

Symbolic Interaction Communication of Traditional Games in Yogyakarta Palace Culture

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ABSTRACT

Traditional games constitute living cultural heritage that transmits social values, collective memory, and cultural identity; however, their meanings are increasingly threatened by modernization and digitally oriented leisure activities. This study aimed to analyze symbolic interactions in traditional games within the Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat Palace, identify the meanings attributed to their symbols by abdi dalem, and explain their role in sustaining Javanese culture. The study employed a qualitative design combining phenomenology and communication ethnography. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with purposively selected abdi dalem, and documentation, then analyzed through data reduction, data presentation, conclusion drawing, and source, theoretical, and methodological triangulation. The findings revealed that symbolic interactions developed through Mead's interconnected concepts of mind, self, and society. Game forms, numbers, colors, movements, turns, and customary rules functioned as significant symbols conveying ethical, social, philosophical, and spiritual meanings. Traditional games also facilitated role-taking, value transmission, social cohesion, and the reinforcement of cultural identity. The discussion demonstrates that abdi dalem act simultaneously as players and interpreters who continually negotiate shared meanings within palace norms. Therefore, traditional games are not merely recreational activities but also living communication systems that preserve Javanese values and support intergenerational cultural continuity within contemporary society amid rapidly changing social conditions.

INTRODUCTION

The Yogyakarta Palace, as the center of Javanese culture, holds a rich philosophical heritage manifested through various artifacts and social practices, including traditional games. Traditional games, often perceived as merely recreational activities, actually represent a microcosm of the values and norms of Javanese society. Within the palace environment, traditional games serve not only as forms of entertainment but also as mediums for transmitting values, ethics, and cultural identity (Cragoe, 2016; Dahyat, 2025; Dezfoulia & Nemati, 2025; Jia & Liu, 2025; Rakhoveio et al., 2025).

Several researchers have previously examined symbolic interaction within the context of traditional arts. Research on the Jaran Kepang Semarang art form identified unique patterns of symbolic interaction among dancers, musicians, and audiences amid the era of disruption. Other research on the Besutan art form in Jombang revealed that traditional arts function as ritual communication mechanisms that harmonize the surrounding environment and strengthen

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shared beliefs. Similarly, research on Bantengan in Malang demonstrated that traditional performing arts contain symbolic elements representing strength, courage, and spiritual communication (Fraizilla & Novariyanto, 2025; Istikomah, 2024; Khasanah et al., 2024; Regina et al., 2024; Yunika Puspasari et al., 2024).

However, research specifically examining traditional games within the Yogyakarta Palace from Mead's symbolic interaction perspective remains limited. This gap exists despite the Yogyakarta Palace possessing a distinctive cultural identity that influences how its community members—particularly the *abdi dalem*—communicate and interpret symbols embedded in traditional games. Research on the Mubeng Beteng ritual at the Yogyakarta Palace has shown that ritual symbols represent Javanese cultural values, Islamic spirituality, and social solidarity. These findings indicate that the Yogyakarta Palace represents a significant locus of symbolic communication practices that warrants further exploration (Fadilah, 2026; Kuncoro, 2025; Permatasari et al., 2026; Septarina et al., 2023; Supriyanto, 2025).

This issue becomes more specific within the cultural setting of the Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat Palace, which remains an important center of Javanese cultural authority and symbolic production. Within the palace, material objects, spatial arrangements, etiquette, speech levels, rituals, and bodily movements are not socially neutral; rather, they are interpreted through values such as *andhap asor* (humility), *tepa selira* (consideration for others), harmony, self-restraint, and respect for hierarchy. Traditional games practiced by *abdi dalem* therefore cannot be reduced to technical rules or winning strategies because their forms, turns, movements, colors, numbers, and interactional conventions may function as significant symbols. *Dakon*, for example, engages players in face-to-face interactions in which the movement of seeds, timing of turns, and responses to opponents may convey intention, competence, restraint, or respect. Nevertheless, these meanings remain insufficiently documented from the perspective of the cultural actors who practice and interpret them within palace life.

Previous research indexed through major academic databases has demonstrated the educational and social value of traditional games, although most studies have emphasized outcomes rather than meaning-making processes. Susanti and Nurtania (2017) found that the communication behavior of Komunitas Hong supported the preservation of Sundanese traditional games and toys through community-based cultural transmission. Kiptiah (2023) showed that culturally embedded play and community activities strengthened cooperation, communication, confidence, and mutual respect among children in Banjarmasin riverside communities. More recently, Lathifah et al. (2025) reported that traditional games grounded in Ki Hadjar Dewantara's educational principles could enrich cultural values, social identity, togetherness, and responsibility. Collectively, these studies confirm that traditional games serve as productive spaces for enculturation and social development; however, they generally treat cultural values as identifiable content or outcomes and provide limited explanations of how specific gestures and objects acquire shared meanings through interaction.

A second body of research has examined symbolic communication in Indonesian arts, rituals, and palace culture. Kusumastuti et al. (2020) identified patterned symbolic interactions and cultural transmission among dancers, musicians, and audiences in Jaran Kepang Semarang, demonstrating that traditional performances are sustained through interdependent social roles. Rahmawati (2021) found that the Sekaten tradition functions as dialogical, locally

grounded communication involving *abdi dalem* and supporting social harmony. Setiawan et al. (2024) further demonstrated that participants in Jombang's Besutan art constructed meanings through their involvement as performers, indicating that symbols are interpreted through situated experiences rather than passively received. Research on the Yogyakarta Palace has also examined symbolic landscapes and ritual representations (Amrina & Santoso, 2024; Manuela, 2025). Nevertheless, these studies have primarily focused on performance, language, ritual, or public representation, leaving ordinary traditional games as a comparatively underexplored arena of symbolic interaction.

Research concerning *dakon* has begun to address the pressures of digitalization but has not fully resolved this conceptual limitation. Nugroho et al. (2023), in a study published in *Library Hi Tech News*, examined the *Dakon UNAIR Arena* application and found that its implementation increased users' interest and participation, promoted cooperation and social interaction, and strengthened appreciation for Indonesian culture. The study demonstrated that technological adaptation could revitalize traditional games rather than simply replace them. However, its institutional library context and emphasis on revitalization did not explain how meanings emerge from face-to-face interactions among culturally knowledgeable participants. Similarly, research using traditional games for character education has commonly identified cooperation, discipline, responsibility, and sportsmanship as benefits but has rarely analyzed the microprocesses through which players interpret movements, take the role of others, regulate the self, and establish shared definitions of situations.

Accordingly, the principal research gap lies at the intersection of cultural communication, symbolic interaction, and traditional game studies. Existing scholarship has established that traditional games preserve values and support social learning, while studies of Javanese arts and rituals have demonstrated that cultural symbols organize collective behavior. However, it remains unclear how traditional games within the Yogyakarta Palace operate as communication systems in which *abdi dalem* simultaneously act as players, bearers of palace norms, and interpreters of symbolic forms. Furthermore, the application of George Herbert Mead's concepts of mind, self, society, significant symbols, and taking the role of the other to the embodied sequences of traditional play remains limited. Without this perspective, studies risk presenting cultural meanings as fixed philosophical attributes attached to game materials rather than as meanings that are continually confirmed, negotiated, and refined through interaction.

Addressing this gap is urgent for both cultural and analytical reasons. As opportunities for intergenerational play become less common amid the expansion of digital leisure, tacit meanings may disappear even when game boards, photographs, or written rules are successfully preserved. The knowledge most vulnerable to loss includes understanding when a gesture is considered respectful, how experienced players accommodate beginners, what forms of competition remain compatible with palace etiquette, and how participants connect play with social or spiritual order. The Yogyakarta Palace is therefore not merely a location for collecting examples of traditional games; it is a living interpretive community where cultural authority and everyday interaction intersect. Examining the voices and experiences of *abdi dalem* is essential to preventing preservation programs from separating visible artifacts from the social relationships that provide those artifacts with meaning.

The novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing traditional games within the Yogyakarta Palace as cyclical symbolic communication rather than solely as recreational heritage,

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educational media, or cultural objects. By combining phenomenology with communication ethnography and interpreting findings through Mead's symbolic interactionism, this study connects participants' lived experiences with observable patterns of culturally organized communication. It specifically positions abdi dalem as dual agents who perform the games while interpreting their ethical, social, and spiritual meanings. Based on this perspective, the study proposes a contextual model in which social acts, role-taking, symbolic interpretation, shared meaning, and cultural identity continuously influence one another. This integrated perspective differentiates the research from previous studies that isolate subjective experience, game functions, or formal representations of cultural symbols.

This study therefore aimed to analyze the dynamics of symbolic interaction in traditional games practiced within the Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat Palace, identify the meanings attributed to game forms, quantities, colors, movements, and customary rules by abdi dalem, and explain how these games function in transmitting values and sustaining Javanese cultural identity. Theoretically, this research contributes to cultural communication studies by extending symbolic interactionism to an underexamined form of embodied heritage and clarifying the relationship between individual interpretation and palace-based collective norms. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of combining phenomenological inquiry with communication ethnography to integrate emic interpretations and patterned interactions. Practically, the findings can benefit palace administrators, cultural institutions, educators, and preservation communities by informing documentation, intergenerational learning, and revitalization programs that preserve both the playable forms and communicative meanings of traditional games.

METHOD

Research Type and Design

This study employed a qualitative approach combining phenomenology and descriptive communication ethnography. This approach was selected to explore the subjective experiences of abdi dalem as participants in traditional games and to examine communication patterns within the framework of palace culture.

Research Location and Participants

The research took place within the Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat Palace, Yogyakarta Special Region. Participants were courtiers who had or were still actively playing traditional games within the palace grounds. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique with the following requirements: (1) status as a courtier; (2) at least five years of experience playing traditional games; and (3) willingness to serve as a resource person and provide in-depth information.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was carried out in three ways:

1. Participant observation: Researchers participated in traditional game practices within the palace environment to directly observe the symbolic interactions that occurred.
2. In-depth interviews: Conducted with key informants (abdi dalem) to explore their subjective interpretations of the symbols in traditional games.
3. Documentation: Data collection in the form of images, video recordings, and written archives related to traditional games at the Yogyakarta Palace.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis process involved the following stages: (1) data reduction, (2) data presentation, and (3) drawing conclusions and verification. The analysis was based on Mead's symbolic interaction framework, focusing on recognizing significant symbols, the process of taking the role of the other, and the formation of shared meaning. A phenomenological approach was used to understand the lifeworld of abdi dalem, while communication ethnography provided the structure for analyzing communication patterns.

Data Validity Test

Data validity was tested using dependability and confirmability parameters through a triangulation strategy of sources, theoretical foundations, and data collection methods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dynamics of Symbolic Interaction in Traditional Games within the Yogyakarta Palace

This study reveals that the symbolic interaction process in traditional games within the Yogyakarta Palace occurs through three interconnected phases: (1) the mind phase, when players utilize symbols to devise strategies; (2) the self phase, when players view their position from the perspective of their opponents (taking the role of the other); and (3) the society phase, when repeated interactions give rise to structured collective communication patterns.

Traditional games like dakon, as found in this study, are not simply about moving seeds from one hole to another. Every movement a player makes is a significant symbol that conveys messages about their intentions, strategies, and even their inner state. A participant who pours seeds quickly can be interpreted as aggressive, while slow movements can be interpreted as hesitation or a defensive tactic.

These findings align with research on Besutan Arts in Jombang, which shows that traditional arts contain meaningful symbols, the interpretations of which can vary depending on each individual's background (Setiawan et al., 2024). Similarly, in the game of dakon, the meaning of an action is not fixed, but rather negotiated through interactions between participants.

One distinctive finding of this research is the existence of an unwritten code of ethics in traditional games within the palace. This code of ethics includes a prohibition on "underestimating the opponent" even when in a superior position, the obligation to "give opportunities" to less experienced players, and the importance of "maintaining harmony" during the match. This code of ethics reflects Javanese cultural values upheld within the palace, such as *andhap asor* (humility) and *tepo seliro* (tolerance).

The Symbolic Meaning of Traditional Games from the Perspective of Abdi Dalem (the courtiers)

This research successfully identified several key symbols in traditional games within the Yogyakarta Palace and their meanings from the perspective of abdi dalem (the courtiers). These findings were obtained through in-depth interviews with key informants:

1. Symbols of Form and Quantity

The circular or paired appearance of the game (for example, the dakon board with its paired holes) is interpreted by courtiers as a reflection of dualism in Javanese cosmology: the worldly and the afterlife, male and female, physical and spiritual, and horizontal (between humans) and vertical (human and the Creator) relationships. The number of holes or certain

game elements is also imbued with philosophical meaning, for example, the number 16 on the dakon board is associated with the 16 cardinal directions in Javanese cosmology or the 16 months in the Javanese calendar.

These findings support research on symbols in the Mubeng Beteng ritual at the Yogyakarta Palace, which found that ritual attributes (banji-banji, clothing) reflect the cultural values and identity of the Javanese people (Manuela, 2025). Similarly, in traditional games, the material aspects are not merely inanimate objects, but symbols rich with philosophical content.

2. Color Symbolism

The colors that adorn traditional game equipment—although often subtle due to the use of natural materials—have their own symbolic meanings. Brown (derived from wood) is interpreted as a symbol of the earth and fertility, white symbolizes purity, black symbolizes intrinsic awareness, while red or yellow (from turmeric or roots) symbolize enthusiasm and alertness.

Research on the Yogyakarta keris as a cultural symbol shows that each physical element of the keris (pamor, shape, ricikan) contains a specific symbolic meaning. Analogous to these findings, color and shape in traditional games also serve as a medium of nonverbal communication that conveys cultural messages.

3. Symbols of Movement and Custom

The game process itself—the sequence of moves, the number of moves, how to start and end the match—symbolizes the cycle of human life (birth, life, death, and spiritual rebirth). The rules regarding who has the right to take the first turn, how to respond to an opponent's move, and when the match is declared over all reflect the social etiquette highly valued in Javanese society.

These results align with research on the symbolic interaction patterns of Jaran Kepang Semarang, which found that the interaction between dancers, musical accompaniment, and audience members follows a specific pattern that reflects the social values of the local community (Research Team, 2020). In traditional games, similar interaction patterns are also seen between players, between players and the audience, and between players and the "spirit" of the game itself.

The Role of Traditional Games as a Means of Communication and the Formation of Cultural Identity.

This research reveals three main roles of traditional games within the Yogyakarta Palace:

a) A Means of Enculturation and the Transmission of Values

Traditional games serve as a learning ground for cultural values for the younger generation of the palace (the sons and daughters of the courtiers). Through play, children learn about cooperation (gotong royong), sportsmanship (legowo), adherence to rules (social norms), and strategic problem-solving. Research on the Sekaten tradition at the Yogyakarta Palace shows that local traditions can serve as a medium for interactive communication to foster unity and harmony among the religiously diverse community of courtiers. In line with these findings, traditional games also serve as a dialogical space that brings together various levels of the palace community in an atmosphere of equality and enjoyment.

b) A Tool for Maintaining Cultural Identity

Traditional games serve as an instrument for maintaining Javanese cultural identity amidst the onslaught of globalization and modernization. When the younger generation of the palace plays traditional games, they indirectly preserve their ancestral heritage while affirming their identity as part of Javanese society.

Research on Bantengan in Malang shows that traditional arts not only survive amidst modernization but also adapt through innovations in music, costumes, and performance media. Similarly, traditional games in the Yogyakarta Palace have also undergone subtle changes—in raw materials, packaging, or performance context—without losing their philosophical essence.

c) Media for Ritual and Spiritual Communication

For courtiers, traditional games are not entirely separate from the spiritual dimension. Several sources mentioned that certain types of games may only be played at special times because they are considered to possess "power" or "blessings." Traditions before and after playing—such as communal prayers or incense burning—indicate that traditional games also function as ritual communication connecting humans with ancestors and the universe.

These results support research on the existence and meaning of Bantengan, which states that traditional arts function as rituals to ward off disaster, cleanse the village, and provide entertainment (Researcher, 2025). Traditional games in the palace have similar functions, albeit with varying degrees of intensity and specificity.

Research Novelty

This research yields a novelty in the form of a Symbolic Interaction Communication Model of Traditional Games within the Cultural Framework of the Yogyakarta Palace. This model demonstrates that symbolic interaction in traditional games moves in a continuous cycle: starting with Social Act, continuing with Role of Act, leading to Symbolic Interpretation (interpretation of symbols), which ultimately results in Source of Cultural Identity and Shared Meaning.

This model emphasizes the position of *abdi dalem* (court servants) as both actors and interpreters of cultural symbols, distinguishing this study from previous research that tends to view traditional game players as passive subjects or merely technical participants. In the context of the Yogyakarta Palace, *abdi dalem* possess dual cultural competence: on the one hand, they are actors who conduct the games, and on the other, they are interpreters who understand the layers of meaning behind the game's symbols.

Another novelty of this research is the combination of phenomenological and ethnographic communication approaches in analyzing traditional games. This strategy allows researchers to understand traditional games from two perspectives simultaneously: *etic* (systematic external observation) and *emic* (internal interpretation by cultural actors), resulting in a more comprehensive and contextual understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that symbolic interaction in traditional games within the Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat Palace developed through the interconnected processes of mind, self, and society. Through these processes, *abdi dalem* interpreted movements, colors, forms, numbers, and customary rules as significant symbols that conveyed social, ethical, philosophical, and spiritual meanings. Traditional games therefore functioned not merely as

recreational activities but also as mediums for enculturation, value transmission, cultural identity preservation, and social relationship formation. The findings further demonstrated that abdi dalem performed dual roles as participants and interpreters of cultural symbols, enabling shared meanings to be continuously negotiated through interaction. By combining symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and communication ethnography, this study provided a contextual understanding of traditional games as living communication systems embedded within Javanese palace culture.

Future research should involve a broader and more diverse range of participants, including members of the royal family, younger generations of abdi dalem, cultural practitioners, palace visitors, and communities outside the palace, to obtain comparative perspectives on symbolic interpretation. Subsequent studies could also compare different traditional games or examine similar games across Javanese cultural settings to determine whether their symbolic meanings remain consistent or vary according to location, generation, and social position. Longitudinal research is recommended to investigate changes in meanings and interaction patterns resulting from modernization, tourism, and digital adaptation. Furthermore, digital ethnography and audiovisual interaction analysis could be employed to examine how traditional games are represented, learned, and negotiated through digital platforms while assessing whether technological revitalization preserves or transforms their original cultural meanings.

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