

The Transformation of the Function of Jeep Vehicles from Combat Vehicles to Urban Cultural Identity: An Ethnographic-Archaeological Study in the City of Bandung

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ABSTRACT

Historic vehicles represent an important category of movable cultural heritage because they contain historical values, technological development, and collective memories of societies. However, the preservation of military vehicles in Indonesia remains limited, particularly regarding their transformation from functional war equipment into cultural identity symbols. This study aims to reconstruct the transformation process of military jeep vehicles, particularly Willys MB and Ford GPW, from instruments of warfare during the Indonesian independence period into cultural heritage objects within the urban community of Bandung. This research employed a qualitative ethnoarchaeological approach by combining material culture analysis and community ethnography. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with historical jeep communities, artifact documentation, and analysis using cultural biography theory, collective memory theory, and the Burra Charter framework. The results reveal three transformation phases: (1) 1945–1960, when jeeps functioned as combat and guerrilla mobility instruments; (2) 1960–1990, when they shifted into civilian utility vehicles; and (3) 1990–present, when preservation communities transformed them into symbols of historical memory and urban identity. The discussion shows that preservation practices, public commemorative activities, and community narratives play significant roles in maintaining the cultural meaning of these vehicles. This study concludes that historic jeeps are not merely technological artifacts but dynamic heritage objects that contribute to collective memory, national identity, and community-based heritage preservation in Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

The history of jeep vehicles in Indonesia cannot be separated from the War of Independence (1945–1949). The presence of this vehicle was not the result of commercial transactions, but a direct consequence of the geopolitical turmoil after the Japanese surrender in August 1945. When Allied forces especially the British under AFNEI's command landed in various Indonesian ports to disarm the Japanese army, they brought with them a fleet of light combat vehicles that had been the backbone of Western military mobility since World War II: Willys MBs and Ford GPWs.

The Willys MB was produced in more than 359,000 units during the war, equipped with a 2.2-liter four-cylinder engine with 54 horsepower, a weight of about 1,100 kilograms, a length of 3.3 meters, and four-wheel drive (4x4) capabilities. The Ford GPW was produced

as a licensed version with nearly identical specifications, so the parts of the two variants could be interchanged in the field – a decisive logistical advantage on the battlefield.

In the city of Bandung, jeeps first appeared as instruments of foreign powers. The British troops of MacDonald's Brigade arrived in October 1945, carrying a sloping vehicle that soon became an unfamiliar sight on the streets of the city. The situation turned around as the conflict heated up: through fighting and the takeover of military depots, fighters of the Indonesian Army (TRI) and the people's army managed to control a number of jeep units. The first functional transformation took place quickly – machine guns were mounted in the tailgate, simple steel plates were mounted as shields, and jeeps were transformed into agile guerrilla command vehicles.

In the Bandung Lautan Api incident on March 23–24, 1946 – when about 200,000 Bandung residents burned their own city so as not to fall into the hands of the Dutch NICA military jeeps played a crucial logistical role: transporting officials, field commanders, and combat equipment amid the panic of mass evacuation to the plateau south of Bandung. In the first phase of its presence, these vehicles are living and functional war artifacts.

Seven decades after the War of Independence, old jeeps are once again enlivening the streets of Bandung – but this time as a vehicle for nostalgia, communal identity, and cultural expression. This phenomenon is most visible in the presence of the historic jeep preservation community that has grown since the mid-1990s. The two most well-known are the Jeep Ex Military Community (KJM) founded by Tatang Teddy – familiarly called Tedy Keuyeup – and the Bandung Jeep Association (PJB).

The motive that drove the establishment of this community went far beyond the automotive hobby. As expressed by its founders, there is an explicit awareness that these vehicles hold historical value that should not be extinct. Tatang Teddy's statement – "This jeep has a history for this nation, that's why I want to preserve it" – reflects the awareness of heritage that grows organically from below, long before the state came up with regulations on the protection of moving cultural heritage objects.

What distinguishes this community from conventional automotive hobby groups is its explicit and structured cultural awareness (Sachs, 2023; Wenger, 2012). KJM and PJB members don't just chase old vehicles as an investment or mechanical pleasure; They build a narrative that positions themselves as heirs and guardians of the nation's historical memory. This identity as the "custodians of the artifacts of the revolution" is reflected in the way they document vehicles, the way they talk about their history, and the way they choose events to display their vehicles publicly (Bladh, 2019).

These community activities have created a unique cultural ecosystem. Jeep parades on the 17th of August commemoration, regular kopdar (ground coffee) at historical workshops, cross-terrain explorations to battle sites around Bandung, to attendance at cultural events and national commemorations – all of this forms a new cultural landscape in which historical material objects become mediums of social interaction, identity formation, and collective memory transmission between generations (Larsson, 2025; Wydra, 2018).

One significant category of movable heritage that reflects modern historical experience is military automotive artifacts (Clark, 2020; Conlin & Jolliffe, 2016). Vehicles used during armed conflicts often possess values beyond their original functional purposes because they become witnesses to political struggles, technological advancement, and collective memory

formation (Orianne & Eustache, 2023). Globally, military vehicles from World War II, such as the Willys MB and Ford GPW jeeps, have been preserved in various countries through museums, historical vehicle associations, and community-based conservation initiatives. The Willys MB, produced by Willys-Overland Motors, reached more than 359,000 units during 1941–1945, while Ford GPW production exceeded 277,000 units during the same period. Their extensive use during World War II established these vehicles as symbols of military mobility and technological innovation. Nevertheless, in many developing countries, including Indonesia, historical vehicles are still rarely positioned within formal heritage protection systems despite their potential historical significance.

Indonesia represents an important case in understanding the transformation of military vehicles into cultural heritage because several wartime artifacts remain connected to the national independence narrative (Ross, 2026). During the Indonesian War of Independence (1945–1949), military jeeps such as Willys MB and Ford GPW entered Indonesian territory through Allied military operations after the Japanese surrender. In Bandung, these vehicles initially represented foreign military power but later transformed into strategic instruments used by Indonesian fighters during the revolutionary period. The Bandung Lautan Api event on March 23–24, 1946, represents one of the historical moments associated with military mobility, where various vehicles, including jeeps, supported evacuation and logistical activities during the conflict. Over time, these vehicles experienced functional changes from combat equipment into civilian transportation tools before eventually becoming historical objects preserved by automotive communities.

The contemporary phenomenon of historic jeep preservation in Bandung demonstrates how material objects can develop new cultural meanings through community practices. Communities such as the Komunitas Jeep ex Militer (KJM) and Paguyuban Jeep Bandung (PJB) have played an important role in maintaining these vehicles, documenting their histories, and introducing them to younger generations. Their activities extend beyond automotive hobbies because they construct narratives of national memory and cultural identity through restoration activities, historical discussions, parades, and participation in commemorative events. This condition illustrates that objects are not passive remnants of the past but active elements involved in shaping social identity, collective memory, and relationships between communities and historical experiences.

Previous research has shown that material objects possess social meanings that continuously change according to their interactions with human actors. Kopytoff (1986), through the concept of cultural biography of objects, explained that objects experience different social stages, including production, circulation, utilization, and eventual transformation into culturally significant entities through a process known as singularization. Similarly, Gosden and Marshall (1999) emphasized that objects contain biographies shaped by human relationships, historical contexts, and cultural interpretations. Recent studies on community-based heritage management have also demonstrated that local communities frequently become important actors in conserving cultural heritage outside formal institutional frameworks (Smith et al., 2016; Sudarmadi, 2023). However, most previous studies have focused on buildings, landscapes, traditional objects, or archaeological sites rather than modern transportation artifacts.

Although studies on material culture and community heritage have developed significantly, research examining historic military vehicles as movable cultural heritage remains limited, particularly within the Indonesian context. Existing studies related to Indonesian heritage preservation generally emphasize architectural heritage, archaeological remains, and traditional cultural practices, while modern conflict archaeology and industrial heritage studies remain underdeveloped. Furthermore, previous research has rarely examined how automotive artifacts transform from functional technological objects into symbols of urban cultural identity through community-based practices. This creates a disciplinary gap between archaeology, heritage studies, and cultural anthropology, particularly regarding how contemporary communities actively construct meanings around historical vehicles.

The absence of comprehensive academic studies on historic jeep preservation creates several important problems. First, the number of surviving original military jeeps continues to decline due to physical deterioration, modification, and limited conservation awareness. Based on information from preservation communities, the number of original Willys MB and Ford GPW units operating in West Java is estimated to have decreased significantly compared with previous decades. Second, Indonesia currently lacks a strong empirical foundation for developing policies related to movable cultural heritage registration and conservation. Although Government Regulation Number 1 of 2022 encourages public participation in cultural heritage preservation, effective implementation requires scientific research that identifies historical value, authenticity, and community involvement. Third, the knowledge possessed by early jeep collectors and community pioneers is at risk of disappearing due to aging custodians and limited documentation.

This research introduces a novel perspective by integrating cultural biography theory, ethnoarchaeological approaches, collective memory theory, and cultural significance assessment frameworks to understand historic jeep vehicles as dynamic heritage objects. Unlike previous studies that primarily examine artifacts through their physical characteristics or historical documentation, this study investigates the complete transformation process of jeep vehicles, from military instruments during independence struggles to symbols of urban cultural identity within Bandung society. The application of ethnoarchaeology provides a methodological contribution by connecting material analysis of vehicles with observations of living communities that preserve, interpret, and reproduce the meanings of these artifacts. Furthermore, applying the Burra Charter framework to historic vehicles contributes to expanding heritage assessment beyond immovable cultural properties.

Therefore, this research aims to reconstruct the cultural biography of Willys MB and Ford GPW jeep vehicles within the Indonesian historical context, particularly in Bandung, by examining their functional transformation, social meanings, and role in forming urban cultural identity. Specifically, this study seeks to identify the historical phases of jeep transformation from military equipment, civilian utility vehicles, to heritage symbols; analyze the social practices conducted by historical jeep communities in preserving collective memory; and evaluate the cultural significance of these vehicles based on historical, aesthetic, scientific, and social values. Through this approach, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of how material objects become integrated into identity formation processes within contemporary urban communities.

The findings of this research are expected to contribute theoretically, practically, and institutionally. Theoretically, this study enriches archaeological and heritage studies by expanding discussions of cultural biography and material culture into the field of automotive heritage and modern conflict archaeology. Practically, the research provides valuable insights for historic vehicle communities, collectors, and conservation practitioners regarding sustainable preservation strategies. Institutionally, the findings may support policymakers in developing community-based conservation models, registration mechanisms, and heritage protection strategies for movable cultural objects in Indonesia. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that historic vehicles are not merely outdated technologies but living cultural artifacts capable of maintaining historical consciousness, strengthening community identity, and preserving collective memory across generations.

METHOD

Research Approach: Qualitative Ethnoarchaeology

This research used a qualitative ethnoarchaeological approach a methodological orientation that bridges ethnography as the study of living communities, and material archaeology as the analysis of physical artifacts. Ethnoarchaeology, as formulated by David and Kramer (2001), is ethnographic field research designed to contribute to archaeological interpretation by examining the material traces of ongoing human behavior.

In this study, the approach is operationalized in two simultaneous tracks: (1) ethnographic assessment of the historical jeep community in the city of Bandung; and (2) material archaeological analysis of the jeep vehicles themselves as physical artifacts that keep traces of use, modification, and transformation across eras. The research location was determined in the city of Bandung and its surroundings (Bandung Regency), with a field research duration of twelve months.

Primary Data Collection

The first technique was participatory observation on the activities of historical jeep communities KJM, PJB, and affiliated groups. Activities that became an observation arena included: routine kopdar as a forum for the exchange of technical and historical knowledge; parades and convoys on August 17 and March 23; restoration sessions in historical workshops; as well as cross-terrain exploration to historical battle sites around Bandung.

The second technique was an in-depth interview with purposively selected speakers from four main groups: historic military jeep owners and collectors; mechanics and technicians of restoration specialists; local automotive observers and historians; as well as administrators and active members of the KJM and PJB communities. The number of speakers is determined based on the principle of data saturation, estimated to be between 20 to 30 speakers.

The third technique is systematic documentation of artifacts, including: measurement and recording of the physical dimensions of the vehicle following the standard protocol of archaeological documentation; systematic technical photography using multi-angle protocols; and analysis of original versus modified components. Each vehicle unit is assessed to produce a material integrity profile based on the Burra Charter framework (Australian ICOMOS, 2013).

Data Analysis

Interview data was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis in six phases: data familiarization, initial code generation, theme search, theme review, theme definition, and analytical report writing. To ensure methodological rigor, the coding process was carried out independently by two researchers with the resolution of differences through consensus discussion.

Artifact data were analyzed using an archaeological typology combined with Burra Charter-based material integrity analysis. Each unit is classified based on model variants, estimated years of production, and original component completeness index calculated as the ratio of original verified components to total assessable components (score 0–1). Validity is guaranteed through triangulation of data sources, triangulation of methods, member checking, and systematic trail audits.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Typology of Historical Jeeps in Bandung: Classification and Material Integrity Profile

Based on field documentation, three main variants of the vehicle were found. The Willys MB (1941–1945, more than 359,000 units produced) can be identified by the tubular cross-frame under the radiator and the engine gauge plate coded MB. The Ford GPW (1941–1945, more than 277,000 units produced) can be distinguished by its square-shaped front frame crossmember and GPW-coded engine plates. The Willys CJ (Civilian Jeep, produced from 1945) was a conversion of the military production line to the civilian market the forerunner of the modern civilian SUV generation.

An assessment of the level of originality of the artifacts showed a significant gradation. Adapting the Military Vehicle Preservation Association's (MVPA) scoring system, this study classified the units into three categories: (1) Original Primary Units component integrity index > 0.85 ; (2) Functional Restoration Unit index $0.50\text{--}0.85$; and (3) Modified Units $< \text{index of } 0.50$. The latter category, while historically lower from an archaeological conservation perspective, is actually the most prevalent in the field reflecting the tension between the value of authenticity and operational needs that are constantly being negotiated within the community.

Functional Transformation Phase: Biography of Jeep Vehicle Materials in Indonesia

The analysis of historical and ethnographic data allows the reconstruction of the three-phase transformation of the function of military jeep vehicles in Indonesia. Phase I (1945–1960): From Combat Equipment to Operational Vehicles. When the TRI and the people's army succeeded in gaining control of the vehicle units of the Allied military depots, the jeeps were immediately converted into guerrilla combat vehicles: equipped with machine guns, equipped with improvised steel plates, and used for reconnaissance operations and command transport. The jeep became a decisive mobility instrument in the TRI guerrilla strategy in the hilly terrain of West Java, including in the dramatic evacuation of Bandung Lautan Api in March 1946.

Phase II (1960–1990): From Official Vehicles to Civil Work Tools. As vehicles age and new, more modern military fleets enter, jeep units began to be sold or transferred to the civilian sector. Some became official vehicles of local government agencies, some were purchased by civilians for agriculture and transportation in hard-to-reach areas, and some were converted to

informal public transportation known as "latrine taxis" in the mountainous areas around Bandung. In this phase, vehicles undergo the desacralization of military status and become an ordinary utilitarian commodity.

Phase III (1990–present): Singularization and the Formation of Community Identity. The turning point came in the mid-1990s, when the scarcity of units still in operation provoked cultural awareness among automotive enthusiasts and historians alike. The establishment of KJM and PJB marks the institutionalization of this awareness in the form of a social organization with an explicit agenda of heritage preservation. The singularization that occurs is communal, reflexive, and national the values attached to the vehicle are explicitly associated with the narrative of Indonesia's national independence (Anugrah et al., 2025).

The Formation of Urban Cultural Identity: Collective Memory and Social Practice

Ethnographic findings show that historical jeep vehicles have become the main medium for the formation and reproduction of the cultural identity of the Bandung urban community through three mutually supportive social mechanisms. The first mechanism: the ritual of preservation. Cooperative activities, exploration, and restoration together are not just technical pastimes, but social practices that in the framework of Halbwachs (1992) function to build and update the *cadres sociaux* necessary to maintain collective memory.

The second mechanism: national parades and convoys. In Nora's (1989) framework of *lieux de mémoire*, the jeep parade serves as a ritual that makes physical artifacts a "place" where collective memories of the revolution can be accessed, experienced, and publicly transmitted. The fundamental difference between static monuments and moving artifacts in the parade is the kinesis dimension the movement of jeeps through urban spaces actively remaps Bandung's urban landscape as a landscape of memory.

The third mechanism: the national narrative. Interviews with community members consistently show narrative patterns that associate specific vehicles with specific historical figures and events (Jovchelovitch, 2012). Although not always archaeologically verifiable, these narratives serve as "symbolic glue" that connects material objects to national memory.

The Cultural Landscape of Jeeps in Bandung: The Geography of Urban Memory

Spatial distribution mapping shows that historical jeep vehicles in Bandung are present in four categories of space. First, the historical restoration workshop serves as a place of production of archaeological technical knowledge where the diagnosis of the authenticity of components is carried out and knowledge of the original specifications of the vehicle is passed down from senior mechanics to the next generation. Second, private collector's garages are the most intimate space in some cases they serve as informal museums equipped with photo documentation and interpretive materials about the history of vehicles.

Third, the city's public space is activated by the presence of jeeps in parades and convoys. Jalan Asia Afrika, Tegalega Square, and the main corridors of Bandung are transformed into *lieux de mémoire* in these moments. Fourth, the natural landscape around Bandung cross-terrain exploration trails that trace the route of historical military operations in the Priangan Mountains is a space where vehicles are re-placed in a geographical context that is close to the original context of their use, creating a "performative archaeology".

The Value of Cultural Significance: A Framework-Based Analysis of the Burra Charter

Following the Burra Charter's cultural significance assessment framework (Australia ICOMOS, 2013), this study identified four categories of values. Historical value is the strongest category: Willys MB and Ford GPW jeeps are the only remaining movable and operable categories of the 1945–1949 Indonesian War of Independence materials. The aesthetic value lies in the iconic design of the seven-hole grille – one of the most universal design artifacts of the 20th century – which was able to elicit a strong emotional and cultural response from the people of Bandung.

Its scientific value lies in its potential to contribute to the understanding of WWII military technology, the logistical dynamics of the War of Independence, and the process of material transformation from military to civilian contexts. Social value is the most dynamic dimension: the jeep vehicle has historically been the focus of cultural sentimentality, communal identity, and social cohesion for the communities that surround it. The Burra Charter explicitly recognizes social value as a category of significance that encompasses "qualities that make a place or object the focus of other spiritual, political, national, or cultural sentiments" – and all of those criteria are met in this case.

CONCLUSION

This research succeeded in systematically reconstructing the three transformation phases that formed the material biography of jeep vehicles over eight decades. The first phase (1945–1960) marked the presence of jeeps as combat artifacts that were captured and converted into guerrilla instruments. The second phase (1960–1990) was a period of utilitarian desacralization: jeeps transitioned to diverse civilian functions and became ordinary commodities. The third phase (1990–present) is the singularization phase, in which vehicles are pulled out of commodity circulation through a community-initiated collective process, and historical-symbolic values progressively replace functional values. This reconstruction shows that the process of singularization in Indonesia's urban context depends on three structural conditions: the availability of social networks that facilitate the exchange of knowledge and values; historical momentum that gives legitimacy to heritage claims; and the growing awareness of urban identity that seeks roots in historical material artifacts. The three social mechanisms that work simultaneously – preservation rituals, national parades, and the construction of national narratives – form the historical jeep community in Bandung as a memory preservation institution that functions without a formal mandate from the state. This research provides three original theoretical contributions. First, the empirical expansion of the concept of cultural biography of objects (Kopytoff, 1986) into the domain of military automotive artifacts – a field that was previously hardly explored in the context of Indonesian archaeology. Second, the development of ethnoarchaeological methodologies for contemporary artifact custodian communities, shifting the focus from the community of makers to the community of caregivers and interpreters of the meaning of artifacts. Third, the application of the Burra Charter's cultural significance framework to historic motor vehicles, providing an assessment instrument that can be adapted to other categories of movable artifacts. The findings of this study have significant and urgent policy implications within the framework of Government Regulation Number 1 of 2022. The first recommendation is the development of a community-based registration system for historic motor vehicles – a kind of

"heritage passport" for each unit of historic vehicle that records the chassis number, provenance, and material integrity index on an ongoing basis. The second recommendation is the establishment of contextual and realistic authenticity criteria for movable cultural heritage objects, based on the Burra Charter framework that recognizes authenticity can be attached to fabrics, settings, uses, associations, and meanings separately or integrated. The third recommendation is the establishment of fiscal and technical incentive mechanisms for historic vehicle owners that comply with conservation standards. The fourth and most fundamental recommendation is a shift from a top-down approach to a community-based Co-Stewardship model, positioning the community as strategic partners rather than policy objects that have local knowledge, institutional capacity, and social legitimacy that formal heritage bureaucracies do not have.

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