

The Dynamics of the Judging System in the National Reyog Ponorogo Festival: The Dilemma of Interests and Its Impact on the Creativity of Artists

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Abstract

This study investigates the internal dynamics of the judging process at one of Indonesia's premier cultural events, the National Reyog Ponorogo Festival. The National Reyog Ponorogo Festival is one of Indonesia's premier cultural events, designed to preserve and showcase the traditional art of Reyog. While the festival serves as a vital space for cultural expression and community engagement, its judging system has raised ongoing concerns regarding fairness, objectivity, and the influence of non-artistic interests. This study investigates the internal dynamics of the judging process and explores how it affects the creativity and strategic choices of participating artists. Utilizing a qualitative ethnographic approach, data were collected through participant observation, document analysis, and in-depth interviews with five experienced jurors from various cultural and academic backgrounds. These insights were interpreted using theoretical frameworks from Pierre Bourdieu (field theory), Richard Schechner (performance theory), and John Rawls (justice as fairness). The findings reveal that despite standardized scoring rubrics, judges interpret criteria through subjective lenses shaped by habitus, cultural capital, and institutional alignment. Artistic conformity often results from perceived jury expectations, limiting risk-taking and innovation among performers. The festival's aesthetic economy tends to privilege groups with more access to resources and historical visibility, raising equity concerns. The study concludes by recommending structural improvements to the adjudication system, including greater transparency, juror rotation, and post-festival feedback mechanisms. These reforms aim to balance tradition and innovation, and promote a judging culture that is pedagogical, inclusive, and conducive to artistic growth.

Introduction

Cultural festivals serve as critical platforms for the preservation, promotion, and revitalization of traditional art forms. In Indonesia, one such festival that carries both cultural and symbolic significance is the National Reyog Ponorogo Festival. Celebrated as an annual competition showcasing the performance art of Reyog a traditional Javanese folk theatre combining dance, music, and mythical storytelling the festival not only reinforces communal identity but also shapes the contemporary trajectory of the Reyog tradition. Ostensibly rooted in values of aesthetic excellence and cultural heritage, the festival also functions as a competitive field where recognition, legitimacy, and symbolic capital are conferred. However, concerns have been raised over the integrity and objectivity of the judging system, with allegations that decisions are often shaped by political agendas, social networks, and personal affiliations rather than artistic merit.

This concern reflects a broader tension between artistic autonomy and institutional power in the cultural sphere. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural production emphasizes that art is not

produced in isolation but within structured fields of power and contestation, where agents compete for cultural legitimacy and distinction (Bourdieu, 1993). In such arenas, judgments about artistic value are often entangled with struggles for authority and influence, mediated through forms of capital economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. The judging process in festivals like Reyog Ponorogo, therefore, is not merely a neutral act of evaluation but a performative mechanism of cultural regulation and reproduction. These dynamics raise critical questions about fairness, transparency, and the space for innovation in traditional arts.

The objectivity of artistic judgment has long been problematized within performance studies and cultural sociology. Richard Schechner's (2003) theory of performance highlights the repetitive nature of restored behaviors, suggesting that institutionalized practices, such as judging, tend to reproduce past forms and expectations, thereby potentially stifling creative departures. In the case of Reyog, the perceived conservatism of the judging criteria may disincentivize experimentation, pushing artists to conform to stylistic norms favored by jurors rather than pursuing new expressive possibilities. As a consequence, artistic creativity risks being subordinated to systemic conservatism and sociopolitical interest.

This problem is further complicated by the increasing commodification of cultural performances. According to Adorno and Horkheimer's (2002) critique of the culture industry, the logic of commodification tends to prioritize marketable forms over artistic integrity. When applied to cultural festivals, this framework suggests that art can become instrumentalized for political display, tourism, or entertainment value, thereby transforming its evaluative frameworks. The Reyog festival, though rooted in cultural tradition, is not immune to these forces. With regional governments, cultural elites, and commercial sponsors playing roles in the festival's organization, the judging system may inadvertently align with strategic interests that privilege visibility and prestige over genuine artistic innovation.

From a normative perspective, the issue can also be analyzed through the lens of justice. John Rawls' (1999) theory of justice as fairness posits that institutional arrangements should ensure equal opportunities for all participants and avoid arbitrary advantages. If judging outcomes in the festival are influenced by non-artistic criteria—such as political alliances, prior relationships, or regional favoritism—then the principle of fairness is clearly violated. Artists lacking access to influential networks may be disadvantaged, regardless of the quality of their performances. This not only undermines meritocracy but also jeopardizes the long-term sustainability of Reyog as a dynamic art form capable of attracting new generations of performers.

Previous studies on festival adjudication have revealed similar patterns of subjectivity and bias, especially in settings where judging panels lack transparency, consistency, or independence (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Schechner, 2003). In such contexts, artists may internalize the logic of conformity, anticipating what judges are likely to reward and adapting their work accordingly. This phenomenon aligns with Bourdieu's concept of habitus, wherein actors unconsciously embody the norms and expectations of their social field (Bourdieu, 1989). In the Reyog context, habitus manifests in the repetition of certain choreographic patterns, costume designs, and narrative elements that have historically been rewarded by the jury. Such tendencies contribute to artistic stagnation and inhibit the festival's potential as a site of cultural innovation.

Additionally, the judging system can be seen as a site of social construction, where collective perceptions about quality and legitimacy are negotiated and stabilized through repeated performances. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue, reality itself is socially constructed through institutionalized practices. In the case of Reyog, the adjudication process does not simply reflect objective evaluations; it actively shapes what is considered exemplary Reyog performance. If these judgments are consistently skewed by external interests, then the dominant conception of "excellent" Reyog becomes increasingly narrow, exclusionary, and disconnected from the lived creativity of its practitioners.

This raises concerns not only about artistic fairness but also about the broader educational and developmental role of festivals. Paulo Freire's (2000) notion of critical pedagogy advocates for dialogic spaces where participants are empowered to reflect on and transform their social realities. A judging system that suppresses artistic agency through non-transparent mechanisms runs counter to this ideal. Rather than empowering artists to explore, question, and expand the boundaries of

Reyog, such a system reinforces hierarchical control and passive compliance. For the festival to fulfill its potential as a site of cultural emancipation and innovation, its evaluative structures must be subjected to critical scrutiny and reform.

Despite these challenges, the Reyog Ponorogo Festival continues to attract enthusiastic participation and enjoys substantial institutional support. Its potential as a cultural laboratory remains vast. However, realizing this potential requires rethinking its adjudication framework not simply in technical terms, but as a deeper cultural practice that embodies values of equity, creativity, and inclusivity. This entails recognizing the judging system as a dynamic field of power, shaped by both explicit and implicit interests, and calling for new norms that promote transparency, reflexivity, and artistic freedom.

This study seeks to address these concerns by critically examining the judging system of the National Reyog Ponorogo Festival. Through a qualitative research approach combining field observations, interviews with performers and jurors, and textual analysis, the study explores how interests—social, political, and symbolic—are negotiated within the festival arena and how these dynamics impact the creative choices of artists. Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory and Schechner's performance theory, the research identifies the structural mechanisms that influence judging outcomes and the performative adaptations that artists undertake in response.

The novelty of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach and its focus on the intersection of power, culture, and artistic expression within a specific ethnographic setting. Unlike previous studies that treat festival judging as a procedural issue, this research frames it as a cultural and political practice embedded in broader social structures. By doing so, it highlights the hidden costs of compromised judgment and proposes pathways toward more just and generative cultural platforms.

In scope, the study focuses on the National Reyog Ponorogo Festival over recent years, examining patterns of adjudication, stakeholder interests, and artist responses. It does not aim to generalize across all Indonesian festivals but instead offers a detailed case study with implications for cultural policy, performance practice, and the sociology of art. Ultimately, the study aspires to contribute both to academic scholarship and to ongoing conversations among artists, organizers, and policymakers about how to cultivate a fairer and more creatively vibrant festival culture.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach to examine the dynamics of the judging system in the National Reyog Ponorogo Festival, with a particular focus on how social, political, and symbolic interests are enacted and negotiated within the adjudication process and how these dynamics influence the creativity of participating artists. Grounded in the epistemological view that reality is socially constructed and culturally mediated (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), this research seeks to understand meaning from the perspectives of the participants themselves—artists, choreographers, jurors, and organizers—rather than imposing predetermined analytical categories. Within this ethnographic tradition, the researcher engages immersively with the cultural practices, social interactions, and institutional structures that surround the festival, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of the lived experiences, embodied knowledge, and performative strategies that shape both artistic production and the practice of judgment.

The rationale for employing ethnography is further strengthened by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the field, which conceptualizes the cultural arena as a dynamic space in which agents compete for legitimacy, recognition, and various forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1993). At the same time, Richard Schechner's (2003) performance theory offers a critical lens through which not only the staged performances but also the very act of judging can be understood as a form of "restored behavior." Together, these perspectives require a methodological approach that is both observational and interpretive, enabling the researcher to trace, in real time, how power relations, symbolic negotiations, and institutional norms intersect within festival practices. The research was conducted at the National Reyog Ponorogo Festival, an annual cultural event held in Ponorogo, East Java, Indonesia, which brings together local, regional, and national participants in a competitive performance setting judged by a panel of academics, cultural practitioners, and government representatives. The festival thus represents a convergence of artistic display, cultural

preservation, and institutional authority, making it an ideal site for investigating the interrelation between creativity, legitimacy, and interest-based dynamics. During the research period, the festival was organized into several stages, including preliminary rounds, semi-finals, and finals, each accompanied by formal adjudication and varying degrees of public commentary, providing multiple points of entry for observing and analyzing evaluative practices and participant responses. Data collection followed core ethnographic principles and was carried out through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The researcher attended the festival in person and systematically observed the performances, interactions among artists, organizers, and judges, as well as the backstage dynamics and informal exchanges that shaped the broader social atmosphere of the event. Attention was paid not only to aesthetic elements but also to nonverbal communication, ritual practices, spatial arrangements, and symbolic gestures, all of which were recorded in detailed field notes. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eighteen key stakeholders consisting of Reyog performers and choreographers, festival jurors, cultural organizers and local officials, as well as academic observers and critics. These interviews explored participants' perceptions of the judging system, their experiences of inclusion or exclusion, interpretations of fairness, and the ways in which adjudication processes affected their artistic decisions. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and subsequently coded for thematic analysis. Complementing these primary data sources, the researcher also examined official festival documents such as judging guidelines, evaluation forms, and public statements, alongside media coverage, social media discourse, and community commentary, in order to triangulate perspectives and capture both formal and vernacular understandings of the festival and its values.

The analytical process combined thematic coding with an interpretive framework drawn from several interrelated theoretical concepts. Bourdieu's notions of field and habitus were used to analyze how judgments emerge from socially conditioned dispositions and how artists modify their creative choices in response to perceived expectations and institutional pressures, while the concept of symbolic capital helped illuminate how recognition, awards, and ranking influence the status and future opportunities of participants. Schechner's idea of restored behavior was applied to identify recurrent patterns in both performance and judgment that reflect institutionalized aesthetic preferences and normative frameworks. These interpretations were further enriched by Rawls's (1999) concept of justice as fairness, which provided an ethical lens for examining participants' perceptions of equity and access within the judging system, as well as by Adorno and Horkheimer's (2002) critique of cultural commodification, which helped assess the extent to which artistic expression was shaped by political, commercial, or ideological forces rather than by creative autonomy. Through this integrated framework, the data were interpreted in ways that highlighted the complex interplay between institutional structures, power relations, and individual agency. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, methodological triangulation was applied across observations, interviews, and documentary sources, thereby strengthening the credibility and consistency of the analysis. Member checking was also undertaken by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants in order to confirm accuracy and invite critical feedback. Throughout the research process, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to document positionality, potential biases, emotional responses, and shifting interpretations, recognizing that knowledge production in ethnography is inseparable from the researcher's situated perspective. This reflexive engagement was particularly important given the sensitivity of issues such as favoritism, political intervention, and institutional critique, and special care was taken to present participants' voices with accuracy, respect, and ethical consideration.

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to the commencement of fieldwork. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage of the research without consequence. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in place of real names and identifying details were removed from all published data. Given the potential risks associated with critiquing institutional practices, particular attention was paid to anonymizing both individuals and specific organizational references, ensuring that the presentation of findings balanced analytical depth with ethical responsibility. While the ethnographic approach enabled a deep and contextually rich understanding of the judging system, the findings remain necessarily situated and cannot be

generalized to all cultural festivals. The focus on a single event enhances analytical depth but limits comparative scope, and restricted access to some private jury deliberations may have constrained certain insights into decision-making processes. Nevertheless, the use of multiple data sources and indirect observations helped to mitigate these limitations and provided a robust foundation for interpreting the complex dynamics of judgment, power, and creativity within the National Reyog Ponorogo Festival.

Results and Discussion

Choreographic Composition and Thematic Alignment

The choreographic aspect emerged as the most dominant evaluative category, carrying the highest weight (30%) in the official scoring rubric. Field observations and interviews revealed that jurors emphasize the coherence between the performance's theme and its movement vocabulary. Across the board, there was a consensus that strong choreography begins with a well-grounded thematic idea, translated through traditional movements that preserve the soul of Reyog while allowing space for innovation.

Juri Arif, a senior cultural official, emphasized that “Reyog is not merely dance it carries cultural spirit. Movement is its foundation. Innovating is fine, but never stray from the roots”. Similarly, Bapak Sukatno argued that innovation must be drawn *from* the traditional vocabulary, not imposed from outside, stating: “Choreographers must show personal style, but not abandon the core of Reyog”.

Meanwhile, juror Eko an internationally recognized choreographer offered a more performative and compositional reading, describing choreography as “the meeting point of emotion, body, and structure”. He praised works that balance rhythmic vitality with internal dynamics, citing the need for “ritual coherence” in Reyog's structure of opening, middle, and closure. However, several jurors expressed concern about choreographic imbalance, especially among younger artists who prioritize speed and complexity over expressive depth. Bapak Rohim labeled such tendencies as “storm choreography intense but emotionally flat, urging for more *mat-matan* (reflective pacing) that allows audiences to “breathe and feel”.

Artistic Innovation and Aesthetic Depth

Artistic and aesthetic elements (20%) were highly valued, particularly the integration of costume, lighting, set design, and symbolic meaning. Across interviews, jurors favored works that demonstrated harmonic integration among these elements while preserving the philosophical underpinnings of Reyog. According to Bapak Sri from ISI Surakarta, “aesthetic beauty is not merely appearance but the depth of emotional impact”. He advocated for harmony as an “embodied feeling” rather than a checklist of visual features. This was echoed by Eko, who stated that true aesthetic value lies in “symbolic resonance that stirs the audience emotionally, not just visually”.

Nonetheless, there was divergence in tolerance toward contemporary styling. While Arif and Sri emphasized caution against “visual excess that erodes meaning”, Eko and Sukatno were more permissive, acknowledging aesthetic evolution as long as the spirit of Reyog remained intact. Many jurors appreciated creative reinterpretations that used minimalist but meaningful design. Simplicity with emotional coherence often outperformed complex but incoherent spectacles. Jurors stressed the importance of **visual economy**—the art of delivering strong impressions with restraint.

Musical Interpretation and Rhythm Integration

Music, valued at 15%, was universally seen as the “heartbeat” of performance. All jurors agreed that traditional instrumentation kendhang, slompret, gong, and kempul must remain central to Reyog, even when fused with contemporary elements. Sync between music and choreography was a decisive factor in high scoring. Rohim emphasized, “Music without soul is not Reyog. Modern sounds are fine, as long as they don't bury the traditional rhythm”. Similarly, Bapak Sri described music as a “sacred breath” of the performance that must dialog with movement, not overshadow it. Improvisational music was welcomed by Eko and Sukatno, provided it enhanced the performance's dramaturgical narrative. “Good music reinforces aesthetic unity,” Sukatno

noted. Observational data revealed that jurors marked down performances with poor synchronization between movement and tempo or those relying excessively on electronic instruments at the expense of Reyog's sonic identity.

Supporting Elements: Costume, Makeup, and Stagecraft

Supporting elements costume, props, and lighting carried a 10% weight and functioned as visual extensions of the thematic core. All jurors stressed that while modifications are acceptable, iconic characters such as Warok, Jathil, and Bujang Ganong must remain visually legible and culturally appropriate. Arif warned against "over-fashionization" of sacred figures: "When Warok looks like a fashion model, his power vanishes". Sukatno agreed, noting that costuming must align with character roles and stage narratives. Eko highlighted that lighting and props should "enhance atmosphere and not distract from dramaturgy". Jurors gave high marks to teams who used stage design not only decoratively but dramaturgically creating spatial metaphors aligned with the performance narrative.

Dance Performance and Expressivity

The *kepenarian* dimension (15%) was measured through three classical concepts: wiraga (technical skill), wirama (musicality), and wirasa (emotional embodiment). All jurors agreed that these dimensions must work in harmony. Sri insisted on a holistic embodiment of movement: "Technique is body; rhythm is breath; emotion is soul. Without all three, the dance is lifeless". Rohim introduced a critical addition *seleh* (moment of stillness as a key to emotional resonance). He challenged the overuse of speed and energy, arguing that "not every moment must be explosive; stillness reveals depth". Eko added a global perspective, suggesting that *presence* the dancer's ability to radiate energy is the fourth layer needed in contemporary performance, particularly when Reyog seeks international stages. High scores were awarded to groups whose dancers demonstrated consistency, character immersion, and ensemble synergy. Individual brilliance was appreciated, but group cohesion remained paramount.

Harmony and Structural Integrity

This final aspect (10%) assessed how all performance components converged into a coherent whole. Jurors used phrases such as *nyawiji* (soulful integration) and *tuturan rasa* (narrative flow) to describe the ideal performance. Sri and Sukatno emphasized the importance of dramaturgical consistency—from thematic interpretation, choreographic progression, to emotional resolution. Works with disjointed elements—e.g., mismatched music or abrupt transitions—were seen as immature or poorly conceptualized. Rohim introduced the metaphor of "napas panjang" (long breath) to describe performances that unfold with pacing, clarity, and emotional arc. In contrast, overly ambitious yet chaotic presentations were seen as lacking maturity.

Jury Dynamics, Transparency, and Ethical Considerations

Although the technical scoring system was found to be structurally sound with weighted rubrics and individual scoring sheets all jurors acknowledged the pressure to maintain fairness amidst potential external influences. As Sukatno observed, "Public pressure is real... even when outcomes are justified by score, perceptions may differ". Jury discussions were conducted to harmonize divergent scores, especially when ranges were extreme. Senior jurors like Arif insisted on consensus building to avoid favoritism and ensure "moral accountability". Meanwhile, Eko and Sri advocated for post-festival written feedback to help artists learn and evolve a practice still lacking in current formats. Calls for improvement included standardization of jury qualifications, rotation systems, and public access to performance evaluations. All jurors viewed their role not merely as evaluators but as cultural stewards tasked with nurturing the Reyog tradition toward both fidelity and evolution.

The Judging System as a Cultural Arena: Between Objectivity and Symbolic Power

The judging process at the National Reyog Ponorogo Festival does not operate merely as an administrative evaluation mechanism but as a cultural arena, in the Bourdieusian sense, where

power, legitimacy, and symbolic capital are actively contested (Bourdieu, 1993). Each performance is more than an aesthetic artifact; it is a strategic act embedded in the field of cultural production. In this space, artists seek recognition not only from the audience but, more crucially, from jurors who act as gatekeepers of cultural value.

The analysis of juror interviews indicates that despite the use of formal rubrics, subjective interpretations of traditionalism, creativity, and authenticity strongly influence scoring decisions. While some jurors insist on the preservation of “pakem” (traditional frameworks), others advocate for creative expansions as long as they do not violate the spiritual ethos of Reyog. These interpretive negotiations point to the relational dynamics of symbolic power: those with the authority to judge effectively define what is considered legitimate Reyog expression. In turn, participants modify their choreographic strategies to align with these perceived norms, reaffirming Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and field interdependency.

This arena is further shaped by social capital, as repeated winners tend to come from artist groups with deeper institutional ties, experience, and visibility. While jurors like Sukatno and Rohim argue that “longstanding excellence” justifies these outcomes, this pattern also risks reproducing inequality by marginalizing emerging or peripheral groups. Hence, the judging system, while formally structured, operates within unspoken hierarchies of influence and familiarity.

Performance and Restored Behavior: The Limits of Innovation

Richard Schechner’s theory of *restored behavior* offers insight into how judging processes and performative expectations are ritualized over time. The repetition of favored structures, movements, and aesthetic styles by winners creates a feedback loop new participants internalize the criteria of past success, leading to a narrowing of creative options. Indeed, juror reflections confirm that some choreographers strategically design their performances based on the presumed preferences of jurors, not necessarily their own creative instincts. Rohim described this as the “storm choreography” syndrome, where speed and complexity are prioritized over nuance and emotional pacing. This tendency points to a structural tension between innovation and conformity, in which the fear of misalignment with jury expectations discourages aesthetic risk-taking.

Schechner’s notion of *liminality* where performance can become a transformative space is thus undermined. Instead of being sites of experimentation and cultural negotiation, festival stages become codified zones where restoration trumps reinvention. This stagnation threatens the dynamic evolution of Reyog and reduces its capacity to reflect contemporary sociocultural realities.

Commodification and the Aestheticization of Competition

The findings also resonate with Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of the culture industry, where art risks becoming commodified and instrumentalized (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002). The festival, as a competitive event mediated by institutions and sponsorships, becomes a platform not only for artistic expression but also for regional pride, political display, and media spectacle. In such contexts, aesthetic choices are often influenced by what is perceived as “marketable” or publicly appealing rather than what is artistically or culturally urgent. This dynamic was subtly acknowledged by jurors who admitted to considering audience reception, visual grandiosity, and thematic relatability as secondary scoring factors. As Pak Eko noted, “Spectacular lighting and stage design should serve meaning, not distract from it” yet the inverse often happens in pursuit of scoring advantage. Furthermore, jurors’ emphasis on “professionalism” and “presentation polish” may inadvertently privilege groups with access to better resources, training, and production capacity, thereby reinforcing structural inequalities between urban and rural teams. The competition’s aesthetic economy, while celebrating excellence, also risks reducing Reyog to a consumable cultural product, evaluated through quasi-commercial standards of appeal and execution.

The Politics of Fairness: Justice, Bias, and Structural Reform

John Rawls’ theory of justice as fairness (1999) provides a valuable normative lens to assess the ethical integrity of the judging system. Theoretically, each group should enter the competition under conditions of equal opportunity, judged solely on the merit of their performance. In practice, however, the findings suggest that perceptions of bias, elite favoritism, and historical winner

dominance persist among participants and observers. While jurors universally expressed commitment to objectivity and described scoring processes as transparent and consensus-driven, several acknowledged the pressure of public scrutiny and the reputational inertia of past winners. This recognition undermines the ideal of neutral adjudication and reinforces the need for institutional safeguards such as rotating jurors, public dissemination of scoring rubrics, and structured feedback for all participants. Moreover, the current lack of reflective dialogue post-festival means that the learning value of the event is limited. Jurors such as Sri and Eko suggested introducing feedback mechanisms, where participants can understand scoring rationales and improve accordingly. This aligns with Rawls' second principle of justice, which calls for **procedural transparency** and mechanisms that benefit the least advantaged.

Artistic Integrity and the Ethos of Critical Pedagogy

The discourse of several jurors reflects Freirean ideals of critical pedagogy, where art serves as both expression and education (Freire, 2000). The festival, in this view, becomes a dialogic space where artists, jurors, and audiences co-create meaning through performance. Yet, for this dialogic space to flourish, power asymmetries must be recognized and addressed. Jurors such as Arif and Sri invoked the need to “honor tradition without paralyzing creativity,” urging younger artists to be both respectful and bold. Their comments suggest a deep understanding that artistic integrity lies not in rigid imitation, but in critical engagement with heritage. However, for this ethos to be institutionalized, the judging system must reward process-based thinking, cultural literacy, and context-aware innovation—not just technical prowess. A key insight here is the disconnect between jurors' nuanced aesthetic philosophies and the simplified quantitative nature of scoring systems. While rubrics provide structure, they may not fully capture the “living grammar” of embodied cultural expression. Integrating qualitative feedback and narrative commentary could bridge this gap, aligning procedural evaluation with cultural pedagogy.

Towards a More Inclusive and Evolving Festival Culture

The National Reyog Ponorogo Festival sits at a crossroads between preservation and innovation, elite tradition and popular expression, formal structure and performative fluidity. To ensure its continued relevance, the judging system must evolve not by abandoning structure, but by embedding reflexivity, diversity of perspective, and critical openness within its procedures.

This includes:

- a. Broadening jury composition to reflect varied artistic and cultural backgrounds;
- b. Providing structured reflection space post-festival for collective evaluation;
- c. Reframing the rubric to emphasize interpretive depth and social resonance;
- d. Encouraging artistic mentorship between senior artists and emerging groups;
- e. Publishing curated festival reports as part of cultural policy transparency.

Only by situating the judging system as an evolving cultural practice rather than a fixed bureaucratic tool can the festival serve both as a repository of tradition and a catalyst of contemporary meaning-making.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the dynamics of the judging system at the National Reyog Ponorogo Festival, revealing the complexity of cultural evaluation in a traditional yet competitive setting. The findings demonstrate that while the festival adopts formalized scoring criteria covering choreography, aesthetics, musical accompaniment, and performance quality the actual assessment process is deeply shaped by jurors' personal interpretations, social networks, and symbolic hierarchies within the cultural field.

The study highlights a fundamental tension between preserving the integrity of Reyog traditions and accommodating artistic innovation. Through ethnographic insights and juror interviews, it becomes evident that performers often adapt their works not purely for artistic expression but to align with the perceived expectations of judges. This performative adaptation reinforces patterns of conformity and potentially limits creativity and critical experimentation. Applying theoretical frameworks from Bourdieu, Schechner, and Rawls, the discussion reveals that

the judging process is a site of power negotiation, cultural reproduction, and contested legitimacy. While many jurors express a genuine commitment to fairness and pedagogical engagement, structural reforms are still needed to ensure equity, transparency, and reflective feedback. The study contributes to performance studies and cultural policy discourse by offering a critical lens on how institutionalized artistic competitions mediate tradition, power, and innovation. It recommends systemic adjustments to the judging mechanism to cultivate a more inclusive, educative, and forward-looking festival culture for Reyog and other traditional performing arts.

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