

Aceh Documentary as a Field of Cultural Production: Institutional Transformation and the Production of Acehese Cultural Narratives, 2013–2026

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Abstract

This study analyzes the institutional transformation of Aceh Documentary as a field of cultural production that enables the creation, preservation, and circulation of Acehese narratives from 2013 to 2026. It examines how local filmmakers built an independent film ecosystem through regeneration, community programs, festivals, collaborative networks, and changing documentary functions. A qualitative design combined phenomenology and historical inquiry. Purposively selected informants included the founder, core administrators, mentors, and alumni. Data from interviews, observation, and documentation were analyzed through Moustakas's phenomenological procedure and four-stage historical analysis, with source, technique, and time triangulation. The findings identify four phases: community pioneering and consolidation (2013–2014), institutionalization and program expansion (2014–2019), network strengthening and digital professionalization (2020–2024), and expansion toward the film industry (2025–2026). Social capital underpinned its conversion into cultural and symbolic capital, while economic capital remained limited. Documentary production accumulated four functions: social advocacy, public literacy, cultural preservation, and digital distribution. Aceh Documentary therefore functions not merely as a production house, but as a shared learning institution and cultural intermediary sustaining local filmmakers and circulating Acehese social, historical, and cultural narratives.

Keywords: documentary film; cultural production; Acehese narratives; collective memory; local filmmakers

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis transformasi kelembagaan Aceh Documentary sebagai arena produksi kultural yang memungkinkan penciptaan, pelestarian, dan sirkulasi narasi Aceh selama 2013–2026. Kajian ini menjelaskan cara sineas lokal membangun ekosistem perfilman independen melalui regenerasi, program komunitas, festival, jejaring kolaborasi, dan perubahan fungsi dokumenter. Penelitian menggunakan desain kualitatif yang memadukan fenomenologi dan pendekatan historis. Informan dipilih secara purposif, meliputi pendiri, pengurus inti, mentor, dan alumni. Data wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi dianalisis melalui prosedur fenomenologi Moustakas dan analisis historis empat tahap, dengan triangulasi sumber, teknik, dan waktu. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan empat fase: rintisan dan konsolidasi komunitas (2013–2014), pelembagaan dan ekspansi program (2014–2019), penguatan jejaring dan profesionalisasi digital (2020–2024), serta ekspansi menuju industri film (2025–2026). Modal sosial menjadi fondasi konversi menuju modal kultural dan simbolik, sedangkan modal ekonomi tetap terbatas. Produksi dokumenter mengakumulasi empat fungsi, yaitu advokasi sosial, literasi publik, pelestarian budaya, dan distribusi digital. Dengan demikian, Aceh Documentary bukan sekadar rumah produksi, melainkan ruang belajar

bersama dan perantara budaya yang menjaga keberlanjutan sineas lokal serta sirkulasi narasi sosial, sejarah, dan budaya Aceh.

Kata kunci: film dokumenter; produksi kultural; narasi Aceh; memori kolektif; sineas lokal

الملخص

تحلل هذه الدراسة التحول المؤسسي لمؤسسة Aceh Documentary بوصفها مجالاً للإنتاج الثقافي يتيح إنتاج السرديات الاتشيمية وحفظها وتداولها من عام ٢٠١٣ إلى عام ٢٠٢٦. وتبحث في كيفية بناء صنّاع الأفلام المحليين منظومة سينمائية مستقلة من خلال إعداد الأجيال، والبرامج المجتمعية، والمهرجانات، وشبكات التعاون، وتحول وظائف الفيلم الوثائقي. اعتمدت الدراسة تصميمًا نوعيًا يجمع بين الظاهراتية والاستقصاء التاريخي. واختير المخبرون قصديًا من المؤسس، والإداريين الأساسيين، والمرشدين، والخريجين. وجمعت البيانات بالمقابلات والملاحظة والوثائق، ثم حُللت وفق إجراءات مستاكاس الظاهراتية والتحليل التاريخي ذي المراحل الأربع، مع تثلث المصادر والتقنيات والزمنة. وأظهرت النتائج أربع مراحل: التأسيس وتوطيد المجتمع بين عامي ٢٠١٣ و٢٠١٤، والمأسسة وتوسيع البرامج بين عامي ٢٠١٤ و٢٠١٩، وتعزيز الشبكات والاحتراف الرقمي بين عامي ٢٠٢٠ و٢٠٢٤، والتوسع نحو صناعة السينما بين عامي ٢٠٢٥ و٢٠٢٦. وشكّل رأس المال الاجتماعي أساسًا للتحول إلى رأس مال ثقافي ورمزي، في حين ظل رأس المال الاقتصادي محدودًا. كما تراكمت للإنتاج الوثائقي أربع وظائف: المناصرة الاجتماعية، والتثقيف العام، وحفظ الثقافة، والتوزيع الرقمي. وبذلك لا تعمل Aceh Documentary بوصفها دار إنتاج فحسب، بل فضاءً للتعليم المشترك ووسيطًا ثقافيًا يدعم استدامة صنّاع الأفلام المحليين وتداول السرديات الاجتماعية والتاريخية والثقافية لاتشيه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الفيلم الوثائقي؛ الإنتاج الثقافي؛ السرديات الاتشيمية؛ الذاكرة الجمعية؛ صنّاع الأفلام المحليون

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1. INTRODUCTION

Documentary film occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of narrative, history, and culture. Rather than merely recording events, it organizes voices, images, memories, and social meanings into an audiovisual cultural text through which communities represent themselves and negotiate how their experiences are understood. Within Indonesia's creative economy, film, animation, and video have also become strategic subsectors promoted through production, distribution, and creative employment initiatives (Kreatif, 2024). Documentary practice therefore connects cultural expression with institutional conditions that determine who can produce, preserve, and circulate local narratives.

A documentary is not an objective copy of reality. It is a constructed representation shaped by narrative selection, aesthetic decisions, ethical considerations, and the filmmaker's position in relation to the people and events being recorded (Nichols, 2017; Turner, 1999). This representational character enables community-based documentaries to articulate collective experiences that are often absent from mainstream discourse. Following the political reforms of 1998, reduced censorship and more affordable digital cameras

widened access to audiovisual production and encouraged independent film communities across Indonesia (Hanan, 2021; Irawanto & Octastefani, 2019). These communities became not only production groups but also cultural spaces in which local stories, identities, and memories could be narrated from within.

Aceh's documentary development emerged from a particularly complex historical setting. Almost three decades of armed conflict between the Free Aceh Movement and the Indonesian government were followed by the 2004 tsunami and the 2005 Helsinki peace agreement, initiating extensive social and cultural reconstruction (Ikromatoun, 2017). Post-tsunami nongovernmental organizations created a need for visual documentation of recovery and indirectly introduced audiovisual skills to young Acehnese outside formal education. In this context, documentary film acquired significance as an archive of social experience, a medium for public reflection, and a means of preserving local historical and cultural memory. Social networks and community capital also became essential resources for rebuilding life after conflict and disaster (Liata, 2025).

Aceh Documentary was established in 2013 within this context as an independent, collective, and community-based space for learning and producing documentary film. In 2014, the informal community became a legal organization under the name Yayasan Aceh Dokumenter. It subsequently developed structured programs, including the Aceh Documentary Competition, Aceh Documentary Junior, Aceh Film Festival, Aceh Documentary Forum, Gampong Film, and AdocLab. Through these programs, the institution did more than produce films: it trained local cultural agents, created spaces for interpreting Acehnese realities, preserved memories of conflict and social change, and developed channels through which local narratives could reach wider audiences. From 2013 to 2026, transformation occurred across production practices, technology, regeneration, mentoring, distribution, and production networks.

This study therefore treats Aceh Documentary as a field of cultural production rather than merely as a media organization undergoing administrative change. Its institutional transformation is examined as a sociocultural process in which local filmmakers act collectively to produce meaning and sustain regional narratives. Six complementary perspectives guide the analysis. Sztompka's (2004) theory of social transformation conceptualizes change as social becoming produced through reciprocal relations between structure and agency. The film-ecosystem concept maps education, production, distribution, appreciation, and networking. Tarrow's (2011) social-movement theory explains how shared needs, mobilizing structures, and institutionalization turn local filmmakers into an enduring collective force.

Bourdieu's (1993) field of cultural production is central to explaining how filmmakers negotiate position and recognition through social, cultural, symbolic, and economic capital. The production-of-culture perspective demonstrates that audiovisual cultural texts are shaped not only by individual creativity but also by technology, organizational structure, occupational careers, regulation, markets, and collaborative work (Peterson & Anand, 2004). Participatory communication, derived from Freire and Servaes, is used to examine dialogical mentoring as a mechanism for transmitting documentary skills, cultural sensitivity, and organizational values across generations (Pongoh, 2022; Servaes, 2008). Together, these perspectives connect institutional change with the production, preservation, and circulation of Acehnese narratives. Recent scholarship on collaborative audiovisual practice reinforces this institutional emphasis by showing that participation and co-creation are not single techniques but heterogeneous production relations that organize authorship, decision-making, and collective work in non-fiction media (Balaguer & Alberich-Pascual, 2024).

Previous studies on film in Aceh have predominantly examined meaning, identity, cultural diplomacy, educational functions, or documentary film as a catalyst for social change. Recent Aceh-based scholarship

has shown how documentary meaning can be constructed through visual rhetoric and symbolic organization (Azhari, 2026), while research on public discourse has emphasized the role of mediated representation in producing social meaning, legitimacy, and collective perception (Fajri, 2025). International scholarship also demonstrates that community film festivals are shaped by organizational power, local history, and competing meanings of participation (Póvoa, 2023), and that collaborative audiovisual production depends on differentiated relations among participants rather than on participation as an undifferentiated category (Balaguer & Alberich-Pascual, 2024). However, limited attention has been paid to the institution that makes sustained cultural narration possible: how a local film community organizes regeneration, converts social relations into cultural authority, builds spaces of appreciation, preserves collective memory, and develops distribution channels over more than a decade. Existing research has also rarely reconstructed the transformation of a single regional film institution diachronically while connecting organizational change with its changing capacity to produce and circulate local narratives. This gap establishes the novelty of the present study.

Accordingly, this study addresses three objectives: (1) to examine the institutional transformation of Aceh Documentary as a regional cultural-production institution from 2013 to 2026; (2) to analyze how local filmmakers, regeneration programs, festivals, and collaborative networks construct an independent field of cultural production in Aceh; and (3) to explain how documentary production developed from recording events into a mechanism for social advocacy, public literacy, cultural preservation, and the digital circulation of Acehnese narratives.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative design combining phenomenology and historical inquiry. A qualitative approach was selected because the research sought to understand meaning, experience, and institutional change rather than to test relationships among variables (Fadli, 2021). Phenomenology was used to examine how filmmakers interpreted the changes they experienced, while historical inquiry reconstructed Aceh Documentary's development from 2013 to 2026 chronologically (Hasbiansyah, 2008; Kuntowijoyo, 2013; Maulana & Budiyo, 2024). The unit of analysis was the institution and its practices of learning, production, preservation, and circulation; the study did not conduct a formal textual analysis of individual films. The two approaches complement Sztompka's framework: phenomenology captures the subjective experience of agents, while historical inquiry explains the changing structures within which local cultural production took place.

The research was conducted in Banda Aceh, with the Aceh Documentary office serving as the primary field site. Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct knowledge of and involvement in the organization (Lenaini, 2021; Sugiyono, 2017). They included the organization's founder, core administrators, program mentors or facilitators, and alumni. Variation in position and length of involvement enabled the institutional transformation to be examined from multiple generational and organizational perspectives.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews guided by questions derived from the research objectives (Kvale, 2018), observation of Aceh Documentary's activities and programs, and documentary study of organizational archives, photographs, and media reports. All interview excerpts presented in this article were translated into English by the author without altering their meaning.

Two analytical procedures were integrated. First, phenomenological analysis followed Moustakas (2011): epoche, horizontalization, identification of significant statements, thematic clustering, textural and

structural description, and synthesis of the shared essence. Second, historical analysis followed four stages: heuristics or source collection, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography (Kuntowijoyo, 2013; Sayono, 2021). Trustworthiness was maintained through source triangulation across informants with different roles, technique triangulation across interviews, observation, and documents, and time triangulation through repeated checks of informant accounts when field conditions permitted (Moleong, 2012).

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 Institutional Phases in Acehese Cultural Production

The institutional transformation of Aceh Documentary did not occur as a single abrupt change. It developed gradually through organizational experience, the growth of its filmmakers, and changes in the social and technological environment. Interview, observation, and documentary data indicate four phases: pioneering and community consolidation (2013–2014), institutionalization and program expansion (2014–2019), network strengthening and digital professionalization (2020–2024), and expansion toward the film industry (2025–2026). Each phase changed not only the organizational form but also the institution's capacity to train cultural agents, preserve audiovisual records, and circulate Acehese narratives.

Table 1. Institutional phases in the production and circulation of Acehese narratives

Period	Institutional phase	Principal characteristics and cultural significance
2013–2014	Pioneering and community consolidation	Informal structure; solidarity-based work; documentary advocacy; formation of the founding network; initial articulation of local social realities.
2014–2019	Institutionalization and program expansion	Legal status as a foundation; access to partnerships; annual competitions; Aceh Film Festival; structured regeneration and recurring spaces for local film circulation.
2020–2024	Network strengthening and digital professionalization	Clearer divisions of work; professional production technology; wider festival networks; expanded capacity to produce and circulate Acehese audiovisual narratives.
2025–2026	Expansion toward the film industry	Further structural specialization; development of Aceh Cinema; hybrid physical–digital distribution; stronger continuity of access to local films and cultural narratives.

During the pioneering phase, Aceh's film ecosystem was still limited, and documentary film was not yet a familiar form of cultural production. Aceh Documentary had no formal organizational structure; activities depended on interpersonal solidarity and the commitment of a small group of filmmakers. Documentary work initially functioned as a means of bringing local social realities into public view.

“At that time, film activities in Aceh had not developed as they have today; only a handful of people were active in filmmaking.”

(Founder of Aceh Documentary, interview)

The second phase began with legal institutionalization as Yayasan Aceh Dokumenter in 2014. Legal status created access to program funding and partnerships through the founder's networks. The establishment of the Aceh Film Festival in 2015 provided a recurring space for appreciation, discussion, and the circulation of local audiovisual narratives. Annual competition and mentoring programs transformed occasional activities into an institutional mechanism for regenerating filmmakers and sustaining cultural production.

The third phase involved a shift from a relatively informal work system to a more differentiated organization. Responsibilities were increasingly distributed among program, production, education, festival, publication, and administrative divisions. Production technology developed from basic digital equipment toward cinema cameras, drones, and more advanced post-production practices. At the same time, national and international festival networks expanded the spaces in which Acehnese films, social experiences, and cultural perspectives could be encountered.

"The organizational structure was initially simple, but it later developed into a more complete structure with program, production, education, festival, publication, and administration divisions."

(Core administrator of Aceh Documentary, interview)

"We have built networks with international film festivals in Malaysia, Morocco, Thailand, the Philippines, and the Middle East."

(Founder of Aceh Documentary, interview)

The fourth phase, covering 2025–2026, was marked by further specialization and the emergence of Aceh Cinema as a digital distribution platform. This initiative responded to the need for a sustainable circulation system in which Acehnese films could reach audiences beyond physical screenings. The organization did not abandon community screenings; rather, physical and digital circulation began to operate together as complementary spaces for preserving access to local films and extending the reach of Acehnese narratives.

3.2 Local Filmmakers as Collective Cultural Agents

The movement emerged from a shared perception that Aceh required a medium through which its people could articulate their own social realities, histories, and cultural concerns. The initial motivation was therefore not entertainment alone, but documentary film as a means of social advocacy and self-representation.

"The original foundation was to use film as a medium of advocacy for various social issues in Aceh."

(Founder of Aceh Documentary, interview)

Mobilization developed through personal relationships. Individuals who had previously participated in advocacy and audiovisual work connected with other local filmmakers and gradually formed the founding group. The subsequent institutionalization of annual competitions and mentoring programs gave this interpersonal network an enduring mechanism for collective action, filmmaker regeneration, and the transmission of local cultural perspectives.

"Friendship, kinship, and togetherness."

(Founder of Aceh Documentary, on the values that hold the organization together)

These values were repeatedly identified as organizational bonds. Participants remained involved not only through formal employment or project contracts, but through a collective sense of belonging. Alumni returned as mentors, speakers, jurors, and production collaborators, thereby linking successive generations of filmmakers and enabling skills, ethical orientations, and knowledge of Acehnese social realities to circulate within the institution.

3.3 Capital and Position-Taking in the Cultural Production Field

Social capital was the resource most consistently identified as Aceh Documentary's institutional foundation. Trust, personal relations, and public credibility enabled the organization to access expertise, partnerships, production opportunities, and spaces for the circulation of cultural works.

"Social capital consists of networks and public trust."

(Core administrator of Aceh Documentary, interview)

"Social capital is the main foundation. It later produces cultural and symbolic capital and, eventually, helps the organization obtain economic capital."

(Mentor of Aceh Documentary, interview)

Cultural capital appeared in the research, writing, directing, cinematography, and visualization skills developed through the programs. These competencies enabled participants to transform Acehese social experiences into audiovisual narratives. Symbolic capital grew from the organization's continuity, festival presence, and recognition of its alumni and films. Informants emphasized that this recognition accumulated through consistent work rather than large-scale promotion.

"Aceh Documentary's reputation was not built through major promotion, but through consistency."

(Mentor of Aceh Documentary, interview)

Economic capital remained the most limited resource. Funding was largely obtained through grants, program cooperation, donors, and government support. This dependence constrained long-term planning and made the diversification of institutional income an unresolved concern.

The production system also changed across technology, occupational roles, regulation, distribution, and teamwork. Equipment progressed from DSLR cameras to digital cinema cameras, drones, and color-grading workflows, expanding the technical and aesthetic possibilities of local cultural representation. Alumni developed career pathways within the organization by returning in professional and pedagogical roles. Team production became less dependent on a single supervisor and increasingly collaborative. However, legal uncertainty remained a persistent problem for regional film communities operating between voluntary cultural work and the formal film industry.

"The greatest challenge is the absence of legal certainty."

(Founder of Aceh Documentary, interview)

3.4 Participatory Mentoring and the Transmission of Cultural Knowledge

The mentoring system was organized around dialogical participation rather than one-way instruction. The founder and mentors described the process as collaborative learning in which participants were encouraged to discover their own perspective, documentary voice, and way of interpreting the social and cultural realities they encountered.

"We apply a method of learning together, not a teacher-student system."

(Founder of Aceh Documentary, interview)

"Mentoring must be participant-centered. My task is to help participants find their own perspective, not to make them follow my way of making films."

(Mentor of Aceh Documentary, interview)

"I need to be more patient and listen more before giving feedback."

(Mentor of Aceh Documentary, interview)

Alumni also perceived a change in the mentors' capacity to adjust explanations to participants who had little prior knowledge of documentary filmmaking. This adaptability enabled technical knowledge and cultural sensitivity to be transmitted without imposing a single way of representing reality.

"The mentors now adjust more carefully to the participants' ways of thinking, especially because many of them initially do not understand documentary film."

(Alumnus of Aceh Documentary, interview)

3.5 From Documentation to the Production and Circulation of Acehese Narratives

The data show that documentary production developed into four complementary functions: social advocacy, public literacy, cultural preservation, and digital distribution. These functions did not emerge as separate stages that replaced one another; they accumulated and reinforced each other, gradually transforming documentary film from a record of events into a continuing practice of producing, interpreting, preserving, and circulating Acehese narratives.

Social advocacy was present from the pioneering phase. Documentary production brought Acehese social issues into public discussion and offered communities a medium for presenting their own experiences. Public literacy developed through the Aceh Documentary Forum, film discussions, and mentoring that trained young filmmakers not only in technical production but also in reading social realities, selecting perspectives, and organizing them into audiovisual narratives.

Cultural preservation grew from Aceh's post-conflict and post-tsunami context. Programs such as Nostalgia at the Aceh Film Festival screened films on conflict, history, and collective memory, while Gampong Film brought screenings and discussions to villages. Documentary practices therefore served as audiovisual cultural records and as spaces where different generations could interpret Aceh's past and connect it with contemporary social life.

Digital distribution became most visible during the 2025–2026 phase through Aceh Cinema. The platform reduced dependence on conventional screening channels and enabled independent works to circulate across geographical boundaries. Digital access complemented, rather than eliminated, festivals, village screenings, and other physical exhibition spaces. The transformation therefore concerned not only technology, but also who could access, interpret, and continue the circulation of Acehese cultural narratives.

3.6 Shared Learning Space as Institutional Cultural Identity

The phenomenological analysis revealed different expressions of the same institutional experience. The founder summarized Aceh Documentary as "life." A core administrator described it as "a long journey of building a learning space, producing local filmmakers, and presenting Acehese narratives through sustainable films." One alumnus expressed the experience through the phrase "ADC TAJAM," while another explained that involvement in the program transformed film from ordinary entertainment into an awareness of the struggle, knowledge, and collective work behind cultural production.

"In the past, I saw film only as entertainment, but now I can see the struggle behind the screen."

(Alumnus of Aceh Documentary, interview)

Two shared meanings emerged. First, informants understood transformation not as something that simply happened to them but as a process they actively shaped together. Second, despite changes in technology, organizational structure, and personnel, the identity of Aceh Documentary as a shared learning space remained the institution's most stable element. This identity linked organizational continuity with the intergenerational reproduction of documentary knowledge and commitment to Acehese narratives.

"Everything will change, and we always want to be present within every change."

(Founder of Aceh Documentary, interview)

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Institutional Transformation as Cultural Becoming

The four phases demonstrate Sztompka's (2004) concept of social becoming while also showing that institutional transformation is inseparable from cultural production. Aceh Documentary did not merely adapt passively to changes in funding, technology, or distribution. Its participants repeatedly interpreted available conditions, mobilized their relationships, and created new organizational forms through which Acehese experiences could be narrated and circulated. The continuity between informal solidarity and formal institutionalization resembles the development of post-Reform independent film communities described by Van Heeren (2012), where grassroots initiatives preceded more structured arrangements.

Tarrow's (2011) sequence of shared grievance, mobilizing structure, and institutionalized collective action is also visible. The shared need was the absence of a sustained medium through which Acehese communities could represent local social realities in their own voices. Personal relations supplied the initial mobilizing structure, while legal status, annual competitions, festivals, and mentoring routines institutionalized the movement. Comparable studies of grassroots movements show that personal solidarity networks can be more decisive than large material resources in maintaining collective action (Irawan, 2022; Rahmat & Savirani, 2020). In this case, collective action also created the social infrastructure for regional cultural narration.

Legal institutionalization expanded access to cooperation and program resources. This finding corresponds with research emphasizing legal status and clear organizational structures as important conditions for the sustainability of nonprofit organizations (Andhityawati & Darma, 2022). Nevertheless, formalization did not replace informal values. Friendship, kinship, and togetherness continued to function as the movement's moral infrastructure and as the basis for transmitting a shared commitment to local cultural representation.

4.2 Capital Conversion and Position-Taking in a Regional Cultural Field

Bourdieu's (1993) field of cultural production clarifies why social capital became central. Aceh Documentary operated in a regional cultural field where economic resources, professional infrastructure, and stable distribution were limited. Networks and trust therefore functioned as the initial capital through which participants gained training, collaboration, festival access, and public recognition. These resources shaped who could participate in producing and circulating Acehese audiovisual narratives. The pattern is consistent with the role of social capital in post-conflict Aceh described by Liata (2025).

The conversion process moved from social capital to cultural capital in the form of filmmaking competencies and embodied professional dispositions, and then to symbolic capital through reputation and recognition. Cultural capital and habitus matter because repeated participation turns acquired knowledge into durable ways of perceiving, selecting, and representing reality within a cultural field (Huang, 2019). The interaction among habitus, capital, and field consequently produces institutional practice rather than isolated individual action (Krisdinanto, 2023). The gradual accumulation of symbolic recognition through sustained production also resembles patterns identified among Acehese women writers and literary communities, where legitimacy emerged through the continuity of works rather than instant publicity (Muslimin & Lismalinda, 2024; Nilofar, 2020). This process also resonates with recent work on cultural intermediaries, which shows that screen-sector actors do not merely transmit cultural products but actively negotiate cultural value, visibility, and recognition within institutional fields (Nwonka, 2025).

Economic capital, however, remained fragile. Grants, donors, partnerships, and public support made programs possible but also left the organization vulnerable to external funding cycles. The findings therefore reveal an asymmetrical conversion of capital: social, cultural, and symbolic resources could be accumulated internally, whereas economic capital continued to depend largely on actors outside the organization.

4.3 Documentary Film, Cultural Memory, and Digital Circulation

The production-of-culture perspective shows that Aceh Documentary's films cannot be separated from the institutional conditions that make audiovisual cultural texts possible (Peterson & Anand, 2004). Changes in technology enabled higher production quality and new aesthetic possibilities. Organizational differentiation created clearer responsibilities. Alumni circulation generated occupational and pedagogical pathways. Digital platforms expanded the distribution environment, while teamwork became increasingly collaborative. These changes affected not only how films were made, but also how Acehnese voices, histories, and cultural meanings were selected, preserved, and made accessible. Documentary memory is similarly mediated rather than simply stored: historical-documentary research shows that film can transmit collective and transgenerational memory across generations (Kortti, 2022), while archival documentary scholarship emphasizes that archival forms actively construct and contest historical representation rather than functioning as neutral containers of the past (Harvey, 2025).

These changes parallel broader developments in Indonesian cinema. Affordable digital technology has transformed production practices and supported regional filmmaking since the Reform period (Salsabila & Yulifar, 2022). National filmmaking has also become more closely connected with transnational festivals, funding, and creative producers who coordinate artistic and institutional processes (Barker, 2024). Aceh Documentary's international networking and alumni involvement illustrate how a regional cultural institution entered these wider circuits without abandoning its community basis or its orientation toward local narratives.

The transition from physical screenings toward hybrid physical-digital circulation can be understood through the long-tail logic: works aimed at specialized audiences can remain accessible and find viewers beyond mainstream distribution (Anderson, 2006). Aceh Cinema is therefore not only a technical platform. It is an institutional archive and circulation space that reduces geographical limitations and helps retain access to Acehnese social, historical, and cultural narratives. At the same time, the reported absence of legal certainty confirms that film communities remain positioned between nonprofit cultural activity and formal industry. Although Law No. 33 of 2009 regulates the national film sector, it does not specifically resolve the institutional position of regional, community-based production groups (Andraresta, n.d.; Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 33 Tahun 2009 Tentang Perfilman, 2009).

4.4 Participatory Communication and Sustainable Cultural Regeneration

The mentoring model reflects Freire's critique of the banking model of education and his preference for dialogical learning (Pongoh, 2022). Mentors did not position themselves as the sole owners of knowledge. Instead, participants were encouraged to interpret issues, develop perspectives, and make production decisions. Servaes's (2008) participatory paradigm further explains why involvement from the earliest stages can generate ownership and sustained engagement. In the context of Aceh Documentary, this dialogical process also transmitted ways of listening to communities and representing local experiences ethically.

The finding corresponds with studies showing that participatory involvement produces stronger program ownership than top-down instruction (Satriani, 2011) and that treating documentary participants as collaborators rather than objects strengthens trust (Borish et al., 2021). Dialogical communication also supports critical awareness and collective action beyond formal educational settings (Rustandi, 2024). In Aceh Documentary, participatory mentoring connected technical regeneration with the intergenerational transmission of organizational values, documentary ethics, and sensitivity to Acehnese cultural contexts. This finding is also consistent with research on collaborative audiovisual media, where co-creation is treated as a set of production relationships involving differentiated roles, shared decisions, and negotiated authorship (Balaguer & Alberich-Pascual, 2024). Community-media research further shows that documentary collectives can reorganize production and circulation around visibility, counter-representation, and collective agency (Kishore, 2023).

The four documentary functions demonstrate how an audiovisual cultural practice can connect public discourse, literacy, memory, and circulation. Documentary film can encourage critical audience awareness in social-issue advocacy (Fadhilurrohmah & Hidayat, 2025), combine community activity with public education (Santyaputri, 2025), increase understanding and appreciation of local cultural heritage (Syafiqoh & Hidayat, 2024), and reach audiences through digital distribution beyond conventional cinema structures (Rozi, 2025). Aceh Documentary's institutional significance lies in integrating these functions within a continuing ecosystem where local realities are transformed into shared narratives rather than remaining isolated records.

Taken together, the findings indicate that Aceh Documentary is more than a production house. It is an intermediary cultural institution linking learning, audiovisual narration, advocacy, collective memory, festivals, and distribution. Its stability does not mean the absence of change; rather, its identity as a shared learning space allows the institution to remain recognizable while its programs, technologies, and networks evolve. This position connects the article directly with studies of culture: institutional transformation matters because it determines the continuity of local cultural expression and the public circulation of Acehnese narratives. At the same time, this intermediary role should not be romanticized: research on community film festivals shows that participation can be constrained by internal power relations, managerial differences, and uneven understandings of local context (Póvoa, 2023).

5. CONCLUSION

Aceh Documentary's institutional transformation from 2013 to 2026 developed through four connected phases: community pioneering and consolidation, institutionalization and program expansion, network strengthening and digital professionalization, and institutional expansion toward the film industry. This transformation was not a passive response to external pressure. It was a process of social and cultural becoming actively shaped by local filmmakers through the reciprocal interaction of structural opportunities and collective agency.

The organization contributed to Aceh's independent field of cultural production by converting personal networks into structured regeneration programs, festivals, production collaborations, and distribution channels. Social capital formed the principal foundation and was gradually converted into cultural and symbolic capital, while economic capital remained the most persistent limitation. The participatory principle of "learning together, not teacher and student" strengthened ownership, trust, and the intergenerational transmission of skills, ethical orientations, and sensitivity to local realities.

The function of documentary production expanded from recording events to four mutually reinforcing functions: social advocacy, public literacy, cultural preservation, and digital distribution. Through these functions, Aceh Documentary enabled social experience, conflict history, village life, and collective memory to be produced and circulated as audiovisual cultural narratives. The evidence therefore positions the organization not merely as a film production house, but as a shared learning institution and cultural intermediary that sustains local filmmakers and preserves the continuity of Acehnese narratives within and beyond the region.

Theoretically, this study shows that the field of cultural production in a regional context is sustained not only by artists and works, but also by institutions that organize regeneration, recognition, memory, and circulation. Practically, the findings point to the need for diversified institutional income beyond external grants, clearer government recognition of community-based regional film organizations, and the continued institutionalization of dialogical mentoring as leadership changes. Future research may examine the language, narrative structure, and cultural representation of individual Aceh Documentary films or compare similar institutions across Indonesian regions.

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