

# Sacralization of the Memorial Monument for the Javanese Diaspora in Suriname on the Day of Wong Jawa

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## Abstract

The Day of Wong Jawa is an annual commemoration of Javanese Immigration Day. It has become a national day to commemorate the first arrival of the Javanese people in Suriname. Various commemorative monuments were built to celebrate the event. This research was conducted to understand the meaning of a commemorative monument and how it becomes sacred. To understand this, the research used qualitative research methods. Data was obtained through observations and interviews with several informants. The results of this study show that the monument's sacredness arises from its serving as a gathering place for the diaspora to remember their ancestors. The sacredness is also demonstrated by how diasporas dress and sow flowers at the monument. The monument becomes a place where the spirits of the ancestors of the Surinamese Javanese diaspora are present. This research suggests that the monument can serve as a unifying space for the diaspora while offering an opportunity to reflect on the experiences of Javanese ancestors.

**Keywords:** Sacralization, Memorial monument, Diaspora, Javanese Surinamese, The Day of Wong Jawa

## Introduction

Over the past decade, scholarly and public interest in the Javanese community of Suriname has grown, yet most accounts remain fragmentary and often focus on political history, labour regimes, or contemporary multicultural policy rather than on the lived memories of ordinary families and their commemorative practices. As an artist-researcher who has repeatedly visited Suriname since 2018 and worked closely with Javanese communities, the first author encountered powerful stories about ancestral journeys, plantation suffering, and endurance that were not fully captured in official archives or state narratives. These encounters revealed how monuments, annual rituals such as The Day of Wong Jawa, and everyday acts of remembering function as key sites where diaspora, Javanese cultural identity, and sacred memory intersect. The present study grows out of this long-term engagement and responds to a broader lack of research on how Javanese Surinamese

themselves sacralise specific places and monuments as vessels of memory, thereby contributing an empirically grounded perspective to debates on diaspora, cultural memory, and the sacralisation of heritage. One important diasporic story owing to colonialism during world migration history is that of the Javanese community in Suriname (Prasopsombat, 2025). The Dutch East Indies colonial policy of 1890 initiated the Javanese immigration to Suriname. Their arrival supplied sugar plantations with workers. In Suriname, several ethnic groups lived together peacefully during the colonial period. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, due to the abolition of slavery in 1863, the Dutch faced a labour crisis in Suriname. The Dutch opted for recruiting contract labourers from different colonies. Java was one of the prime labour pools, then still under the rule of the Dutch East Indies (Hoefte, 2008; Meel, 2017). In the 1890s,

tons of Javanese were brought to Suriname as indentured labourers employed by the plantations of the Dutch colonial administration (Hoefte, 1998; Meel, 2017). This movement reflects the story of gallant and valiant struggle, and at the same time, the losses suffered in the process. The Javanese community of Suriname has kept their lineage alive till today. The Day of Wong Jawa, a celebration commemorating the immigration of the Javanese who first arrived in Suriname, has become a new tradition, celebrated and the ritualisation of each year.

The anniversary of Javanese immigration to Suriname, known as The Day of Wong Jawa, is celebrated on August 9 every year. This holiday has officially become one of the national days on the Surinamese calendar and coincides with the day of the Indigenous peoples in Suriname. (Van Amersfoort & Van Niekerk, 2006;). This commemoration reminds us of the first arrival of the Javanese ancestors in Suriname on August 9, 1890, linking past and present Javanese in the diaspora (Hoefte, 2018; Vertovec, 1999; Tirtosudarmo, 2022). The occasion acts as a gathering (Suparlan, 1995), a communal pilgrimage, and the ritualisation of the past into important events *harsh conditions*. When a community shares an experiencing it creates a sense of commonality. Pilgrimages and reunification commemorations on The Day of Wong Jawa are social, religious, and emotional activities that depict the strength of culture as a intergenerational connector (Cohen, 1997). Through the use of symbolic cultural elements such as donning Javanese (Jawa) clothes, performing traditional dance, and holding a memorial (slametan), the commemoration continues to reaffirm that 'we are still Javanese, despite the distance' (Hoefte, 2008). Monuments are put as markers that are part of the commemoration of narratives of the past. The monument is not merely a symbol that stands out in the memorial but also the most essential element in the Javanese Immigration commemoration.

With each passing year this event has more than a date. It has developed into a visual and cultural representation. The remnant is a symbol of remembrance against alienation, a form of solidarity, and a reconstruction of the collective Javanese memory in Suriname. Visual art plays a crucial role in this commemorative moment; the monuments constructed represent art forms that connect the past with the present

and are imbued with meaningful interpretations. In Suriname's Javanese community, statues and other monuments allow people to remember their common struggle, as well as to think about their cultural identity. This research further investigates how diasporic traditions and memories are reaffirmed through visual art, such as the statues within the memorial. Further, it ensures a thorough understanding and appreciation of the importance of tradition in the continuity of cultural identity (Sreejak, 2025).

Monuments commemorating the Javanese community of Suriname have been transformed into sacred sites. The memorials are not just about the construction but also about the heritage (Prasopsombat, 2025) of Surinamese Javanese which is passed on in remembrance. As a result, some of the existing memorials are now part of the country's cultural heritage. Every people of a country should be able to celebrate their cultural heritage (Akkapram, 2024) together. In Suriname, for example, these monuments are not only Javanese, but are blessed by all ethnicities, copying the multicultural society and forever open to interpretation.

These memorials are living vessels for memory and resilience. The Javanese labourers were recruited during the Dutch colonial period. *which the participants* were mistreated in harsh conditions, the Javanese managed to keep their identity and customs. (Hoefte, 1998; Oostindie, 2005) Through ceremony, prayers and annual commemorations such as *The Day of Wong Jawa* the monument ultimately becomes sacred cultural stage of the present and the past of the ancestors (Suparlan, 1995). Remembrance activities at these sites allow for the acknowledgment of the Javanese struggle and contribution and the incorporation of them into the larger Surinamese national narrative. No particular ethnic group is exclusively permitted to view and commemorate these Javanese monuments, as they ultimately constitute a shared heritage for all. Suriname exemplifies how societies can respect one another and coexist peacefully at cultural level (Hoefte, 2013) their site is imaginatively symbolic of resilience.

Citizens are reminded that culture is not exclusive to a single community but belongs to all. This inclusive aspect turns the memory of the diaspora into a base for national pride. Symbols (Anderson, 2006) bind dissimilar people through a shared belief system. The

main challenge for the future is not the physical reality of the monument itself but lay in activity within that building. Educational centres, including schools, universities, and initiatives, help in imparting knowledge to young people. While previous studies have addressed Javanese migration, ethnic politics, and cultural performance in Suriname, few have examined the sacralisation of memorial monuments and The Day of Wong Jawa from the perspective of participants' own memories and emotions, which is the central focus of this article.

## Data and methods

### Research methods

Research was conducted in the areas of Mariënborg and Nieuw Amsterdam. The Mariënborg area is a village in Commewijne district. Most of the area was a former sugar cane plantation, coffee and sugar factory, where Javanese people first set foot and then worked (Hoeft & Mingoen, 2022). Nieuw Amsterdam is the capital of the Commewijne District. The coastal town is located at the mouth of the Suriname and Commewijne rivers. It is across from Paramaribo, the country's capital city. The population is mainly of Javanese and Indian descent. The area features Fort NieuwAmsterdam, an openair museum that showcases the past of Suriname. The old Mariënborg sugar cane factory can be found 3 km away from Nieuw Amsterdam (Hoeft & Mingoen, 2022).

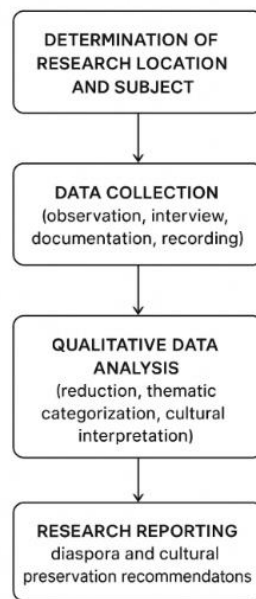
This research used descriptive qualitative methods and the qualitative research framework of Creswell and aims to obtain profound understanding of the social phenomena happened in these places. This method focuses on the detailed accumulation of data using indepth interviews, observation, and analysis of relevant documents (Creswell & Poth, 2016). It offers the researcher the opportunity of obtaining rich, diversified, and powerful views of the community Mariënborg and Nieuw Amsterdam. Using anthropological theory and method allows us to explore the social and cultural meanings of the celebration, as well as how Javanese group identity is constructed always and in Suriname (Hoeft & Meel, 2018). Ways in which the participants engage with each other, access to their traditions, and the social norms the participant already exhibit will reveal the relation between cultural heritage and

community identity in the context of longterm historical migration (Hoeft & Mingoen, 2022).

One way to use descriptive qualitative research methods is to collect data, including information through observation, interviews, documentation, visual materials, and recordings of interviews on video channels that further strengthen research data and even conduct interviews directly in the field to observe the behavior and activities of sources at the research location (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The author began this research in 2018 by visiting several locations that became the primary focus of the research in the Mariënborg area, Nieuw Amsterdam, and the capital area of Paramaribo. In addition, the author was also greatly helped by various sources who provided oral information, data, and discussions at the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia (KBRI) in Paramaribo. The Indonesian Embassy in Paramaribo played a very significant role in this research. One is by providing accommodation for the author to observe at various locations and places on The Day of Wong Jawa on August 9, 2018. Data collection continued in the following years with intensive discussions and interviews with informants from Suriname. Discussions were also held with alumni of IACS (Indonesian Art and Culture) Suriname, a group founded by young Surinamese nationals who had conducted cultural exchanges in Indonesia (Hoeft & Meel, 2018). These alumni still conduct intense cultural activities at the Indonesian Embassy in Paramaribo, and almost all official Surinamese government activities involving young people of Javanese descent always involve this group. There are 15 primary informants in this study, most of whom are fourthgeneration Surinamese.

The following is a flowchart of the descriptive qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2016) method for the JavaneseSurinamese diaspora, this diagram illustrates the following stages:

1. Determining the research location and subjects
2. Data collection (observation, interviews, documentation, recordings)
3. Qualitative data analysis (reduction, theme categorization, cultural interpretation)
4. Reporting the diaspora research results and recommendations for cultural preservation



**Figure 1** Qualitative inquiry and research design

**Source:** Creswell and Poth (2016)

**Table 1** Data from informants from the Surinamese community related to the question of The Day of Wong Jawa

| No. | Name                   | Gender | Tribe/Etnicity | Generation | Age |
|-----|------------------------|--------|----------------|------------|-----|
| 1.  | Partodjojo             | Male   | Javanese       | 5          | 42  |
| 2.  | Poredjo, Esther R.A    | Female | Javanese       | 4          | 34  |
| 3.  | Ralitsa                | Female | Javanese       | 4          | 27  |
| 4.  | Saerah                 | Female | Javanese       | 4          | 31  |
| 5.  | Gio Sudirman           | Male   | Javanese       | 4          | 33  |
| 6.  | Liese SoemoHirosemo    | Female | Javanese       | 3          | 55  |
| 7.  | Poredjo                | Female | Indo European  | 4          | 41  |
| 8.  | Nancy Saridjo          | Female | Javanese       | 4          | 55  |
| 9.  | Karin Hoekstra         | Female | Javanese       | 4          | 51  |
| 10. | Rasid Hendrik Soedono  | Male   | Javanese       | 4          | 60  |
| 11. | Richardo Soerodikromo  | Male   | Javanese       | 4          | 46  |
| 12. | Endet Melitsa          | Female | Javanese       | 3          | 39  |
| 13. | Terencia Jitno         | Female | Javanese       | 4          | 35  |
| 14. | Moertabat Jane         | Female | Javanese       | 4          | 46  |
| 15. | Sri Christina Roebinah | Female | Javanese       | 3          | 52  |

**Source:** Own elaboration (2025)

## Data source

### *Sacralization of place*

Javanese communities in Suriname are actively engaged in an intricate process of reconstructing memories of their homeland and ancestral lineage, meticulously curating memories of their ancestors' early experiences and subsequently forging a cohesive collective memory. This collective effort serves to sacralize these memories (Misztal, 2004), thus making them an integral component of the cultural identity journey undertaken by Javanese living in Suriname (Allen, 2011; Pramesti & Mukhlis, 2023). This culturally reconstructed identity is closely related to the collective memory of the community. Events are held annually at sites that have a historical association with the presence of Javanese in Suriname. For example, at one of the sugar factories Marienburgh or at Sana Budaya and some other sites where Javanese communities first settled and built communal links (Kurnia, 2015). By sacralizing these places during the "*The Day of Wong Jawa*" ceremony, a uniqueness will emerge for the Javanese community in Suriname. In which the commemorative monument is a historical symbol and a consecrated space that creates closeness.

Monuments become sites of memory, filled with rituals, pilgrimages and practices that connect participants to their history. The monument is not only a meeting place but also an altar that brings generations together. As time passes, the site turns hallowed ground for various rituals.

Basically, when these monuments are made sacred, they become places where communities can come together. They are basically sites that connect the past, present and future. Every time you visit, the energy here becomes new, and this monument occupied a sacred place in the psyche of a community. Memory, community and spirituality come together on a vital point of contact that has great powers to transcend physical reach. Therefore, the monument as a sacred place affirms the spiritual value as well as honors and celebrates the continuity of Javanese culture in Suriname in a nuance filled with gratitude and awareness of the importance of the inheritance.

### *Javanese Surinamese*

The Surinamese Javanese are a group of people originally from Java who settled in Suriname in the late 1800s and early 1900s to work as indentured labourers in plantation agriculture (Hoefte, 1998). During the Dutch colonial period from 1890 to 1939, around 32,956 Javanese were brought to Suriname (Suparlan, 1995). The founding of their establishment in this territory led to the emergence of a Javanese Diaspora. Here, in a strong ethnic enclave, Javanese culture is maintained in Suriname. Despite having lived in Suriname for over a hundred years, this community still practices Javanese traditions such as holding slametan ceremonies, performing wayang kulit (shadow puppet shows), and speaking to each other in Javanese.

The Javanese Surinamese have become a crucial element in Surinamese society, being part of the government and making essential contributions in economic and cultural fields (Hoefte, 1998). Due to economic struggles in agriculture, many Javanese Surinamese have moved to other sectors like trade and services (Suparlan, 1995). Javanese Surinamese are the people of Suriname who have origins in the island of Java in Indonesia. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they were brought to Suriname as contract workers on plantations (Hoefte, 1998). The Dutch colonialism saw around 32,956 Javanese moved to Suriname between 1890 and 1939 (Suparlan, 1995) as a result of this migration.

Their presence in Suriname created a unique Javanese diaspora that has preserved elements of Javanese culture, language, and traditions while adapting to the new environment (Hoefte & Mingoen 2022). Research suggests that despite living in Suriname for more than a hundred years, Surinamese Javanese continue to perform slametan, wayang kulit and speak Javanese (Suparlan, 1995).

Javanese in Suriname is part of a multiethnic society. They are also represented in the government. The Javanese community is also a big contributor to the economy of the country. Many Javanese Surinamese who initially worked in agriculture have now moved to other sectors such as trade and services (Suparlan, 1995). This change shows flexibility and ability to meet circumstances and be popular in the industry. On the whole, Javanese community in Suriname has managed

to retain its identity and being integrated into another society in an interesting way. This transformation reflects their flexibility. Furthermore, they have effectively entered into new sectors for work. Thus, the Javanese community in Suriname is a fascinating case of a diaspora that has managed to retain its cultural identity while adapting into a new society.

*Comparative perspectives on Javanese and other migrant communities*

While I choose the Surinamese Javanese diaspora as the empirical focus of this paper, its analysis is situated within the recognition that Javanese migrant peoples have themselves taken various forms during the colonial and postcolonial periods, including in New Caledonia, the Netherlands, and parts of the Caribbean. Across these sites, Javanese migration was linked to imperial labour systems especially indentured and contract labour and, later, to postwar family reunification and secondary migration, with simultaneous, layered attachments to both Java and new “host” societies. Research on the Surinamese Javanese who had made significant migrations to the Netherlands, for instance, demonstrates how ideas of belonging to one’s home, one’s homeland, and “return” have repeatedly been in a state of renegotiation as families transition between Indonesia, Suriname, and Europe and how commemorative practice, language and religious life work to foster a fragmented sense of community. This more extensive cartography of the Javanese diaspora offers a critical comparative perspective for understanding the particular ways in which sacred sites and public rituals are mobilised in Suriname.

Meanwhile, other studies of Asian diasporas show that the intertwining of ritual, heritage sites, and public festivals as vehicles for memory and identity is not exclusive to the Javanese case. A case in point is how Teochew Chinese communities in Thailand rely on clan temples, dialect associations, and transnational festivals alike to preserve Teochew cultural repertoires as they negotiate cultural assimilation into Thai society and participate in state-sponsored multiculturalism. Analysis of Teochew heritage practices in Thailand (Prasopsombat, 2025) shows these communities strategically mobilise religious rituals, ancestral halls, and cultural performances as “contact zones” through which transnational links with southern China are

maintained even as local ways of belonging to the Thai state are articulated. In the same light, research on Yunnan-linked communities and other Chinese groups in mainland Southeast Asia reveals how oral traditions, visual symbols, and performative arts travel with migrants and become rooted in new local contexts even as they continue to signify a distant homeland. Similarly, comparative research on Peranakan Chinese in Thailand and elsewhere emphasizes that these commemorative forms function within, and sometimes contest, state narratives of multicultural cohesion and national identity.

Placing the Surinamese Javanese case within this broader literary backdrop does not imply that a full cross-case comparison is reached in this paper. The goal, instead, is to place The Day of Wong Jawa and Javanese migration statuary sacralisation within a diasporic lineage of practices in which monuments, public art, pilgrimages, and heritage performances serve as major sites for negotiating belonging, cultural differentiation, and official multiculturalism frameworks. In Suriname, the annual celebration of 9 August is especially noteworthy, as it is both symbolically and strategically linked to Indigenous Peoples’ Day, which honours the country’s First Nations and is conceptualised by the state as an expression of Suriname’s multiethnic, plural character.

This calendar alignment also makes Javanese Immigration Day not just an intra-ethnic occasion but also situated within a wider terrain of postcolonial memory, where various histories of dispossession, labor, and resistance are explicitly commemorated in public discourse. Within this comparative framing, various aspects of the Surinamese Javanese experience appear locally specific, including Mariënborg’s plantation and post-plantation history. The enmeshment of Javanese and Indigenous commemorations on 9 August. The high prominence of the Indonesian state (through the embassy and cultural diplomacy programmes) in sustaining diaspora customs and monuments. Similarly, themes of the centrality of women as custodians of memories, the use of monuments as ‘vessels’ of collective suffering and endurance, along with the deployment of festivals to register both ethnic pride and national loyalty, similarly echo themes identified in studies of the Teochew, Peranakan, and Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia and

beyond. Reading *The Day of Wong Jawa* through these broader debates in diaspora and heritage scholarship therefore helps clarify how Javanese Surinamese commemorations both echo and subtly rework global repertoires of diasporic memorymaking.

### *Diaspora memorial commemoration*

Commemorating the Diaspora is a significant phenomenon amongst the collective memory of groups who either suffer forced migration or choose voluntary migration. The diaspora community's history, struggles and cultural identity are commonly depicted in monuments, ceremonies or cultural activities to remember them. For example, in Suriname commemorating the migration history is part of the country's national memory. Similarly, in South Africa, they built "The Old Slave Tree Memorial" that represent enslaved people who were auctioned and sold in that Africa. They say a tree was used for an auction, and that tree is the Slave Tree because sometimes people were chained to the tree during the selling. This monument highlights the dark chapter of slavery, the battle against it, and the suffering of the enslaved people. In addition, it will educate the people and remind pregnant colonial pasts so as not to forget or ignore the suffering.

As indicated by their commemorative day, the Javanese have constructed a narrative for their own past. Such events are also staged in Canada where the IndoCaribbean share similar histories of forced migration with the Indians, Africans, Maroons and other ethnic groups (Hoeft, 1998). Diaspora celebrations often see cultural performances, exhibitions, and discussions that reflect the message of unity in diversity (Suparlan, 1995). These events stimulate social cohesion and further understanding of Suriname's multicultural identity by recognising a common struggle and contribution of the several diaspora communities. These joint observances highlight the importance of conserving the past to build an inclusive society. Suriname has many memorial monuments that are an important part of history. Most of these monuments are from different ethnic groups. Further, they come from the colonial and slavery period. Commemorative days are often held for diaspora migrants of various ethnic groups.

### *The Day of Wong Jawa*

The Day of Wong Jawa (Javanese Immigration Day), celebrated on August 9, commemorates the arrival of the first Javanese contract laborers in Suriname, and has evolved into an important annual ritual through which the Javanese-Surinamese community publicly shares its migration and settlement journey over the last 90 years. Family members from different regions Paramaribo, Mariëburg, Nieuw Amsterdam, and rural districts gather to honor their ancestors at various historic sites such as Sana Budaya and the former plantation complex of Mariëburg through prayers, speeches, cultural performances, and the laying of flowers at monuments.

In this respect, The Day of Wong Jawa is not only a remembrance but actively contributes to a reconstitution of a shared memoryscape in which Suriname is celebrated as "home" (the land of the first and second Javanese contract labourers), and Java as an affective and symbolic source of origin. Most contemporary Javanese in Suriname today are citizens of the country, yet they still speak varieties of Javanese, practice Slametan, carry on wayang and Javanese dance, and pass on concepts of respect and kinship from generation to generation, forming a distinctive group within the highly plural society of Suriname. Sociolinguistic studies of Surinamese Javanese reflect transformation and perseverance in the heritage language, but also emphasize the active efforts of family and community groups to maintain Javanese as a defining characteristic in a multilingual society, especially alongside Dutch and Sranantongo. In this regard, The Day of Wong Jawa has become a 'centered point' of language and culture which is utilized as a platform to conduct prayers, speeches, songs, and performances in both Javanese and Indonesian as well as Dutch, strengthening diasporic identity and offering younger generations experiential knowledge of their ancestral roots, something which could otherwise be lost to globalized media and schooling.

From the perspective of diaspora theory, such commemorative occasions reveal how migrant groups are able to retain an identity that is highly ritualized, linking them both with a remembered homeland and a concrete place of settlement. Wilson's work on youth, identity, and nationalism in Java posits that young people use tradition according to particular preferences

and inventively mix ancestral symbols with contemporary modes of expression, as demonstrated in the way young Javanese-Surinamese people reinterpret traditional dance, music, and fashion in The Day of Wong Jawa to create a hybrid Surinamese-Javanese self. Historical investigations by Meel and Hoefte show that Javanese organizations in Suriname have long mobilized associations, festivals, and political formations to express Indonesian and Javanese identities within the Surinamese nation-state, which suggests that today's commemoration taps into broader collections in the life of organizations and nationalist imagination.

The event also reflects larger discussions involving nationalism and multiculturalism in Suriname. Findings from recent studies on Indonesian nationalism in Suriname suggest that Javanese political movements and commemorative practices have been significant in creating Indonesian-Javanese pride and simultaneously in negotiating a place in Suriname's plural political order. Public discourses concerning The Day of Wong Jawa depict the holiday as one of a helping hand in the formation of national unity, and as promoting coexistence across ethnic borders especially when it is held in parallel to Indigenous People's Day and includes representatives of other communities and state institutions. Meanwhile, ethnographic reports tell us that the survival of Javanese culture in Suriname is less a function of official discourse and more the life of families and community leaders and how they manage day-to-day life, teaching children and grandchildren, with some flexibility, language, skills, and culture. So while the forces of social transformation, upward mobility, and cultural assimilation are still very much unfolding, The Day of Wong Jawa also suggests that diasporic communities can manage to evolve and flourish without losing contact with their cultural roots, with ritual changes and intergenerational interaction as a main mechanism of cultural reproduction.

## Results

The results show the importance of celebrations in strengthening community attachment to cultural heritage, as well as the active role of Javanese youth and descendants in preserving traditions and promoting cultural activities in Suriname.

### **Building a monument to commemorate the arrival of the Javanese**

The Javanese community built several monuments to commemorate the Javanese ancestors who first came to Suriname. Two main monuments take center stage: The Monument Commemorating 100 Years of Javanese Immigration in VHJI or Sana Budaya and the Monument Commemorating 120 Years of Javanese Immigration in Marienburgh. Both monuments serve as historical markers and visual art objects that connect the past and present, allowing communities to reflect on and celebrate their cultural diversity. Surinamese artists create the artworks. These monuments combine elements of tradition with modern and contemporary artistic expression.

### **Monument commemorating 100 years of Javanese immigration**

This monument commemorating 100 years of Javanese immigration was erected in 1990 by Soeki Irodikromo, an artist of Javanese descent. It is located at the Vereniging Herdenking Javanse Imigratie (VHJI). The monument holds deep historical and emotional significance for this community.

*"Kanggone iku mau koyo godong utawa gunung, nek wong jowo nyebute gunung, gunung iki dinggo tetenger wong bisa kumpul manunggal lan ngururi kabudayan Jowo."* (Interview with Soeki Irodikromo, January 17, 2017).

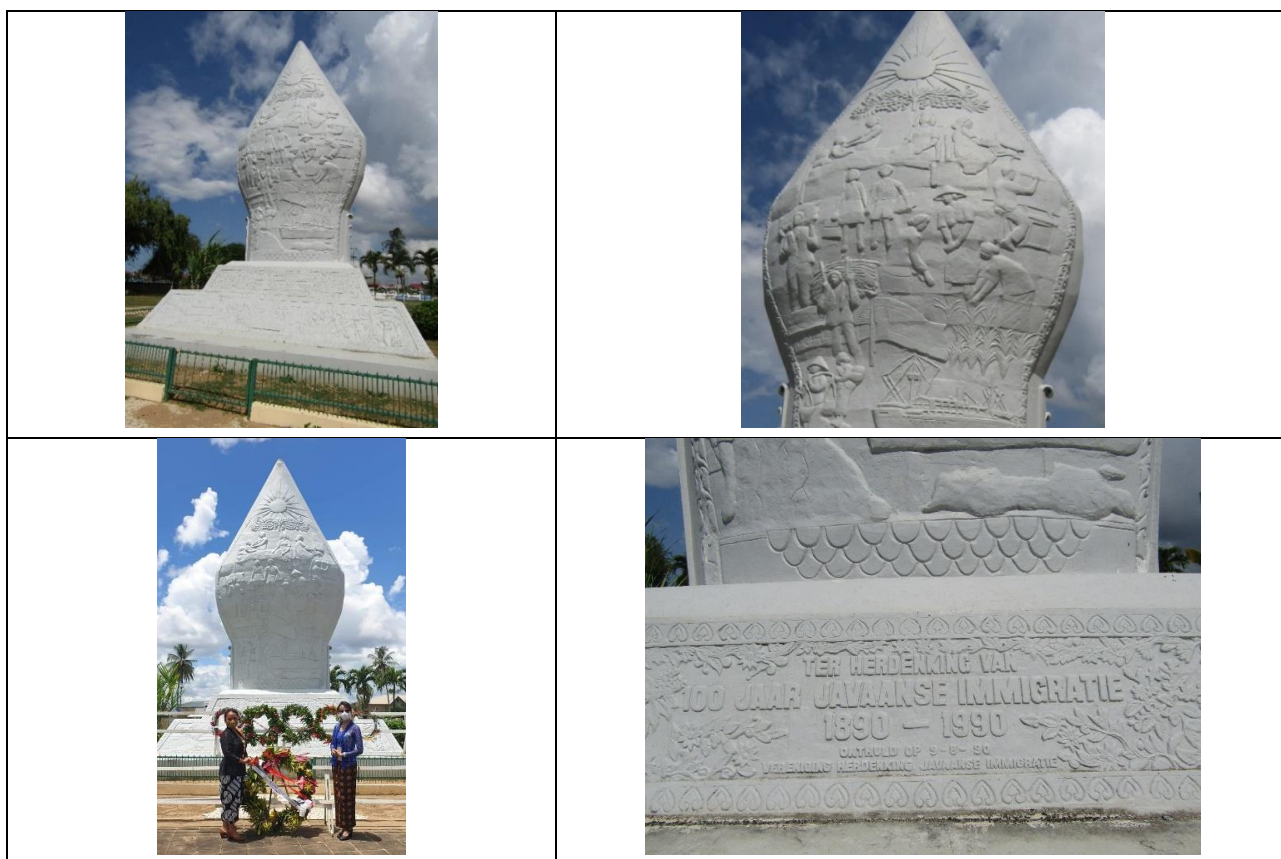
"This monument is in the shape of a leaf, or the Javanese call it Gunung, as a symbol or marker for Surinamese Javanese to come back together and maintain Javanese culture." The monument is not only a tribute to the ancestors, but also a symbol of the resilience and struggle of the Javanese people in the new land. Over the years, VHJI has become a warm and vibrant gathering place where community members can reminisce about their ancestors' long struggles and successes. The younger generation is encouraged to understand and appreciate their cultural roots through activities such as traditional dances.

This monument commemorating 100 years of Javanese immigration symbolizes strength for the Javanese community in Suriname. It has become an important center of cultural activity and historical witness for the Javanese community in Suriname. Every year, it relives the stories of the arrival of their ancestors

through the much anticipated celebration of The Day of Wong Jawa. Many symbols are found on the reliefs of this monument.

The artistic details of the monument show the spirit, perseverance and hard work of the ancestors who left their homes to (build a new life) in Suriname. The monument's presence serves as a reminder of the tale of courage and sacrifice that typify the Javanese community in Suriname. The memorial signifies resilience and a permanent reminder that

distance and time aside, we, as a community with common heritage and identity share in the land of exile. The monument for the 100th anniversary of immigration is a holy site. Along with being one of the points of commemoration, under the monument, it is also a place of pilgrimage for the Javanese descendants to reminisce about their past about where they came from and came to Suriname. This memorial is a key part of the historical memory of the Javanese in Suriname.



**Figure 2** Monument commemorating 100 years of Javanese immigration






**Source:** Own elaboration (2025)






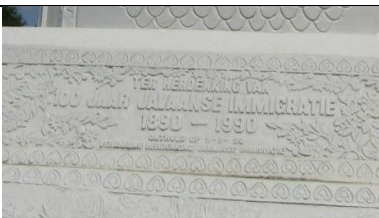
### Monument commemorating 120 years of Javanese immigration


The 120th anniversary of Javanese Immigration Monument was held on August 7, 2010, at the old sugar factory in Mariënburg, where the Javanese were the first to arrive to work and live in Suriname. The area is connected to the labour contribution of the Javanese community to the sugar plantation sector. The sugar estate was the first place where Javanese immigrants

arrived. On the one side, this monument is a reminder of the historical path of the Javanese people. However, on the other side it also the symbol of resistance and work of the spirit. Through time, the monument represents the shared memory of the Javanese community, where hard work is central to economic development in Suriname. That is the monument is not merely a physical structure, it's also a story of survival, hard work and cultural assimilation.

**Table 2** Symbolic meanings of the monument commemorating 100 years of Javanese immigration

| No. | Form of relief  | Meaning   |
|-----|---|---|
| 1.  |    | <p>The Javanese have long used the sun and the tree of hope to depict the greatness of God, new hope, and hope for the future. The sun is located at the very top of this memorial monument.</p>            |
| 2.  |    | <p>The SS Koningin Emma was the ship to deliver the first wave of Javanese immigration to Suriname.</p>   |
| 3.  |   | <p>Pak tani, wearing a hat and carrying a load, depicts a farmer in Java working under the hot sun.<br/>A woman carrying a load is wearing a jarik, a subordinate garment often worn by Javanese women.</p> |
| 4.  |  | <p>A worker carrying a load on his shoulders reflects a Javanese worker working in a sugar cane plantation.</p>   |
| 5.  |  | <p>Women planting rice or tandur or planting backwards is a way of planting rice done by farmers in Java</p>  |

| No. | Form of relief  | Meaning  |
|-----|---|--|
| 6.  |    | Painting is part of the modern work of Javanese people in Suriname.  |
| 7.  |   | Youth are part of the new generation of Javanese descendants in Suriname.  |
| 8.  |  | Java Island is part of the origin or ancestral land of the Javanese people   |
| 9.  |  | The early life of the Surinamese Javanese immigrants who came to work on Dutch plantations.                          |
| 10. |  | Dutch sugar cane and cocoa plantations, where the early immigrants worked.   |
| 11. |  | An affirmation that this monument is a form of commemoration of 100 years since the arrival of Javanese in Suriname. |

| No. | Form of relief  | Meaning  |
|-----|---|--|
| 12. |  | <p>Jaran Kepang art symbolizes the Javanese culture that Javanese people in Suriname still maintain.</p> |

Source: Own elaboration (2018)



Figure 3 Monument commemorating 120 years of Javanese immigration in Marienburgh

Source(s): Own elaboration (2018)

The symbols and meanings on this monument depict the history of the Javanese people’s journey from when they left their ancestral land to Suriname. This can be seen in some scenes that become the center of attention of this statue. At least the various symbols in this monument provide a deep meaning that is not just a form of statue. However, the statue implies a variety of meanings and stories that are the intention of making this monument.

**Sowing flowers at the memorial monument**

Sowing flowers or placing flowers on memorial monuments is always done by the Javanese diaspora in Suriname. At least once every August 9, they do it at various points along the commemorative monument established. The practice of sowing flowers at the memorial monument is another form of grave pilgrimage, or visiting graves, among the Javanese community. Grave pilgrimage is a tradition deeply embedded in Javanese society and has a deep spiritual meaning. This tradition is a religious ritual that honors ancestors and maintains relationships across

generations. In Javanese culture, grave pilgrimage is known as “nyadran” or “nyekar” and is usually performed before the holy month of Ramadan, on religious holidays, or when someone is about to undergo an important event. The primary purpose of this pilgrimage is to pray for the spirits of the ancestors to get a decent place in the afterlife. It is also a moment of reflection for pilgrims to reflect on death and the afterlife.

The Javanese pilgrimage custom is not confined to the island of Java. However, it is also practiced by Javanese descendant communities in the diaspora across various parts of the world, including Suriname, as seen in The Day of Wong Jawa. Pilgrimage is the most important activity when visiting memorial monuments to remember ancestors. Sowing or placing flowers can be translated as a pilgrimage activity. Pilgrimage activities are held in front of the memorial, erected to commemorate the first Javanese Immigration to Suriname, which brought the ancestors of the Javanese community in Suriname. The pilgrimage on August 9 every year can be seen as a symbol of respect for the ancestors of the Javanese community who arrived in Suriname first.

The practice of pilgrimage and sowing flowers at the commemorative monument on The Day of Wong Jawa is carried out with a similar essence as in Java, namely as a form of devotion and respect for the spirits of ancestors. Families routinely sprinkle flowers and pray. This communal prayer becomes a moment of reflection and connection, where they remember the merits of their ancestors and ask for peace for their souls. More than just a religious ritual, pilgrimage is a social glue that strengthens family and community bonds, reminding them of their cultural roots and shared history. The procession is often accompanied by other traditional ceremonies that reflect a blend of Javanese cultural elements and local Surinamese influences, including the enjoyment of various cuisines and music that depict acculturation in Suriname.

#### **Wearing traditional Javanese clothes during the pilgrimage at the monument**

For the Javanese Surinamese diaspora community, the Immigration Memorial Monument that was created






eventually became a sacred place. This sacredness is shown in the way pilgrims dress when visiting the monument. They wear special clothes, namely traditional Javanese clothes. They use beskap, kebaya, or batik, which, of course, they imported from Indonesia. Dressing in traditional Javanese clothes is not only a medium of respect when making a pilgrimage, but it is also an identity for the Javanese descendants in Suriname amid a multicultural and ethnic society. The sartorial choices further underscore the complex relationship between culture, identity, and community, showing how clothing can symbolize ethnic affiliation and cultural pride.

The gatherings at the memorial monument site turned nostalgic as the Javanese people gathered, interacted, and shared stories by remembering traditions and traditions. Strengthening the values inherited by their ancestors. The gathering becomes a collective ritual to create a sense of bond and identity among Surinamese Javanese. The Javanese community in Suriname shows that they are still in the midst of celebrations and gatherings. Even though they live far from Java, they still show their love and care for their culture.

#### **Discussion**

This study aims to locate and discover local wisdom (Maneenetra, 2025) local and culture forms still retained by the Javanese community in the diaspora since being set foot in Suriname on August 9, 1890. Upon their arrival, the Javanese community in Suriname constructed and maintained cultural artifacts that have become strong markers in their history. These items are essential to maintain their culture, despite being far from home. For the next generation of Javanese in Suriname, these artifacts are symbols of pride and artistic heritage that must be preserved (Hoefte & Mingoen, 2022). Because of this, The Day of Wong Jawa which is celebrated every 9th of August becomes more significant. Every year, a festive event takes place to celebrate the arrival of the first Javanese to Suriname and their success in upholding their culture and traditions on foreign soil. This celebration helps the youth get to know their ancestors and be inspired by the struggles of their ancestors.

**Table 3** Details of the monument commemorating 120 years of Javanese immigration

| No. | Form of relief  | Meaning  |
|-----|---|--|
| 1.  |    | A figure of two Javanese women who are identical to the lurik clothes worn in daily dress in Javanese society.   |
| 2.  |    | A simple house made of wood found in the barracks of workers on plantations.   |
| 3.  |   | The downwardsloping figure of the statue is interpreted as a symbol of the sadness of the immigrants who left their ancestral lands in search of a better life.                |
| 4.  |  | Statue figures carrying “gembolan” or luggage that can usually still be found in Javanese society when traveling.  |
| 5.  |  | The article “Monument ter nagedachtenis aan de komst van de eerste javanen in Suriname, August 9, 1890” shows the arrival of the first Javanese to Suriname on August 9, 1890. |

Source: Own elaboration (2018).



**Figure 4** Javanese descendants of Suriname make a pilgrimage in front of the memorial monument  
**Source:** Own elaboration (2025)



**Figure 5** Commemoration of Javanese immigration in VHJI/Sana Budaya  
**Source:** Own elaboration with Waterkant.net (2025).



**Figure 6** The atmosphere with Javanese people in Commewijne during The Day of Wong Jawa  
**Source:** Own elaboration (2018)



**Figure 7** Pencak Silat clothing worn by Javanese people from Suriname during the celebration  
**Source:** Own elaboration (2018)



**Figure 8** The atmosphere with Javanese people in Commewijne during The Day of Wong Jawa

**Source:** Own elaboration (2025)

This diverse activities are held to introduce and commemorate the richness of Javanese culture. More and more Surinamese join The Day of Wong Jawa celebration despite not being of Javanese descent. This moment is also joined by a diversity of ethnic communities making it a national moment. This reflects Suriname's high degree of social integration, where differences in culture and ethnicity represent national wealth and are celebrated. Each year, the event is accompanied not only by Javanese music, costumes, performing arts but also Kaseko. The Surinamese music Armen is a mix of African, European and American traditions (Leeflang, 2024).

Both Surinamese enjoy this celebration as it is a commemoration to appreciate the contribution of the Javanese culture. On stage, Javanese music accompanied Latin songs to show how cultures can merge. Moreover, the Javanese artists also collaborated with other group artists to create performance art. This type of event will strengthen unity and multiculturalism in this country. This event provides a space for Javanese people to express their culture and for other ethnicities to appreciate it and participate in it too.

Every year The Day of Wong Jawa is celebrated as a unifying event that signifies diversity. All other ethnicities in Suriname join in and busy themselves with combined dances and the serving or selling of their regional dishes. Through this event, people from different cultures can meet and mingle in a spirit of friendship and tolerance. Cultural differences can be a great unifying force that brings people together.

Celebrations and monuments achieve artistic expressions which strengthen the identity of the Javanese community in the diaspora as well as invite participation and empathy from other Surinamese communities. With each passing year this Day of Wong Jawa has become a cultural phenomenon in Suriname. It proves that this day is advantageous to the Javanese community and the society of all ethnic groups in Suriname.

Moreover, the event held every year show that the Javanese diaspora community, especially in Suriname, has the potential to become the next Javanese cultural generation whose presence in Suriname since their ancestors come to Suriname survive. We can see this in things like pilgrimages to the historical past to remember the struggle and achievement of our ancestors. The younger generation remembers their roots through these activities and this enhances their pride and identity.

Moreover, it promotes a sense of group pride and identity. In this case, one's cultural identity manifests itself through celebrations as well as everyday actions that are in line with the values of the community.

The presence of agrarian symbols in the monument shows that agrarian culture which is part of Javanese culture is resilient and sustainable, thus, it grows continuously. Also, the "Kayon" symbol embodied in a puppet which represented the island of Java. The depiction of Javanese farmer activities Tandur in the rice fields showed the respect and appreciation of meaning agriculture the source of livelihood. Javanese

communities in Suriname can be seen trying to maintain their historical connection with agrarianism and its visuals, which capture the imagination of the Surinamese regarding the importance of agrarian culture in Javanese tradition.

According to Compoli in 2020, monuments built became more than works of art. Monuments are visual reminders of the history and traditions brought by ancestors (Osborne 2010; Coe 2003; Hutton 1993). Everything within the reliefs gives the Surinamese society a perspective on the values and life that Javanese society embraces. Without a doubt, there are also elements borrowed from other cultures. Moreover, this is all presented through the medium of art. This presentation through art does not make it impossible for this to be cultural dialogue during the celebrations. The efforts to express Javanese cultural identity aim to instill historical awareness and strengthen the notion of unity in diversity in Surinam's multicultural communities.

So, the celebration of The Day of Wong Jawa which takes place in the memorial is not just an annual ritual. However, it is also a medium for strengthening interethnic solidarity. Moreover, it fosters a positive dialogue between the community. In the light of constantly changing globalization, such celebrations are a way how local communities finetune their practices in a way which is not irrelevant or unrespectful of their cultural heritage but also enriches the broader national identity (Mazurkevych et al., 2024).

## Conclusions

This new study demonstrates that The Day of Wong Jawa is itself not simply an annual commemorative Javanese immigration to Suriname event but rather a watershed moment in which memorial monuments themselves are sacralised and serve as living manifestations of diasporic memory. By congregating together, praying, dispersing flowers and dressing together in Javanese clothes at places of historical significance (Mariënborg, Nieuw Amsterdam, Paramaribo), these spaces are not only places of remembrance but sacred spaces where descendants of history come face-to-face with the imagined presence of their ancestors and discover their identity as the Javanese Surinamese.

Indeed, these studies show that the sacralization of these memorials was essential for reconstructive the

collective memory of survivors, as well as sharing with our descendants about slavery, forced labor on the plantations, suffering, and survival that lasted four generations or five generations. The annual commemoration, driven by the young people and in collaboration with the Indonesian diaspora in Suriname, the Indonesian Embassy as well as other bodies like IACS alumni, makes it possible for the younger generation to have the experience of migration as a part of their story so that it becomes not only a memory of its time, but also a memory legacy that generations before them learned through life and continue to use that wisdom and to help make their identities and daily activities in society.

Moreover, the fact that the ceremony is inclusive for other ethnic groups – a commemoration of the Day of Indigenous Peoples of Suriname – as well as to highlight how the commemoration of this immigration day also celebrates the Day of Indigenous Peoples of Suriname, this also indirectly reveals the role of legacy of memory in the memorialization of Javanese from August 9 – is also a discourse that reaches toward the idea of multicultural life and the world beyond the colonial frame as well as how that legacy cannot take from the culture and identity of the people of this diaspora. Formally, this paper contributes to the literature on memorialization of cultural memory, diaspora and sanctuary by demonstrating how monuments function partially as monuments of memorialization, identity bargaining and interethnic cross-sectional confrontations. Instead of being merely statistical entities, Suriname's Javanese monuments are “realized as zones of hybridity and symbols of cultural resistance,” where memory, community, spiritualization, and the sacredness/ deity/ sacredness distinction are entwined in practice and is a product of a process of cultural practice that has emerged.

Methodologically, this descriptive qualitative ethnographic study further delves into the sacralizing theme of place, which is a power combination of anthropological, visual, and memory studies approaches within the diasporic migration studies world. Secondly, it expects that the longevity of these memorial locations comes from both preservation (which cannot exist without physical preservation) and remembrance (which is held every August 9). Hence, enhancing intergenerational partnerships, deepening collaborations

with schools and cultural institutions, and engaging nonJavanese communities for the purpose of maintaining The Day of Wong Jawa (Javanese Immigration Day) as a center for commemorating Javanese migration, establishing an identity, and building community relations in a pluralistic society such as Suriname are essential.

#### **Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process**

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with English language polishing and paraphrasing. The author(s) reviewed and edited all AI-assisted text and take full responsibility for the content of the article.

#### **Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing**

The authors declare that they used a generative AI tool (ChatGPT, OpenAI) only to assist in language polishing and summarizing scientific background information. The AI tool was not used to generate scientific interpretations, arguments, data, or conclusions. All content has been critically evaluated and approved by the authors, who bear full responsibility for the final text.

#### **CRedit author statement**

**Tri Wahyudi:** Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Resources; Data curation; Formal analysis; Visualization; Writing – original draft.  
**Hanggar Budi Prasetya:** Methodology; Validation; Formal analysis; Writing – review & editing; Supervision.  
**Suwarno Wisetrotomo:** Theoretical framework; Writing – review & editing; Supervision.

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