

Power, Culture, and Harmony in the Javanese Political Ethos: An Anthropological and Cultural Analysis in Relavance with the Surinamese Diaspora

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the transformation and contemporary relevance of the Javanese Political Ethos (Etos Politik Jawa) within the multicultural political context of Suriname. In the classical Javanese tradition, political legitimacy is grounded not in formal authority but in moral integrity, self-restraint, and the maintenance of social harmony. Using a qualitative approach based on historical-philosophical analysis of classical Javanese texts and participatory observation within Javanese cultural and political circles in Suriname, this study analyzes how the ethos is maintained and reinterpreted in a diasporic setting. The findings show that the Javanese Political Ethos continues to function as a lived cultural practice, although in contemporary politics it is increasingly reduced to symbolic identity representation, critically referred to as “*Bakmi and Nasi Goreng* Politics.” Despite this transformation, the ethos retains normative relevance as a framework for ethical leadership and social cohesion in a pluralistic democracy. This study contributes to political culture and diaspora studies by demonstrating how normative traditions adapt while preserving their moral significance.

Keywords: Diaspora Politics, Javanese Political Ethos, Leadership Ethics, Political Culture, Suriname

INTRODUCTION

Since their arrival in Suriname at the end of the nineteenth century, the Javanese community has played a visible and structural role in the country’s social and political landscape. Rooted in strong historical traditions and social cohesion, various political organizations emerged to represent the interests of the community. The oldest and most influential among them was KTPI (*Kerukunan Tulodo Prenatan Inggil*), founded in 1949, which for decades actively participated in national politics and maintained its influence through different forms of political cooperation. Over time, internal divisions within KTPI led to the emergence of new political movements and parties, including D21 (Democrats of the 21st Century), PDO (Party for Democracy and Development), *KTPI Nieuwe Stijl*, and later *Pertjajah Luhur*, which originated from the *Pendawa Lima* movement. These organizations increasingly engaged in strategic alliances with larger national parties such as NDP (National



Democratic Party) and ABOP (General Liberation and Development Party). This historical development not only demonstrates the political resilience of the Javanese community, but also reflects the transformation of the Javanese Political Ethos itself. While earlier forms of political organization were closely associated with collective moral values, harmony, and cultural leadership, contemporary political practices increasingly emphasize symbolic identity representation and pragmatic electoral alliances. The evolution of these organizations therefore illustrates how the Javanese Political Ethos has been reinterpreted and adapted within the changing political realities of the Surinamese diaspora.

At the same time, criticism has increasingly emerged within the community itself regarding the way these parties shape contemporary political practice. In public discourse, the term “Bakmi and Nasi Goreng Politics” has arisen as an ironic designation for a type of politics that relies heavily on cultural symbolism, such as traditional food, clothing, and folkloristic representation but displays little substantive ideological depth or policy vision. Within this approach, “*kejawaan*” or “javanese-ness”, risks being reduced to external characteristics, while fundamental values such as social harmony (*rukun*), moral integrity, justice, and refined leadership are scarcely visible in concrete political decision-making. Rhetoric about *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) often contrasts with the reality of internal divisions.

This development raises a fundamental question about the relationship between cultural identity and normative political tradition. Within Javanese philosophy, there exists a deeply rooted conception of leadership and power based on moral integrity, spiritual legitimacy, and social balance. The so-called “Javanese Political Ethos (*Etos Politik Jawa*)” can be understood as a coherent normative system in which authority does not derive solely from formal position but from ethical consistency and inner self-mastery. As Endraswara (2013) argues, the Javanese model of leadership is distinguished by its strong symbolic-spiritual dimension, while Achmad (2024) emphasizes that moral purity and justice constitute crucial sources of legitimacy within the Javanese community.

Although this tradition has been extensively described from historical and philosophical perspectives, a systematic analysis of how this normative framework relates to the contemporary political reality of the Javanese diaspora in Suriname remains lacking. In particular, it is unclear to what extent the Javanese Political Ethos still functions as a substantive moral reference framework, or whether it has been reduced to a form of symbolic identity politics. The tension between normative tradition and pragmatic political practice, therefore constitutes the central analytical problem of this article.

Against this background, this study focuses on two central questions concerning the transformation of the Javanese Political Ethos from a normative moral framework into a symbolic form of political practice within the Surinamese context: (1) How was the Javanese Political Ethos historically and philosophically formed within the classical Javanese tradition? (2) How has this ethos been transformed and reinterpreted in the contemporary political landscape of Suriname, particularly through symbolic identity representation and pragmatic political practices? Through historical-

philosophical analysis and interpretation of contemporary political developments, this article aims to provide a critical re-evaluation of Javanese political identity within a modern, democratic, and multicultural society. Figure 1 shows the flag of *Kerukunan Tulodo Pranatan Inggil* (KTPI), a political party representing the Javanese community in Suriname. The emblem incorporates Javanese wayang symbolism and is framed by rice and cotton, symbolizing prosperity and welfare:



Figure 1. The flag of the political party KTPI (*Kerukunan Tulodo Pranatan Inggil*)

Literature Review

The Concept of “Ethos” in Political and Traditional Javanese Philosophy

According to the *Van Dale Groot Woordenboek van de Nederlandse Taal* (2022), “ethos” refers to the set of norms, values, and character traits that characterize a person, group, or culture. The concept thus encompasses moral character, collective attitude, and a normative framework of reference. The Oxford English Dictionary (2022) defines “ethos” as “the characteristic spirit, moral values, and guiding beliefs of a community, culture, or institution.” In a scholarly sense, ethos therefore refers to a profound moral and cultural framework that guides thinking, behavior, and judgment within a community. Ethos is therefore not a superficial cultural attribute, but a normative structure that shapes collective identity and behavioral orientation.

The concept of “politics” is defined by Van Dale (2022) as the set of ideas, objectives, and actions related to the governance of a state or community. The Oxford English Dictionary (2022) further emphasizes the aspect of governance and the exercise of power. In political theory, politics refers to processes of decision-making, the formation of authority, and the organization of power within a society. Etymologically, the term derives from the Greek *polis*, meaning city-state, and refers to the organization of communal life. In a broader sense, politics can be understood as the acquisition, expansion, and preservation of power (Ghufron, 2024). Politics therefore always implies a relational dimension between rulers and community, between authority and legitimacy.

The adjective “Javanese” refers, according to both Van Dale (2022) and the Oxford English Dictionary (2022), to everything related to Java, its people, language, and culture. In this study, however, “Javanese” does not refer exclusively to ethnic origin, but to a cultural-ideological framework historically formed within the Javanese civilizational tradition.

The combination of these concepts, ethos, politics, and Javanese, leads to the concept of *Etos Politik Jawa* (Javanese Political Ethos), which can be understood as the set of moral values, cultural beliefs, and normative views on power and leadership that historically developed within the Javanese tradition. This ethos functions as a moral compass guiding the legitimation of authority, the exercise of power, and the organization of social relations.

To adequately understand this concept, an anthropological approach is necessary. Anthropology studies human beings in their physical, social, and cultural totality (Koentjaraningrat, 1990; I Gede, 2011). It examines how people form groups, develop norms, and create structures that regulate their collective life. In this context, culture is understood as a coherent system of meanings, values, and behaviors that guide social interaction (Geertz, 1973). Political actions and conceptions of leadership therefore cannot be separated from the symbolic and normative frameworks in which they are embedded.

Within interpretive anthropology, culture is regarded as a “web of meanings” through which people interpret their experiences and orient their actions (Geertz, 1973). Political legitimacy and authority, in this perspective, are not merely institutional phenomena but are constructed through shared symbols, rituals, and moral beliefs. When cultural meanings become institutionalized, they acquire a normative function and structure the social order.

In the Javanese context, culture manifests itself as a relatively stable system of values and behavioral norms transmitted through tradition (Hiplunudin, 2019). These values are not merely abstract but are reproduced in rituals, manners of interaction, and everyday practices. When such a cultural configuration also provides legitimacy to power relations, it can be understood as an ideological-symbolic system (Geertz, 1973). In this sense, the Javanese Political Ethos constitutes a normative structure in which culture, ideology, and political practice are interwoven.

Within this study, the concept of ethos therefore acquires a political-philosophical meaning: it refers to a collective moral order that not only guides behavior but also grants legitimacy to leadership and the exercise of power. The Javanese Political Ethos can thus be understood as a cultural-ideological framework in which values of harmony, moral integrity, and social balance serve as guiding principles for political authority.

Classical Javanese Texts as the Foundation of Political Morality

The normative foundations of the Javanese political tradition are largely embedded in classical didactic texts. These works function not merely as literary products but as moral-political manuals in which views on power, authority, leadership, and cosmic order are systematically transmitted. Within

this tradition, works such as *Serat Wulangreh*, *Serat Tripama*, *Serat Sabda Jati*, and *Serat Kalatidha* occupy a central position. Together, they articulate a political ethos in which moral self-discipline, spiritual legitimacy, and social responsibility are inseparably connected.

Serat Wulangreh, written by Pakubuwana IV of Surakarta, is a core text within Javanese political ethics. The work is didactic in nature and provides guidelines for personal conduct and leadership. The political core of this text lies in its explicit rejection of three destructive character traits: *adigang* (arrogance based on lineage or physical power), *adiguna* (intellectual arrogance), and *adigung* (arrogance derived from power or status). These three traits are presented as sources of moral decay and ultimately political failure. Arrogance creates social distance, undermines legitimacy, and leads to symbolic humiliation. Intellectual self-glorification without practical competence is exposed as empty display. Power without moral integrity degenerates into superficial authority. The central lesson is that authority does not rest on lineage, intellect, or external grandeur, but on inner maturity and moral discipline (*laku batin*). In addition, *Serat Wulangreh* portrays the figure of the ruler as a representative of a higher, divine order. The king is seen as the guardian of justice and tradition (*adat*). Obedience to the ruler is therefore not merely politically justified but cosmologically legitimized: maintaining order means preserving harmony between humanity, society, and the divine. This idea is further deepened in the concept of *manunggaling kawula gusti*, the spiritual unity between human beings and God, attainable only through self-purification, humility, and control of desires. Political leadership is thus presented as a spiritual calling that requires inner purification.

Where *Serat Wulangreh* emphasizes moral self-control, *Serat Tripama*, written by Mangkunegara IV, highlights the active virtues of leadership. In this text, three core values are identified: *guna* (competence), *kaya* (tangible contribution or achievement), and *purun* (courage and determination). *Guna* refers to intellectual and practical competence; a leader must be capable of solving problems and bearing responsibility. *Kaya* implies that leadership produces measurable results for the benefit of the community or the state. *Purun* emphasizes courage and loyalty, even to the point of self-sacrifice. This triadic framework demonstrates that moral integrity alone is insufficient; leadership also requires decisiveness, loyalty, and effectiveness. The combination of these virtues forms the ideal of the exemplary human being who is both morally and practically grounded.

In *Serat Sabda Jati*, written by Ranggawarsita, the emphasis shifts toward inner purity and moral vigilance. Central concepts include *ronging budiyayu* (nobility of character), *prihatos* (ascetic simplicity), self-reflection, and spiritual discipline. The text explicitly warns against worldly temptations, corruption, and moral decline. Leadership here is portrayed as an ethical test: only those who keep their hearts pure and remain conscious of their divine responsibility can act justly. Political authority without spiritual self-control inevitably leads to degeneration. The emphasis lies on introspection and listening to the inner conscience as a condition for legitimate authority.

Serat Kalatidha offers a critical reflection on periods of moral crisis, described as *jaman edan* (an age of madness). The text illustrates how states may decline despite formally sound structures and

seemingly competent officials. The cause of decline is not sought solely in institutional weakness but in the loss of moral example and integrity. Propaganda, false rumors (*ujar lamis*), opportunism, and conflicts of interest are presented as symptoms of a morally disordered society. The central call is *eling lan waspada* or to remain aware and vigilant. In times of moral chaos, self-control and loyalty to ethical principles are the only means of avoiding collective degeneration.

Taken together, these texts demonstrate that the Javanese political tradition regards leadership as an integrated combination of moral, spiritual, and practical qualities. Leadership presupposes moral self-control, in which arrogance, pride, and the glorification of power are explicitly rejected. Authority is not understood purely as institutional but as spiritually legitimized, in the sense that political authority is expected to be in harmony with a higher cosmic order.

At the same time, leadership requires practical competence and courage: a leader must act effectively, bear responsibility, and remain steadfast in serving the collective interest. Inner purity is an essential condition, since corruption and moral decay are seen as forces that undermine authority from within. Finally, these texts emphasize the importance of continuous vigilance, particularly in times of moral crisis when social structures are under pressure and the temptation to deviate from ethical principles becomes strong. Together, these elements constitute the normative foundation of the Javanese Political Ethos.

Within this tradition, politics is not reduced to the pursuit of power but is understood as an ethical and spiritual responsibility. Power without moral discipline leads to decline; legitimacy arises from harmony between inner integrity, social justice, and cosmic order. These classical texts therefore form the normative foundation of the Javanese Political Ethos. They articulate a vision of leadership in which authority can only be sustainable when rooted in self-discipline, justice, and moral responsibility toward both society and God.

The Invisible Dimension of Power in Javanese Culture

Within Javanese culture, power is not understood solely as a visible political structure but as a spiritual-symbolic reality that derives its legitimacy from an invisible cosmic order. Rituals, sacred places, *pusaka* (heirlooms), myths, and cosmic symbols function as instruments of spiritual legitimation (Artha, 2007). In contrast to the Western rational-empirical approach to power, in which legitimacy is primarily linked to institutional or legal structures, the Javanese worldview emphasizes harmony with nature, inner intuition (*rasa*), and spiritual knowledge (*ngelmu*). Inner-oriented forms of knowledge such as *kanuragan* and *saktisme* contribute to the belief that certain individuals possess supernatural power (*kasekten*), which supports their authority (Sukatno, 2018). These conceptions are not merely personal belief systems but structure the model of Javanese leadership, in which modernity is not rejected but integrated within a deeply rooted tradition (Hiplunudin, 2019).

The spiritual dimension of leadership is rooted in Javanese cosmology, which distinguishes between the horizontal relationship of the microcosm (*jagad cilik*) and the transcendent relationship

between the microcosm and the macrocosm (*jagad gedhe*), representing the divine (Achmad, 2024). These relationships do not constitute a dualism but form an interconnected cosmic unity. Human beings are viewed as part of a broader network of interdependence between humans, nature, ancestors, and God. In this context, culture functions not merely as a social background but as a system of meaning that structures social and political order (Geertz, 1973).

Religion and belief play a central role in the construction of power. The legitimacy of Javanese rulers was not only political but also cosmically grounded, for example through mythical connections with Kanjeng Ratu Kidul (Queen of the South-Sea) or claims of divine descent (I Gede, 2011). According to Anderson (1990), alongside the visible world there exists a subtle, invisible world that is experienced as real in everyday life. Spiritual symbolism is therefore not merely decorative but constitutes a concrete source of political legitimacy. Geertz (1973) emphasizes that religion, as a symbolic system, shapes deep collective emotions and motivations, causing religious legitimacy to be experienced as a lived reality.

This metaphysical legitimacy manifests itself in concepts such as *wahyu*, *pulung*, and *teja*. Leadership is considered legitimate when *wahyu keprabon*, a divine confirmation of kingship has been received, which according to tradition may shift from one dynasty to another (Anderson, 1990; Hiplunudin, 2019). *Pulung* is regarded as a spiritual sign determining the destiny of a leader, for instance in the selection of village heads (Danandjaja, 1984). *Teja*, the radiant aura or cosmic light, is seen as the visible manifestation of inner spiritual power. Power is thus not merely a rational instrument but a cosmic substance that attaches itself to particular individuals (Sukatno, 2018).

The body of the leader functions as the bearer of this cosmic energy, cultivated through ascetic practices such as fasting, meditation, *tapa*, *kungkum*, and self-discipline. Anderson (1990) argues that asceticism in the Javanese tradition is primarily aimed at concentrating and accumulating power. Even the sexual vitality of a ruler was symbolically associated with the fertility of the land and the welfare of the people. Power is thus understood as a form of life energy that generates order and vitality.

In addition to the body, *pusaka* (heirlooms) play a fundamental role as concentrations of cosmic power. Objects such as kris daggers, spears, gamelan instruments, and royal carriages function not only as symbols of authority but also as active carriers of spiritual energy (Anderson, 1990; Sukatno, 2018). The possession of certain *pusaka* can confirm political legitimacy, while the misuse of power may symbolically lead to the “loss” of this spiritual force (Endraswara, 2014). Even noble women were considered bearers of sacred legitimacy that could be transferred to the ruler (Artha, 2007).

Myths and invisible beings such as *dhanyang* and *dhemit* also support the symbolic structure of power (Danandjaja, 1984; Hiplunudin, 2019). Through narratives such as those of Ratu Kidul and the chronicles of *Babad Tanah Jawi*, royal authority is presented as an integral part of a broader cosmic order (Herusatoto, 2017). Rituals at sacred sites such as Mount Lawu, Mount Merapi, the Southern Sea, or Banglampir renew the relationship between leaders and the spiritual world (Artha, 2007). In this

context, rituals are not merely contemplative acts but mechanisms for mobilizing and sustaining power (Anderson, 1990).

The invisible dimension of power in Javanese culture thus demonstrates that political legitimacy does not arise solely from formal structures but from the integration of cosmology, symbolism, the body, *pusaka*, myth, and ritual. Power is understood as a cosmic substance that must be accumulated, controlled, and harmonized with the spiritual order. Leadership is legitimate when it aligns with the macrocosmic order and is capable of maintaining harmony within the microcosm of society.

Metaphysical Legitimation and the Moral Limitation of Power in the Javanese Political Tradition

The Javanese political tradition primarily understands power as a metaphysical reality rooted in cosmic order, myth, and divine legitimacy rather than merely in rational or institutional structures. The central concept of *wahyu* functions as a sign of divine election: leadership is not seen as a learned competence but as a spiritual calling manifested in a chosen individual (Hiplunudin, 2019). Legitimation therefore occurs not solely through formal procedures but through symbols, spiritual signs, and cosmic confirmation.

The legitimacy of a ruler is also interpreted through concrete symbolic indicators. The loss of sacred *pusaka*, or the occurrence of social and cosmic disorder, may be interpreted as signs of declining authority and even as precursors of dynastic collapse (Anderson, 1990; Endraswara, 2014). In this perspective, power is not primarily measured by administrative effectiveness but by the degree to which a leader remains in harmony with the cosmic order.

This metaphysical foundation reinforces a monocentric model of authority, in which power is highly concentrated around the person of the leader and sustained by traditionally institutionalized authority (Hiplunudin, 2019; Ghufon, 2024). Yet this model contains an inherent ambivalence. When symbolic legitimacy is no longer accompanied by moral responsibility and genuine concern for the people, it may degenerate into feudalism, dynastic politics, and authoritarian practices (Abimanyu, 2024; Achmad, 2024).

For this reason, power in Javanese ethics is normatively constrained by cultural and moral values such as harmony, self-control, and the principle of *sepi ing pamrih, rame ing gawe* acting selflessly while remaining diligent in service (Artha, 2007; Hiplunudin, 2019). Within this synthesis, the *Etos Politik Jawa* (Javanese Political Ethos) emerges as an integrated system in which metaphysics, moral order, and social legitimacy converge. Power can endure only when it remains aligned with cosmic harmony and ethical integrity.

METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretative-philosophical approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the Javanese Political Ethos within its cultural, symbolic, and spiritual context (I Gede, 2011; Creswell, 2013; Bowen, 2009). The study is phenomenological in nature and

focuses on lived experiences and the attribution of meaning surrounding Javanese political values such as *rukun* (social harmony), *nrimo* (acceptance), and *andhap asor* (humility) in relation to power and leadership. This approach aligns with the anthropological perspective that culture constitutes a system of shared meanings that structures social life and social order (Koentjaraningrat, 1990).

Data collection combined participatory and non-participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, inspired by anthropological approaches such as Geertz's concept of "thick description". Fieldwork was conducted over a period of two years (2024–2026) in culturally significant locations, particularly the Keraton Kasunanan Surakarta, as well as within Javanese cultural and political circles in Suriname. The research involved interactions with numerous informants, including cultural practitioners, community elders, political actors, and academics selected through purposive and contextual engagement during the fieldwork process. Rather than relying on a fixed number of respondents, the study emphasized depth of interpretation and continuity of observation in order to understand how the Javanese Political Ethos is maintained, transformed, and reinterpreted in contemporary diaspora politics. These findings were complemented by a literature study of classical and contemporary works on Javanese philosophy, political ethics, and diaspora studies.

The analysis was carried out through content analysis and hermeneutics, allowing both thematic patterns and deeper cultural layers of meaning to be reconstructed. Validity and reliability were ensured through triangulation, peer debriefing, prolonged engagement in the field, and cultural validation, in accordance with qualitative research principles articulated by Guba and Lincoln (1985), Denzin (1970), and Koentjaraningrat (1990). These procedures ensure that the interpretations are both methodologically rigorous and culturally grounded.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Field Research in and around the Keraton Surakarta: Ritual, Power, and Spiritual Legitimacy

Field research conducted in the Keraton Kasunanan Surakarta Hadiningrat shows that, despite the loss of formal state power, the institution still functions as the symbolic and normative center of the Javanese Political Ethos. As the heir to the Mataram kingdom, the *keraton* embodies a strongly centralized and hierarchical model of governance in which power is not autonomous but legitimized through ritual, morality, and cosmic order.

The administrative structure of *Kabupaten Nayaka*, the obligation of *seba* during court ceremonies such as *Grebeg* (a royal ritual where the traditional Javanese ruler distributes mountain shaped offerings to the public to mark specific holidays) and *Tingalan Jumenengan* (coronation anniversary), and the system of land allocation (*siti gadhuhan*) illustrate how loyalty and authority were constructed both administratively and symbolically. Political authority was continuously reaffirmed through ritual visibility, hierarchical ordering, and formal recognition within the court structure.

The spatial organization of the palace, constructed along a north–south axis with successive gates (*kori*), courtyards, and pendopo halls, reflects a gradual transition from the public to the sacred

sphere. Access to the core of power is accompanied by moral discipline and self-restraint, symbolized by the principle *mulat sarira hangrasa wani*, which emphasizes self-reflection and inner purification as conditions for legitimacy.

Classical texts such as *Serat Wulangreh* and *Serat Tripama* reinforce this normative structure by defining leadership as moral self-control, loyalty, and spiritual integrity. Together, these institutional, spatial, and textual elements demonstrate that the keraton is not merely a historical monument but a living system in which power is bounded and legitimized by ethics, ritual, and cosmic order.

Field research conducted in and around the Keraton Kasunanan Surakarta further demonstrates that political power within the Javanese tradition is primarily constructed and affirmed through ritual and symbolism. Observations of *Sekaten* (a week long ceremony to celebrate the Prophet Muhammad birthday) with the *Grebeg Maulud* revealed how religious celebrations simultaneously function as forms of political legitimation. The procession of the *gunungan* from the *keraton* to the *Masjid Agung* (Grand Mosque) symbolizes the flow of prosperity from the ruler to the people and reaffirms the classical ideal of *manunggaling kawula gusti* (the unity between ruler and people). Power here is not articulated through law or coercion but through collective participation, ceremony, and cosmic order.

Rituals surrounding *Malam 1 Suro* with the the *Kirab Pusaka* further emphasize that royal authority rests upon spiritual legitimacy. The handling of *pusaka* (sacred heirlooms), the silent procession (*tapa bisu*), and the central role of symbolic elements such as *Kebo Kyai Slamet* (albino white buffalo) demonstrate that leadership is understood as the maintenance of cosmic balance. The ruler presents himself not merely as a political leader but as a guardian of harmony between visible and invisible worlds.

The ritual *Adang Tahun Dal* and the use of *Dandang Kyai Dudo* illustrate the historical and genealogical anchoring of power. By personally cooking rice and sharing it with the people, the ruler confirms his moral responsibility and closeness to the community. Ritual here functions as an instrument of memory, continuity, and the normative limitation of power.

Finally, observations of royal funeral and inauguration ceremonies, including the main importance of the *Watu Gilang* and the use of royal regalia, demonstrate that kingship is only recognized as legitimate after ritual testing and moral purification. Power in this context is understood as a spiritual mandate requiring ethical self-control, inner strength, and cosmic recognition. The *keraton* (royal palace) thus functions as a living center where political authority is continuously reaffirmed through ritual and morally constrained.

Transformation and Tension within the Javanese Political Ethos in Suriname

Within the Javanese diaspora in Suriname, a clear tension emerges between cultural symbolism and substantive political practice. A well-known phenomenon is the so-called “Bakmi and Nasi Goreng Politics,” referring to a pragmatic and partly clientelist mobilization strategy. Political campaigns are

often characterized by food distribution, cultural performances, and festive gatherings in which symbols of Javanese identity such as traditional cuisine and folkloric performances occupy a central role. Politics thereby acquires a strongly performative character, in which emotional mobilization and visibility sometimes appear more important than programmatic vision and structural policy development. Rhetoric about *gotong royong* and unity often contrasts with a reality of internal division and rivalry even among Javanese themselves.

Additionally, there is a pronounced personalization of power, visible in parties such as *Pertjajah Luhur* under the leadership of Paul Somohardjo and later the succession by Bronto Somohardjo. This concentration of loyalty around a central figure resembles the traditional monocentric character of Javanese political culture, in which leadership is closely linked to charisma and symbolic representation. Within the context of a modern democratic rule-of-law state, however, this raises questions regarding dynastic continuity, institutional renewal, and meritocratic openness. The emergence of alternative leaders and parties, as well as shifting loyalties toward multiethnic national parties, indicates a process of fragmentation and renegotiation of political representation within the community.

At the same time, integration into broader national political structures is occurring, with Javanese politicians participating in multiethnic parties and adopting a more confrontational and parliamentary political style. This development marks a shift from implicit, harmony-oriented leadership styles toward explicit, critical, and media-oriented forms of political engagement.

Underlying this transformation is also a process of cultural erosion. Although rituals and traditions remain visible, the deep knowledge of the philosophical and ethical foundations of the Javanese Political Ethos is gradually diminishing. Due to the largely oral character of the tradition and the lack of systematic documentation within the diaspora, an epistemic rupture has emerged. As a result, political identity risks shifting from a morally grounded ethos toward a predominantly symbolic and pragmatic form of ethnic mobilization.

Continuity, Fragmentation, and the Renegotiation of the Javanese Political Ethos

The findings demonstrate that within the *keraton* context, the Javanese Political Ethos primarily functions as a moral and cosmic system of legitimacy. Power is not understood as mere administrative control but as moral authority rooted in self-discipline, introspection (*mulat sarira*), spiritual discipline, and ritual order. The ruler embodies harmony between humanity, nature and the divine (*manunggaling kawula lan gusti*), while hierarchy, ceremony, and spatial order make the ethical structure of authority visible. Leadership in this tradition is not domination but exemplary conduct and responsibility, and loyalty is moral rather than coercive. At the same time, the ethos cannot be reduced to texts or formal rules: it lives through ritual, practice, and symbolism, drawing strength from the cultural cohesion in which it is embedded.

When this ethos is transferred to the diaspora context in Suriname, a fundamental

transformation occurs. Migration history, the largely oral character of knowledge transmission, and the focus on socio-economic survival have led to a fragmentary transmission of political values. What has largely been preserved are cultural symbols and rituals, while the deeper philosophical and normative content has weakened. This explains the emergence of pragmatic mobilization practices described as the “Bakmi and Nasi Goreng Politics,” in which legitimacy is constructed more through emotional mobilization, material distribution, and performative visibility than through structural policy vision. Here, a dualism emerges between the normative ideal preserved in the *keraton* tradition and the fragmented political practice of the diaspora.

Within the contemporary Surinamese political landscape, this tension is further reinforced by personalization of power and dynastic continuity, visible in certain Javanese-oriented political parties. Although this model parallels the traditional monocentric character of Javanese political culture, the basis of legitimacy shifts from moral integrity toward symbolic representation and electoral visibility. Internal fragmentation, elite competition, and shifting loyalties toward multiethnic parties demonstrate that cultural symbolism alone is insufficient to sustain long-term cohesion. At the same time, the participation of Javanese politicians in national parties illustrates that adaptation to a competitive parliamentary democracy is unavoidable, even when it conflicts with classical values such as *unggah-ungguh* (refined conduct) and conflict avoidance.

The discussion therefore reveals that the Javanese Political Ethos in Suriname stands at a critical crossroads. On the one hand, it remains relevant as a moral reference framework that constrains power through integrity and harmony-oriented thinking; on the other hand, it risks being reduced to symbolic capital within a pragmatic political field. The central challenge lies in the reconstruction of this ethos into a coherent normative system that remains rooted in traditional values while being institutionally translated into the requirements of a modern, pluralistic democracy. Without such recalibration, the political identity of the Javanese diaspora risks shifting from an ethically grounded leadership model to a purely performative and clientelist practice. Figure 2 shows supporters carrying the flags of the *Pertjajah Luhur* during a public gathering. The red-and-white flags feature the party’s emblem, a red star containing the initials ‘PL’, symbolizing the political movement founded to represent the interests and political participation of the Javanese community in Suriname:



Figure 2. Supporters carrying the flags of the *Pertjajah Luhur* during a public gathering

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the Javanese Political Ethos, in its classical formulation, provides a normative framework in which legitimacy does not primarily arise from formal position, electoral majority, or political dominance, but from moral integrity and inner self-control. Leadership in the Javanese tradition is understood as an ethical responsibility requiring spiritual maturity, empathic sensibility (*rasa*), and a fundamental orientation toward social harmony (*rukun*). Power, in this perspective, is not an end in itself but a mandate for self-restraint, service, and exemplary conduct. The analysis of classical texts such as *Serat Wulangreh*, *Serat Tripama*, *Serat Kalatidha*, and *Serat Sabda Jati* confirms that ideal leadership is consistently linked to devotion to higher values, fidelity to moral principles, and the willingness to subordinate personal interests to collective welfare. At the same time, these texts display a critical awareness of moral decline and the abuse of power. The depiction of ethical crisis in *Serat Kalatidha* demonstrates that the Javanese tradition itself allows space for self-reflection and correction. The Javanese political ethos is therefore not naive idealism but a moral limiting system that also functions as an evaluative instrument for political practice.

In the context of contemporary Suriname, this ethos still possesses normative potential, yet in practice it operates fragmentarily and under tension. Cultural symbols and identity expressions remain visible, while the translation of ethical principles into consistent policy formation and political integrity is not always evident. Phenomena such as the so-called “Bakmi and Nasi Goreng Politics” illustrate how pragmatic mobilization, personal loyalty, and short-term calculation sometimes prevail over structural and principled orientations. As a result, a gap emerges between the normative ideal of moral leadership and the empirical political reality. The relevance of the Javanese political ethos therefore lies less in whether it is fully implemented today and more in its potential as a critical and corrective reference framework. In a multiethnic and postcolonial society such as Suriname, it can serve as an ethical horizon for redefining leadership as moral responsibility rather than merely ethnic representation or personal prestige. If contextually reinterpreted and institutionally translated within a democratic constitutional order, this ethos may contribute to strengthening political legitimacy, integrity, and long-

term policy orientation.

Scientifically, this research contributes to the enrichment of political science debates by integrating a cultural-philosophical perspective into the analysis of legitimacy and leadership. It goes beyond explanations that reduce Javanese politics to ethnic mobilization or clientelism, demonstrating that behind political practice lies a deep normative system that constrains power through moral requirements. Socially, this study opens space for renewed reflection both within the Javanese diaspora and the community in Indonesia. Values such as *unggah-ungguh*, *tepa selira* (empati), *asah asih asuh*, (educate, love, care/nurture) and *sapa nandur ngundhuh* (what you sow is what you reap) can be reinterpreted as political and ethical principles, not merely as cultural etiquette. Moreover, these values show conceptual resonance with the core principles of Pancasila, particularly regarding justice, humanity, and deliberative consensus.

Ultimately, this research positions the Javanese Political Ethos as a normative evaluative framework for contemporary politics, both in Suriname and in Indonesia. In an era in which politics is often characterized by pragmatism and personalization, this tradition offers an alternative vision emphasizing integrity, self-restraint, and public responsibility. Consequently, the contribution of this study is not only academic, but also normative and socially relevant.

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