



The Younger Generation's Perception of Supernatural Elements in Jaranan Performances

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Abstract

This study investigated young people's perceptions of the Supernatural elements in Jaranan, a traditional Javanese performance that blends spirituality, art, and collective expression. The research aimed to understand how these elements are interpreted in a modern context shaped by globalization, technology, and shifting cultural values. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were gathered through interviews, observations, and literature reviews involving youth participants from various cultural backgrounds. The findings revealed a dual perspective among respondents: while some viewed the Supernatural elements as symbolic expressions of ancestral wisdom and local spirituality, others perceived them as theatrical or performative aspects detached from their original sacred meanings. Factors influencing these perceptions included family background, media exposure, education, and community engagement. The study highlighted that modernization does not necessarily erase traditional beliefs but rather transforms the way younger generations internalize and reinterpret them. These insights underscore the importance of cultural education and intergenerational dialogue in preserving the philosophical essence of Jaranan while allowing it to adapt within a changing cultural landscape.

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Introduction

The Jaranan performance has long been an essential part of the cultural landscape of Javanese society. It is not merely a folk spectacle, but a space where tradition, spirituality, and social expression converge into a symbol-laden form. Across various regions of East and Central Java, Jaranan appears with its distinct local nuances: the pulsating rhythm of the gamelan, dancers with woven bamboo horses, and the moment when some performers enter a trance-like state. This scene is often interpreted as a manifestation of Supernatural power or a form of human connection with another dimension (Mauricio, 2002). Such phenomena position Jaranan not only as a performing art but also as a cultural text imbued with spiritual and cosmological significance.

For traditional communities, the Supernatural elements in Jaranan are considered living entities—treated with reverence and faith. Many long-time spectators still believe that guardian spirits or supernatural forces play a role in each performance (Santoso & Putri, 2019). However, this perspective has gradually shifted amid rapid social changes. The younger generation, growing up in the digital era, experiences Jaranan differently. They do not only attend live performances but also engage with them virtually—through short clips on TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram. In these digital spaces, trance scenes and ritual elements are often simplified into visual entertainment or sensational content. This phenomenon raises an intriguing question: how do young audiences today interpret the Supernatural aspects of Jaranan?



Previous studies indicate that the Supernatural component in traditional performing arts carries complex meanings. Wulandari and Santosa (2021) examined *jathilan* in Yogyakarta and found that spirit possession continues to serve as a symbol of collective belief, although its meaning evolves along with the audience's social context. Similarly, research by Rizky, Nareswari, and Sumaryono (2019) on *Jaranan Senterewe* in Sleman highlighted that shifting social contexts shape how the Supernatural is perceived in performance. Thus, the notion of "magic" in Jaranan cannot be understood singularly—it may appear as faith, as an aesthetic expression, or even as a cultural communication strategy within modernity.

This shift in meaning is evident in how younger generations perceive tradition. The Australia–Indonesia Centre (2017) reported that young Indonesians are increasingly selective in accepting cultural values. They appreciate tradition yet seek rational explanations behind it. Sarwono (2014) describes urban youth as a "transitional generation," living between modern logic and traces of ancestral culture. This perspective illustrates the identity dilemma faced by many young Javanese when engaging with a heritage deeply rooted in spirituality. For some, the Supernatural elements of Jaranan are captivating aesthetic features; for others, they appear as relics of the past—difficult to reconcile with contemporary rationality.

Jaranan itself has long stood as a cultural identity symbol. Suyono and Mulyono (2019) assert that *Jaranan Temanggung* plays a crucial role in preserving oral traditions and the spiritual practices of rural communities. It is not merely popular entertainment, but a manifestation of the relationship between humans, ancestral spirits, and natural forces. Within this context, the Supernatural element is not just a dramatic effect, but a means through which society negotiates the connection between the visible and invisible worlds. Yet, for younger generations—more familiar with scientific reasoning—the acceptance of supernatural beliefs is not always straightforward. This difference in worldview opens a new interpretive space where Jaranan is reimagined: no longer a purely spiritual ritual, but an aesthetic experience rich with symbols and layered meanings.

The transformation in perception is also closely related to how traditions are transmitted. Mardika et al. (2022) note that many Jaranan artists and groups today face challenges in maintaining the spiritual essence of the performance amid demands for modern entertainment. Meanwhile, Ferdian, Rusman, and Asrori (2022) demonstrate that within the *Pegon Jaranan* dance, religious and educational values can still be conveyed in ways that resonate with contemporary audiences. These findings suggest that preserving traditional arts can no longer rely solely on oral transmission—it requires a renewed understanding of its audiences, particularly the young generation, who tend to be more critical and selective.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore how the younger generation interprets the Supernatural aspects of Jaranan. How do they perceive trance scenes, Do they still view them as manifestations of spiritual power, or rather as refined artistic expressions, Such questions are crucial for ensuring that efforts to preserve Jaranan can bridge two worlds: traditional belief and modern rationality. Ultimately, understanding young people's perceptions is not only about safeguarding an art form but also about maintaining the cultural relevance of tradition in the flow of contemporary change.

Literature Review

The discussion on young people's perception of the Supernatural elements in Jaranan should be situated within two major theoretical frameworks: cultural theory and cultural identity theory. Both frameworks provide the foundation for understanding how the meaning of the Supernatural is interpreted, negotiated, and reconstructed within changing social contexts.

Geertz (1973) introduced an interpretive approach to culture through the concept of thick description—an attempt to understand the meaning of human actions based on symbols and their social context. Within this framework, trance scenes in Jaranan cannot be seen merely as physical phenomena but as forms of symbolic communication between humans, communities, and the spiritual world. The meaning, however, may vary depending on who observes it. For older audiences, trance may be regarded as a manifestation of communion with ancestral spirits; for younger viewers, it might appear as a metaphor for human strength that transcends limitations.

Barker (2012), in his cultural studies framework, emphasizes that cultural meaning is never singular. Audiences are active subjects who negotiate meaning according to their social backgrounds and experiences. This perspective is highly relevant when examining how the younger generation interprets tradition. They do not simply inherit meanings from their predecessors but reinterpret them in their own language. Social media, film, and modern education have provided new ways of viewing the Supernatural—not as something to be believed in absolutely, but as something to be appreciated.

The concept of the “invention of tradition” proposed by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) also offers an important context. Tradition, they argue, is often not a static inheritance but a form of social reconstruction adapted to contemporary needs. In the case of Jaranan, many art groups have created new versions of the performance—more theatrical, more attuned to modern audiences, and sometimes emphasizing entertainment over ritual. Cahyono, Sunarto, and Widodo (2023) note a similar phenomenon in their study of Barongan in Blora: for younger generations, mystical aspects are more often perceived as dramatic effects rather than as spiritual experiences. This shift reveals that tradition endures precisely because of its ability to adapt.

Conversely, Koentjaraningrat (1984) asserts that culture always develops through three manifestations: systems of ideas, social systems, and artifacts. The Supernatural elements in Jaranan reflect all three. They appear as ideas about the spiritual world, as social practices that strengthen solidarity, and as artistic forms that embody aesthetic value. When the younger generation reinterprets these elements, they are in fact adapting these three manifestations to align with contemporary values and ways of thinking.

From a social perspective, studies on youth identity also provide an essential foundation. Saud, Yaseen, and Mashud (2025) demonstrate that social media plays a significant role in shaping the cultural identity of Indonesian youth. Digital platforms create a space in which they negotiate between local and global cultures. Rachmawati and Suparno (2023) further emphasize that appreciation of cultural diversity depends on how strongly young people feel connected to their traditional roots. When traditions such as Jaranan are perceived not only as belief systems but also as artistic expressions, that connection can be sustained even as the form of belief evolves.

Research on Jaranan and similar art forms underscores the dual function of the Supernatural—both spiritual and social. Indriyanto, Kusumawardani, and Astuti (2022) found that mystical values in the Jaran Kepang performance in Pagergunung not only reinforce religious belief but also foster communal unity. Arifin and Prabowo (2020) interpret the spiritual aspect of Jaranan as a medium for cultural preservation rather than a purely religious ritual. In other words, the Supernatural has become a symbolic language that continues to live across generations, even as its meaning transforms.

Grounded in these theoretical perspectives, this study does not aim to determine whether belief or rationality is “right.” Instead, its focus lies in understanding the process of meaning negotiation—how what was once perceived as the “supernatural” now reemerges in different forms as expression, identity, and cultural pride.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive–interpretative design to understand young people’s perceptions of the Supernatural elements in Jaranan performances. This approach was chosen because it enables the exploration of socio–cultural meanings and lived experiences that cannot be captured through numerical data, but rather through narratives, symbols, and interpretations embedded within the community’s context (Barker, 2012; Geertz, 1973). The qualitative method allows the researcher to trace how the younger generation interprets the Supernatural elements—such as trance, spirit invocation, and ritual offerings—not only as spiritual phenomena but also as representations of cultural identity.

The research was conducted in two regions where Jaranan traditions remain active: Kediri and Blitar, East Java. These areas were selected due to their diverse Jaranan communities, ranging from traditional troupes to those that have evolved into modern entertainment performances (Mardika et al., 2022; Suyono & Mulyono, 2019). The selection of these sites also considered accessibility to the younger generation, who serve as the primary focus of this study.

The research participants consisted of 20 informants aged between 17 and 30 years, including students, university undergraduates, and regular Jaranan spectators. Informants were recruited using purposive sampling, based on their engagement with and knowledge of this traditional art form (Sarwono, 2014; Australia–Indonesia Centre, 2017). The primary data were collected through in-depth interviews and participant observation. Semi-structured interviews were employed to allow informants to express their perceptions freely while maintaining thematic focus and coherence (Rachmawati & Suparno, 2023).

Observations were carried out across several performances, covering the pre-performance, execution, and post-performance phases. Field notes focused on emotional reactions, facial expressions, and social interactions between performers and audiences, particularly during trance sequences (Wulandari & Santosa, 2021; Santoso & Putri, 2019). This approach enabled the researcher to capture the dynamic interplay between aesthetic experience and spiritual belief as perceived by young audiences.

To enrich the analysis, secondary data sources were also utilized, including documentation, scholarly articles, and online video archives of Jaranan performances. These secondary materials provided historical context and supported interpretations of the shifting meanings of Jaranan in the modern era (Mauricio, 2002; Rizky et al., 2019). The researcher also reviewed academic works such as *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz, 1973) and *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) to strengthen the interpretive framework for understanding the relationship between tradition and contemporary perception.

Data analysis followed three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, as cited in Koentjaraningrat, 1984). During the reduction stage, interview results were categorized into main themes such as “the Supernatural as entertainment,” “the Supernatural as a symbol of spirituality,” and “the transformation of meaning in popular culture.” Data display was conducted through matrix construction and descriptive narration to map the relationship between perception, experience, and social context. The final stage involved reflective interpretation, linking the findings to cultural theories and local values underlying the meaning of Jaranan (Arifin & Prabowo, 2020; Ferdian et al., 2022).

The credibility of the data was ensured through source and method triangulation, comparing interview findings with observations and visual documentation. Member checking was also conducted with several informants to verify interpretive accuracy and minimize researcher bias (Indriyanto et al., 2022). An ethnographic perspective, following Geertz’s (1973) interpretive model, was used to understand ritual symbols and actions, while the concept of the “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) helped explain how Supernatural elements in Jaranan undergo processes of reinterpretation within modernity.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study by obtaining informed consent prior to interviews and ensuring participant anonymity to protect their privacy and safety. These methodological choices adhere to cultural research principles that respect community confidentiality and values (Cahyono et al., 2023).

Through this methodological framework, the study seeks to present a comprehensive understanding of how the younger generation perceives the Supernatural elements in Jaranan performances—not merely as religious or entertainment components, but as a site of negotiation between identity and modernity. The data collection and analysis process aim to produce an authentic, reflective, and culturally grounded portrayal of the socio-cultural experience of East Javanese youth today (Saud et al., 2025).

Results and Discussions

Perception of the Young Generation toward Supernatural Elements

The findings of this study reveal that the perception of the young generation toward the supernatural elements in Jaranan performances lies between two main poles: spiritual belief and cultural appreciation. Most informants aged 18–25 perceive the supernatural elements not as something entirely mystical, but as an aspect of traditional identity rich in symbols and local meanings (Wulandari & Santosa, 2021; Rizky et al., 2019). They interpret the trance state not as spirit possession, but as an artistic expression and an emotional transcendence emerging through music, rhythm, and the atmosphere of the performance.

Nevertheless, a segment of the youth still believes in the existence of unseen forces within Jaranan. Such beliefs are commonly found among those who were raised in rural environments and remain closely connected to ritual traditions (Indriyanto et al., 2022). For them, the supernatural elements represent a manifestation of the spiritual relationship between humans, nature, and the spirit world — a balance maintained through dance, gamelan music, and offerings. Hendriko, Sutanto, and Setiawan (2019) explain that the trance condition experienced by Jaranan performers is often regarded as a medium of communication with the supernatural realm, carrying both religious and therapeutic significance for the community.

In contrast, informants from urban areas such as Kediri and Blitar view the supernatural elements primarily as a performative attraction. They do not necessarily believe in metaphysical powers but still consider these elements essential for providing the distinctive sensations and atmosphere that differentiate Jaranan from other modern entertainment forms such as music concerts or contemporary dance (Mardika et al., 2022; Cahyono et al., 2023). This phenomenon illustrates a shift in value orientation among younger generations who tend to be more rational, visual, and digitally oriented. As noted by Saud, Yaseen, and Mashud (2025), the young generation today constructs its cultural identity through a fusion of inherited traditions and modern experiences, including exposure to social media.

Interestingly, although most informants reject the literal spiritual dimension, they continue to express respect toward the rituals and norms accompanying the performance. They understand that practices such as incense burning or offerings serve as gestures of reverence toward ancestors and traditions, rather than purely mystical acts (Arifin & Prabowo, 2020). This demonstrates that, for the younger generation, supernatural elements have shifted from the domain of belief to that of cultural symbolism — signifying that modernity does not entirely erase spirituality but transforms the way it is understood.

During interviews, several informants described their experience of watching Jaranan as emotionally stirring and a source of local pride. They referred to the supernatural elements as “the most captivating part,” especially during the trance scenes when the performance reached its musical climax. This phenomenon illustrates the formation of collective emotion within the performance space — a moment when the boundary between performer and audience becomes blurred (Mauricio, 2002; Santoso & Putri, 2019). This aligns with Geertz’s (1973) notion that culture constitutes a system of lived meanings rather than merely displayed symbols.

Moreover, field observations show that social media also contributes to shaping new perceptions of the supernatural elements. Many viral videos of Jaranan performances highlight trance scenes and intense performer interactions, making these elements part of the aesthetic appeal for digital-native audiences who seek visual stimulation more than spiritual meaning (Rachmawati & Suparno, 2023). Barker (2012) refers to this phenomenon as recontextualization, in which cultural meanings are reproduced according to the tastes and lifestyles of a new generation.

However, not all young people remain neutral. A small number of informants voiced concerns that the dominance of supernatural elements may hinder Jaranan's acceptance in modern public spaces such as schools or national festivals. They hope that the performance can be revitalized without losing its aesthetic essence (Suyono & Mulyono, 2019). At this point, a paradox arises between preservation and adaptation — echoing Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) idea that traditions are often “reinvented” to remain relevant within changing social contexts.

Overall, the young generation's perception of the supernatural elements in Jaranan demonstrates the dynamic interplay between belief and representation. These elements are no longer viewed solely as manifestations of the supernatural but as living cultural expressions — fluid, negotiated, and continually redefined amid the currents of modernity. For them, Jaranan is not merely a sacred dance but a symbolic space where spirituality, entertainment, and identity converge and engage in dialogue.

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Supernatural Elements in the Modern Era

In the context of a rational and modern society, the presence of supernatural elements in Jaranan performances occupies a fascinating position—situated between spiritual heritage and cultural spectacle. For many young people, the supernatural elements are no longer something to be feared or avoided, but rather a component of cultural identity that should be understood symbolically. This perspective aligns with Geertz’s (1973) interpretation that ritual symbols function as a bridge between systems of belief and social action. In this sense, supernatural practice is not merely a metaphysical phenomenon, but a cultural language through which communities express their relationship with the unseen world.

In many Javanese communities, Jaranan continues to serve as a space where the boundaries between the physical and spiritual realms become blurred. The supernatural elements—trance, offerings, chants, and sacred symbols—represent humanity’s connection with transcendent forces (Rizky, Nareswari, & Sumaryono, 2019). However, amid globalization and digital technology, these meanings have undergone a new negotiation. Younger generations tend to interpret the supernatural not as an overpowering metaphysical force but as a form of cultural aesthetics—something exotic and worthy of study or documentation (Sedyawati, 2010). They perceive these elements as layers of dramatic narrative within the performance, offering emotional depth and historical resonance.

Nevertheless, this shift in meaning does not imply that the supernatural elements have lost their spiritual relevance. For some youth raised in traditional environments, the supernatural remains a medium for reflecting on the relationship between human existence and nature. The experience of witnessing a dancer in a trance, for instance, is often interpreted not as evidence of otherworldly possession, but as a form of energy unification—a kind of collective meditation affirming the bond between individuals, ancestors, and the cosmos (Haryono, 2013). Within this framework, the supernatural becomes a bodily language of society—one that cannot be easily replaced by modern rationality.

Several studies suggest that the changing perception of the supernatural is closely tied to developments in media and education. Access to information has made younger generations more critical, yet also more curious (Suprpto, 2018). They approach the supernatural with dual perspectives—both skeptical and appreciative. On one hand, they view it as a mythical remnant of the past; on the other, they acknowledge that without it, Jaranan would lose its essence. This dual awareness illustrates how modernity does not necessarily negate spirituality but instead demands new modes of interpretation (Kuntowijoyo, 2006).

In practice, the supernatural elements in Jaranan now also function as a medium of intergenerational communication. Senior performers continue to conduct rituals with deep conviction, while younger audiences record the events on their smartphones, upload them to social media, and discuss their meanings in digital spaces. This phenomenon reveals how supernatural elements have transformed into “digital cultural symbols” that traverse the boundaries between tradition and technology (Hutomo, 2020). The processes of documentation and reinterpretation not only sustain the existence of Jaranan but also allow younger generations to understand their spiritual heritage through the language of their time.

The meaning of the supernatural in the modern era, therefore, is no longer singular. It exists between two realms—spiritual and symbolic, sacred and profane, ritual and entertainment. The tension between these poles is precisely what keeps Jaranan relevant and dynamic. When young viewers watch trance scenes with a blend of fascination and curiosity, they are in fact engaging with a cultural inheritance that challenges the logic of modernity. As Eliade (1957) notes, such moments constitute a hierophany—a manifestation of the sacred within everyday life. Although its form has evolved, the religious experience persists, reconfigured within a more aesthetic and reflective frame.

In interviews with several young informants, a new awareness emerged that the supernatural elements need not be separated from the artistic values of performance. They perceive offerings and chants as integral parts of traditional dramaturgy, enriching the atmosphere and emotional intensity of the show. At this point, the supernatural is no longer seen as a threat to rationality but as an artistic dimension that adds depth to cultural expression (Smith, 2006). Such transformation reflects a process of symbolic adaptation: the younger generation does not reject the miraculous but situates it within an aesthetic and identity framework.

Interestingly, the meaning of the supernatural also mirrors broader social conditions. Amid modern life that often feels superficial and accelerated, many young people are searching for alternative forms of spirituality—not through formal religion, but through culture and art (Susanto, 2015). Jaranan performances, with their pulsating rhythms and mesmerizing trances, offer a space for them to “feel something greater than themselves.” Here, the supernatural elements function as a portal to collective experiences that transcend logic.

This transformation demonstrates that the supernatural is not a relic of the past but part of an ongoing cultural process of adaptation. Young audiences do not merely watch Jaranan; they reinterpret, viralize, and even draw inspiration from it for new creative works—short films, contemporary performances, or other artistic content (Rizky et al., 2019). Each act of reinterpretation adds new layers of meaning that enrich the tradition. In the

long trajectory of culture, the supernatural may never truly disappear; it merely assumes new forms, adapting itself to the language of the era.

Ultimately, the supernatural elements in *Jaranan* within the modern era can be read as a reflection of how the younger generation negotiates its dialogue with tradition. They may no longer believe that spirits literally possess the dancers, yet they understand that behind every movement and chant lies a long history of human attempts to connect with something greater. Within this awareness, the supernatural finds its renewed form—not as a metaphysical power, but as a symbol of continuity linking the past, present, and future of culture.

Conclusion

The study on how younger generations perceive the mystical elements within *Jaranan* performances reveals an intriguing shift in perspective between tradition and modernity. What was once understood as a purely spiritual dimension is now being reinterpreted as a symbolic and aesthetic expression of local culture. The younger generation no longer regards the mystical as something fearful or narrowly supernatural; instead, they see it as a representation of values, identity, and ancestral heritage imbued with deep philosophical meaning. This reinterpretation does not erase the sacred dimension of *Jaranan*, but rather places it within a new contextual framework that resonates with contemporary life.

This phenomenon also illustrates the adaptive capacity of mystical elements to respond to the changing times. They do not fade away under the pressures of modernity but instead find renewed vitality through reinterpretation. When young people watch, record, and share *Jaranan* performances on social media, they are, in essence, creating a new cultural space where mystical elements live on in more symbolic and communicative forms. This process shows that cultural heritage endures not only through formal preservation but also through active participation in cultural practices that evolve with the logic of the present era.

Furthermore, the younger generation's perception of mystical elements reflects the fluidity of contemporary cultural identity. Rather than rejecting their ancestral spiritual heritage, they seek to understand it through a more reflective and intellectual framework. The mystical is no longer confined to religious belief but also serves as a medium for contemplating the relationship between humans, nature, society, and the past. In this context, *Jaranan* functions as a bridge connecting traditional spirituality with contemporary discourses on art, culture, and popular imagination.

Based on these findings, this study offers several recommendations. First, it is essential for educational institutions and art communities to create spaces that allow younger generations to explore and discuss the meanings of local culture without excessive mystical stigmas. A critical and creative approach can effectively sustain the relevance of tradition within the modern world. Second, collaboration among traditional artists, scholars, and local governments is needed to document and reframe *Jaranan* performances in ways that appeal across generations while maintaining their authenticity. Third, future research could further explore the role of digital media in transforming the meaning of mystical elements—particularly how these forms of spiritual aesthetics interact with visual culture and content consumption among young audiences.

Ultimately, the endurance of mystical elements in *Jaranan* is not merely about preserving old beliefs but about ensuring that culture continues to speak in new ways. In the hands of the younger generation, the mystical finds renewed vitality—not as a relic of the past, but as a living narrative that continues to evolve alongside the rhythm of modern change.

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