



# What's 'Wisdom' in Local Wisdom Imaginaries on Indigenous Research?

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## Abstract

The abundance of studies on local wisdom in Indonesia is evident from a Google Scholar search, which yields a wealth of resources. However, the concept of local wisdom and its distinction from related terms such as 'local knowledge' and 'indigenous knowledge' remains unclear. This article seeks to clarify the notion of 'wisdom' by: first, re-examining the definitions and debates surrounding local wisdom, local knowledge, and indigenous knowledge; second, tracing the models of indigenous research conducted in Indonesia; third, formulating a critical and philosophical approach to interpreting wisdom as conceptualised in Indonesian academic studies; and fourth, critically reflecting on the discourse of local knowledge, highlighting its role not only as a concept but also as a practical social movement that amplifies local voices.

**Keywords:** local wisdom, decolonization knowledge, indigenous research, critical epistemology, Indigenous People of Southeast Asia



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## Introduction

Building on Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999/2022) seminal work on decolonising methodologies, the Indonesian scientific community has begun re-evaluating the contours of postcolonial research. Epistemologically, post-independence sovereign states are not merely reconsidering sovereignty in geopolitical, cultural, and economic terms but are also critically reflecting on the decolonisation of knowledge itself. As Smith argues, decolonising knowledge serves as a counterforce to the enduring legacy of colonial epistemic domination, in which European intellectual traditions—steeped in Enlightenment thought, modernisation, and racialised superiority—have historically imposed hierarchical structures of understanding. The conceptual division between 'Western' and 'Eastern' or 'Northern' and 'Southern' knowledge is not a neutral classification but an epistemic construct devised by the Western scientific paradigm to categorise, label, and discipline non-Western communities, often reducing them to the status of indigenous or local knowledge. The European colonial pursuit of *terra nullius*—the myth of uncharted lands ripe for discovery—further entrenched these epistemic asymmetries (Lindqvist, 2012).

Despite shifts in global discourse, the impact of imperialism and colonialism on indigenous knowledge systems remains profound. Rather than fostering epistemic equity, globalisation has largely reinforced divisions between what is deemed scientific and what is dismissed as superstition, thereby consolidating political power in the hands of dominant institutions. The colonial education system, designed to cultivate an indigenous elite, simultaneously entrenched a hierarchical classification of knowledge—civilised and thus modern, or uncivilised and thus traditional—legitimising knowledge production within frameworks that perpetuated colonial authority. Consequently, the decolonisation of knowledge necessitates not only a reassessment of how knowledge is produced within cultural spaces but also a deeper interrogation of the political and institutional forces shaping epistemic structures.

In Indonesia, however, this intellectual movement remains largely confined to interdisciplinary discussions within the social humanities. Few attempts have been made to integrate decolonial perspectives into the natural sciences or technology, reflecting broader institutional and epistemic constraints. The National Research and Innovation Agency (*Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional* or BRIN), a state-level scientific body, has since 2023 begun engaging with decolonial approaches in the social sciences, yet the discourse remains methodologically underdeveloped. The challenge lies in formulating robust methodological frameworks, expanding the recognition of indigenous epistemologies, and integrating new concepts into broader academic and scientific conversations. Institutionally, BRIN has taken initial steps towards acknowledging local epistemic traditions by introducing knowledge acquisition programmes aimed at documenting and disseminating indigenous knowledge in accessible scientific formats, including audiovisual media, anthologies, monographs, and textbooks. However, these efforts represent only a preliminary step in a much larger and more complex process of epistemic decolonisation.

## Local Wisdom and the Decolonisation of Knowledge: Towards an Integrated Approach in the Social Sciences

The study of local wisdom in Indonesia remains an evolving discourse within the broader agenda of epistemic decolonisation. While various scholars have engaged with this concept from different disciplinary perspectives, the precise intersection between local wisdom and the systematic decolonisation of knowledge remains underexplored. A key challenge lies in the extent to which local epistemologies are recognised as legitimate knowledge systems rather than romanticised or instrumentalised within dominant academic structures.

In examining the relationship between local wisdom and decolonisation, Supratman (2021) highlights the role of open science in facilitating epistemic sovereignty, particularly within historical studies. Drawing on Syed Farid Alatas (2003), he argues that rather than rejecting Western social sciences outright, scholars must critically engage with and scrutinise the epistemological biases inherent in Global North scholarship. This position echoes the earlier critique of Syed Hussein Alatas in *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977), which dismantles colonial-era constructions of local peoples in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines as economically unproductive. By foregrounding the digitisation of local historical sources through libraries, archives, galleries, and museums, Supratman sees digital access as a means of enabling scholars from the Global South to reclaim epistemic agency.

Beyond historical scholarship, the imperative to build a decolonised science calls for the establishment of independent and sovereign epistemic communities free from Western academic dependence. This resonates with various conceptual frameworks introduced by Indonesian scholars to localise and reclaim knowledge, including Intellectual Nativism (Akmaliah, 2022), Nusantaraisation (Salleh et al., 2021), *Pribumisasi Ilmu* (Yunus, 2010), and the Indigenisation of Science (Santoso, 1997). These concepts, while distinct, share a common goal of integrating indigenous epistemologies into mainstream academic discourse.

Despite the growing scholarship on decolonisation, much of the research merely justifies why decolonising knowledge is necessary without fully critiquing the implications of post-decolonial knowledge. There is a tendency to overlook how knowledge production itself remains entangled in political agendas. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2022) argues in her formulation of *Kaupapa Māori* research, reclaiming indigenous knowledge requires not only rejecting Western research paradigms but also ensuring that indigenous voices shape their own historical interpretations. However, this critical approach is not always reflected in local wisdom research in Indonesia, which often frames decolonisation within cultural locality without sufficiently challenging the structural power dynamics that shape epistemic hierarchies.

In this study, we cautiously interpret the term *local wisdom* as it is commonly understood by Indonesian researchers in discussions of cultural locality, in contrast to *indigenous knowledge* in global discourse on local epistemologies. These terminological differences inevitably shape scientific approaches, influencing how local knowledge is validated or

marginalised within academic frameworks. The lack of interrogation into the epistemic politics of local wisdom research raises concerns about whether it serves as a truly transformative decolonial project or remains an extension of knowledge structures that prioritise cultural representation without systemic critique.

The decolonisation of knowledge in Indonesia has been explored across various academic disciplines, although the degree of engagement remains uneven. In the social sciences, decolonisation efforts have taken the form of critiques of Eurocentric frameworks in sociology and political science (Takbir et al., 2022; Utomo, 2021) as well as attempts to indigenise international relations theories (Mas'oed, 2024). Within historiography and education, the rethinking of history education and historical narratives signals a broader decolonial turn in Indonesian scholarship (Dannari et al., 2021; Jaelani, 2018; Subekti, 2012). Museums and government institutions also play an important role, with research addressing how museums curate and interpret historical narratives from a decolonial perspective (Kirana, 2018; Sadzali, 2017) and how governance structures remain shaped by colonial legacies (Luhur & Abdillah, 2020). Meanwhile, studies on urban labour (Erman & Saptari, 2013) and explorations of Nusantara philosophy (Alfariz & Permatasari, 2022; Cahyawati, 2022; Gunawan, 2020; Hidayat, 2004; Kartika, 2004; Raja, 2019; Sutrisno, 2005) demonstrate broader efforts to foreground indigenous perspectives in both economic and philosophical thought.

While these studies indicate a growing interest in decolonisation, engagement with local wisdom remains largely concentrated in the social sciences and humanities, whereas the natural sciences and technology sectors have yet to fully integrate decolonial methodologies, reflecting broader epistemological and institutional barriers.

Parallel to the decolonisation movement, scholarly engagement with local wisdom as an epistemic orientation has gained traction. Research on local wisdom spans multiple disciplines, including philosophy (Sartini, 2004), environmental studies (Marfai, 2019), and political thought, particularly in relation to Pancasila (Riyanto, 2015). However, much of this scholarship remains fragmented, with limited interdisciplinary integration.

Institutionally, efforts to consolidate local wisdom studies have begun to take shape. One such initiative is the Centre for Local Wisdom Studies at the Department of Architecture, University of Merdeka Malang, which has published *Local Wisdom: Jurnal Ilmiah Kajian Kearifan Lokal* since 2009. While this journal represents an important step in legitimising local wisdom as an academic field, the extent to which such initiatives contribute to a broader epistemic shift remains unclear.

Despite the growing interest in local wisdom and decolonisation, the discourse remains compartmentalised, with limited methodological integration across disciplines. While the social sciences and humanities have made significant contributions, the absence of decolonial perspectives in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields reflects the ongoing dominance of Western epistemic frameworks. Moreover, local wisdom research often lacks critical engagement with power structures, risking its appropriation as a static cultural artefact rather than a transformative epistemic project. Moving forward, a

more systematic approach is needed—one that not only historicises and critiques colonial knowledge systems but also actively builds indigenous epistemologies into broader academic and policy frameworks.

## Philosophical and Methodological Considerations

A critical examination of the epistemic construction of local wisdom is essential in assessing its place within the broader project of decolonising knowledge in Indonesia. Methodologically, this inquiry adopts a critical-philosophical approach, integrating philosophical reflection with socio-epistemological analysis. A literature study is employed, drawing from reputable national and internationally indexed journal sources, as well as internet-based searches focusing on key terms such as indigenous research, local wisdom, and related concepts. By synthesising these approaches, this discussion interrogates how local wisdom is framed in scholarly discourse, its epistemic implications, and its alignment with decolonial thought.

At the core of this inquiry is a fundamental question: what constitutes wisdom in local wisdom? The tendency to equate all local practices and knowledge with wisdom is a reductionist stance that risks essentialising and romanticising the past without critically engaging with the knowledge itself. Not all local knowledge is inherently wise, nor does its locality automatically confer legitimacy. This raises further questions: what kind of wisdom is being invoked? Who defines it? Under what conditions should it be applied?

The widespread appeal of local wisdom in academic and policy discussions can be traced to its perceived status as *summum bonum*—an intrinsically good and universally beneficial ideal. The notion of wisdom is often assumed to be timelessly valid, reinforcing its authority in research and policymaking. Consequently, scholarly discourse frequently presents local wisdom as a monolithic, one-size-fits-all solution, without addressing the complexities of its contextual application.

To clarify the critical stance on the interpretation of local wisdom in indigenous research in Indonesia, this discussion is structured into four main sections. The first re-examines definitions and debates surrounding local wisdom, local knowledge, and indigenous knowledge. The second traces the methodological models of indigenous research conducted in Indonesia. The third formulates a critical-philosophical approach to analysing how wisdom is conceptualised within Indonesian academia. Lastly, a critical reflection on local knowledge emphasises its significance not only as a theoretical construct but also as a social movement advocating for local epistemic voices.

# Local Wisdom, Local Knowledge, and Indigenous Knowledge

## *On the word 'indigenous'*

To explore further why the term wisdom is preferred in the phrase local wisdom, it is essential to outline the advantages and disadvantages of other similar terms. Semantically, wisdom, knowledge, and indigenous are often considered interchangeable and synonymous. As explained in the introduction, wisdom carries moral weight, whereas knowledge is inherently neutral and free from ethical demands.

However, the semantic properties of local and indigenous may be the primary factor making these terms almost synonymous and interchangeable. Indigenous is inherently local due to its ties to a specific locale, and when something or someone is described as local, the general perception is that they are native (indigenous) to that area. To clarify the differences between the two, a relational geography perspective can help explain where they intersect and where they diverge.

Relational geography refers to the complex relationships between people and their living environments. This discourse is often politically laden, particularly regarding the politicisation of Indigenous Peoples' living spaces and their self-initiated development. Castree (2004), responding to debates on indigenism by examining relational geography frameworks proposed by experts in geography and sociology, found that indigenous claims in their political capacity are not solely about reclaiming historical and natural resources but also about asserting a deep connection to place, which includes an organic quality in their claim. Indigenous claims are not merely about geographical locality but are rooted in a deeper, often primordial attachment to the land, as highlighted by Schefold (1998). This attachment is expressed through legends, myths, and long-standing cultural practices, distinguishing indigenous status from merely being local.

Another proposition, militant particularism, advanced by Harvey and Williams (1995), emphasises class struggle in shaping group identities that co-constitute with gender, ethnicity, and other specific identifiers. From this perspective, identity and socio-geographical differences within the capitalist framework are instrumental in controlling individuals for capital accumulation. Consequently, geography, identity, and class in a Marxist undertone are relational, as their interaction generates positionality. This idea is closely linked to the social status of the majority of marginalised Indigenous People, who tend to receive little serious attention from central or regional governments.

In Indonesia, however, the term indigenous is less popular because other categories denote the same concept. The rejection of indigenous as a legitimate claim, due to its non-existent legal status, is evident in Li's (2000) study, which argues that the articulation of indigenous in Indonesia has been neutralised, reflecting indigenism in Indonesia through a synthesis of ideology and new cultural production inspired by colonial configurations—specifically, the ethnicisation and traditionalisation of tribe. Such new cultural configurations exemplify the coloniality of knowledge, as suggested by Quijano (2000),

where contemporary knowledge production retains colonial traces and interests. Tribes become ethnic groups, which cannot fully relate to the global indigenous movement, as most ethnic groups in Indonesia have modernised their tribal cultural elements due to interactions driven by colonial-era trade. Consequently, the articulation of indigenous in Indonesia is framed as customary, projecting a civilised image suited to nation-building politics (Li, 2000).

Meanwhile, instead of indigenous, the term isolated community (*masyarakat terasing*) is used, conveying the impression that such groups must be developed and integrated to align with the spirit of Pancasila unity. In the postcolonial context, isolated communities are undoubtedly indigenous, as their existence is organic, local, and deeply rooted in a specific region. However, when this clashes with the concept of a nation-state, which possesses far more influential and modern territorial and sovereign rights, a logical explanation emerges for the strategy of rejecting the indigenous label and neutralising it as isolated communities.

Persoon (1998) argues that the political implications of using the term indigenous can significantly affect development politics in Indonesia, as the global struggle to mobilise solidarity for indigenous groups has led conservation organisations to recognise them as natural allies and strategic partners in environmental conservation agendas. Such utilitarian and conditional coalitions empower indigenous communities while simultaneously weakening the legitimacy of the government, which is responsible for ensuring territorial sovereignty and maintaining national integrity in the modern era.

Schefold (1998) offers a similar perspective to Persoon, framing the absence of the indigenous category in Indonesia as a consequence of postcolonial politics, particularly following the emergence of the nation-state and the global Cold War contestation. He argues that the urgency to shift the status of communities from indigenous and/or tribal to isolated was part of an effort to rehabilitate their social structures, which were seen as incongruent with modern Indonesian society during the Sukarno era—a period characterised by class consciousness and aspirations for a permanent class-based revolution. Furthermore, Schefold contends that during President Suharto's era, which differed little from his predecessor's, this rehabilitation effort was reinforced under the pretext of national security, as isolated groups were perceived as counterproductive to the aspirations of a modern nation-state due to their conservative cultural elements. Such pejorative views strengthened the government's urgency to integrate these communities into modern Indonesian society through dispossession for developmental purposes. Severing their cultural attachment to indigenous land was seen as a means of instigating a psychological paradigm shift, preventing them from being drawn into communist ideologies.

The politics surrounding the use of the term indigenous is fraught with risk, both in studying and recognising its validity, due to the conflicting interests of communities and the national government, which acts as the state agent. Consequently, in the context of national identity, indigenous lacks state legitimacy, causing struggles over cultural identity in Indonesia to emphasise the notion of customary rather than indigenous when engaging

with global partners who share similar activist agendas. However, this does not diminish the appeal of the term indigenous; rather, it suggests that because indigenous receives limited official recognition, when paired with knowledge, the phrase struggles with compatibility issues in Indonesia. This challenge is compounded by long-standing political interventions, both historical and contemporary, that have shaped dominant understandings of identity and knowledge production.

### *On the Word 'Knowledge'*

Indigenous research highlights the interplay between culture and philosophy, revealing the embedded values and wisdom in daily practices. This holistic approach frames indigenous knowledge as both a community resource and a subject of broader epistemological inquiry. Understanding indigenous knowledge requires examining its epistemic foundations and its divergence from Western frameworks.

Three key aspects shape indigenous research. First, the reconstruction of local knowledge through formal and philosophical approaches. Canagarajah (2002) emphasises its distinct anthropological, social, and philosophical dimensions, which differ in justificatory bases from scientific knowledge. Western epistemology, as Pritchard (2023) notes, traditionally categorises knowledge into scientific, religious, and moral realms, often marginalising local epistemologies. Local knowledge, however, derives legitimacy from social institutions and lived experiences rather than positivist criteria (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Foucault, 1972). This diversification of epistemic foundations is reflected in feminist epistemology (Longino & Lennon, 1997), postcolonial critiques (de Sousa Santos, 2015), and Indigenous Epistemology (Foley, 2003; Grincheva, 2013). Critical geography also underscores the significance of indigeneity, place, and territory in knowledge formation (Larsen & Johnson, 2012; Radcliffe, 2017, 2018, 2020), while Dei, Karanja, and Erger (2022) conceptualise land as epistemology.

Second, indigenous research introduces epistemological relativity. There are two main approaches to integrating philosophy and ethnographic facts: modelling epistemic communities through cultural assumptions or using ethnographic data to illustrate epistemological frameworks. Ethno-philosophical studies exemplify the former, examining knowledge systems rooted in mystification (Feyerabend, 1975; Feyerabend, 1981), while ethnographic data is used to challenge objectivism in epistemology. These perspectives demonstrate how epistemic and moral standards vary across cultures. However, indigenous research in Indonesia tends to defend rather than critically examine local wisdom, prioritising cultural preservation over interrogation. This inclination risks conflating indigenous research with an essentialist defence of tradition rather than recognising its evolving nature.

Third, local knowledge is inherently value-laden. It can challenge state policies that infringe on indigenous rights but also reinforce existing power structures. Its political dimension is inseparable from histories of colonialism, imperialism, and globalisation. Feyerabend's epistemological anarchism provides a useful lens for critiquing rigid knowledge hierarchies. He famously opposed methodological monism, arguing that knowledge thrives

through pluralism and competing alternatives (Feyerabend, 1975, 1981). His principle of *anything goes* is often misunderstood; rather than endorsing arbitrary relativism, it rejects dogmatic constraints, encouraging methodological openness (Chang, 2021; Shaw, 2017). Feyerabend's principles of Tenacity and Proliferation advocate maintaining diverse perspectives to prevent premature theoretical abandonment (Feyerabend, 1999).

Indigenous research, therefore, must embrace locality, geography, and historical contexts while remaining pluralistic and open-ended. By resisting epistemic monism, it contributes to the decolonisation of knowledge and the pursuit of emancipatory inquiry.

### *On the Word 'Local'*

The term local often evokes a sense of place and an individual's connection to it. The strength of this emotional and social bond determines the extent to which one perceives themselves as belonging to a particular locale. This section synthesises the concept of local through linguistic, geographical, and epistemological lenses to illuminate its evolving significance in scholarly discourse.

Etymologically, local originates from the Latin *locus*, meaning place. Over time, its semantic range has expanded to denote specificity—something particular to a given area, region, or community. The notion of locality implies relevance and proximity, both spatially and emotionally, between individuals and the spaces they inhabit. According to *Merriam-Webster*, the term encompasses meanings ranging from spatial positioning and administrative jurisdiction to public services and even biological processes. These definitions underscore its deeply embedded nature within human geography, particularly in its ontological inquiry into spatial transformation, human perception of change, and the critical interrogation of temporal shifts influenced by human intervention.

Understanding the local necessitates an inquiry beyond etymology. In spatial geography, individuals construct a sense of place by imbuing spaces with meaning and emotion (Fouberg et al., 2009, p. 13). These affective and symbolic dimensions constitute core elements in defining local within spatial constraints. Political boundaries further shape its meaning, as locality often aligns with administrative jurisdictions, territorial delineations, and governance structures. In the context of development studies, local signifies the level closest to individuals, emphasising how grassroots-oriented research agendas foster sustainability, organic growth, and targeted interventions (Duncan, 2003).

However, place-based identity is not merely a geographical construct but also a political one. Massey (2003) offers a more radical interpretation, positioning the local as a site of resistance against globalisation. She critiques globalisation as an active process, not an inevitable force, driven by powerful actors—multinational corporations, international financial institutions, and hegemonic state actors such as the United States. By framing globalisation as a political and economic project rather than an autonomous phenomenon, Massey challenges deterministic narratives of global integration. Her scepticism lies in globalisation's tendency to erase spatial distinctiveness and impose a homogenised modernity under the guise of progress.

As a locus of resistance, the local offers a critical lens for re-examining nationalism, place-based identity, and territorial belonging. This discourse extends beyond spatial considerations to intersect with broader ideological debates, mirroring the contested nature of indigeneity. Just as indigenous identity is a battleground for epistemic and political struggles, the notion of local carries inherent tensions—at times embraced as a counterpoint to global hegemony, at others co-opted into dominant frameworks of governance and economic development.

Politicising the local, then, is more than an academic exercise; it is an ethical and activist imperative. When deployed strategically, an emphasis on locality serves as both a critique of ineffective state policies and an intervention against homogenising global discourses. The invocation of local as an ethical framework underscores its role in advancing social justice by amplifying marginalised epistemologies and challenging dominant knowledge systems. By foregrounding locally situated perspectives, this approach disrupts the global narratives that often marginalise or misrepresent indigenous and community-based knowledge systems.

### *On the Word ‘Wisdom’*

The Indonesian equivalents of wisdom, namely *kebijaksanaan* and *kearifan*, reflect distinct yet overlapping dimensions of prudence and discernment. The corresponding adjectives, *bijak* and *arif*, denote the capacity for sound judgement informed by ethical and epistemological considerations. Philosophically, wisdom operates within two primary domains: an epistemic framework encompassing knowledge and intellectual inquiry, and a practical-ethical orientation that underscores prudence, restraint, and moral rectitude.

In the Indonesian context, wisdom is predominantly understood through its practical-ethical lens, often construed as an essential attribute of leadership. It is associated with superior moral discernment, self-regulation, and social responsibility. However, contemporary discourse on wisdom appears increasingly circumscribed, particularly in relation to cultural phenomena, thereby limiting its interpretative scope.

Despite the wealth of psychological, philosophical, and religious resources available for conceptualising wisdom, its definition—especially in the context of local wisdom—remains contentious and elusive. How should one approach this inquiry? A pragmatic entry point is the recognition that wisdom, when synthesised with cultural and religious paradigms in Indonesia, assumes a predominantly spiritual connotation. Within this framework, wisdom is perceived as an intellectual and moral pathway towards enlightenment or divine proximity. However, drawing from Western philosophical traditions, which have historically delineated wisdom through epistemological and ethical distinctions, provides a useful counterpoint for examining its role in local wisdom.

In Western thought, the bifurcation of wisdom into epistemic and ethical categories is rooted in Cartesian aspirations to render philosophy scientifically rigorous. This development contributed to the declining perception of wisdom as the ultimate foundation of human knowledge (Jonkers, 2020). In Indonesia, however, such a division is less pro-

nounced. Ideally, both scientific inquiry and indigenous wisdom—whether emerging from empirical study or cultural heritage—constitute essential components of human knowledge and civilisation.

A prevailing research trend in Indonesia seeks to integrate wisdom into scientific discourse, particularly within the domain of cultural studies. This trend is evident in scholarly output indexed on platforms such as Google Scholar, where numerous studies attempt to codify local wisdom within a research framework. While this approach suggests a progressive intellectual endeavour, it is important to acknowledge that wisdom, as an inherently abstract and evolving concept, resists full commensurability.

Although wisdom should not be conflated with scientific knowledge, its incommensurability must remain a foundational premise. A common scholarly approach is to identify a cultural phenomenon and subsequently apply legitimising theories that elevate it to the status of local wisdom, reinforcing its epistemic value. While this method contributes to cultural appreciation, it risks overlooking the broader transformative potential of local wisdom—particularly if the local element is leveraged to enhance its interpretative depth.

In Eastern philosophical traditions, including those of East, South, and Southeast Asia, wisdom is conceptualised as relational, interdependent, and ultimately devoid of inherent permanence. It derives aesthetic significance from the transient and impermanent nature of existence. This metaphysical perspective situates wisdom within a cyclical temporality, wherein past, present, and future exist within a continuous, interwoven matrix (Takahashi, 2000). Importantly, this recognition of impermanence does not engender fatalism but rather fosters contemplative awareness, urging individuals to embrace life's limitless potential in both present and future contexts.

By contrast, Western traditions position wisdom as an autonomous faculty, emphasising its function in the systematic pursuit of knowledge (Takahashi, 2000). While both traditions acknowledge the boundlessness of wisdom, the Western approach frames it within a mechanistic and empirical worldview, wherein the universe is perceived as a complex system governed by discrete, interacting entities (Grof, 1983). This orientation engenders an expansionist impulse, wherein the pursuit of wisdom aligns with the systematic exploration and mastery of reality through scientific methodologies.

A compelling question emerges: what implications arise from synthesising the inquisitive and contemplative dimensions of wisdom within the framework of local wisdom? Indonesian cultural phenomena already underscore plurality and diversity, yet integrating both epistemic traditions could further enrich the discourse on unity within diversity. Drawing on the thought experiment proposed by Mahaswa and Kim (2023), which advocates for a pluriversal approach to knowledge production as a means of fostering epistemic justice, such an integration could offer a radical reconfiguration of local wisdom. A pluriversal framework not only advances postcolonial intellectual traditions but also foregrounds inclusivity in both theoretical and empirical inquiry.

While a pluriversal perspective is invaluable for critically examining local wisdom discourses in Indonesia, the objective here is not to provide an exhaustive critique. Instead,

the aim is to expand the conceptualisation of wisdom by incorporating its inquisitive dimension, thereby enabling more rigorous and generative scholarship on local wisdom. Such an approach not only amplifies Indonesia's cultural and intellectual plurality but also interrogates elements of local wisdom that may be misaligned with contemporary ethical and social paradigms, particularly those that perpetuate structural inequalities.

## **The Synthesis of *Local* and *Wisdom* in the Indonesian Context**

What occurs when the term local is conjoined with wisdom to form the concept of local wisdom? Ideally, this synthesis should transcend mere cultural categorisation and function as a distinct epistemological construct. The Indonesian term kearifan, often translated as wisdom, imbues the local with an ontological dimension, reinforcing its embeddedness within cultural and ethical frameworks. This conceptualisation entails a dual aspiration: to fortify communal identity and to leverage local knowledge in navigating contemporary socio-political realities.

When examined through Massey's framework, the discourse of local wisdom in Indonesia reveals its potential as a mechanism for transnational solidarity, linking national identity with global indigenous movements. However, this intersection is fraught with tensions. The notion of the local is often subsumed within globalised discourses, oscillating between being romanticised as a repository of authenticity and being problematised as an impediment to progress. This dialectic underscores the paradox of local wisdom: positioned both as a counterpoint to modernity and as an entity that simultaneously benefits from global knowledge circulation and technological advancement.

The absence of a fixed definition for local within the discourse of local wisdom reflects a broader phenomenon: the politicisation of indigeneity as a means of contesting structural hegemony. In the Indonesian context, this conceptual fluidity aligns with Benedict Anderson's (2006) theorisation of the imagined community, wherein locality transcends its geographic signification to assume a symbolic and ideological function. This reconceptualisation highlights the evolving role of local wisdom in shaping national identity, governance, and epistemic justice. The following section further investigates the philosophical underpinnings of wisdom and its broader implications when interwoven with the local.

## **Further Elaboration on *Wisdom* in the *Local Wisdom Imaginary***

In Indonesia, mainstream studies and research featuring local wisdom in their titles have yet to yield innovative results. These studies primarily focus on reflective analyses of cultural phenomena, reiterating existing knowledge rather than offering new insights or practical applications.

A reassessment of the term wisdom is needed to foster new approaches by broadening the framework beyond mere cultural reflection. Wisdom should be integrated into an interdisciplinary context, combining insights from various disciplines to deepen our

understanding of local wisdom, its practical implications, and the struggle to decolonise. In Indonesia, the relationship between decolonisation and local wisdom has yet to be explored in an inquisitive manner.

As mentioned earlier, regardless of whether we use terms like local knowledge or local wisdom, there is a need to redefine wisdom in a way that aligns with the definition of knowledge. This requires rejecting the conventional belief in a unified scientific vision. To escape the confines of timelessness and the association with the old-age trope, wisdom must actively seek validation, just as knowledge does. While this does not mean that Eastern approaches to wisdom should be absorbed by Western perspectives, reinventing wisdom to be reflective, inquisitive, and oriented towards epistemological pluralism can foster a more realistic, pragmatic, and balanced discourse.

Schefold's (1998) concept of primordial attachment demonstrates resilience during Indonesia's efforts to define a new national identity. Primordial attachment, a form of social self-assertion, was not opposed by the state, which was focused on nation-building through homogenisation. Instead, ethnic identity became co-constitutive with the emerging national identity. This observation contributes to the discourse on local wisdom, as the state did not perceive diversity as a major concern. However, if the existence of local wisdom was guaranteed by the desire to engineer a pluralistic condition to counteract complete homogenisation, where did it go wrong? Two answers emerge:

Firstly, the study of local wisdom in Indonesia often remains confined to mere reflection. Secondly, the problematic form of homogenisation that does not entirely erase ethnic identity is achieved through Pembangunan (development) and the state's production of knowledge based on the Western scientific paradigm. This paradigm aims to sustain smooth development while also reflecting on the co-constitutive status of ethnic and national identity. In this framework, the priority is already evident.

The consequence of prioritising a unified and homogeneous national identity over the flourishing of ethnic identity has proved superficial. When the state seeks to project a political message about its morality (unity in diversity) and appropriate culture by aestheticising Indonesia's unique cultural particularities, it subjects communities to displacement, as seen during the construction of Taman Mini Indonesia Indah (Costa, 2020). This attitude reflects a persistent feature in Indonesian politics: the romanticisation of the past to inspire a glorious future (Mahaswa & Hardiyanti, 2023).

If local wisdom is merely used to glorify Nusantara's past, it risks being reduced to a static, localised notion. While anthropology offers valuable insights, excessive reflection limits its dialectical potential. To remain relevant, local wisdom must be seen as an evolving concept that informs contemporary practices and policies.

Recent trends indicate that local wisdom has been explored in alternative ways, often because it conveys a sense of grace or encompasses the idea of knowledge. It has been recommended for informing policies or mitigating strategies concerning disaster risk reduction (Panda et al., 2023). In some parts of Indonesia, insights and knowledge from indigenous communities have proven effective in addressing both natural and human-induced

crises (Nugroho et al., 2023). Moreover, local and indigenous knowledge can complement global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) principles (Sandoval-Rivera, 2020).

To strengthen the study of local wisdom and Indigenous and Local Knowledge (ILK), it is crucial to reassess the logic behind historical progression and modernity's dominance over obsolescence. Gómez-Bagethun (2022) highlights how postmodern and post-development thought challenge Western historical narratives, including Kant's (1991) optimism and Hegel's (Haddour, 2021) Eurocentrism. Hegel's rhetoric reduces cultural appreciation to a secondary role in national development, as seen in Costa's (2020) critique of Indonesia's cultural aestheticisation and ILK's instrumentalisation in tourism promotion. Without a clear definition, ILK risks becoming a vague concept, yet its openness remains essential for it to function as a viable paradigm.

In post-development literature, particularly ILK from the perspective of Latin America (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, 2016; Quijano, 1995), certain challenges emerge, including development processes that dispossess and disenfranchise communities, or ILK practices that do not meet ethical standards. This overview highlights the precarious status of ILK in the contemporary world and underscores the need to approach it with care and openness. Ethical considerations must be integrated into the analysis, incorporating care ethics into the discussion.

Scholars, particularly in Latin America, use ILK to highlight the overlooked role of care in development. Like Indonesia, South America's resource wealth fuels critiques of development and coloniality. Post-development scholars argue that development, as a design (Escobar, 2018), is a modern extension of coloniality, co-constitutive with modernity (Walsh & Mignolo, 2018).

ILK critically interrogates development, identifying areas for radical reform and advocating changes within planetary boundaries (Gómez-Bagethun, 2022). Inspired by Latouche and Gorz, ILK scholarship advances epistemologies of the South (Escobar, 2018; Mignolo, 2011), echoing Alatas' (S. F. Alatas, 2003, 2022) call to decolonise the social sciences (S. F. Alatas, 2022; Chen, 2010; Kamal, 2024).

Quijano (1995) positions Latin America's precolonial rationality—rooted in egalitarianism and reciprocity—as a foundation for alternative epistemologies. This aligns with Alatas' vision of decolonising modernity by synthesising indigenous traditions with Enlightenment thought, asserting that Latin America's identity should emerge from its own intellectual heritage rather than Eurocentric models.

ILK should not only be epistemologised from the South but should also engage in an evolving ontological process. Development, often framed as historical reason liberating humanity from ignorance, must acknowledge alternative subjectivities that progress at different paces and are not solely growth-driven. Mahaswa and Hardiyanti (2023) critique Indonesia's unrealised ambition to balance rationality and sensitivity in development. Similarly, Latin America's development logic incorporates new meanings into a distinct intersubjective structure.

Latin America's ILK experience offers insights for Indonesia, as both regions use ILK

to critique development's limitations (Fischer, 2004; Spencer, 2004; Strang, 2004). Their shared histories of authoritarianism have sought to neutralise indigenous and ethnic sovereignty. Indonesia's paradigm shift on tribal societies has reconfigured traditions, a process Wieringa (2024, 2009, 2013) terms postcolonial amnesia, wherein state intervention re-shapes cultural morality. Costa's findings suggest that aestheticisation aids nation-building but also enables moral and political control. This reflects Indonesia's deontological stance, where traditions are rehabilitated based on normative obligations rather than intrinsic value, often fostering hostility towards socially, religiously, or gender-nonconforming traditions.

Although a deontological ethical stance is not inherently flawed, it contradicts Indonesia's historical pluralism, shaped by the geographic isolation of its communities. This tension necessitates reconsidering alternatives or at least complementing the deontological approach. The issue extends beyond a moral dilemma to the precarious status of Indigenous and Local Knowledge (ILK), which remains vulnerable to politicisation.

Addressing this asymmetry requires careful engagement, making care ethics a relevant alternative. Care ethics, when applied to ILK, highlights the precarity arising from the asymmetrical relationship between the state and local, indigenous, or isolated communities. Fitzgerald (2022, p. 198) categorises this precarity into three dimensions: (1) precarious relations of production, (2) precarious relations of distribution, and (3) precarious relations to the state.

The precarious production of ILK is often reduced to cultural ornamentation, elevating Indonesia's global prestige while lacking substantive support. Many local wisdom studies emphasise aesthetic or spiritual aspects, avoiding deeper inquiry to preserve the status quo.

ILK also faces precarious distribution, as its logic diverges from modernity's dominant framework and remains unvalidated within it. While decentralisation aims to enhance regional welfare, its bureaucratic rationalisation prioritises efficiency over adaptability, leading to alienation. ILK communities are thus denied autonomy, as the state's paternalistic oversight infantilises them as irrational Others.

Precarity in state relations further marginalises ILK. Although its scientific validity is not openly challenged, systemic neglect—evident in development projects that disenfranchise and dispossess communities—renders ILK an ornamental tool aligned with Pancasila or Nusantara nostalgia. Care ethics offers a targeted response to these precarities, addressing the structural inequalities that undermine ILK's role in knowledge production and governance.

ILK, when moralised, risks becoming mere reflection rather than critical inquiry, aligning with Quijano's (2000, 2007) concept of the colonial matrix. Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, p. 5) conceptualises care as ethical maintenance with political implications, shaping interdependent worlds. Care ethics challenges singular truths by highlighting vulnerability (Fitzgerald, 2022, p. 201), reinforcing ILK's open-ended nature and its incommensurability with state structures.

Whether ILK is treated as wisdom or inquiry, ignoring Indonesia's flawed decentrali-

sation would be naïve (Barter, 2008; Diprose, 2009; Diprose et al., 2019; Hofman et al., 2009; Siburian, 2024; Van Hoorn & Rademakers, 2022). While scholars can critique decentralisation, meaningful reform remains unlikely under the status quo.

## Critical Reflection on the Future of Indigenous Research

Revisiting indigenous research in Indonesia, which assumes inherent wisdom in all cultures, necessitates a reassessment of its future direction. A key challenge lies in how researchers approach case studies that diverge significantly from mainstream disciplines.

Firstly, researchers must avoid overgeneralising locality or reducing it to political narratives that reinforce identity and nationalism. Current Indigenous research often remains confined to ethno-nationalist projections rather than addressing specific local issues. For instance, Google Scholar searches reveal a dominant focus on Java, Indonesia's geopolitical and academic hub, reinforcing a Java-centric perspective. This trend, which seeks to nationalise local wisdom, risks politicisation and obstructs a more inclusive, context-sensitive approach.

Indigenous research in Indonesia often assumes that wisdom values endure and remain relevant to future challenges by framing local wisdom research as a national endeavour fostering cultural preservation and moral learning. However, scholars acknowledge that moral learning within this framework lacks robust support from other studies. Many works on local wisdom fail to define their intended moral models, distancing research from genuine decolonisation efforts.

Taufan et al. (2023) discuss local wisdom but provide little concrete support for indigenous communities, relying instead on speculative definitions. Similarly, Panggabean et al. (2015) present 'Local Wisdom: Global Excellence' in a grandiose yet ultimately romanticised manner, failing to address local challenges. This tendency reflects a broader academic preference for flexibility over the concrete integration of local knowledge into daily life. Without critical engagement, local knowledge risks being exoticised rather than meaningfully applied.

The notion of local wisdom as an analytical paradigm in Indonesian research remains largely unsubstantiated. While often contextualised within regional cultures, it lacks a solid methodological or institutional foundation. Kuhn (1962) describes scientific paradigms as evolving through crises, yet local wisdom research remains monolithic, reinforcing cultural values without addressing pluralism.

Many researchers assume that wisdom values are inherently discoverable through scientific inquiry, reinforcing ethnocentric or nationalised research agendas without substantial justification. The push for national character education further complicates matters, raising concerns about political motivations within local wisdom research. Simplistic assumptions obscure complexities, particularly in integrating traditional languages and oral traditions into broader scientific discourse.

Three dominant approaches define local wisdom research in Indonesia: philosophical, psychological, and cultural studies perspectives. While these fields explore indigenous thought, material culture, and psychology, they often lack critical engagement. Instead, research is guided by predetermined positive assumptions rather than rigorous methodologies. Moving forward, local wisdom and Indigenous research in Indonesia must adopt more critical, comprehensive, and methodologically sound approaches.

## Conclusion

The study of wisdom in local wisdom research yields two key insights. First, wisdom remains an unattainable ideal unless it incorporates an inquisitive element to strengthen its reflective dimension. Without critical engagement, local wisdom risks stagnating in romanticised narratives rather than evolving into a meaningful epistemological force. Second, researchers must recognise that age-old wisdom is not static; it must adapt to new paradigms and challenges within both national and global contexts. As Kuhn (1962) suggests, incommensurability prevents knowledge systems from being fully comparable within a single framework, underscoring the need for ongoing reinterpretation rather than rigid validation.

For wisdom to transcend nostalgia and contribute to global discourse, it must embrace inquiry and resist becoming a mere aestheticised nationalistic project. In terms of research programmes, local wisdom research in Indonesia still lacks the institutional rigour to function as a scientific paradigm. Its treatment as a static object of study rather than a dynamic epistemology risks reinforcing ethnocentric biases and limiting its critical potential.

The state and academia must foster an environment where local wisdom is examined critically rather than passively celebrated. Bureaucratic and ideological constraints should not dictate research trajectories, nor should scholars feel pressured to conform to nationalistic narratives. Intellectual freedom, exercised responsibly, is crucial in ensuring that local knowledge remains dynamic, relevant, and capable of engaging with broader epistemological shifts. Ultimately, local wisdom research must move beyond preservation towards interrogation and refinement, ensuring its continued relevance in an evolving world.

## Acknowledgements

We extend our sincere gratitude to the anonymous reviewers and the editorial team of the *Indigenous Southeast Asian and Ethnic Studies* (ISEAES) Journal for their invaluable feedback and suggestions. Their insights have significantly enriched this work. Furthermore, we stand in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples and members of local customary communities worldwide who continue their advocacy for rights and justice. Your resilience and determination remain a source of inspiration.

## Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

This research is no funding or any under research grant.

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