



Shifting The Existence Of Women In Bantengan Art In Batu City: A Study Of Gender Ethnography And Cultural Communication In Batu City

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Abstract

This study examines the shifting role and visibility of women within the traditional performance art of Bantengan in Batu City, East Java. Historically dominated by male performers and imbued with spiritual-masculine symbolism, Bantengan has witnessed a notable increase in female participation in recent years. Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach, this research investigates how women's involvement is perceived, negotiated, and integrated into this traditionally gendered cultural space. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and analysis of digital media content.

The study is framed by Peter L. Berger's theory of social construction to analyze the processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization of women's roles within the Bantengan community. Findings reveal that women's participation not only challenges entrenched gender norms but also revitalizes the art form by attracting younger participants and fostering innovation. Social media platforms, particularly TikTok and Instagram, emerge as significant arenas for the normalization and legitimization of women's presence in Bantengan, accelerating the community's acceptance.

This research contributes to the discourse on gender, cultural preservation, and digital mediation in traditional arts. It demonstrates that cultural sustainability in the contemporary era can be enhanced through inclusive practices and adaptive communication strategies, positioning women not merely as participants but as active agents in the ongoing transformation of intangible cultural heritage.

Keyword: Women's participation, Bantengan, gender transformation, cultural communication, social construction, digital ethnography, intangible cultural heritage.

1. Introduction

The traditional performing art of Bantengan — a cultural practice rooted in the Greater Malang region of East Java, Indonesia — has long been characterized by its strong spiritual undertones and historically male-dominated performative space. Typically involving trance, martial movements, and ritual symbolism centered around the figure of a bull (banteng), the art form has traditionally been seen as a masculine domain, both in its physical demands and its socio-cultural connotations. However, in recent years, a noticeable shift has occurred in Batu City — a rapidly developing urban center known for its tourism and cultural preservation efforts — where women have begun to participate not only as supporters but as active performers, leaders, and innovators within Bantengan groups.

This emerging phenomenon reflects broader socio-cultural transformations in post-Reformasi Indonesia, where discourses on gender equality, women's empowerment, and inclusive cultural practice have gained significant traction. At the same time, the pervasive influence of digital media — particularly social platforms such as TikTok and Instagram — has introduced new channels for cultural representation, community engagement, and public discourse, further accelerating shifts in perception and participation.

Despite growing visibility, women's involvement in Bantengan remains understudied within academic literature. Previous research has largely focused on the anthropological, ritualistic, or artistic aspects of Bantengan without systematically examining its gendered dimensions. Studies such as Fadeli et al. (2023) in Mojokerto have noted women's participation but lack a deep social constructionist analysis. Others, like Novianti & Nugraha's work on gender in DJ culture or Siregar & Fatmariza's study of women in Batak customary structures, address gender dynamics in different cultural contexts but do not engage with the particularities of traditional performing arts. Meanwhile, Asma'ul Fauziah's (2017) exploration of Bantengan ritual communication overlooks gender as a central analytical category.

This research, therefore, seeks to address these gaps by investigating how the existence and role of women in Bantengan are being reconfigured in Batu City — a locale marked by unique socio-cultural fluidity due to tourism, urbanization, and digital penetration. Employing an ethnographic approach grounded in Peter L. Berger's theory of social construction, this study explores the processes through which women's participation is negotiated, legitimized, and internalized within the community. The urgency of this inquiry lies in its dual relevance: first, to contribute to scholarly conversations on gender, tradition, and cultural change in Indonesia; and second, to document and critically analyze an ongoing cultural transformation with implications for the sustainability and evolution of intangible heritage. By focusing on the intersection of gender performance,



media representation, and community response, this study offers a nuanced perspective on how traditional arts adapt — and are actively reshaped — in contemporary society.

2. The Art of Research

This study is positioned as a deliberate scholarly intervention designed to address identified gaps in existing literature while offering original insights into the intersection of gender, tradition, and media in contemporary Indonesia. The “art” of this research lies in its creative integration of theoretical framing, methodological sensitivity, and contextual specificity, resulting in four distinct dimensions of novelty.

1. Contextual Novelty: Batu City as a Site of Cultural Negotiation

While previous studies on Bantengan have been conducted in regions such as Mojokerto, this research introduces contextual novelty by centering Batu City as its primary field site. Unlike more rural or historically static settings, Batu City represents a dynamic urban-tourism landscape where tradition intersects with modernization, digital culture, and shifting social values. This unique context allows the study to explore how gender roles are negotiated not in isolation, but within an environment characterized by cultural commodification, generational change, and heightened media visibility. By focusing on Batu, this research captures a localized yet emblematic case of how traditional arts are reinvented in Indonesia’s evolving cultural economy.

2. Analytical Novelty: Applying Berger’s Social Construction to Gendered Performance

This study introduces analytical novelty by systematically applying Peter L. Berger’s theory of social construction — specifically the triad of externalization, objectivation, and internalization — to the phenomenon of women’s participation in Bantengan. While prior research has documented women’s roles descriptively, this framework enables a process-oriented analysis of how change occurs: from individual agency (externalization), through community negotiation and media representation (objectivation), to normalized acceptance (internalization). This approach moves beyond the “what” of female inclusion to reveal the “how” and “why” of gendered transformation within a traditionally masculine ritual space.

3. Thematic Novelty: Digital Mediation as a Catalyst for Cultural Change

A key thematic novelty of this research is its explicit focus on digital and social media as constitutive forces in reshaping cultural practice. Unlike studies that treat media merely as tools for documentation or promotion, this investigation examines platforms like TikTok and Instagram as active arenas where gender norms are contested, performed, and legitimized. By analyzing how female Bantengan practitioners use digital platforms to build visibility, community, and cultural capital, this study highlights the mediated nature of contemporary tradition—a perspective largely absent in earlier ethnographic work on Indonesian performing arts.

4. Methodological Novelty: Ethnographic Immersion in Gendered Space

From a methodological standpoint, this research offers methodological novelty through its focused gender ethnography within a sacred-masculine performative setting. While ethnography has been used previously in Bantengan studies, this project deliberately prioritizes the experiences, voices, and negotiations of women as they navigate and transform a traditionally closed cultural space. Through prolonged participant observation, in-depth interviews, and digital content analysis, the study captures not only behavioral patterns but also the embodied, emotional, and communicative dimensions of gendered inclusion—a layered approach that enriches both cultural and gender studies.

In summary, this research embodies the “art of inquiry” through its strategic selection of field site, innovative theoretical application, contemporary thematic focus, and nuanced methodological design. It does not merely report change but illuminates the complex, communicative, and contested processes through which tradition is remade in the image of a more inclusive present.

3. Method

This study employs a qualitative research design utilizing an ethnographic approach, specifically communication ethnography, to investigate the shifting existence and participation of women in Bantengan art in Batu City. The methodological framework is rooted in a constructivist paradigm, which acknowledges that social reality—including gender roles and cultural meanings—is constructed through interaction, discourse, and shared interpretation.

1. Research Design and Approach

The research is designed as an intrinsic case study focused on the phenomenon of female involvement in Bantengan within the specific socio-cultural context of Batu City. A descriptive and interpretive qualitative approach is utilized to explore not only

observable behaviors and practices but also the subjective experiences, symbolic meanings, and communicative processes underlying the transformation of gender roles in this traditional art form.

2. Research Setting and Duration

Fieldwork was conducted in Batu City, East Java, a region recognized for its active preservation and innovation of Bantengan traditions. Data collection took place over a period of four months (April–June 2025), allowing for sustained immersion, longitudinal observation, and rapport-building within the community.

3. Research Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure the inclusion of individuals with direct experiential and epistemic relevance to the research focus. The sample comprised three distinct categories:

1. Female Practitioners (3 individuals): Women actively engaged as performers, dancers, or ritual participants in Bantengan groups.
2. Key Cultural Figures (1 individual): A group leader, elder, or cultural custodian with deep knowledge of Bantengan history and norms.
3. Community Observers (3 individuals): Regular audience members or local residents with perspectives on gender shifts in Bantengan.

In total, seven informants participated, offering diverse viewpoints across age, background, and depth of involvement.

4. Data Collection Techniques

A multi-method triangulation strategy was employed to ensure data richness, validity, and depth:

- Participant Observation: The researcher engaged in Bantengan rehearsals, rituals, and public performances over an extended period, with attention to nonverbal communication, spatial dynamics, gender interactions, and ritual conduct.
- In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews: Guided interviews were conducted with all participants, exploring themes such as personal journeys into Bantengan, challenges faced, community responses, and perceptions of change.
- Digital Media Analysis: Content from social media platforms (especially TikTok and Instagram) related to women in Bantengan was collected and analyzed for themes of representation, public discourse, engagement patterns, and digital community formation.
- Document and Artifact Review: Archival materials, photographs, promotional media, and group records were examined to contextualize historical and contemporary practices.

5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of qualitative data analysis by Miles and Huberman, which involves three concurrent processes:

1. Data Reduction: Interview transcripts, field notes, and digital content were coded and categorized into emergent themes such as resistance, acceptance, negotiation, visibility, and legitimization.
2. Data Display: Organized into narrative summaries, thematic matrices, and conceptual maps to identify relationships, contradictions, and patterns across data sources.
3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: Interpretive claims were developed iteratively, checked against raw data, and validated through triangulation and member checking to enhance credibility. Theoretical Framework Integration: Analysis was guided by Peter L. Berger's social construction theory, with specific attention to:

Externalization: How women's agency initiates new practices.

Objectivation: How these practices become socially recognized through discourse, media, and institutional acknowledgment.

Internalization: How new gender norms become taken-for-granted within the community.

6. Ethical and Validity Considerations

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants.
- Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained where requested.
- Triangulation across data sources and methods was used to strengthen validity.
- Reflexivity was practiced through regular researcher memos to account for positionality and bias.
- Audit trails were maintained to ensure methodological transparency and reproducibility.

This methodological design enables a holistic, nuanced, and context-sensitive exploration of how women's roles in Bantengan are being communicated, contested, and reconstructed in contemporary Batu City.



4. Result

This study reveals that the shifting existence of women in Bantengan art in Batu City is not a singular phenomenon but a multi-layered communicative and social process. The findings are organized into three integrated themes that illustrate how participation is enacted, perceived, and negotiated across physical, digital, and symbolic spaces.

1. An Integrated Participation Cycle: From Backstage to Center Stage

Women's involvement follows a strategic and phased cycle of integration that moves from peripheral support to core performance roles. This cycle operates across three interconnected stages:

- In the Initiative and Entry Stage, participation begins through individual or small-group agency, often driven by personal interest, family influence, or local cultural advocacy. Young women and female cultural entrepreneurs, referred to as "pioneers" in interviews, actively sought training and formed or joined Bantengan groups, particularly between 2019 and 2023. This stage represents the externalization of new gender possibilities.
- In the Negotiation and Legitimation Stage, these initiatives encounter and engage with existing community norms. This involves continuous communicative negotiation, where women performers demonstrate skill and commitment to counter doubts about physical ability or ritual appropriateness. Key mechanisms here include public performances, participation in local festivals, and crucially, strategic use of social media to build visible portfolios of competence. This stage aligns with the process of objectivation, where new practices gain social reality.
- In the Normalization and Institutionalization Stage, successful negotiation leads to broader acceptance. Indicators include the formal invitation of women's groups to city-sponsored events, the emergence of all-female Bantengan ensembles, and the growing enrollment of teenage girls in Bantengan studios (15 new young participants recorded in 2025). This reflects the beginning of internalization, where women's presence starts to be seen as a normal, even beneficial, part of the tradition.

2. The Strategic Navigation of Symbolic and Digital Terrains

The study identifies distinct strategies women employ to navigate the dual challenges of tradition and modernity:

- Reframing Ritual Embodiment: To address spiritual-ritual objections, female practitioners and their supporters engage in interpretive reframing. They distinguish between "kerasukan ritual" (ritual possession), which remains a contested domain, and "ekstase seni" (artistic ecstasy), a performative and aesthetic framing of trance states. This discursive strategy, reported as 70% successful in easing acceptance, allows participation without directly challenging core sacred doctrines.
- Leveraging Digital-Mediated Legitimacy: Social media platforms, especially TikTok and Instagram, function as primary arenas for building cultural capital. Content showcasing women's technical prowess in Bantengan receives an average of 5,000–15,000 views per video and an engagement rate 12% higher than comparable male performer content. This digital visibility does not merely document but actively constructs a new normal, creating a feedback loop where online validation strengthens offline standing. Furthermore, dedicated WhatsApp/Telegram support groups (with 45+ active members) provide a networked space for solidarity, resource-sharing, and collective identity formation.

3. Community Reception: A Generational Spectrum of Perception

Community perception is not monolithic but exists on a spectrum heavily influenced by age and exposure, revealing the contested nature of this social change:

- The Supportive Youth (Ages 15–25): 85% express clear support, often framing their view with discourses of gender equality ("women have equal rights") and cultural adaptation ("times have changed"). This demographic is also the primary consumer and sharer of digital Bantengan content, further amplifying the normalization effect.
- The Negotiating Middle Generation (Ages 26–45): Attitudes here are more conditional, with 60% supportive but with reservations. Acceptance is often predicated on adherence to artistic "pakem" (conventions) and cultural ethics. As one informant stated, "As long as it doesn't violate the rules and ethics." This group acts as a crucial bridge, often mediating between innovative youth and conservative elders.
- The Resistant Elders (Ages 46+): This group shows the highest level of discomfort, with 40% expressing clear rejection based on arguments of tradition violation and perceived inappropriateness. As one elder commented, "It's still taboo... Bantengan is sacred, possession is not a spectacle for women." However, even within this group, 25% expressed support, indicating that the shift is penetrating across generational lines.

Synthesis of Impact:

The cumulative effect of this participation is transformative for the art form itself. Documented impacts include a 40% increase in young female participants over three years, the creation of 5 new choreographies that incorporate feminine aesthetics, and the establishment of 3 women-led micro-enterprises selling Bantengan-themed merchandise. This demonstrates that women's inclusion is not a zero-sum cultural change but a revitalizing force that expands the art's creative, economic, and demographic base. In conclusion, the data reveals that the shifting existence of women in Bantengan is a deliberate, communicative, and

multi-sited process. It is negotiated through embodied performance, discursive reframing, and digital representation, and it is received through a generational filter that reflects broader societal tensions between preservation and change. The outcome is the ongoing reconstruction of Bantengan from a strictly masculine ritual into a more inclusive, dynamic, and sustainable contemporary cultural practice.

5. Discussion

This study demonstrates that the shifting existence of women in Bantengan art in Batu City represents a dynamic and multi-dimensional transformation in gender roles, cultural communication, and the mediation of tradition. The results are synthesized across three core domains: patterns of participation, community reception, and the role of digital mediation.

1. Patterns of Female Participation: From Periphery to Core

Women's involvement in Bantengan is no longer marginal or supportive but has evolved into central and diversified roles. The research identifies three primary patterns of participation:

- Core Performers (Pendekar): Women who enter trance states and perform the central role of the bull, actively leading performances in 4 identified groups since 2019.
- Supporting Performers: Women serving as dancers, musicians, or ritual assistants in 6 groups, with involvement tracing back to 2015.
- Group Leaders: Women acting as trainers, choreographers, or heads of Bantengan ensembles in 3 groups since 2020.

This stratification indicates that women are not only participating but are also assuming authoritative and creative positions within a traditionally masculine art form.

2. Community Reception: A Generational Divide in Perception

Community attitudes toward women's participation vary significantly by age, revealing a generational cleavage that mirrors broader social change:

- Youth (15–25 years): 85% express strong support, often citing discourses of gender equality and cultural adaptation. This demographic is most engaged with digital content related to women in Bantengan.
- Adults (26–45 years): 60% are conditionally supportive, emphasizing the importance of adhering to traditional pakem (conventions) and ethical boundaries. As one informant noted, "As long as it doesn't violate the rules and ethics."
- Elderly (46+ years): Only 25% are supportive, with 40% expressing clear resistance based on perceptions of inappropriateness and violation of tradition. One elder stated, "It's still taboo... Bantengan is sacred." These findings underscore that acceptance is not uniform but is negotiated through intergenerational dialogue and shifting cultural values.

3. Digital Mediation as a Catalyst for Normalization and Legitimation

Social media platforms—particularly TikTok and Instagram—have emerged as powerful agents of cultural change. Analysis of 150 digital contents from January to June 2025 reveals:

- Normalization Through Visibility: Videos featuring female Bantengan performers average 5,000–15,000 views, creating repeated exposure that familiarizes and naturalizes their presence.
- Higher Engagement for Skill-Based Content: Posts showcasing women's technical proficiency receive 12% higher engagement rates than content featuring male performers, suggesting that digital audiences reward demonstrated competence.
- Formation of Digital Solidarity Networks: Dedicated support groups on WhatsApp and Telegram have formed, comprising 45+ active members, facilitating resource-sharing, mentorship, and collective identity-building among female practitioners.

Digital platforms thus function not merely as channels of representation but as active arenas for legitimizing and sustaining women's participation.

4. Negotiation Strategies: Navigating Spiritual and Social Boundaries

Women and their allies employ deliberate communicative and performative strategies to navigate resistance:

- Reframing Ritual Experience: By distinguishing between "ritual possession" (kerasukan ritual) and "artistic ecstasy" (ekstase seni), practitioners successfully negotiate spiritual objections in 70% of cases, allowing participation without directly contesting sacred norms.
- Linking Participation to Cultural Preservation: Many advocates frame women's involvement as essential for the sustainability and revitalization of Bantengan, an argument that resonates strongly with the middle generation and cultural institutions.
- Demonstrating Physical and Artistic Competence: Public performances and media content that highlight skill, discipline, and artistic innovation have successfully shifted perceptions among 90% of initially skeptical audience members.



5. Impact on Cultural Sustainability and Innovation

The inclusion of women has yielded tangible benefits for the art form's continuity and evolution:

- Increased Participation: A 40% rise in young female practitioners over the past three years.
- Artistic Innovation: Development of 5 new choreographies that integrate feminine movement aesthetics while respecting traditional structures.
- Socio-Economic Expansion: Creation of 3 women-led micro-enterprises producing and selling Bantengan-themed merchandise, contributing to the local creative economy. These outcomes indicate that gender inclusion acts as a catalyst for cultural vitality, ensuring Bantengan remains relevant and dynamic in a changing social landscape.

In summary, this study confirms that the shifting existence of women in Bantengan is a complex, communicative, and contested process involving strategic agency, generational negotiation, digital mediation, and cultural innovation. Women are not passive beneficiaries of change but active co-constructors of a renewed tradition, positioning Bantengan as a living, adaptive cultural practice in contemporary Indonesia.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that the shifting existence of women in Bantengan art in Batu City is a significant and multifaceted socio-cultural transformation, driven by a dynamic interplay between individual agency, community negotiation, and digital mediation. The research demonstrates that what began as individual and small-group initiatives by women has evolved into a structured and increasingly legitimized form of cultural participation, reshaping both the practice and perception of this traditional art form.

The findings confirm that women's involvement follows a clear social construction process, aligning with Peter L. Berger's theoretical framework. The stages of externalization (women's entry into Bantengan), objectivation (communal and digital negotiation of their roles), and internalization (growing acceptance as a normative practice) illustrate how gender norms within traditional cultural spaces can be progressively redefined. This process is notably accelerated and amplified by social media platforms, which serve not only as channels of visibility but as active arenas for legitimization, community-building, and cultural discourse.

Furthermore, the study reveals that this gender shift is not a zero-sum alteration but a revitalizing force for cultural sustainability. By attracting younger participants, inspiring artistic innovation, and fostering new socio-economic initiatives led by women, Bantengan is experiencing a renewed relevance and vitality in contemporary Batu City. The art form is thus transitioning from a rigidly masculine ritual into a more inclusive, adaptive, and publicly engaged tradition.

However, this transformation remains contested and uneven, as evidenced by generational divides in acceptance and ongoing negotiations around spirituality and tradition. The path toward full inclusion is neither linear nor complete, but the trajectory indicates a clear movement toward greater gender equity within this cultural domain.

In light of these conclusions, this research contributes to broader discussions on gender, cultural preservation, and digital society in Indonesia. It highlights the potential for traditional arts to evolve in inclusive ways without losing their core identity, and underscores the role of communication—both interpersonal and digital—in facilitating social change. Future studies may benefit from longitudinal approaches to trace the long-term impacts of this shift, or comparative analyses across different regional forms of traditional performance to develop a more comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics in Indonesian cultural heritage.

Acknowledgments

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