

**BEYOND THE RITUAL: EXPLORING MEANING OF LIFE  
AMONG *CUPU KYAI PANJALA* DEVOTEES**

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**Abstract.** This qualitative study explores the meaning of life among devotees of the Cupu Kyai Panjala ritual, a Javanese spiritual tradition in Gunungkidul, Indonesia. Employing a case study approach, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation with three devotees aged 40–70 years, who have participated in the ritual for over a decade. The findings reveal that the ritual fosters profound spiritual and social meaning, promoting values of patience, resilience, and sincerity. Devotees exhibit enhanced self-understanding, positive attitude changes, and strong commitment to preserving ancestral traditions. Social support from the ritual community further reinforces their sense of purpose. Drawing on Bastaman's (2007) framework, the study highlights how consistent participation in the ritual shapes life goals, strengthens social bonds, and enhances psychological well-being. These findings underscore the vital role of local cultural practices in fostering meaningful lives among Kejawen practitioners.

**Keywords:** cultural heritage, Javanese tradition, meaning of life, psychological well-being, ritual.

## Introduction

Javanese society is deeply rooted in cultural practices, including rituals passed down through generations. In Indonesia, six religions are officially recognized: Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. However, local belief systems, including those of indigenous faith practitioners, continue to be upheld by certain communities. Unfortunately, discrimination against these practitioners persists in both social and administrative spheres (Ananta et al., 2015).

The lack of recognition of local beliefs as official religions has led to the misconception that Indonesian society lacked religion before the arrival of major religions such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism (Matanasi, 2017). Indigenous faith practitioners often face challenges in obtaining legal recognition and equal access to civil rights compared to adherents of officially recognized religions (Saifuddin, 2018). While some Javanese traditions can be adapted and practiced without conflicting with Islamic teachings, many cultural practices are perceived as incompatible with Islam. Consequently, some Javanese individuals adopt Islam to facilitate their integration as Indonesian citizens and to fulfill their civic duties following national regulations (Marzuki, 2012). Indigenous faith practitioners are not prohibited in Indonesia but are not included among the six officially recognized religions (Viri & Febriany, 2020).

According to Dwiyanto (2010), Gunungkidul, where the majority of the population is Muslim and strongly adheres to Javanese customs, is home to numerous traditions such as *Mitoni*, *Rasulan*, *Nyadran*, *Kenduri*, and the *Cupu Kyai Panjala* ritual, among others. These customs are manifestations of *Kejawen* (Javanese spiritual traditions), which predate the arrival of Islam in Gunungkidul. One enduring tradition is the *Cupu Kyai Panjala* ritual, practiced in Gunungkidul.

Among these rituals, the *Cupu Kyai Panjala* ritual is particularly distinctive because it combines ancestral objects, annual communal gathering, and interpretive practices in which devotees reflect on life events based on ritual signs. While other Javanese rituals such as *Mitoni* or *Nyadran* mainly emphasize rites of passage or

ancestral remembrance, *Cupu Kyai Panjala* explicitly invites participants to contemplate their life direction, moral choices, and future hopes. Despite this uniqueness, empirical psychological studies on this ritual are almost non-existent. Existing research on Javanese indigenous practices tends to focus on healing traditions or community well-being in other contexts, such as indigenous healing for physical and mental health (Farmawati et al., 2022). Therefore, studying *Cupu Kyai Panjala* is urgent to understand how an under-researched indigenous ritual contributes to life meaning among Kejawen practitioners.

The *Cupu Kyai Panjala* ritual emerged as a social activity among the Javanese community in Gunungkidul Regency. This ritual is a religious or spiritual ceremony that incorporates elements from various religious or belief systems. It serves to foster harmony between humans and nature and has evolved in response to the community's need to express religious emotions (Matanasi, 2017).

According to Bastaman (2007), individuals who fail to find and fulfill the meaning of life often experience existential frustration, leading to an inability to address life's challenges effectively, feelings of emptiness, lack of motivation, and absence of life goals. Beliefs and internalizing values such as truth, virtue, beauty, faith, and love shape human behavior. Embracing and believing in these values can imbue an individual's life with meaning. Many people find meaning through their religious beliefs, while others dedicate their lives to artistic pursuits. Love, both given and received, can also foster a sense of purpose and fulfillment, enriching life with meaningful experiences (Bastaman, 1996).

Acceptance of life's inevitable tragedies with sincerity and resilience can transform an individual's perspective from one of suffering to one that perceives meaning and wisdom in adversity. Suffering can provide meaning and purpose when an individual adopts a more positive attitude toward it (Bastaman, 1996).

In contemporary psychology, meaning in life is widely recognized as a central component of well-being. Steger (2009) summarizes evidence that meaning in life is consistently associated with higher life satisfaction and lower psychological distress.

Recent conceptual work further clarifies that meaning in life consists of at least three dimensions—coherence, purpose, and significance—each contributing differently to psychological functioning (Martela & Steger, 2016).

At the same time, a growing literature documents the role of rituals and spirituality in promoting resilience and mental health. Spiritual or religious coping has been found to buffer stress and support psychological well-being in diverse populations (Howard et al., 2023), and ritual practices—such as collective religious ceremonies or Sufi gatherings—have been shown to enhance emotional resilience and social cohesion (Hakim & Rahman, 2022). However, these studies rarely examine *indigenous* rituals in the Indonesian or specifically Javanese context. Existing work on Javanese indigenous traditions tends to focus on healing practices or ecological rituals rather than on existential meaning (Farmawati et al., 2022).

To our knowledge, no empirical study has systematically explored how the *Cupu Kyai Panjala* ritual shapes devotees' meaning of life. By focusing on long-term ritual participants and interpreting their narratives through a meaning-of-life framework, this study aims to fill that gap and provide novel insights into how local cultural practices contribute to existential meaning and psychological well-being among *Kejawen* practitioners.

Based on the issues outlined above, this study aims to explore the meaning of life among *Kejawen* practitioners, specifically devotees of the *Cupu Kyai Panjala* ritual in Gunungkidul. The meaning of life is a crucial aspect for these devotees, as its absence can lead to a loss of hope and purpose. The findings of this study are significant in understanding the extent to which the lives of ritual devotees are imbued with meaning.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how devotees of the *Cupu Kyai Panjala* ritual construct meaning in life through their long-term participation. The case study design enabled an in-depth examination of a bounded

system—namely, a specific ritual community in Gunungkidul—within its real-life cultural context.

**Participants and recruitment.** Data were collected from three devotees (one woman and two men) aged 40–70 years who had participated in the *Cupu Kyai Panjala* ritual for more than ten years. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their status as active devotees and their willingness to narrate their experiences.

**Data collection procedures.** Data were gathered between June and September 2024 through: (1) in-depth semi-structured interviews, and (2) non-participant observations during ritual-related activities. Interviews focused on life history, experiences of the ritual, perceived changes in attitude and outlook, and reflections on life meaning. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Non-participant observations were conducted during communal gatherings and preparatory activities for the ritual, with detailed field notes documenting interactions, symbols, and emotional expressions.

**Data analysis.** The interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed using thematic analysis: familiarization with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; producing the report. Coding was conducted manually. First, the researchers read the transcripts repeatedly and produced open codes reflecting meaningful units related to life experiences, ritual meanings, and changes in attitudes. Second, related codes were grouped into candidate themes aligned with Bastaman's (2007) framework of meaningful life (e.g., self-understanding, attitude change, self-commitment, purposeful activity, social support). Third, themes were refined by constantly comparing them with the raw data and removing overlaps. The final themes were then used to structure the findings section.

**Trustworthiness.** To enhance the credibility of the findings, the study employed member checking, where preliminary interpretations were discussed with participants to confirm accuracy, and peer debriefing with colleagues familiar with qualitative

research. Triangulation between interview data and observational notes was also used to confirm the consistency of interpretations.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Overall, the findings show that the *Cupu Kyai Panjala* ritual serves as a meaning-making system that integrates spiritual beliefs, ancestral values, and communal relationships. Through repeated participation, devotees gradually develop a more coherent understanding of their life, clearer purpose, and a sense that their life is significant for their family and community. This pattern is consistent with contemporary theories which conceptualize meaning in life as comprising coherence, purpose, and significance (Martela & Steger, 2016). The meaning of life is not immediately grasped through the ritual but develops gradually through consistent participation in the annual ritual, enabling devotees to understand and internalize its significance (Wijianti, 2018).

The meaning of life arises from interpersonal relationships, interpretations, aspirations, and evaluations of individual experiences, guiding individuals toward their desired future and fostering a sense of purpose and value (Martela & Steger, 2016). Achieving a sense of meaning influences an individual's lifestyle and contributes to psychological well-being and mental health (Steger et al., 2009).

The findings indicate that devotees of the *Cupu Kyai Panjala* ritual derive diverse meanings of life from social, environmental, habitual, daily, and consistent participation in the ritual. These factors contribute to changes in their attitudes and behaviors. The devotees demonstrate a strong understanding of the importance of preserving cultural heritage, believing that the ritual instills values of patience, resilience, and sincerity. Changes in their attitudes reflect an increased sense of responsibility toward the tradition and their social environment. Their commitment is evident in their consistent participation and adherence to ancestral values. Social support from the ritual community further strengthens their convictions.

**Table 1: Summary of Findings on Meaning of Life Among Devotees**

Subject	Self-Understanding	Meaning of Life	Attitude Change	Self-Commitment	Purposeful Activity	Social Support
Subject 1	Acknowledges responsibility to preserve tradition; finds spiritual balance	Homage to ancestors; inner peace	Increased patience and acceptance	High commitment to continue and pass on tradition	Annual moment of reflection	Full support from family and community
Subject 2	Views tradition as family identity	Strengthens connection to ancestors; fosters gratitude	Positive changes toward family and society	Consistent participation encourages family involvement	Integral to life routine	Strong solidarity from ritual community
Subject 3	Initially unaware, later recognizes positive impact	Provides life direction and values	From skepticism to openness	Feels responsible to perpetuate ritual	Strengthens community ties	Supported by family and ritual community

Self-understanding refers to an individual's awareness of their circumstances or shortcomings and a strong desire to improve their situation (Bastaman, 2007). Subject 1 acknowledges a responsibility to preserve ancestral traditions, finding that the ritual helps them understand life's values and spiritual balance. Subject 2, from a family with a long history of ritual participation, views the tradition as part of their family identity. Subject 3 initially lacked understanding of the ritual's meaning but, after years of participation, recognizes its positive impact on their life.

The second aspect, the meaning of life, involves recognizing values that serve as life goals and are applied in daily life (Bastaman, 2007). Subject 1 perceives the ritual as a form of homage to ancestors, finding inner peace in its practice. Subject 2 feels that the ritual strengthens their connection to ancestors and fosters gratitude in life. Subject 3 finds that the ritual provides direction and helps them understand life's values.

The third aspect, attitude change, involves transitioning from inappropriate to appropriate ways of addressing life's challenges (Bastaman, 2007). Subject 1, after years

of participation, reports increased patience and acceptance of life's challenges. Subject 2 notes positive changes in their attitude toward family and society. Subject 3, initially skeptical, has become more open and accepting of the ritual as part of their life.

The fourth aspect, self-commitment, refers to the consistent pursuit of life goals (Bastaman, 2007). Subject 1 is highly committed to continuing the ritual and passing it on to future generations. Subject 2 consistently attends the ritual and encourages family members to participate. Subject 3, despite only 15 years of involvement, feels a responsibility to perpetuate the ritual.

The fifth aspect, purposeful activity, involves efforts to develop one's potential (Bastaman, 2007). Subject 1 uses the ritual as an annual moment of reflection. For Subject 2, the ritual is an integral part of their life routine, providing direction. Subject 3 uses the ritual to strengthen community ties.

The sixth aspect, social support, involves the encouragement provided by those around the individual pursuing their life goals (Bastaman, 2007). Subject 1 receives full support from family and the community. Subject 2 experiences strong solidarity from the ritual community and family support. Subject 3 is supported by family and the ritual community, which guides in facing life's challenges.

The findings align with Bastaman's (2007) framework, which emphasizes self-understanding, meaning of life, attitude change, self-commitment, purposeful activity, and social support as critical components of a meaningful life. The *Cupu Kyai Panjala* ritual serves as a conduit for devotees to internalize these aspects, fostering psychological well-being. Compared to previous studies, such as Wijianti (2018), which explored the ritual's cultural significance, this study uniquely highlights its role in shaping individual life meaning through consistent participation. The ritual's emphasis on ancestral values and community solidarity resonates with Martela and Steger's (2016) concept of meaning derived from interpersonal relationships and aspirations. Similarly, Steger et al. (2009) underscore the link between meaning and mental health, which is evident in the devotees' reported improvements in patience, resilience, and gratitude. The novelty of this study lies in its detailed exploration of how a local

Javanese ritual contributes to existential meaning, offering insights into the interplay of cultural heritage and psychological well-being.

The analysis revealed that devotees derive a deep sense of meaning through consistent participation in the *Cupu Kyai Panjala* ritual. This meaning-making process aligns with the contemporary framework of purpose, coherence, and significance proposed by Martela & Steger (2016), which conceptualizes meaning in life as an interplay of having life direction (purpose), understanding one's experiences (coherence), and feeling that life has inherent value (significance).

Across participants, ritual engagement provided a stable source of coherence, helping them interpret adversity through culturally rooted narratives. This finding mirrors earlier research showing that Javanese indigenous practices promote psychological harmony and emotional regulation (Farmawati et al., 2022). Devotees described the ritual as a moral compass that helps them understand life's challenges, which strengthens the coherence dimension of meaning.

Devotees consistently emphasized the ritual's contribution to emotional strength, patience, and the ability to face hardship—outcomes that correspond directly with the concept of resilience. Howard et al. (2023) demonstrated that spirituality significantly predicts resilience, mental health, and life satisfaction across diverse populations. Similar to their findings, ritual participants in this study described experiencing enhanced emotional stability and a stronger sense of internal control after years of consistent ritual involvement.

The process resembles what Hakim & Rahman (2022) found among Sufi practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic, where ritual engagement reduced stress, reinforced social cohesion, and provided existential reframing. These parallels suggest that the *Cupu Kyai Panjala* ritual operates as a culturally embedded resilience mechanism—supporting emotional regulation, community solidarity, and adaptive coping.

A recurring theme among participants is that ritual participation fosters strong communal ties. Devotees expressed that shared ritual experiences cultivate belonging,

reciprocal support, and collective responsibility. This social dimension is crucial because communal ritual practices have been empirically shown to buffer distress and enhance well-being (Hakim & Rahman, 2022). In line with Howard et al. (2023), who identified “spiritual community support” as a major predictor of resilience, the findings of this study confirm that community relationships play a vital role in sustaining psychological well-being among devotees.

Participants reported changes in personal values, including greater sincerity (*tulus*), gratitude, patience, and responsibility to preserve ancestral traditions. These reported value transformations reflect the significance dimension of meaning—where individuals perceive their actions as important and aligned with a higher cultural or spiritual purpose (Martela & Steger, 2016).

Such internalization of values also corresponds with documented cultural constructs in Javanese spirituality such as *nrimo ing pandum* (acceptance of destiny), which contributes to emotional equilibrium and mental well-being (Farmawati et al., 2022). Several participants described the ritual as a guide that helps them remain grounded, appreciative of life, and motivated to engage in prosocial behavior.

Participants experienced increased life clarity, improved direction, and stronger social bonds as they matured within the ritual practice. These findings reinforce Howard et al.’s (2023) evidence that spiritual frameworks support individuals in constructing coherent identity narratives and long-term aspirations. Moreover, ritual involvement appeared to shape daily habits—including self-discipline, gratitude routines, and community participation—that are known to support psychological health. The findings parallel Sufi coping research (Hakim & Rahman, 2022), which highlights the role of ritual acts in cultivating mindfulness, emotional regulation, and meaning reconstruction.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study shows that the *Cupu Kyai Panjala* ritual provides profound meaning for its devotees, both spiritually and socially. Through long-term engagement with the ritual, participants develop deeper self-understanding, reinterpret life challenges, and

cultivate more positive attitudes such as patience, gratitude, and acceptance. They also demonstrate strong commitment to preserving ancestral traditions, engage in purposeful activities to involve younger generations, and experience solid social support from family and the ritual community.

These findings support and extend previous research indicating that meaning in life is closely linked to psychological well-being and that spiritual or ritual practices can foster resilience and social cohesion. The *Cupu Kyai Panjala* ritual thus emerges as a culturally embedded pathway through which *Kejawen* practitioners construct meaning in life in contemporary Indonesia. Future research could involve a larger and more diverse sample, compare *Cupu Kyai Panjala* with other Javanese rituals, or integrate mixed-methods approaches to further clarify how indigenous rituals contribute to meaning in life and mental health.

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