Mberot and cultural compliance in traditions, customs, and rituals: A cultural psychology perspective

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Abstract. This study examines the paradox of cultural compliance and *mberot* (deviation/adaptation from canonical conventions) in the folk arts of *bantengan*, *jaranan*, and *topeng* across Greater Malang through the lens of cultural psychology. The aims are to: (1) describe forms of compliance as representations of customary law and ritual; (2) analyze *mberot* as innovation and as a response to modernization; (3) uncover the psychological paradoxes that shape identity, social relations, and spirituality; and (4) formulate a conceptual account of how traditional and modern values are negotiated. The reviewed methods are qualitative: ethnography, participant observation, in-depth/phenomenological interviewing, documentation, and thematic analysis verified via triangulation and member checking. Findings indicate that compliance appears as ritual discipline (prayer, offerings, canonical plot/movement, trance control) that sustains cosmological harmony and social cohesion; *mberot* emerges as a sustainability strategy—shortening duration, modifying choreography/materials, and stage packaging—accepted so long as it still *ngemu rasa* (embodies the inner aesthetic–ethical "feel"). Psychological paradoxes arise when the needs of the interdependent self (norms/togetherness) coexist with those of the independent self (autonomy/expression), producing mixtures of safety and pride alongside guilt/shame or intrapsychic conflict post-trance. *Rasa/rumangsa* functions as an ethical compass that sets boundaries of propriety, while collective effervescence indicates social acceptance of innovation. We propose the conceptualization of "creative compliance" to explain fidelity to the spirit of tradition through adaptive forms. Practical implications include *rasa*-informed curatorial standards, trance ethics protocols, and intergenerational transmission in education; future research should employ mixed methods to test the theoretical propositions.

1 Introduction

Javanese culture, particularly in Malang, East Java, displays a complex dynamic between adherence to tradition and the tendency to *mberot* (to defy or depart from *pakem*, i.e., canonical conventions). In customary practices and in ritualized arts such as *bantengan*,

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jaranan, and *topeng*, cultural compliance is regarded as a means of maintaining social harmony, spiritual continuity, and collective identity. Communities believe that following ancestral rules, performing rituals devoutly, and observing artistic protocols are not only acts of reverence but also mechanisms for avoiding disharmony and *kualat* (ancestral sanction).

Modernization, globalization, and the commodification of the arts, however, produce a paradox. On one hand, fidelity to *pakem* safeguards ritual sacrality and artistic authenticity; on the other, pressures to adapt give rise to *mberot*, often perceived as deviance. In *bantengan*, for example, traditional prayers and offerings are sometimes omitted in favor of faster, more spectacular shows. In *jaranan*, mystical ritual functions have shifted toward popular stage entertainment. Likewise, in *topeng*, the classical Panji–Klana–Patih sequence is frequently shortened, merged with modern dance, or repackaged for tourism. These *mberot* practices provoke debate: do they desecrate the sacred, or do they constitute relevant strategies of preservation in the contemporary era?

From a cultural-psychological perspective, the paradox of compliance and *mberot* can be explained via self-construal [1], which highlights the relation between the individual and the collective. Traditional compliance reflects an interdependent self-construal—identities built in close relation to community, ancestors, and the cosmos. Conversely, *mberot* can be read as the expression of an independent self-construal—a drive to assert autonomy, creativity, and self-actualization. The paradox affects not only individuals but also social cohesion, the legitimacy of sacrality, and the transformation of the arts themselves.

Prior research shows that Javanese rituals function as mechanisms of social control [2] and generate collective effervescence [3], the social energy that strengthens solidarity. More recent work highlights a shift in motivation from sacrality toward commodification in Javanese life-cycle events and rituals [4]. Likewise, the concepts of *rasa rumangsa* [5] and *rasa* as a dimension of Javanese cultural psychology [6] suggest that compliance and *mberot* are not merely social behaviors but psychologically meaningful mechanisms.

This phenomenon warrants close investigation because it raises fundamental questions: how do Javanese communities, especially in Greater Malang, negotiate tensions between cultural compliance and *mberot* within *bantengan*, *jaranan*, and *topeng*? How do the psychological dynamics of compliance—feelings of safety, fear, shame, and pride—interact with creative impulses to *mberot*? And how does this paradox shape cultural identity and the relevance of traditional arts in modern times?

Taking a cultural-psychological lens, this study contributes not only an academic understanding of the paradox of cultural compliance but also practical insights for strategies to preserve traditional arts amid social change. In Malang, *bantengan*, *jaranan*, and *topeng* are not merely aesthetic heritage; they are socio-psychological laboratories that reveal how tradition, identity, and innovation are dynamically negotiated in contemporary Javanese society.

Beyond social and spiritual functions, cultural compliance in the arts is tied to psychological well-being. Study [4] shows that life-cycle rituals in East Java strengthen gratitude, social cohesion, and psychological well-being—even when carried out amid modernization that often forces adjustments to ritual form. This indicates that adherence to custom has a dual meaning: it provides inner stability and serves as a space for identity negotiation in times of change.

Mberot can also be linked to the dynamics of self-awareness and empathy in Javanese culture. Study [5] finds that *rasa rumangsa* fosters self-awareness that promotes compliance with social norms. Yet when individuals deviate from *pakem*, they are not simply rejecting tradition; they often do so with social relations in mind. *Mberot* is thus not only resistance but also an expression of negotiation between personal needs and collective expectations.

Other scholarship underscores the centrality of *rasa* in Javanese cultural psychology. Study [6] explains that *rasa* is not merely emotion, but an ethical apparatus guiding compliant

as well as deviating behavior. In *topeng*, for instance, *rasa* determines how a dancer embodies the character of Panji or Klana. When artists engage in *mberot* by modifying choreographic form, they are, in effect, crafting new interpretations of *rasa*. A paradox arises when the form is deemed deviant, yet the inner meaning remains consistent with Javanese values.

Further, cultural studies point to ambivalence between sacrality and commodification. Study [7] contends that when traditional arts are turned into objects of tourism, their functions transform—from sacred rite to economic entertainment. This process is often seen as *mberot* against sacrality but simultaneously opens pathways for the arts to survive in modern public spaces. Thus, compliance and *mberot* can be understood as complementary cultural strategies in the context of globalization.

Finally, cross-cultural psychology suggests that tensions between compliance and autonomy are a universal feature of collectivist societies. According to [8] study, collectivist cultures emphasize norm adherence, but individuals continually negotiate to preserve personal agency. In Malang, the paradox manifests in *bantengan*, *jaranan*, and *topeng*: communities maintain customary rites, while artists engage in *mberot* to assert creativity and existence. The phenomenon is thus locally significant and enriches global cultural-psychology discourse.

Research objectives**:**

1) Describe forms of cultural compliance in *bantengan*, *jaranan*, and *topeng* as representations of customary and ritual traditions in Malang, East Java.
2) Analyze the dynamics of *mberot* as departures from *pakem*, both as artistic innovation and as responses to socio-cultural change.
3) Uncover the psychological paradox between compliance and *mberot* that influences personal identity, social relationships, and spiritual experience among practitioners.
4) Offer a conceptual understanding of how Javanese communities negotiate traditional values and modernization through the arts, viewed from a cultural-psychological perspective.

2 Methods

Research on Javanese culture—especially in folk arts such as bantengan, jaranan, and topeng typically employs qualitative approaches to capture the complexity of meaning, symbols, and psychological experience that cannot be reduced to numbers. As emphasized in [9], qualitative methods allow deep exploration of narratives, symbols, and cultural practices so that the meanings behind compliance and mberot can be understood within social and psychological frames.

Many recent studies use cultural ethnography as the dominant approach. For instance, [4] explored Javanese life-cycle rituals through participant observation and in-depth interviews to trace meanings of gratitude and social cohesion. This technique is relevant because Javanese arts are not merely performed for entertainment; they carry ritual and spiritual dimensions. Ethnography enables researchers to embed in communities, observe ritual processes, and record practitioners' psychological experiences.

Beyond ethnography, qualitative research in Javanese contexts also relies on phenomenological interviewing to explore inner experience. Peristianto et al. [5], for example, examined rasa rumangsa using in-depth interviews to understand how self-awareness and empathy are internalized in everyday practice. This technique is crucial for revealing psychological paradoxes between cultural compliance and tendencies toward mberot that often surface in traditional arts.

Thematic analysis is also widely used. Study [6] developed an analysis of rasa as a psychological construct in Javanese culture by identifying themes from interview transcripts and observation notes. This approach enables researchers to discern patterns of meaning

around compliance that are not always explicit. Study [10] underscores that data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing in qualitative work should be cyclical and reflective, so contextual meaning is not lost.

Finally, data trustworthiness in qualitative cultural research is typically maintained through triangulation. Study [2] shows that combining interviews, observation, and documentation is important to avoid single-source bias. Additionally, member checking with informants and peer debriefing with cultural experts strengthen the credibility of findings. Accordingly, this methodological review synthesizes prior qualitative studies of Javanese culture grounded in a combination of participant observation, in-depth interviews, documentation, and thematic analysis. This approach makes it possible to apprehend the paradox of cultural compliance and mberot not merely as social behavior but as psychologically meaningful experience for communities in Malang and Javanese society more broadly.

3 Result

Within a cultural-psychological frame, the dynamics of compliance and *mberot* (deviation/innovation from *pakem*) can be understood along three axes. First, self-construal explains how the self is defined in relation to others: on one side, the interdependent self emphasizes togetherness, obligation, and norms; on the other, the independent self emphasizes autonomy and self-expression [1]. Second, the concept of *rasa*—including *rasa rumangsa* (self-aware tact)—functions as a distinct Javanese ethical-affective compass that regulates propriety, refinement, and social sensitivity so people "know their place," when to comply and when a difference may be permitted without injuring order [5,6]. Third, collective effervescence explains how communal rites generate shared emotional energy that binds people into solidarity, religiosity, and togetherness—an experiential quality that typically arises when ritual *pakem* is performed devoutly [3].

These three axes are concrete in *bantengan* in Malang. Here, the interdependent self-manifests as compliance with sacred procedures—prayer, offerings, disciplined roles—believed to ensure safety and collective harmony, especially at public moments such as Grebeg Suro [11]. Yet tourism, modern staging demands, and post-pandemic recovery drive the independent self in the form of innovations in sound design, shorter durations, or packaging for broader audiences often perceived as mberot by traditionalists [12]. Mediating this tension is rasa / rasa rumangsa: practitioners gauge "how far" adaptation remains njawani (properly Javanese), does not breach unggah-ungguh (Javanese etiquette), and preserves the inner meaning of the performance. If new packaging still sustains the intensity of togetherness and solemnity, collective effervescence is maintained; if sacred elements are overly trimmed, the collective experience easily declines into mere spectacle [4,11].

In jaranan (kuda lumping), the same theoretical axes appear through trance experience. Compliance with pre-ritual safeguards, safety protocols during performance, and collective oversight reflects the interdependent self, as community serves as the bearer of meaning and the guardian of behavioral limits [3]. Trance also opens space for the independent self—an intense personal experience which can be deemed mberot when post-trance behavior exceeds communal propriety [13]. Here rasa rumangsa functions as a subtle regulator: performers learn to manage post-trance expression so it remains pantes (appropriate), does not offend elders, and preserves social face. When emotion regulation and ritual governance are intact, collective effervescence yields feelings of safety, pride, and attachment; when not, guilt, shame, or stigma may fracture cohesion [13].

In topeng (Malangan mask dance/theatre), the interdependent self takes the form of adherence to pakem—sequence of stories, characters (Panji, Klana, the Twin Patih), musical patterns, and costuming associated with ethical-spiritual discipline and the continuity of

lineage [14]. The independent self surfaces as choreographic experimentation, shortened narratives, or even innovations in mask materials and visuality. Such practices are often labeled mberot, but they can also be read as "creative compliance" so long as the spirit of tradition rasa continues to animate the performance [6,15]. Social acceptance is measured not solely by outward form but by whether the innovation ngemu rasa: preserving inner comportment, gestural decorum, and depth of embodiment. When such innovations are staged in communal spaces festivals, kembul topeng and still ignite shared resonance, collective effervescence legitimates the new form [14,15].

Across these arts, rasa bridges the interdependent self (pakem, ritual, unggah-ungguh) and the independent self (creation, adaptation, personal interpretation). Rasa rumangsa enables actors to read relational contexts who is present, what the occasion is, which boundaries are inviolable so that innovation is not simply rebellion but a negotiated form that preserves communal dignity [5,6]. In other words, mberot that is ber-rasa can be understood not as the antithesis of compliance but as a mode of keeping tradition alive.

Field evidence shows that the intensity of collective effervescence functions as an implicit "metric" of whether adaptation is accepted or rejected. In communal events and performances, when new formats still evoke solemnity, poignancy, and togetherness—through shared prayer, stagecraft that honors offerings, or narratives that continue to instruct ethical conduct communities tend to interpret innovation as part of preservation [4]. Conversely, when adaptation severs symbolic sequences and dampens shared emotional resonance, communities are more likely to stigmatize it as mberot [3,11].

This framework also illuminates psychological consequences for performers and communities. Meaningful compliance fosters feelings of safety, pride, and spiritual legitimacy; well-guided mberot enhances creative agency and cross-generational relevance. Mberot that loses its "grip on rasa," however, risks intrapsychic conflict, guilt, shame, and social tension [13]. Thus, the sustainability of bantengan, jaranan, and topeng is not only about preserving forms but about tending the ecology of rasa that undergirds collective experience and cultural identity [14,15].

Ultimately, this narrative suggests that trajectories of safeguarding folk arts need not choose between pakem or innovation. What matters is the quality of negotiation between them: the extent to which the interdependent self remains an ethical foundation, the independent self is afforded channels of expression, rasa guides boundaries of propriety, and collective effervescence is maintained as an index of the performance's living spirit. At this point, transformations often read as *mberot* can be interpreted as creative compliance fidelity to the deepest meanings of tradition in forms relevant to the present [11,12].

4 Discussion

Based on the findings on *mberot* and cultural compliance among Javanese communities in customary traditions and rites specifically in *bantengan*, *jaranan*, and *topeng* in Malang the discussion is summarized as follows.

Table 1. Summary of Key Journals on *Mberot* & Cultural Compliance

Author & Year	Art/Tradition	Method	Key Concepts	Main Findings
Pohan, R. A., Ramli, M., Atmoko, A., Akbar, S., & Hanurawan, F. (2025)	Javanese life-cycle feast (hajatan) traditions (linked to folk arts)	Qualitative ethnography: observation, interviews, documentation	Compliance with hajatan rites sustains social cohesion; mberot emerges as younger generations streamline processes for efficiency; shift from sacrality to commodification	Compliance fosters gratitude and spiritual connectedness, while forms of mberot become survival strategies in the modern era
Hidajat, R. (2021). The Artistry and Creative Process in Malang Mask Dance	Malangan mask (Panji dance & variants)	Ethnographic study of performing arts; observation & aesthetic analysis	Canonical pakem (movement, costume, storyline) upheld by senior artists; younger generations attempt mberot via improvisation and incorporation of modern elements	Paradox: compliance preserves sacrality, whereas mberot drives creativity that keeps Malangan mask alive and relevant
Hidajat, R. (2023). Local Spiritual Belief: Creative Posture of Mask Dancer-Maker in Malang	Mask making and performance (Malangan)	Qualitative—case study & artist interviews	Rituals and spiritual beliefs (ancestral ties); mberot arises when artists modify traditional masks (color, form, materials). Cultural psychology: interplay between rasa and identity	Fidelity to ancestral values is maintained, yet creative innovation is read as a 'new compliance' that helps prevent extinction of the art
Fitanti, S. D. (2023). The Intrapsychic Conflict of a Kuda Lumping Dancer after Trance Ritual	Jaranan (Kuda Lumping)	Qualitative case study; phenomenological interviews	Trance rites trigger psychological conflict: compliance maintains social harmony; mberot (uncontrolled possession) leads to fear and stigma	Paradox of compliance: following ritual offers safety, yet mberot as uncontrolled post-trance behavior can disrupt social balance
Istikomah, R. (2024). The Performance of Bantengan in the Grebeg Suro Event to Enhance Religiousness. International Seminar on Islamic Education and Peace	Bantengan in Grebeg Suro rites	Phenomenology; participant observation, interviews	Ritual compliance: prayer, offerings, sacred rules; mberot emerges when performance formats are altered for tourism. From a cultural-psychology view, there is a tension between spiritual values and public entertainment demands	Bantengan survives due to adaptability, yet a paradox persists between maintaining pakem and meeting market expectations

Note: Data synthesized from prior research reviews.

With reference to Table 1 ("Summary of Key Journals on *Mberot* & Cultural Compliance"), the following points can be described:

1) Cultural compliance in *bantengan*, *jaranan*, and *topeng*

Bantengan. Compliance is realized in pre-ritual discipline (prayer, offerings, role arrangements), processional structure, and stage ethics—particularly in communal moments such as *Grebeg Suro*. These practices are understood as safeguards for social-spiritual well-being and as sources of performance legitimacy [11]. At the community-management level, local wisdom is affirmed in post-pandemic governance, marking compliance that extends from stage to organizational practice [12].

Jaranan. Compliance appears in pre-trance protocols, collective control during performance, and etiquette toward elders and ritual apparatus. These safeguards prevent "unruly" behavior and keep expressions during and after trance within bounds [13]. Topeng. Compliance entails keeping *pakem*: story order, characters (Panji, Klana, the Twin Patih), costume, musical patterns, and the ethos of *ngemu rasa*. Such adherence is viewed as an ethical-spiritual discipline and a support for identity continuity [14].

Key takeaway: In all three arts, compliance is not merely "technical rule-following" but a mechanism for sustaining cosmological harmony, social cohesion, and symbolic legitimacy [3,4].

2) The dynamics of *mberot* (deviation/adaptation) as artistic innovation and response to social change

Bantengan. Adapted durations, modern sound systems, and festival staging are often perceived as *mberot* by conservatives; empirically, however, these moves function as survival strategies and post-pandemic recovery—a form of adaptive *mberot* [11,12].
Jaranan**.** Shifts from sacred ritual to public entertainment (non-ritual stages) generate practices that some communities deem "deviant," evidencing negotiations between market/audience demands and communal propriety [13].

Topeng. Choreographic innovation, shortened narratives, and modifications to mask materials spark *mberot* discourse; when innovation still preserves *rasa*, it is accepted as creative compliance—fidelity to the spirit of tradition in new guises [6,15].

Key takeaway: *Mberot* operates as an adaptation mechanism to modernization, tourism, and the creative economy—accepted insofar as *rasa/unggah-ungguh* remain intact [6].

3) Psychological paradoxes between compliance and mberot (identity, social relations, spirituality)

Personal identity. Compliance fosters safety, pride, and spiritual legitimacy; *mberot* enhances creative agency and self-relevance—yet risks guilt/shame if judged excessive [13]. Social relations. Compliance strengthens communal acceptance (interdependence), whereas *mberot*—if not *ber-rasa*—invites stigma. Here *rasa rumangsa* acts as a fine-grained regulator so that difference remains socially wise [5].

Spirituality & communal experience. Devout ritual performance kindles collective effervescence—the shared emotional vibration that binds people to ancestors and to one another [3,11]. Innovations that preserve this intensity tend to be legitimated; severing symbolic sequences reduces the experience to mere spectacle, sharpening the compliance–*mberot* paradox [4].

Key takeaway: The paradox emerges because two psychological needs co-occur: the interdependent self (cohesion/norms) and the independent self (expression/autonomy). *Rasa* is the balancing key [1,6].

4) Conceptual understanding of negotiating traditional values and modernization from a cultural-psychological perspective

The literature suggests a triadic pattern of negotiation: (a) Cultural/contextual determinants *pakem*, elder authority, public agendas (tourism, education) [4,11,12]; (b) Psychological mechanisms—self-construal (interdependent ↔ independent), *rasa/rumangsa* as ethical-affective compass, and collective effervescence as an indicator of communal vitality [1,3,5,6]; (c) Artistic practice—*bantengan* (formalized rites ↔ festival staging), *jaranan* (trance control ↔ entertainment format), *topeng* (preserving *pakem* ↔ choreographic/material innovation) [15].

From this pattern arise conceptual propositions: (P1) The stronger the interdependent self, the greater the compliance with *pakem*/ritual; (P2) An independent self-guided by *rasa/rumangsa* tends to produce innovations not judged as destructive *mberot*; (P3) Collective effervescence mediates social acceptance of innovation; (P4) Community perceptions of *mberot* depend on whether innovation *ngemu rasa*. Negotiations are most stable when ethical compliance and creative novelty are jointly maintained through *rasa*—making *mberot* a form of creative compliance rather than an antithesis of tradition.

5 Conclusion

Forms of cultural compliance**.** In *bantengan*, *jaranan*, and *topeng* in Greater Malang, compliance is not only technical adherence to *pakem* (prayer/offerings, story order, costume, musical patterns, trance control) but functions as a mechanism that preserves cosmological harmony, social cohesion, and symbolic legitimacy within artistic communities.

Mberot as creative adaptation**.** Practices perceived as "deviant" shorter durations, modern sound systems, festival formats, choreographic/material modifications operate as sustainability strategies in the face of modernization, tourism, and the creative economy. *Mberot* is accepted as creative compliance if it continues to *ngemu rasa*.

Psychological paradox**.** The needs of the interdependent self (norms, togetherness, symbolic protection) coexist with those of the independent self (autonomy, self-expression). This tension produces dual outcomes: safety/pride and cohesion, but also potential guilt/shame, stigma, or intrapsychic conflict (especially in trance practices).

Balancing mechanism**.** *Rasa / rasa rumangsa* serves as an ethical-affective compass that sets boundaries of propriety so that innovation does not compromise the dignity of tradition. Collective effervescence functions as a social indicator when the intensity of communal experience is sustained, innovation tends to be legitimated.

Conceptual propositions**.** (P1) Interdependence strengthens adherence to *pakem*/ritual; (P2) Autonomy guided by *rasa* tends to yield innovations not interpreted as destructive *mberot*; (P3) Effervescence mediates social acceptance of innovation; (P4) Perceptions of *mberot* hinge on whether innovation preserves *rasa*.

6 Implication

This study positions self-construal, *rasa/rumangsa*, and collective effervescence as three axes for reading negotiations of compliance–*mberot* in Javanese folk arts, and advances the concept of "creative compliance": fidelity to the spirit of tradition through adaptive forms.

Methodological. Mixed methods are recommended: deep ethnography combined with quantitative instruments (self-construal scales, indicators of effervescence, and *rasa* assessments via vignettes) and longitudinal thematic analysis across ritual cycles, with special attention to post-trance intrapsychic conflict.

Practical/Policy. Implement *rasa*-informed curatorial standards—non-negotiable ritual elements (prayer, offerings, symbolic sequence) alongside flexible duration, staging, or media; orient funding (grants/residencies/festivals) to evaluate the quality of *rasa* negotiation; establish safety and trance-ethics protocols with psychological support and public literacy components.

Socio-Cultural & Education**.** Strengthen intergenerational transmission focused on training in *rasa/rumangsa*; integrate "creative compliance" modules in schools and studios; build audience literacy so innovations that sustain communal intensity are more readily accepted.

Future Research Agenda**.** Conduct cross-site and cross-style studies to map thresholds of "proper *rasa*"; examine long-term effects of innovation on community cohesion, cultural identity, and performance economies; design curatorial experiments to measure how changes to ritual elements influence collective effervescence and acceptance of *mberot*.

Limitations. Reliance on qualitative sources (including proceedings/ethnographies) limits generalizability; culturally validated psychometric instruments are needed to measure *rasa* and effervescence more reliably.

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