

Transforming Ratus: A Descriptive Qualitative Study on Tradition, Health, and Javanese Women's Identity

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ABSTRACT

Background: *Ratus as a traditional Javanese health ritual historically associated with purity and marital preparation, has undergone a significant transformation in meaning among contemporary women. This study aims to explore how Ratus is reinterpreted as a cultural, spiritual, and personal practice, revealing women's bodily agency and negotiation within the dynamics of modernity.*

Methods: *This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach using a case study method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, nonparticipant observation, and documentation involving eight Javanese women aged 25–50 from Yogyakarta and Bantul, selected purposively for having practiced Ratus for at least two years. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, supported by source triangulation and member checking to ensure data validity.*

Results: *Five main themes emerged: (1) transformation of Ratus from a sacred ritual to a self-care practice; (2) spiritual and emotional healing dimensions; (3) reinforcement of cultural identity and female solidarity; (4) commodification of tradition within beauty markets; and (5) negotiation between tradition and modernity as symbolic resistance to Western medical and beauty norms.*

Conclusion: *Ratus now functions as both a holistic health practice and a medium of cultural self-expression, reflecting Javanese women's adaptive agency amid modernization. This study recommends strengthening the preservation of ratus practices through a sustainable cultural approach by involving women, health workers, and community leaders in efforts to maintain its meaning and health benefits.*

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INTRODUCTION

The female body in Javanese culture has never been a neutral entity. It has always been the subject of regulation, symbolic meaning, and ideological arena, both in the customary system, religious practices, and traditional health heritage. In a patriarchal society like Java, women's bodies are not only understood biologically but also burdened with social and spiritual meanings that are passed down from generation to generation. One of the most significant expressions of cultural constructions of women's bodies are

traditional practices aimed at treating, controlling and representing the body in accordance with prevailing social norms (Nurhayati, 2020).

One such practice is Ratus, which is the process of fumigating the female genital area using a mixture of certain herbs that are believed to have properties in cleaning, refreshing, and maintaining the sanctity of the female reproductive organs. The practice of Ratus has long been part of the tradition of Javanese women's body care, especially before marriage, after childbirth, or in order to prepare themselves to enter certain phases of domestic and spiritual life (Lestari, 2019; Saraswati, 2018). In local narratives, Ratus is seen not only as a form of body care, but also as a symbol of purity, women's readiness to carry out their roles as wives, and a form of control over the body within the framework of heteronormative norms and patriarchal values (Rahayu & Handayani, 2021).

However, in the last two decades, the practice of Ratus has undergone a shift in meaning and form. Globalization, the development of urban lifestyles, increased awareness of holistic health, and the influence of the feminism movement have encouraged contemporary Javanese women to review their relationship to their bodies and traditions. Women are no longer just objects of established cultural constructions, but also transformed into subjects who actively interpret and reinterpret traditional practices, including Ratus, according to their needs, experiences, and self-awareness (Fitriani & Arimbi, 2020).

This phenomenon is in line with findings in body studies and women's agency, which state that seemingly traditional daily practices, such as body care, can become a field of negotiation of meanings and symbols between cultural structures and individual freedom. The body is no longer understood as a passive object shaped by culture and ideology, but rather as an arena where power, resistance, and identity are actively negotiated. In this context, the practice of Ratus can be read not only as an ancestral heritage practice, but also as an expression of women's agency in reclaiming their bodies both as biological and symbolic spaces (Azizah, 2020).

On the other hand, traditional health practices in Indonesia, including Ratus, are also experiencing new challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, this practice remains a part of the rich local culture and continues to be preserved. But on the other hand, it must also deal with modern health discourses, medical standards, and state policies that sometimes view traditional practices as unscientific, irrational, or even harmful (Dewi & Wulandari, 2019). In these situations, women are often caught in a tug of war between cultural authority and medical authority, between tradition and modernity, between community values and individual experience.

Ratus' practices are also commoditized in the modern beauty and health market. Ratus products are now packaged in instant form, sold through e-commerce, and promoted by health influencers or beautypreneurs with narratives of self care, sensuality, and empowerment. This phenomenon demonstrates glocalization, a process in which local practices survive and transform in a global context, while also showing how traditional practices can be reframed with modern and capitalistic language (Yuliani, 2023). However, there are not many academic studies that examine in depth the dynamics of meaning and power relations in the practice of Ratus, especially from the perspective of contemporary Javanese women's body identity construction (Mutmainnah, 2022).

This research not only documents the sustainability of women's traditional practices but also analyzes how these practices are reinterpreted in a changing social context. A descriptive qualitative approach is used to capture women's experiences as subjects who live in various layers of social and cultural structures. By exploring the direct experiences

of female Ratus users through interviews and observations, this research seeks to understand how women's bodies become the intersection of cultural heritage, personal experience, and negotiation of meaning in everyday life.

The uniqueness of this research lies in its boldness in interpreting Ratus not merely as a traditional ritual, but as a cultural communication practice that reflects how Javanese women interpret their bodies amidst the currents of modernity and global capitalism. Through Ratus, women not only carry out ancestral heritage but also negotiate their position between customary values, religious norms, and the demands of modern lifestyles. This research shows that Ratus functions as a space where women assert control over their bodies not through overt resistance, but through subtle symbolic, personal, and cultural means.

This research is also important in an effort to expand the discourse on women's health in Indonesia, which has been too much dominated by medical biological approaches, and less attention to the cultural, spiritual, and symbolic dimensions of women's bodies. By taking the practice of Ratus as the object of study, this research contributes a critical perspective on issues of gender, tradition, and the body in cultural communication studies and contemporary women's studies. Overall, the aim of this study is to understand how the practice of Ratus is interpreted, maintained, and reconstructed by contemporary Javanese women as part of self-care, body spirituality, and agency in the face of shifting cultural value structures.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study method. This approach was chosen because it is in accordance with the research objectives, namely, to explore and deeply understand the meanings, experiences, and interpretations of Javanese women towards the traditional practice of Ratus in the context of contemporary life. The case study method allows researchers to examine phenomena thoroughly and contextually in real life, as explained by Yin (2018) that case studies are effectively used when the boundaries between phenomena and context are not clearly defined.

The subjects in this study are Javanese women who actively practice Ratus, both in urban and rural areas. Informants were selected purposively with the following criteria: aged between 25 and 50 years old, have been practicing Ratus for at least the last two years, willing to be interviewed and observed, and have a deep understanding or reflection on the practice. There was a total of eight informants from two main research locations, namely Yogyakarta City and Bantul Regency. The selection of these locations considered the high level of tradition preservation and accessibility to participants. This research was conducted over a period of three months, from February to April 2025.

Researchers were present in the field to collect data through limited observations and in-depth interviews. The entire data collection process was carried out by the principal researcher, assisted by a female field assistant from the local area. The involvement of a female assistant was deliberately chosen to foster a sense of security and emotional closeness between the researcher and the informant, given that the research topic touches on personal and cultural issues. Each interview session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, adjusted to the informant's comfort and availability. Interviews were conducted in person at the informant's home or at a Ratus practice location of their choosing, to ensure a more natural and contextual conversation.

Meanwhile, observations were conducted continuously for three weeks, with the first week focused on initial observations to build trust, understand social routines, and

identify cultural symbols inherent in Ratus practice. Field notes were taken daily to record details of interactions, the atmosphere of the practice space, and body language that emerged during the activities. The researcher's presence in this study functions as the main instrument who must maintain neutrality, build empathy, and create a conducive atmosphere for informants to convey their experiences openly. Preliminary observations were conducted to build trust and obtain an initial picture of the context of Ratus practice.

Data in this study were collected through three main techniques: first, in-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. This guide was previously pilot-tested on two out-of-sample participants to test its readability and suitability of substance. Second, non-participatory observations were conducted to observe behaviors, body expressions, as well as the procedures for implementing the Ratus practice. Third, documentation was collected in the form of photographs, promotional brochures, and Ratus product packaging used by the informants.

The research instruments were organized based on key themes such as the meaning of practice, dimensions of spirituality, body perception, and cultural and health factors. To ensure content validity, the instruments were validated through expert judgment by two lecturers with expertise in anthropology and cultural communication. This validation process aimed to assess the suitability of the interview guide content with the research objectives as well as ensuring the clarity of the language used.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis techniques. The process included transcription of raw data, open coding of informants' narratives, grouping codes into thematic categories, and compiling findings in narrative and visual form. To ensure the validity of the data, triangulation techniques were used, both source triangulation by comparing information from various informants with different backgrounds, triangulation techniques by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation, as well as member check techniques that involve confirming the researcher's interpretation to the informant.

This study has obtained ethical approval with number B/9792/UN46.4.1/PT.01.05/2025. The approval was granted by Universitas Trunojoyo Madura prior to data collection. All participants received an explanation of the study objectives and gave their consent to participate.

RESULTS

This study involved eight Javanese women aged between 25 and 50 years old, from Yogyakarta City and Bantul Regency. They were selected *purposively* because they had actively practiced *Ratus* for at least the past two years and had reflective experience of the practice. The participants came from diverse backgrounds, ranging from housewives, salon workers, herbal medicine practitioners, to university students and traditional midwives. This variation shows that *Ratus* is not limited to certain social groups but has become a cross-generational practice.

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Participants

Informant Code	Age (years)	Residence	Length of time practicing Ratus	Occupation/Social Background	Frequency of Practice
S	34	Yogyakarta	3 years	Private employee	Once a week

Informant Code	Age (years)	Residence	Length of time practicing Ratus	Occupation/Social Background	Frequency of Practice
Y	42	Bantul Regency	5 years	Housewife	Twice a month
T	29	Yogyakarta	4 years	Traditional herbal medicine practitioner	Once a week
D	38	Bantul Regency	6 years	Elementary school teacher	Once a month
M	45	Bantul Regency	8 years	Traditional midwife	As needed
N	27	Yogyakarta	2 years	Graduate student	Once a week
R	31	Yogyakarta	3 years	Beauty salon employee	Once a week
L	50	Bantul Regency	10 years	Herbal medicine and spice craftsman	Twice a month

Theme 1: Ratus as a Transformation of Traditional Practices

The practice of Ratus in Javanese society today shows a dynamic transformation in meaning. For the younger generation, this ritual is no longer seen as part of the procession towards marriage or a sign of domestic readiness but has shifted to become a personal ritual for body and mind care. When the researcher visited S's (34) house in Yogyakarta, she was preparing a spice decoction in a small metal container. Warm smoke scented with betel leaf, ylang-ylang, and sandalwood slowly filled the room. She said with a light expression.

"Now I do it once a week. I don't know why, but after doing it, I feel refreshed and more confident." (S)

Observations in urban areas such as Yogyakarta show that this practice is therapeutic. Women do it in the bathroom or back room of their house, in a calm atmosphere without any formal rituals. The domestic space is now transformed into a spa-like place full of personal meaning. This contrasts with informants in Bantul, who tend to maintain a traditional atmosphere. L (50), an herbal medicine maker, still lights incense and recites prayers before starting Ratus:

"I use incense and prayers. I ask the prince for inner balance, hehe." (L)

A comparison of these two regions shows that Ratus in the city has been disciplined by the logic of modernity, while in rural areas, this practice still functions as a spiritual bridge that has been passed down by ancestors. However, both show the same spirit, namely that the female body is a space that must be consciously cared for. The researcher's reflections during the observation show that the aroma of spices, the sound of boiling water, and the dim atmosphere symbolize the balance between the profane and the sacred.

Theme 2: Spiritual Dimension and Emotional Energy

The transition from the physical to the spiritual was a strong theme in the informants' experiences. Almost all of the women associated Ratus with feelings of calm, purity, and connection with themselves. At Y's (42) house in Bantul, the practice was carried out in the afternoon. She closed the door, lit an ylang-ylang scented candle, and sat on a small bamboo chair. She said:

"When I have a lot on my mind, Ratus calms me down. It's like meditation. The smoke is like washing away the fatigue after a hard day's work." (Y)

Observations show that Ratus is often performed in a room symbolically decorated with white cloth covering the windows, incense burning in the corner of the room, and the soothing aroma of spices. This ritual creates an introspective atmosphere, where the body is not only cared for, but also cleansed of emotional burdens. Informant M (45), a traditional midwife, adds a medical dimension to it:

"This is not just a tradition, but a natural way of caring for the body. The smoke is calming, but also healthy." (M)

These findings show a blend of local spirituality and modern health knowledge, creating a hybrid practice that rejects the boundaries between the biological body and the spiritual body. The researcher's reflections note that in the silence of this practice, a balance emerges between gratitude, healing, and body awareness. Ratus becomes a silent ritual that not only cleanses but also affirms women's inner identity.

Theme 3: Ratus and Javanese Women's Identity

For many Javanese women, *Ratus* serves as a marker of cultural identity as well as a space for negotiating self-meaning. T (29), an herbal medicine entrepreneur in Yogyakarta, said:

"When I am Ratus, it feels like going back to my grandmother's time. There is a sense of pride, but also calmness because I can preserve the tradition." (T)

However, for young women like N (27), Ratus is no longer associated with purity for others, but rather a form of self-care:

"I don't care if people say it's old-fashioned, outdated, this and that. The fact is, I feel that ratus make me clean, and it doesn't harm them either." (N)

This difference in perspective indicates that women's bodies have now become an arena of autonomy and symbolic resistance against the old discourse that placed them as moral and social objects. Observations show that the practice of Ratus creates a social space that strengthens solidarity. In the community of mothers in Bantul, they often discuss ratus as a topic of conversation. This space becomes a warm and non-hierarchical arena of communication, where women share experiences and strengthen their sense of togetherness.

Theme 4: Commodification and Cultural Economic Space

The transformation of *Ratus* also comes in the form of complex commodification. In Yogyakarta, this practice no longer only takes place at home, but is also commodified by the beauty and wellness industry. A salon displays a poster that reads:

"Modern Ratus: The Secret of Royal Beauty. A touch of tradition for the modern body." (A)

Ratus products are now available in capsule, aromatherapy, and instant powder forms. The gold-colored packaging, accompanied by batik motifs and ylang-ylang flower symbols, presents an image of luxury that combines local aesthetics and global market tastes. Informant R (31) and L (50), a salon worker, explains:

"Young people today prefer the quick version. But the ingredients are still the same, only the method is different." (R)

"In the past, people made it themselves from their gardens. Now everything is sold. The tradition is alive, but it has also turned into a business." (L)

This phenomenon shows a shift in values from spiritual meaning to commercial symbolism, while at the same time expanding the existence of tradition in the public sphere. In the researcher's view, this process marks dual existence: on the one hand, it loses its sacredness, but on the other, it survives through market adaptation.

Theme 5: Adaptation to Modernization and Resistance to Global Values

The latest findings show that *Ratus* has become a space for negotiating values amid the tide of modernization and globalization. Although this practice is often considered unscientific by modern medical discourse, informants actually view it as a symbol of a more natural and meaningful lifestyle. D (38), an elementary school teacher, said:

"Even though many people think that ratus is an outdated body hygiene technique, it's my choice." (D)

Observations in Bantul show the growth of a community of women who have formed a home-based herbal learning circle. They exchange spices, record recipes, and experiment with new combinations. These activities demonstrate women's agency in creating local knowledge as a form of subtle resistance to the hegemony of science and industry. The researcher's reflections show that this space reflects the epistemological independence of Javanese women, where the body is no longer an object that can be controlled by the times.

Overall, this study reveals that *Ratus* has undergone a multidimensional transformation from a sacred ritual to a reflective practice, with symbols of purity beginning to shift with the times. Javanese women view *Ratus* not only as a form of body care, but also as a statement of identity, emotional healing, and symbolic resistance to the homogenization of global values. This practice has become a flexible cultural field, where spirituality, economics, and modernity blend without negating each other. In the spices and warm smoke, Javanese women reconstruct the meaning of their own bodies not as controlled objects, but as subjects who choose, interpret, and revive traditions in their own way.

DISCUSSION

Findings study This reveal layers complex in practice Hundreds among Woman Java contemporary. Traditions that originally nature sacred now transform become room reflective, therapeutic, and even symbolic contain spiritual meaning, identity, and resistance to values modernity and global capitalism. This shows that Ratus is not only phenomenon culture, but also practice symbolic communication negotiating connection between body, tradition, and power in context glocalization.

Change Queen's practice of purity rituals going to maintenance reflective marked transformation meaning body in culture Javanese. Generation young adopting Ratus as equivalent forms of self-care with modern spa practices but still maintain nuances symbolic from ancestors. Meanwhile generation old Still link it with sacredness and spiritual balance. Phenomenon This shows existence continuity and disruption meaning in a way simultaneously tradition no lost, but adapted through Language new, more personal and secular (Nurhayati, 2020).

In Foucault's framework (1977), body No Again become controlled object norm social, but room resistance and agency women, place they train freedom through care and reflection self. Thus, Hundreds become symbol that Woman Java No fully reject modernity but rather negotiate it through practice a fixed body rooted in spirituality local practice also features dimensions soft spirituality. The informants describe activity as moment for clean self Not only in a way physical, but also mental.

The atmosphere silence, the aroma of spices, and the heat of smoke are created meditative conditions that bring together body, emotions, and consciousness self. Interestingly, spirituality This No ties to formal religion, but rather shaped personal spirituality and embodiment, where the body become a medium of purification and balance energy. M (45), which is based on medical, firm that Hundreds also have benefit physiological that makes body relax and circulate smoother. Phenomenon This firm that practice traditional Woman Java blend modern rationality and spirituality local, forming form new from hybrid spirituality. This is enriching draft spirituality in studies health and culture, where the body Woman Not only become object medical, but source experience existential and knowledge local (Lestari, 2019; Saraswati, 2018).

Identity Woman Java appear as form performativity (Butler, 1990) Produced through repeated and meaningful actions repeat. In community women in Bantul, Ratus create room communication intimacy and solidarity emotional between each other. Activities This show dimensions social Hundreds as binding practices experience collective women, not just a personal ritual. This action becomes kind of Language body a culture that strengthens a sense of togetherness and pride identity as Woman Javanese. With Thus, the practice This turn on return network social and emotional women, making it a gentle arena of empowerment However meaningful (Azizah, 2020).

Study this also highlights how is Ratus now produced, packaged, and sold in a way commercial. In beauty salons and bold platforms, Ratus displayed with "modern but" image natural," blending aesthetics capitalism and symbols tradition. In Appadurai's (1996) framework, this phenomenon can be read as form glocalization traditions that are not extinct under global pressure but adapt self with market logic. Although thus, the commodification process also gives rise to ambivalence: on one side guard the existence of the Hundred, on the other hand, which has the potential to reduce meaning spirituality become just style live (Azizah, 2020).

However, women still own Power control symbolic. They become producers, consumers, and at the same time guard value. That is, capitalization tradition No always

means lost meaning, but can become a cultural survival strategy in the digital economy era. A number of informants are facing social stigma that ancient Hundred or No scientific. Through theory decolonial, this can read as a form of epistemic disobedience in which women use experience his body as source knowledge alternatives that are omitted in tradition local. With Thus, Ratus does not only maintain as a ritual inheritance, but transformed become discourse a counter-opposition subordination epistemic to Western discourse on cleanliness, health, and spirituality (Mutmainnah, 2022).

In a way synthesis, Ratus presents form hybridity culture combines tradition ancestors, spirituality body, and modern rationality in one dynamic practice. Javanese women become agent active in create meaning new for his body alone. Hundreds not just practice cleanliness, but the symbolic and political arena body, place Woman negotiate identity and knowledge. In the end, hundred is A conscious cultural act. It represents the balance between tradition and modernity, spirituality and commodification, purity and agency. Through Ratus, Javanese women rewrite the narrative of their bodies. as a subject of knowledge who negotiates the past and the future in one breath of spices and smoke that is full of meaning (Mutmainnah, 2022).

Study has a number of necessary limitations noticed in interpretation results. First, the scope geographical research is limited to two locations, namely Yogyakarta and Bantul, with a total of eight informants, not yet fully represent Similarities practice Hundreds in the Java region in a way overall. Second, the duration relative research short as well as sensitivity related topics with body and realm personal Woman participate limit depth exploration narrative that can achieved. Although thus, the limitations This No reduce relevance findings, but rather firm the need study advanced with more perspective broad and multidisciplinary.

For next study, it is recommended that a number of direction development methodological. First, the application of approach ethnography participatory and visual will give depth interpretive to experience body, space, and expression symbolic Woman in practice Hundred. Second, study cross- regional and longitudinal need done for catch variation culture and change meaning Hundred between generation and between context social. Third, integration approach interdisciplinary specifically between study culture, science health and psychology Woman can enrich Understanding about dimensions physiological, emotional, and representational from practice this, including How tradition body transform in the digital and globalization era culture.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the practice of Ratus among Javanese women has transformed from a traditional ritual into a reflective practice that combines aspects of culture, spirituality, and body awareness. Ratus is no longer understood simply as an ancestral heritage, but as a space of agency where women negotiate their identity and autonomy over their bodies in the context of modernity. Synthetically, these findings answer the research objective: Ratus practice functions as a medium of cultural communication that reflects Javanese women's ability to reinterpret tradition according to their needs and self-awareness. This confirms that local knowledge has vitality and relevance in contemporary discourses on women's health and identity. Based on the research findings, it is recommended that traditional women's health practices such as Ratus receive greater attention in health policy and cultural education. Integration between local knowledge and modern medical approaches needs to be developed to achieve a more holistic, contextual, and equitable understanding of women's bodies.

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