

SYMPHONIA

Journal of Theory and Research Output

Volume 1, Issue 2, March 2026



From Colonial Space to Collective Memory: The Muslim Community's Struggle in the Five-Day Battle of Semarang

Dari Ruang Kolonial Menuju Memori Kolektif: Perjuangan Komunitas Muslim dalam Pertempuran Lima Hari Semarang

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Submitted : 18 May 2026

Revision : 11 June 2026

Accepted : 21 June 2026

Abstract

This study aims to reconstruct the historical role of the Muslim community of Semarang in the Five-Day Battle of 1945 and to examine the transformation of Lawang Sewu from a colonial building into a site of collective memory. This study employs a qualitative historical approach based on library research by analyzing secondary sources, including scholarly articles, historical books, and newspaper publications related to Lawang Sewu, the Five-Day Battle of Semarang, and Muslim participation in the Indonesian independence movement. The findings indicate that Lawang Sewu represents not only a symbol of Dutch colonial power but also a historical space that reflects the struggle of Muslim communities, including *ulama*, *santri*, Islamic organizations, Muslim women, and local residents. Through the perspectives of *history from below* and collective memory, this study reveals that their contributions have been underrepresented in dominant historiography, while the values of solidarity, nationalism, and social responsibility continue to remain relevant for contemporary Muslim generations.

Keywords: Lawang Sewu; Semarang Muslim Struggle; Five-Day Battle; History from Below; Collective Memory

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk merekonstruksi peran historis komunitas Muslim Semarang dalam Pertempuran Lima Hari tahun 1945 serta mengkaji transformasi Lawang Sewu dari bangunan kolonial menjadi ruang memori kolektif. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode sejarah dengan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan melalui analisis sumber sekunder berupa artikel ilmiah, buku sejarah, dan publikasi surat kabar yang berkaitan dengan Lawang Sewu, Pertempuran Lima Hari Semarang, serta keterlibatan komunitas Muslim dalam perjuangan kemerdekaan Indonesia. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Lawang Sewu tidak hanya menjadi simbol kekuasaan kolonial Belanda, tetapi juga ruang historis yang merekam perjuangan komunitas Muslim, termasuk ulama, santri, organisasi Islam, perempuan Muslim, dan masyarakat lokal. Melalui perspektif *history from below* dan memori kolektif, penelitian ini mengungkap bahwa kontribusi mereka masih kurang mendapat perhatian dalam historiografi dominan, sementara nilai solidaritas, nasionalisme, dan tanggung jawab sosial tetap relevan bagi generasi Muslim masa kini.

Kata Kunci: Lawang Sewu; Perjuangan Umat Islam Semarang; Pertempuran Lima Hari; Sejarah dari Bawah; Memori Kolektif



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INTRODUCTION

Lawang Sewu is one of the most iconic cultural heritage buildings in Semarang City, possessing significant historical, architectural, and social value. Constructed in 1904 by the Dutch colonial government as the headquarters of the *Nederlandsch-Indische Spoorweg Maatschappij* (NIS), a private railway company in the Dutch East Indies, the building represents the development of colonial infrastructure as well as a symbol of Dutch authority in Semarang.¹ Today, Lawang Sewu is widely recognized as a historical tourism destination that reflects the grandeur of colonial architecture and serves as one of the cultural identities of Semarang City.²

Previous studies on Lawang Sewu have predominantly focused on its architectural characteristics, cultural heritage preservation, and its function as a historical tourism destination. Other studies have examined the transitional architectural style of Lawang Sewu, highlighting the combination of European and local elements in its design.³ Further research has explored Lawang Sewu as a space of social interaction, demonstrating that the building holds not only historical significance but also social value for the surrounding community.⁴ These findings indicate that the understanding of Lawang Sewu has largely been dominated by architectural, preservation, and social perspectives. However, studies that examine Lawang Sewu as a historical space that records the traces of social struggle, particularly the role of the Muslim community of Semarang in defending Indonesian independence, remain limited. Therefore, further research is necessary to provide a broader understanding of Lawang Sewu as a site of collective memory and public struggle during the Indonesian National Revolution.

In the context of the national struggle for independence, Lawang Sewu was closely associated with the Five-Day Battle of Semarang, which took place from 15 to 19 October 1945.⁵ This event represented one of the forms of resistance carried out by the people of Semarang against Japanese forces and other parties attempting to regain control of Indonesian territory after the proclamation of independence. During this battle, people from various backgrounds participated in the resistance, including ulama, Islamic boarding school students (*santri*), Islamic militias, and Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and Hizbullah.⁶ Nevertheless, studies on the Five-Day Battle of Semarang have mainly emphasized the chronology of events, military strategies, and the roles of prominent figures, while the experiences and contributions of grassroots Muslim communities have received insufficient attention in official historiography.⁷

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- 1 Hassan Hussein, "Preserving History in a Modern Setting "An Adaptive Redesign of Lawang Sewu for Sustainable Development and Architectural Heritage Conservation," *International Journal of Architecture and Urbanism* 7, no. 3 (December 6, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.32734/ijau.v7i3.13748>.
 - 2 Miguel Cabeleira and Carlos Vaz de Carvalho, "Using Augmented Reality to Improve Touristic Efficacy," *Computers* 14, no. 2 (February 18, 2025): 75, <https://doi.org/10.3390/computers14020075>.
 - 3 Cheryl Pricilla Bensa, Md Azalanshah Md Syed, and Rosya Izyanie Shamshudeen, "Semarang's Old Town in Cinematic Spaces: Historical and Religious Narratives in Film," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 13, no. 1 (December 31, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2026.2617062>.
 - 4 Tessa Eka Darmayanti and Miky Endro Santoso, "Kajian Bangunan Lawang Sewu, Semarang, Jawa Tengah Sebagai Ruang Interaksi Sosial," *Waca Cipta Ruang* 9, no. 2 (November 28, 2023): 122–27, <https://doi.org/10.34010/wcr.v9i2.11162>.
 - 5 Dwi Mulyatari et al., "Forging A New Nation: The Role of Youth Radicalism in Semarang's Revolutionary Struggle, 1945-1947," *Paramita: Historical Studies Journal* 35, no. 2 (October 9, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.15294/paramita.v35i2.16485>.
 - 6 Uswatun Hasanah, "Ulema and Santri Movement During the Indonesian Revolution of 1949-1950," *KnE Social Sciences*, April 4, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v9i12.15849>.
 - 7 Geoffrey C. Gunn, "Revisiting the Indonesian National Revolution Through a Post-Authoritarian Lens," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, October 25, 2024, 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2024.2417429>.

This limitation highlights the importance of reconstructing history by bringing forward the experiences of ordinary people who have often been marginalized within mainstream historical narratives. Therefore, this study employs the perspective of *history from below* to emphasize the experiences and contributions of ordinary communities in historical events. In addition, the concept of collective memory proposed by Maurice Halbwachs is employed to understand how these experiences of struggle continue to be preserved and transmitted through social memory across generations. Through these perspectives, Lawang Sewu is understood not merely as a colonial architectural heritage or a historical tourist attraction but also as a space of memory that preserves the historical experiences of the Muslim community of Semarang in defending Indonesian independence.

Based on this background, this study aims to reconstruct the history of Lawang Sewu within the context of Dutch colonial authority and to reveal the role of the Muslim community of Semarang in the Five-Day Battle of 1945. This study also examines the contemporary relevance of the values of struggle inherited from the Muslim community for present-day generations. The novelty of this research lies in its attempt to reinterpret the history of Lawang Sewu through the perspectives of *history from below* and collective memory, thereby producing a more inclusive historical narrative that positions ulama, *santri*, Islamic militias, and Muslim communities as important historical actors who have received limited attention in official historiography.

Method

This study employs a historical research method with a qualitative approach based on library research.⁸ This method was selected because it enables a comprehensive reconstruction of historical events through the examination and interpretation of written sources related to Lawang Sewu, the Five-Day Battle of Semarang, and the role of the Muslim community in the struggle for Indonesian independence. Through historical inquiry, this study does not merely describe past events but also seeks to understand the social context, actors, and meanings behind historical narratives. The historical approach is considered appropriate for revealing overlooked perspectives in mainstream historiography, particularly the experiences of Muslim communities, ulama, *santri*, and Islamic organizations that contributed to the defense of Semarang during the revolutionary period.

The data used in this study were obtained from secondary sources, including scholarly journal articles, historical books, and newspaper publications discussing Lawang Sewu, the Five-Day Battle of Semarang, and the participation of Muslim communities in the Indonesian independence movement. Newspaper records from the revolutionary period were utilized to understand contemporary narratives and public perspectives regarding the events. In addition, academic publications and historical literature were examined to provide broader interpretations of colonial heritage, social movements, and the involvement of Islamic groups during the struggle for independence. The use of diverse secondary sources enables a more comprehensive understanding of historical events from multiple perspectives.

The data analysis followed the stages of historical research, namely heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. The heuristic stage involved identifying and collecting relevant historical literature and documentary sources. Source criticism was conducted to evaluate the credibility, relevance, and consistency of the selected materials. The interpretation stage involved analyzing historical facts using the perspectives of *history from below* and collective memory to highlight marginalized actors and social experiences in historical narratives. Finally, historiography was carried out by systematically reconstructing the historical account of Lawang Sewu as a space of memory and a witness to the Muslim community's struggle during the Five-Day Battle of Semarang.

8 Mestika Zed, *Metode Penelitian Kepustakaan* (Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2008).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Lawang Sewu as a Colonial Space and Historical Transformation

Lawang Sewu was established as part of the expansion of colonial infrastructure in the Dutch East Indies during the early twentieth century. The building was constructed in 1904 as the headquarters of *Nederlandsch-Indische Spoorweg Maatschappij* (NIS), the first private railway company in the Dutch East Indies that played an essential role in developing railway networks and supporting colonial economic activities. The selection of Semarang as the location of NIS headquarters was closely related to its strategic position as a major port city and commercial center on the northern coast of Java. Therefore, the construction of Lawang Sewu reflected not merely the practical needs of railway administration but also the broader colonial agenda of strengthening economic control and administrative authority over indigenous territories.

The architectural design of Lawang Sewu illustrates the encounter between European architectural concepts and the environmental conditions of the tropical region.⁹ Studies on the building's architecture indicate that Lawang Sewu represents a transitional architectural style that combines European design principles with local adaptations, particularly through the use of large windows, high ceilings, wide corridors, and an effective natural ventilation system. These architectural elements were not only intended to accommodate tropical climatic conditions but also symbolized the advancement of European technology and modernity introduced during the colonial period. Consequently, Lawang Sewu became a physical manifestation of Dutch colonial identity and demonstrated how architecture functioned as a medium for expressing political and cultural dominance.

Beyond its architectural significance, Lawang Sewu also represented the unequal social and political relations established under colonial rule.¹⁰ As the administrative center of a major railway company, the building played a crucial role in supporting transportation systems that facilitated the movement of commodities, labor, and economic resources throughout Java. Although railway development contributed to modernization and increased connectivity, it simultaneously served colonial interests by strengthening Dutch economic exploitation and administrative surveillance over indigenous communities. This dual function demonstrates that colonial architecture should not be understood solely as a cultural heritage object but also as a historical evidence of the complex relationships between modernization, power, and colonial domination.

The historical meaning of Lawang Sewu experienced significant transformation during the Japanese occupation between 1942 and 1945. Following the collapse of Dutch colonial authority, the building was taken over by Japanese military forces and was used for military and administrative purposes. Historical records describe that several underground spaces of Lawang Sewu became associated with imprisonment and harsh treatment of detainees during this period. This transformation changed the symbolic meaning of Lawang Sewu from a representation of Dutch colonial modernity into a space that reflected wartime violence, suffering, and political repression under a different occupying power.

The transformation of Lawang Sewu continued after the end of colonialism and the Indonesian struggle for independence. The building gradually shifted from a colonial administrative facility into a historical heritage site that preserves multiple layers of memory from different historical periods. Contemporary studies of cultural heritage emphasize that historical buildings do not possess fixed meanings; instead, their meanings continuously evolve according to social

9 Hassan Gbran, "Studying the Visual Impact of Modern Construction on Historic Cityscapes: A Case Study of Lawang Sewu Building, Indonesia," *Contexto*, 2024.

10 Lukas Ley, *Building on Borrowed Time: Rising Seas and Failing Infrastructure in Semarang* (U of Minnesota Press, 2021).

interpretations and collective experiences. In this context, Lawang Sewu represents a historical space whose identity has transformed from a symbol of colonial authority into a cultural heritage site that preserves memories of oppression, resistance, and the historical journey of the people of Semarang.¹¹

Muslim Community’s Struggle in the Five-Day Battle of Semarang: A History from Below Perspective

The Five-Day Battle of Semarang, which took place from 15 to 19 October 1945, represents one of the significant moments in Indonesia’s revolutionary history. This conflict emerged as a response to the efforts of Japanese military forces and other foreign powers to maintain influence in Semarang following the proclamation of Indonesian independence. Although historical narratives have frequently focused on military strategies and prominent political figures, the battle was fundamentally supported by the collective participation of local communities from diverse social backgrounds. From the perspective of *history from below*, this event should also be understood through the experiences of ordinary people whose contributions were often marginalized in official historical narratives.

Among the groups that played an important role in the struggle were Muslim communities consisting of *ulama*, *santri*, Islamic organizations, Muslim women, and local residents.¹² Islamic institutions such as mosques, pesantren, and religious organizations became important spaces for building collective awareness, disseminating information, and mobilizing communities during the revolutionary period. Their participation demonstrates that the struggle for independence was not solely a military movement but also a social movement supported by religious solidarity, communal networks, and a shared commitment to protecting national sovereignty.

Table 1. The Roles of Muslim Communities in the Five-Day Battle of Semarang (1945)

| Muslim Community Groups | Roles During the Battle | Historical Contribution |
|----------------------------------|---|---|
| <i>Ulama</i> | Providing religious guidance, motivating resistance, and strengthening the spirit of defending the homeland | Connected Islamic values with nationalist consciousness |
| <i>Santri</i> | Participating in local defense and assisting resistance movements | Represented grassroots Muslim participation in the revolution |
| Hizbullah | Organizing semi-military resistance and supporting defense operations | Demonstrated the involvement of Islamic militias in protecting independence |
| Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah | Mobilizing social and religious networks, providing organizational support | Strengthened collective solidarity among Muslim communities |
| Muslim women | Preparing food, providing medical care, and managing logistical assistance | Expanded the understanding of resistance beyond armed struggle |

Source: Author’s synthesis based on historical literature, newspaper archives, and secondary sources (2026)

11 Desi Dwi Prianti and I Wayan Suyadnya, “Decolonising Museum Practice in a Postcolonial Nation: Museum’s Visual Order as the Work of Representation in Constructing Colonial Memory,” *Open Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (September 22, 2022): 228–42, <https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2022-0157>.

12 Martijn Eickhoff et al., “The Memory Landscapes of ‘1965’ in Semarang,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 19, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 530–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2017.1393945>.

Table 1 summarizes that the participation of Muslim communities in the Five-Day Battle of Semarang was multidimensional, involving not only armed resistance but also religious, social, and logistical contributions that supported the continuity of the struggle. The role of *ulama* and *santri* was particularly significant in shaping the moral and spiritual foundation of the resistance. Religious leaders encouraged society to perceive the defense of independence as both a national responsibility and a religious obligation.¹³ This spirit was strengthened by the broader Islamic movement during the revolutionary period, including the influence of the Jihad Resolution that emphasized the importance of defending the newly independent nation from colonial threats.

Beyond religious leaders, Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and Hizbullah created extensive networks that facilitated community mobilization. Their contributions extended beyond direct military engagement, encompassing the distribution of information, the strengthening of social cohesion, and the organization of local resistance. These activities reveal that the revolutionary movement relied heavily on community-based cooperation rather than solely on formal military structures.¹⁴

Another aspect that has often received limited attention in conventional historiography is the participation of ordinary Muslims, including women and local residents who supported the resistance through non-combat roles. Muslim women contributed by preparing food, caring for wounded fighters, and maintaining logistical systems that allowed resistance groups to continue their struggle. Through the perspective of *history from below*, these contributions are equally important because they reveal that independence was achieved not only through heroic figures but also through the collective sacrifices of ordinary communities.¹⁵

Overall, the involvement of Muslim communities in the Five-Day Battle of Semarang demonstrates that the struggle for Indonesian independence was a multidimensional social movement involving religious leaders, grassroots communities, Islamic organizations, and women.¹⁶ Applying the *history from below* perspective allows this study to reconstruct overlooked historical experiences and challenge dominant narratives that primarily emphasize elite actors. Therefore, the history of the Five-Day Battle should be understood as a collective struggle shaped by the participation of ordinary Muslim communities whose contributions remain essential to Indonesia's historical memory.

Lawang Sewu as a Site of Collective Memory and Its Contemporary Relevance for Muslim Generations

Historical buildings possess meanings that extend beyond their physical existence because they preserve memories, experiences, and social values associated with significant historical events. In this context, Lawang Sewu can be understood as a site of collective memory that connects contemporary society with the experiences of previous generations. According to the perspective of collective memory, historical remembrance is not merely an individual recollection but a social process through which communities maintain, reconstruct, and transmit

13 Faisal Ismail, "THE NAHDLATUL ULAMA: Its Early History and Contribution to the Establishment of Indonesian State," *JOURNAL OF INDONESIAN ISLAM* 5, no. 2 (December 1, 2011): 247, <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2011.5.2.247-282>.

14 Mulyatari et al., "Forging A New Nation: The Role of Youth Radicalism in Semarang's Revolutionary Struggle, 1945-1947."

15 Hieronymus Purwanta, "Militaristic Discourse in Secondary Education History Textbooks during and after the Soeharto Era," *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society* 9, no. 1 (March 1, 2017): 36–57, <https://doi.org/10.3167/jemms.2017.090103>.

16 Nariza Ayu Pasha, "Tracing American Spirit in Indonesia's Independence: A Historical-Comparative Study.," *Rubikon: Journal of Transnational American Studies* 11, no. 2 (2024).

interpretations of the past. Therefore, the historical significance of Lawang Sewu is continuously shaped through public narratives, historical education, cultural preservation, and commemorative practices that keep the memory of struggle alive within society.

The transformation of Lawang Sewu from a symbol of Dutch colonial authority into a space representing resistance and national struggle demonstrates the dynamic nature of collective memory.¹⁷ For the Muslim community of Semarang, the historical narratives surrounding the Five-Day Battle represent not only a record of military confrontation but also a reflection of religious commitment, social solidarity, and collective sacrifice.¹⁸ The involvement of *ulama*, *santri*, Islamic organizations, and ordinary Muslim communities forms an important part of local historical consciousness that challenges historical narratives focused primarily on elite figures and military leadership.

The preservation of these historical memories plays a significant role in transmitting values from the revolutionary generation to contemporary Muslim communities.¹⁹ The experiences of past struggles provide ethical lessons concerning the relationship between Islamic teachings and civic responsibility. Through historical interpretation, the participation of Muslim communities during the independence struggle demonstrates that religious identity and national commitment were not contradictory but mutually reinforcing elements in shaping collective resistance.

Table 2. The Contemporary Relevance of Muslim Struggle Values Preserved Through the Collective Memory of Lawang Sewu

| Historical Values | Historical Context | Contemporary Relevance |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| National responsibility | Muslim communities defended independence as a religious and social obligation | Encourages active citizenship and responsibility for maintaining national unity |
| Social solidarity | Cooperation among <i>ulama</i> , <i>santri</i> , Islamic organizations, women, and local communities during the struggle | Promotes mutual cooperation, tolerance, and collective social responsibility |
| Sacrifice and resilience | Communities contributed despite limited resources and dangerous conditions | Inspires younger generations to face contemporary social challenges with perseverance |
| Unity across Islamic groups | NU, Muhammadiyah, and Hizbullah collaborated despite organizational differences | Provides a model for maintaining harmony and cooperation among diverse Muslim communities |

Source: Author’s analysis based on historical findings and the collective memory perspective (2026)

Table 2 demonstrates that the collective memory preserved within Lawang Sewu does not only maintain historical narratives but also transmits moral and social values that remain relevant to contemporary Muslim generations. The values embedded in the historical experience of Muslim communities in Lawang Sewu provide important lessons for contemporary society, particularly

17 Hassan Gbran and Suzanna Ratih Sari, “The Visual Impact of Modern Constructions on the Old Cities in Indonesia: Peoples’ Perceptions of the Lawang Sewu Building in Semarang,” *Planning*, 2023.

18 Tedi Kholiludin, “Collective Memory, Ritual and Symbols as Cultural Defense of Traditional Muslim Society in Semarang, Central Java,” *Jurnal Sosiologi Agama* 19, no. 2 (December 17, 2025): 126–38, <https://doi.org/10.14421/jsa.2025.192-04>.

19 Asma Afsaruddin, *The First Muslims: History and Memory* (Simon and Schuster, 2013).

in addressing social, cultural, and national challenges.²⁰ The spirit of defending the nation can be interpreted today through constructive contributions in education, social engagement, intellectual development, and efforts to strengthen social harmony. Therefore, the meaning of struggle should not be limited to physical resistance but understood as continuous efforts to contribute positively to the progress of society and the nation.

Furthermore, the preservation of collective memory is essential to prevent the disappearance of local historical narratives that often receive less attention within national historiography. Recognizing the contributions of ordinary Muslim communities allows history to be understood as a product of collective experiences rather than the achievements of a small number of prominent figures. Consequently, Lawang Sewu should be interpreted not only as a colonial heritage building and tourist destination but also as a living historical space where memories of struggle, identity formation, and social values continue to be reconstructed across generations.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Lawang Sewu should not merely be understood as a colonial architectural heritage site but as a historical space that records the struggle and collective experiences of the Muslim community during the Five-Day Battle of Semarang in 1945. Through the perspectives of *history from below* and collective memory, this study demonstrates that the independence struggle involved not only military leaders and political elites but also ordinary Muslim actors, including *ulama*, *santri*, Islamic organizations, Muslim women, and local communities. These findings explain that the participation of Muslim communities was shaped by the interconnected values of religious commitment, social solidarity, and national responsibility. By analyzing historical literature, newspapers, and scholarly works, this research reconstructs overlooked historical narratives and presents a more inclusive understanding of the Muslim community's contribution to the Indonesian independence movement.

The contribution of this study lies in expanding the historiography of the Five-Day Battle of Semarang by positioning Lawang Sewu as a site of collective memory and by highlighting the historical agency of grassroots Muslim communities that have received limited attention in dominant historical narratives. However, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary historical sources, which may not fully capture personal memories and local oral traditions related to the event. Therefore, future studies are recommended to incorporate oral history approaches through interviews with local historians, heritage custodians, or descendants of the fighters to enrich the understanding of collective memory and preserve local historical narratives more comprehensively.

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20 Eko Raharjo Raharjo et al., "Gambang Semarang in the Context of Coastal Culture: Revitalizing Local Wisdom for Education and Tourism," *Resital: Jurnal Seni Pertunjukan* 25, no. 3 (April 29, 2025): 430–59, <https://doi.org/10.24821/resital.v25i3.14839>.

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