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Preservation of Ancient Quranic Manuscript Heritage: An Analysis at the Sunan Gunung Jati Complex

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Abstract

Ancient Quranic manuscripts constitute an important part of Islamic cultural heritage, preserving the history of Quranic transmission, religious scholarship, and manuscript traditions in the Indonesian archipelago. However, the sustainability of these manuscripts is increasingly threatened by aging materials, environmental conditions, and limited conservation management. This study aims to analyze the existence, physical condition, preservation efforts, and challenges associated with safeguarding ancient Quranic manuscripts at the Sunan Gunung Jati Complex, Cirebon. The research employed a qualitative approach using content analysis. Data were collected through a literature review, field observations, in-depth interviews with the traditional custodian of the Sunan Gunung Jati Complex, and manuscript documentation. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis involving coding, categorization, and the identification of key themes. The findings reveal that the manuscripts preserved at Dog Jumeneng Mosque were predominantly handwritten on European paper dating from the mid-nineteenth century, while those kept within the burial complex were written on *daluang* paper from an earlier period. Most manuscripts exhibit physical deterioration, including paper degradation, tears, and ink fading. Preservation efforts remain limited to storage and routine cleaning without the application of professional conservation standards. The study highlights the need for stronger collaboration among site custodians, academics, and cultural heritage institutions to establish sustainable conservation strategies for safeguarding ancient Quranic manuscript heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Cirebon is one of the important centers of Islamic dissemination on the northern coast of Java and has played a significant role in the development of Islamic civilization in the Indonesian archipelago. The Islamization of the region was closely associated with Sunan Gunung Jati, also known as Syarif Hidayatullah, one of the prominent figures of the Wali Songo, who contributed to the spread of Islam through education, preaching, trade, and cultural interaction. Cirebon's strategic

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position as a port city facilitated intensive social, cultural, and religious exchanges, contributing to the emergence of various forms of Islamic intellectual heritage that remain visible today (Rianto & Ikhwan, 2024; Sarabioda et al., 2025). Among these forms of heritage are ancient Quranic manuscripts, which preserve evidence of Quranic copying traditions and the development of Islamic literacy and manuscript culture in the Indonesian archipelago.

One of the sites preserving ancient Quranic manuscripts is the Sunan Gunung Jati Complex in Astana Village, Gunung Jati District, Cirebon Regency. Beyond functioning as a pilgrimage and religious tourism site, the complex also preserves historical Islamic heritage with significant religious, cultural, and scholarly value. Some Quranic manuscripts are preserved in the Dog Jumeneng Mosque, also known as Masjid Sang Saka Ratu, while others are located within the burial area of Sunan Gunung Jati, where access is more restricted. The presence of these manuscripts indicates the development of Quranic copying and manuscript traditions within the local Muslim community and reflects the intellectual and religious dynamics of the region in the past (Ali, 2025; Muslih & Ulum, 2019).

Ancient Quranic manuscripts constitute an important category of cultural heritage because they contain not only religious texts but also material and historical evidence concerning the development of Islamic intellectual traditions. Under Law No. 43 of 2007 on Libraries, an ancient manuscript is a handwritten document that is at least fifty years old and possesses significant cultural, historical, and scholarly value. In addition to serving as a medium for transmitting Islamic teachings, Quranic manuscripts provide valuable evidence for examining codicology, calligraphy, illumination, writing materials, and manuscript-copying traditions across different regions of the Indonesian archipelago (Hijjas, 2017; Pallathadka et al., 2023). Consequently, the preservation of ancient Quranic manuscripts should be understood not only as the protection of religious objects but also as an effort to safeguard Islamic cultural heritage and the historical memory embedded within it.

Previous studies have examined Quranic manuscripts in Indonesia from various textual, philological, and codicological perspectives. Research by (Engkizar et al., 2026; Fajrie et al., 2023; Rohman & Ainuri, 2026), and others has documented aspects such as *rasm*, verse markers, *waqf* signs, calligraphy, illumination, colophons, writing materials, textual characteristics, and manuscript-copying traditions in collections from different regions of Indonesia. More recently, Engkizar et al (2026) positioned Indonesian Quranic manuscripts within the broader Islamic cultural heritage of Southeast Asia, emphasizing the diversity of copying traditions, writing materials, and cultural interactions reflected in these manuscripts. Collectively, these studies have established a substantial scholarly foundation for understanding the textual and material characteristics of ancient Quranic manuscripts in the Indonesian archipelago.

However, the existing literature has predominantly focused on the textual, philological, and codicological dimensions of Quranic manuscripts, while systematic studies of their preservation and management remain comparatively limited. In particular, there is insufficient attention to how ancient Quranic manuscripts are physically preserved, how their collections are managed, what preservation practices are implemented by local custodians, and what challenges affect the sustainability of their preservation within historical religious sites. This issue is particularly important because manuscripts are vulnerable to physical deterioration caused by environmental conditions, inappropriate handling, limited conservation facilities, and inadequate institutional capacity. Thus, there is a research gap between the extensive documentation of ancient Quranic manuscripts as textual and material objects and the limited examination of the practical conditions under which their preservation is sustained as cultural heritage (Mulholland, 2023; Putri et al., 2025).

The Sunan Gunung Jati Complex provides an important context for addressing this gap because its Quranic manuscripts are preserved within a living religious heritage site rather than solely within a specialized archival or museum institution. This setting raises questions concerning the relationship between religious significance, historical value, collection management, and conservation practices. Accordingly, examining the manuscripts in this context can provide a more comprehensive understanding of preservation as a process involving not only the physical protection of manuscripts but also their documentation, accessibility, management, and continuity as cultural heritage (Al Ghozali & Azizah, 2025; Mulholland, 2023).

Against this background, this study examines the preservation of ancient Quranic manuscript heritage at the Sunan Gunung Jati Complex. The study focuses on four interrelated dimensions: the historical existence and distribution of the manuscripts, their physical condition and material characteristics, the preservation practices implemented by local custodians, and the challenges encountered in maintaining their long-term sustainability. By shifting the analytical focus from predominantly textual and codicological description toward preservation and heritage management, the study contributes an additional perspective to the scholarship on Indonesian Quranic manuscripts. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to the study of Islamic manuscript preservation and religious heritage management and practically to the development of more systematic, sustainable, and collaborative approaches to preserving ancient Quranic manuscripts. In a broader sense, such efforts are important for maintaining the manuscripts as sources of religious knowledge, cultural identity, collective memory, and the intellectual heritage of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago.

METHODS

This study on the preservation of ancient Quranic manuscript heritage, focusing on the Sunan Gunung Jati Complex, employed a qualitative approach to obtain an in-depth understanding of the existence, physical condition, preservation practices, and challenges involved in conserving ancient Quranic manuscripts as part of Islamic cultural heritage. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to explore phenomena holistically within their natural contexts through direct interaction with informants, observation of the research objects, and interpretation of documents and field data. Through this approach, the study sought to provide a comprehensive description of manuscript preservation practices and the dynamics of their management at a religious heritage site within the Sunan Gunung Jati Complex (Cresswell et al., 2011; Engkizar et al., 2024; Syawqi, 2019).

Research Method and Design

This study employed a qualitative method using content analysis. Content analysis was used to examine information obtained from interviews, observations, manuscript documentation, and relevant literature in order to identify meanings, patterns, and themes related to the preservation of ancient Quranic manuscripts. This approach enabled the researchers to systematically understand manuscript preservation within its historical, social, and cultural contexts (Allsop et al., 2022; Engkizar et al., 2019; Wahyuna et al., 2025).

Data Sources

The data consisted of primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through direct observation of the collection of ancient Quranic manuscripts preserved within the Sunan Gunung Jati Complex, in-depth interviews with key informants who possessed knowledge of and were involved in the management and preservation of manuscripts within the complex, and visual documentation of the physical condition of the manuscripts. Secondary data were obtained from relevant

written sources, including books, journal articles, previous research findings, policy documents, and literature addressing Quranic manuscripts, the conservation of ancient manuscripts, and the preservation of Islamic cultural heritage (Qureshi, 2022; Takona, 2024).

Research Instruments

The primary instrument in this study was the researcher as the human instrument, who was directly involved in the processes of data collection, processing, interpretation, and analysis. To support these processes, the study employed observation guidelines, semi-structured interview protocols, documentation sheets, and field notes. These instruments were used to obtain in-depth information concerning the history and existence of the manuscripts, their physical condition, preservation practices undertaken by the custodians, and the various constraints encountered in conserving the ancient Quranic manuscript heritage (Richards & Hemphill, 2018).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify, categorize, and interpret the main themes emerging from observations, interviews, documentation, and the literature review. The analysis followed the qualitative data analysis model developed by Lungu (2022), which consists of three main stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.

During the data condensation stage, the researchers selected, focused, simplified, and organized data relevant to the objectives of the study. The data were subsequently presented in systematic descriptive narratives to facilitate the identification of emerging patterns, relationships, and tendencies. The final stage involved drawing and repeatedly verifying conclusions to produce valid and credible findings concerning the condition of the manuscripts, preservation practices, and conservation challenges encountered in maintaining the continuity of ancient Quranic manuscript heritage within the Sunan Gunung Jati Complex. Thematic analysis was employed to strengthen the interpretation process so that the emerging themes could provide an in-depth and comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon under investigation (Engkizar et al., 2026; Herzog et al., 2019; Nieman, 2023).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Historical Context and Distribution of the Quranic Manuscripts

The existence of Quranic manuscripts at the Sunan Gunung Jati complex is closely associated with the historical role of the Dog Jumeneng Mosque as a religious and cultural site in Cirebon. The mosque exhibits a distinctive architectural character shaped by Javanese, Hindu, Chinese, and Islamic cultural interactions. Its tiered spatial structure and the use of *istiwak* as a prayer-time indicator are among the features associated with the historical mosque architecture of the Cirebon region (BouJaoude & Noureddine, 2020; Mukholik, 2017; Noorhidayati et al., 2021). Historical accounts concerning the establishment of the mosque, however, vary. Some sources associate its establishment with 1128 H, while an inscription on one of its pillars records 1321 H. Oral traditions also provide different accounts concerning its founder and the circumstances of its establishment. These variations indicate that the history of Dog Jumeneng has been transmitted through multiple documentary and oral traditions rather than through a single authoritative historical record.

The mosque historically functioned not only as a place of worship but also as a repository of Islamic manuscripts. According to information from mosque administrators, a considerably larger number of Quranic manuscripts and other religious texts were formerly stored in the *para* or attic of the mosque. When the mosque was dismantled around 1952, many manuscripts were reportedly found

damaged and subsequently discarded (Holimi, 2020). This historical event is significant because it explains, at least partly, why only a limited portion of the earlier manuscript collection remains today.

The surviving manuscripts are distributed primarily between the Dog Jumeneng Mosque and the burial complex of Sunan Gunung Jati. Manuscripts preserved at the mosque are displayed in glass cabinets, whereas those kept in the burial area are more restricted in access. According to the informants, several manuscripts in the burial complex have never previously been publicly documented. The collection includes manuscripts written on European paper as well as *dluwang*, suggesting a broader chronological range and different phases of manuscript production. One of the previously undocumented manuscripts is a scroll-shaped Quranic manuscript featuring red rubrication and verse markers.

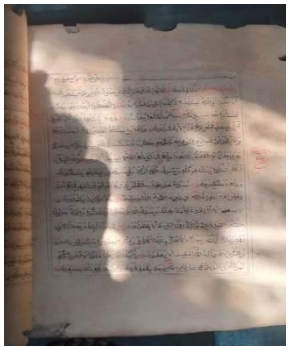


Fig 1. A scroll-shaped mushaf from the collection at the Sunan Gunung Jati burial site

The distribution of manuscripts also extends beyond Dog Jumeneng to family collections, pesantren, royal institutions, and other pilgrimage sites in Cirebon. Previous documentation identified at least eight manuscripts associated with Dog Jumeneng, coded MDJ-1 to MDJ-8 (Affani, 2017). This distribution demonstrates that Quranic manuscripts in Cirebon were preserved through interconnected religious, familial, and institutional networks rather than through a single centralized repository.

Material Characteristics and Physical Condition

The surviving collection demonstrates considerable diversity in terms of paper, production technique, chronology, and physical condition. Most of the documented manuscripts use European paper with identifiable watermarks, including Erve Wysmuller, ProPatria with the countermark H. F. de Charro & Zonen, and a crowned circular watermark with the countermark LVG. These characteristics are useful for establishing an approximate chronology through paper analysis. One particularly significant manuscript is the Palembang-printed Quran dated 1854 M. Its colophon identifies its production in Palembang by Kemas Haji Muhammad Azhari ibn Kemas Haji Abdullah. The manuscript is associated with the earlier al-Azhari Quran printed in 1848 and therefore provides evidence of the continued production of Quranic printing in Palembang during the nineteenth century (Daud et al., 2021). The manuscript is incomplete at the beginning but retains its concluding section and colophon. It also employs the *ayat pojok* system, in which each page ends with the completion of a verse.

In addition to the Palembang printing, the collection includes a manuscript identified as an Indian print from the late nineteenth century and a Quran printed by Taj Company Limited, Lahore-Karachi, probably in the mid-twentieth century (Faris, 2024). These materials demonstrate that the Dog Jumeneng collection represents not only local manuscript production but also the circulation of Quranic texts across the wider Muslim world.

The physical condition of the collection is generally fragile. Several manuscripts are incomplete, with missing initial, final, or intermediate sections. The surviving

pages exhibit brownish discoloration, foxing, paper brittleness, and deterioration of leather bindings. Nevertheless, the black ink remains legible on several manuscripts. Previous documentation similarly records that the Dog Jumeneng manuscripts are generally incomplete and that some of the oldest-looking manuscripts have darker brown paper (Khaeroni, 2017).

The physical deterioration should be understood in relation to both material age and environmental conditions. High humidity, temperature fluctuations, light exposure, and biological activity can accelerate the deterioration of paper and organic binding materials. The condition of the Dog Jumeneng manuscripts therefore reflects not only their age but also the environmental challenges associated with long-term manuscript preservation in a tropical setting. Another historically significant finding is the Arabic-Pegon inscription carved into one of the mosque pillars. The inscription provides material evidence for the historical discussion concerning the mosque's establishment. Its presence is particularly relevant because written evidence offers an important point of comparison with the different oral traditions concerning the mosque's foundation.

Preservation Practices and Challenges

The preservation practices at Dog Jumeneng remain largely basic. The manuscripts are kept in glass cabinets, cleaned periodically, and occasionally aired to reduce moisture. However, the mosque does not yet have a dedicated manuscript storage room with controlled temperature and relative humidity. Manuscripts in the burial complex are subject to more restricted access and are maintained by designated custodians.

From a preservation perspective, these practices represent basic preventive measures rather than comprehensive conservation. Manuscript preservation requires not only protection from dust and direct handling but also appropriate environmental control, documentation, condition monitoring, and professionally guided conservation. The absence of systematic environmental management therefore constitutes an important vulnerability for the collection. The principal challenge identified by the study is limited human-resource capacity in manuscript conservation. Mosque administrators have practical experience in caring for the collection but have not received systematic training in codicology, preventive conservation, or restoration. Similar challenges have been reported in other Indonesian manuscript repositories, where limited human resources and financial support constrain systematic preservation programs (Destriani et al., 2023).

Digital documentation represents one feasible complementary strategy. Digitization can reduce the need for repeated physical handling while preserving access to the textual and visual information contained in fragile manuscripts (Sriwahyuni et al., 2025). For Dog Jumeneng, high-resolution photographic documentation should therefore be integrated with basic cataloguing, condition assessment, and controlled access. Such measures would be particularly relevant for manuscripts in the burial complex that have historically received limited scholarly exposure.

Comparative Significance of the Collection

The Dog Jumeneng collection shares several characteristics with Quranic manuscript collections in other northern coastal areas of Java, particularly in terms of the use of European paper, handwritten production, and the presence of printed Qurans from outside Java. Collections in Demak and Lasem, for example, demonstrate similar intersections between manuscript traditions, Islamic institutions, and local cultural networks. However, Dog Jumeneng is distinctive in the combination of handwritten Qurans, early Palembang printing, Indian printing, and later Pakistani printing within a single historical religious complex. This diversity indicates that the significance of Dog Jumeneng lies not simply in the antiquity of

individual manuscripts but also in the collection's evidence of Quranic transmission and circulation. The 1854 Palembang Quran, for example, provides material evidence of connections between Cirebon and the early Quranic printing tradition in Palembang (Jabbar et al., 2026). The Indian and Pakistani printed Qurans further indicate that the collection continued to absorb materials from wider Islamic publishing networks.

The findings consequently position Dog Jumeneng as a significant site for studying the interaction between manuscript culture, early Quranic printing, pilgrimage networks, and the circulation of Islamic knowledge in coastal Java. At the same time, the incomplete condition of many manuscripts and the absence of systematic conservation demonstrate the urgency of establishing integrated documentation and preservation practices. The combination of historical significance and preservation vulnerability makes the collection relevant not only to Quranic studies but also to the broader study of Islamic manuscript heritage in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

The Sunan Gunung Jati Complex in Cirebon, particularly Dog Jumeneng Mosque and the Sunan Gunung Jati burial area, preserves a diverse collection of ancient Quranic manuscripts that represents an important part of the Islamic cultural heritage of the northern coast of West Java. The manuscripts reflect different historical and material traditions, ranging from handwritten Qurans produced on European paper in the nineteenth century to early printed editions from Palembang and India. However, most of the surviving manuscripts are incomplete and show varying degrees of physical deterioration associated with age, humidity, and limited conservation treatment. Existing preservation practices remain largely basic, consisting primarily of storage in glass cabinets, cleaning, and simple drying, while systematic conservation procedures, technical expertise, and regular condition monitoring are still limited.

Comparison with manuscript heritage sites in Demak and Lasem further indicates that shortages of conservation personnel and reliance on individual initiatives represent broader challenges in the management of ancient manuscripts along the northern coast of Java. Therefore, the sustainable preservation of the collection requires a more systematic heritage-management framework that integrates technical conservation training, standardized cataloguing and documentation, comprehensive digitization, and clear standard operating procedures for manuscript storage, handling, and monitoring. Collaboration among local custodians, cultural and archival institutions, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and the Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Quran is particularly important to strengthen institutional capacity and ensure that the historical, religious, and intellectual values embodied in these manuscripts remain accessible and preserved for future generations.

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Author contribution

Zahara Torreza: data curation, writing-original draft preparation, analysis, **Istiqomah:** conceptualization, methodology, visualization, and editing.

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