarely crosses into reflective cultural memory (where students interrogate sources, causality, and contested meanings). Without curricular recognition (time, assessment, resources), teachers' innovations risk remaining episodic rather than institutional.

If Rengasdengklok is to function as civic pedagogy, the curriculum must shift from "knowing that" to "reasoning with" history: sourcing, perspective taking, ethical reasoning, and public history production (student-made podcasts/exhibits). This would align practice with Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic reflexivity, inviting students to generate and test interpretations rather than receive them.

Ceremonial vs. Reflective Practices

Observations and interviews converge on a ceremonial dominance: flag ceremonies, speeches, and Independence Day linkages structure most engagements. The caretaker reported irregular visits and limited dialogic programming; village officials cited budgetary and leadership-cycle constraints. By contrast, community practitioners' creative reinterpretations (theatre, murals, short films, podcasts) provided rare participatory spaces that invited reflection.

Purnomo & Kurniawan (2025) caution that memory in Indonesia can be instrumentalized for symbolic legitimacy,

privileging ritual affirmation over critical engagement. Our data exemplify this: ceremonies reproduce cultural memory but often foreclose dialogue. In Halbwachs' terms, the social frameworks available to visitors remain one way and official, narrowing the range of meanings that can be publicly entertained. By opening multi vocal, co created formats, practitioners effectively pluralize the memory frame, allowing identity claims to be negotiated rather than dictated closer to democratic ideals of civic learning.

A productive model is ritual plus reflection: keep commemorations (which stabilize belonging) but pair them with dialogic forums (student debates, citizen panels, pop-up exhibits), thereby converting symbolic capital into civic competence.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Rengasdengklok event functions as a powerful site of collective memory and civic identity in Karawang, but its transformative civic potential remains only partially realized. The interviews with community members, teachers, cultural practitioners, site caretakers, and village officials reveal that the event is simultaneously anchored in communicative memory sustained through family storytelling and intergenerational pride and cultural memory, institutionalized through monuments, schools, and ceremonial practices (Assmann, 2011; Halbwachs, 1992). This dual anchoring allows the event to serve as a civic prototype (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), reinforcing pride, solidarity, and courage as defining attributes of Karawang's identity within the national narrative.

At the same time, the study uncovers the limits of educational and institutional integration. Teachers recognize the event's symbolic value but are constrained by curricula that prioritize national over local narratives (Wiratama, 2023). As a result, instruction remains descriptive rather than dialogic, reducing opportunities for students to critically engage with history as a civic

resource (Knowles, 2018). Similarly, government and community commemorations tend to emphasize ritual over reflection, confirming critiques that Indonesian memory politics often instrumentalize history for symbolic legitimacy (Purnomo & Kurniawan, 2025).

Despite these challenges, the findings point toward clear opportunities. Emotional attachment to Rengasdengklok expressed as pride, responsibility, and civic courage can be mobilized as a normative framework for contemporary issues, from anti corruption to environmental stewardship (Priwati & Sanitioso, 2024). Cultural practitioners have already demonstrated innovative pathways through creative reinterpretations such as theater, murals, and digital media, showing how civic memory can be revitalized for younger generations. Similarly, teachers experimenting with project based and site centered learning reveal that pedagogical mediation can bridge memory and civic competence.

In sum, the Rengasdengklok event embodies both the promise and fragility of local civic identity. Its promise lies in its ability to anchor identity, evoke pride, and transmit civic virtues across generations. Its fragility stems from structural gaps: curricular marginalization, dependence on ceremonial forms, and discontinuous government support. To overcome these limitations, the study recommends three integrative strategies: (1) embedding local history into inquiry based civic education, (2) pairing ceremonial rituals with dialogic forums to balance belonging and reflection, and (3) establishing cross-sector collaborations that sustain programming beyond electoral cycles.

By aligning communicative and cultural memory with reflective pedagogies and participatory practices, Rengasdengklok can move from being a static heritage symbol to an active civic pedagogy. In doing so, it not only preserves Karawang's historical legacy but also cultivates the civic dispositions necessary for democratic resilience in contemporary Indonesia.

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