

## **When a Spell is Separated from Its Ritual: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Betawi Mantra in Urban Jakarta**

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### **Abstract**

Betawi incantations, or jampi-jampi Betawi, historically emerged within intimate ritual settings that involved embodied performance, emotional atmosphere, and social meaning. In contemporary Jakarta, these incantations increasingly appear in non-ritual spaces such as festivals, schools, digital platforms, and everyday community gatherings. This study employs descriptive phenomenology to explore how listeners experience Betawi incantations when they are separated from their ritual origins. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with seven cultural practitioners and community members, non-participatory observations at public cultural events, and document analysis of digital recordings and community archives. The analysis identified three essential experiential structures: performative traces rooted in rhythm, vocal texture, and bodily familiarity; affective resonance expressed through warmth, humor, and nostalgia; and identity marking that allows listeners to recognize Betawi cultural presence within Jakarta's multicultural landscape. These findings reveal that the contemporary vitality of Betawi incantations does not rely on ritual authority but on multisensory engagement, emotional connection, and cultural signaling. The study contributes to broader discussions on oral tradition, cultural memory, and urban heritage by showing how embodied and affective experiences enable traditional vocal forms to persist and adapt within changing social environments.

**Keywords:** Betawi ritual speech; urban heritage; descriptive phenomenology; Jakarta culture

## **Introduction**

Betawi incantations, often referred to as jampi-jampi Betawi, are oral expressions historically embedded in everyday and ritual life among Betawi communities in Jakarta. These expressions were transmitted through voice, gesture, and communal interaction, and their meaning depended as much on embodied performance as on lexical content. Recent empirical work on oral traditions in Indonesia highlights a surge in studies that examine how oral forms adapt in urban, mediated, and crisis contexts (Meigalia, Putra, & Sofi, 2021; Azizah, Rahmawati, & Kurniawan, 2021). This growing body of scholarship supports the claim that oral traditions

should be analyzed as lived, sensory practices rather than as static verbal artifacts.

From a phenomenological perspective, the significance of an utterance is inseparable from the bodily and situational context in which it is performed (Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Csordas, 1994). Oral forms convey meaning through rhythm, tone, and embodied presence, and those dimensions can endure even when ritual conditions change (Finnegan, 2018; Ong, 2012). Southeast Asian ethnographic studies indicate that sonic and performative features of ritual speech often continue to elicit emotional and bodily responses when relocated to festivals, recordings, or online platforms (Barwick, 2020; Barendregt & van der Meij, 2020).

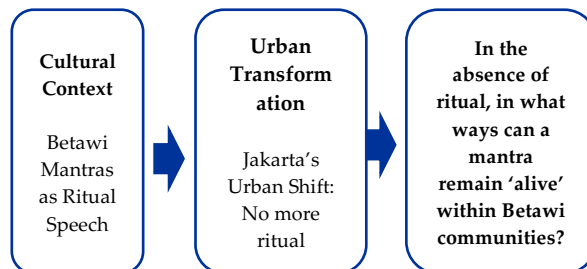
Jakarta's rapid urbanization and the intensified circulation of cultural forms through media have shifted many local practices into new arenas. Ethnographic and applied research documents how Indonesian communities adapted oral practices during the COVID-19 pandemic by using livestreams, small-site performances, and digital archives to maintain continuity (Meigalia et al., 2021; Azizah et al., 2021). More broadly, analyses of digital cultural transformation in Indonesia report that pandemic-related changes accelerated the movement of oral culture into mediated spaces and amplified community-driven preservation initiatives (Arianto, 2021; Mahendra, Putra, & Yusuf, 2025).

At the local level, scholarship on Betawi folklore and literacy has highlighted ongoing efforts to sustain Betawi cultural elements through educational materials, community programs, and cultural festivals (Hidayatullah & Komara, 2023). Studies on Betawi public representation also document how formerly ritualized forms, such as *ondel-ondel*, have been recontextualized as urban cultural icons that perform identity in Jakarta's public sphere (Nugraheni & Latifah, 2021; Callula, Nolani, & Ramadhan, 2024). These local dynamics suggest that Betawi incantations, while reduced in ritual frequency, may persist through performative residue, affective resonance, and identity marking.

Given this context, the present study asks three interrelated questions. First, what elements of Betawi incantations continue to register as meaningful when encountered outside ritual settings? Second, what sensory and affective responses do contemporary listeners report when they encounter such incantations in public, mediated, or informal settings? Third, how do these experiences connect to constructions of Betawi identity in contemporary Jakarta? To answer these questions, the study uses descriptive phenomenology to trace essential structures of experience across interviews, observation, and documentation.

This study integrates four interrelated theoretical domains to account for how Betawi Mantras continue to have experiential force in non-ritual settings: oral tradition and performativity, embodiment and

phenomenology, cultural memory and affect, and urban recontextualization of tradition. Bringing these perspectives together provides an analytic lens that links sonic form to experience and identity.



**Figure 1.** How Betawi Mantras continue to have experiential force in non-ritual settings?

Scholars of orality emphasize that oral forms are sustained primarily through performance features such as voice, rhythm, repetition, and audience interaction (Finnegan, 2018; Foley, 2019; Ong, 2012). Ethnomusicological work in the region shows that melodic contours and performative timing preserve cultural salience even when ritual contexts are absent (Barwick, 2020). Performance theory helps us understand how repeated embodied actions become reproducible behaviors that can be recontextualized while still producing recognizable effects (Schechner, 2013; Bauman, 2012). Regional studies on Betawi performance and related Indonesian practices document how ritual elements are often framed as cultural repertoire for festivals and education while retaining affective power (Callula et al., 2024; Nugraheni & Latifah, 2021).

Phenomenology locates meaning-making in the embodied encounter. Perception is incarnate and structured by bodily habits, posture, and sensory orientation (Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Csordas, 1994). In ethnographic contexts, sound can trigger somatic modes of attention and kinesthetic memory that survive contextual displacement (Feld, 2012; Barendregt & van der Meij, 2020). These perspectives frame Betawi incantations as events that may be felt by the body before, or even without, propositional understanding.

Cultural memory research stresses that communities transmit the past through affective repetition and embodied cues rather than

exhaustive factual recall (Erll, 2021; Gensburger & Lavabre, 2020). Ahmed's account of affect shows how attachments circulate and sustain practices over time (Ahmed, 2014). In urban contexts, language and sound become resources for identity performance and visibility (Blommaert, 2019; Androutsopoulos, 2022). Applied Indonesian studies reveal that Betawi cultural actors use performative and affective registers to sustain cultural recognition in schools, festivals, and community programs (Hidayatullah & Komara, 2023; Hidayatullah, 2023).

Urban studies suggest that traditions are often reconfigured rather than erased in cities. Rituals and oral forms may lose original instrumental roles but gain new significance as symbolic and performative resources within festivals, museums, and digital media (Hannerz, 1992; Low, 2017; Mahendra et al., 2025). Research carried out during and after the pandemic documents concrete strategies whereby communities mediate oral culture digitally and use small-site events to sustain practice (Meigalia et al., 2021; Azizah et al., 2021). These studies support the claim that Betawi incantations can persist through adaptive circulation in urban cultural ecologies.

Combining these four domains allows us to see Betawi incantations as multisensory cultural forms that survive through the interaction of performative residue, embodied perception, affective memory, and recontextualized social use. Descriptive phenomenology provides the method for tracing the lived structures that connect sound and rhythm to emotion and identity in Jakarta's contemporary urban life.

## Method

This study employed descriptive phenomenology to uncover the essential structures of experience that emerge when Betawi incantations are encountered outside their traditional ritual settings. Descriptive phenomenology seeks to reveal how individuals experience a phenomenon before interpretation, categorization, or theoretical framing is imposed (Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Van Manen, 2014). In line with this tradition, the analysis focused on the lived and embodied aspects of listening, remembering, and responding to jampi-jampi Betawi across various contemporary contexts.

Seven participants were selected through purposive sampling, all of whom were either cultural practitioners, Betawi community members, or individuals with personal familiarity with Betawi oral traditions. Purposive sampling is appropriate when the goal is to obtain participants who have direct experiential knowledge of the phenomenon under study (Englander, 2020; Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019).

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**Table 1.** Focus Area and Indicators

| No | Focus Area                  | Indicators                                | Sample Questions                                     |
|----|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | Understanding the tradition | Knowledge, early exposure, family context | "What do you know about Betawi Mantras?"             |
| 2  | Non-ritual experience       | Exposure in public/digital spaces         | "Have you ever heard mantra at festivals or online?" |
| 3  | Embodied experience         | Bodily sensations, rhythmic response      | "How does your body respond when you hear mantra?"   |

|   |                          |                                            |                                                                   |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4 | Affective resonance      | Emotions, nostalgia, warmth                | "Does mantra evoke any memories or emotions?"                     |
| 5 | Cultural identity        | Identity marker, belonging                 | "Do you see mantra as part of Betawi identity?"                   |
| 6 | Cultural transformation  | Shift from ritual to performance           | "Is mantra still meaningful outside ritual?"                      |
| 7 | Digital adaptation       | TikTok, YouTube, digital sound circulation | "How do you feel about mantra circulating on social media?"       |
| 8 | Hopes & future relevance | Preservation, youth engagement             | "Do you think mantra should be preserved for future generations?" |

Three forms of data were collected. The first consisted of semi-structured phenomenological interviews, which allowed participants to describe memories of hearing Betawi incantations, emotional responses, bodily sensations, and the contexts in which they encountered them (see Table 1); semi-structured interviews are commonly used in phenomenological inquiry because they support depth, nuance, and reflection (Bevan, 2014). The second was non-participatory observation at community festivals, small-scale cultural events, and public performances where Betawi verbal forms were used, with observational notes emphasizing gesture, tone, rhythm, bodily engagement, and audience responses. The third was document analysis of digital performances, community recordings, and cultural materials circulating through WhatsApp groups and archives; document analysis is increasingly central to phenomenological studies involving mediated cultural practices (Sundler et al., 2019; Tracy, 2020).

Data analysis followed the general structure of descriptive phenomenology. It began with epoché and bracketing, in which the researcher

suspended prior assumptions to remain close to participants' lived experience, bracketing being central to maintaining phenomenological rigor (Levitt, 2021). This was followed by meaning unit identification, in which interview transcripts and field notes were segmented into meaning units that reflected emotional tones, sensory memories, bodily reactions, and associations with Betawi identity. Next, imaginative variation and eidetic reduction were applied, whereby meaning units were compared across participants to determine which experiential structures consistently appeared, imaginative variation being used to clarify which qualities belong to the essence of a phenomenon (Dahlberg, Todres, & Galvin, 2020). This process culminated in a synthesis of essential structures, from which three essential structures emerged and formed the basis of the findings: performative traces, affective resonance, and identity marking.

Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, in which participants reviewed interpretive summaries (Birt et al., 2016); thick description, achieved through rich phenomenological detail (Tracy, 2020); and triangulation across interviews, observation, and digital documents.

The study followed standard qualitative ethical principles regarding informed consent, anonymization, and respect for cultural sensitivity. Participants chose the level of identification they were comfortable with, especially regarding cultural affiliations.

## Results and Discussion

### Results

The analysis of interviews, observations, and digital materials revealed three essential experiential structures that consistently appeared when participants encountered Betawi incantations outside traditional ritual settings. These structures describe how contemporary listeners interpret, feel, and embody jampi-jampi Betawi in urban Jakarta today. Results of this study as shown in the Table 2.

**Table 2.** Interview Results Coding

| Theme                      | N<br>1 | N<br>2 | N<br>3 | N<br>4 | N<br>5 | N<br>6 | N<br>7 |
|----------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| <b>Embodied Memory</b>     | x      | x      | x      | -      | x      | x      | x      |
| <b>Affective Resonance</b> | x      | x      | x      | x      | x      | x      | x      |

|                         |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Identity Marker         | x | x | x | - | x | x | x |
| Cultural Transformation | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Performance & Rhythm    | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Digital Adaptation      | - | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Living Tradition        | x | x | x | - | x | x | x |

### Performative Traces: Rhythm, Voice, and Bodily Memory

Participants described an immediate sensory familiarity when hearing Betawi incantations, even in informal or secular settings. This familiarity came from rhythmic repetition, melodic contour, tone, and pacing rather than from the verbal content itself. Several listeners noted that their bodies “responded on their own,” such as tapping fingers, smiling, or mimicking the vocal cadence during performances.

These responses align with ethnomusicological findings that rhythm and vocal patterning can trigger embodied memory even when ritual context is absent (Barwick, 2020). Observations at cultural events also showed that audience members often adjusted posture or facial expressions in sync with performers, suggesting forms of somatic attention similar to those documented in Indonesian sonic practices (Barendregt & van der Meij, 2020).

Digital recordings shared in community groups elicited similar reactions. Participants often paused, replayed short segments, or commented on the “Betawi feel” of the sound. This indicates that performative elements continue to function as cultural cues that activate recognition and memory, supporting the view that oral traditions retain vitality through sensory form (Finnegan, 2018).

### Affective Resonance: Warmth, Humor, and Nostalgia

A second structure that appeared consistently across interviews was affective resonance. Participants reported emotions such as warmth, amusement, closeness, and nostalgia when listening to Betawi incantations in non-ritual settings. These emotions did not depend on the ritual meaning of the incantations but emerged from the tone of voice, familiar expressions, and

associations with family members or community experiences.

One participant described the feeling as “kayak balik ke rumah,” indicating that the experience was closely tied to personal and cultural memory. This finding is consistent with cultural memory scholarship which argues that emotional responses often sustain tradition more effectively than textual recall (Erll, 2021; Gensburger & Lavabre, 2020).

Humor was another affective component frequently mentioned. Participants associated the playful tone of some Betawi expressions with “keramahtamahan” and “candaan orang Betawi,” reinforcing how local identity is felt through emotional channels. This pattern mirrors broader Indonesian research showing that affect often mediates the continuity of oral traditions in the midst of social change (Meigalia et al., 2021; Azizah et al., 2021).

### Identity Marking: Cultural Recognition in Urban Spaces

The third essential structure relates to identity marking. Participants described Betawi incantations as symbols that make Betawi identity visible in Jakarta’s multicultural environment. This occurred even in settings where the incantations were used in a stylized, secular, or entertainment-oriented manner, such as during ondel-ondel performances, festivals, or school programs.

Observational data indicated that audiences often treated incantations as recognizable markers of Betawi heritage, similar to the way visual symbols like ondel-ondel now function as urban identity icons (Callula, Nolani, & Ramadhan, 2024; Nugraheni & Latifah, 2021). In digital environments, short clips of jampi-jampi Betawi circulated as humorous or nostalgic content, further strengthening their role as identity signals.

Participants emphasized that the incantations “sound Betawi,” reflecting how particular vocal textures, accents, and rhythm contribute to identity expression. Linguistic ethnography suggests that such auditory features often carry ideological weight in identity formation, especially in multicultural cities (Blommaert, 2019). This is consistent with findings from Indonesian heritage studies, which show that communities rely on symbolic performance to

maintain relevance in rapidly urbanizing environments (Hidayatullah & Komara, 2023).

**Table 3.** Recapitulation Result

| Master Themes (TH)                 | Subthemes                                                           | Essence Across Participants                                             |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1. Embodied Memory</b>          | The body stores rhythm, the body responds first, childhood memories | Mantra endures as a bodily experience rather than a textual one         |
| <b>2. Affective Resonance</b>      | Nostalgia, familial warmth, a sense of homecoming                   | Mantra evokes emotions that reinforce identity                          |
| <b>3. Identity Marker</b>          | Betawi vocal style, markers of origin, urban symbols                | Mantra becomes a cultural identity marker for modern Betawi communities |
| <b>4. Cultural Transformation</b>  | Sacred → aesthetic, ritual → performance stage, home → media        | Shifts in space do not erase meaning; they only change its form         |
| <b>5. Performance &amp; Rhythm</b> | Rhythm as the primary appeal, vocal performativity                  | The rhythm of the mantra is the core aesthetic that persists            |
| <b>6. Digital Adaptation</b>       | TikTok, YouTube, urban festivals                                    | New media expand the living space of the mantra                         |
| <b>7. Living Tradition</b>         | Domestic tradition, family memories, intergenerational transmission | Mantra survives because it is animated by people, not by text           |

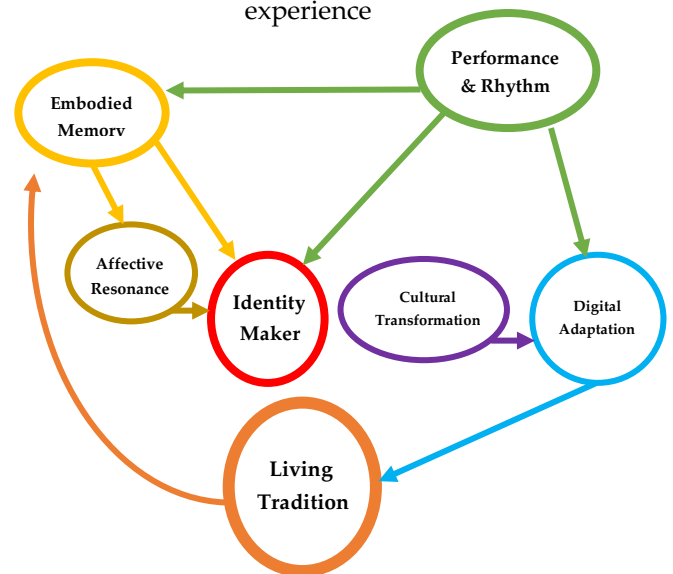
Taken together, the three experiential structures demonstrate that Betawi incantations retain meaning through embodied familiarity, affective tone, and identity signaling. Although participants rarely engaged with the incantations in ritual terms, they consistently interpreted them as culturally significant expressions that evoke

memory, emotion, and belonging (see Table 3). This suggests that the vitality of Betawi incantations today does not depend on ritual authority but on multisensory and affective processes that operate across everyday cultural settings.

## Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate how Betawi incantations continue to generate meaning in contemporary Jakarta despite no longer operating within their original ritual settings. Rather than fading, these forms persist through sensory familiarity, emotional resonance, and cultural signaling. When interpreted through the combined lenses of oral tradition studies, phenomenology, cultural memory, and urban heritage research, the three experiential structures identified in this study become part of a broader pattern observable in many living oral traditions. Figure 2 representation of thematic relationships in Betawi Mantras experience, illustrating the interplay between embodied tradition and digital transformation

**Figure 2.** Conceptual model of Betawi Mantras experience



## The survival of oral tradition through sensory form

The first theme, performative traces, highlights how rhythm, tone, and vocal texture continue to structure listeners' engagement with Betawi incantations. Participants' bodily responses, such as smiling, tapping fingers, or shifting posture, indicate embodied memory



rather than cognitive recollection. This aligns with Finnegan's (2018) argument that oral traditions endure through performative features that engage the listener's senses.

Ethnomusicological studies reinforce this point. Barwick (2020) shows that vocal contour and rhythmic emphasis in Eastern Indonesian ritual songs remain meaningful even when removed from ceremonial settings. Likewise, Barendregt and van der Meij (2020) demonstrate that sonic practices among Indonesian Muslim communities activate bodily dispositions regardless of context. These parallels help explain why listeners in this study still "feel" Betawi incantations even when the text or meaning is not fully understood.

This finding reinforces the idea that oral traditions do not depend solely on ritual authority but can survive through the sensory habits they cultivate. Rhythm, pacing, and speech quality become cultural signatures that listeners recognize intuitively.

#### **Emotional resonance as a basis of cultural continuity**

The second structure, affective resonance, demonstrates how emotional responses such as warmth, humor, and nostalgia sustain Betawi incantations in the present. Participants often described the experience as "familiar," "comforting," or "like going home." These responses align with Erll's (2021) concept of cultural memory, which argues that communities maintain identity through emotionally charged repetitions rather than factual recollection.

Indonesian research conducted during and after the pandemic similarly highlights that oral traditions persisted not because people recalled their ritual meaning but because they provided emotional connection and social reassurance during uncertain times (Meigalia et al., 2021; Azizah et al., 2021). The affective tone of jampi-jampi Betawi, especially humor, further aligns with Betawi cultural styles commonly expressed in daily interaction.

Ahmed (2014) writes that emotions circulate socially and create shared orientations. The circulation of Betawi incantations in digital platforms such as WhatsApp or TikTok can thus be understood as a form of affective sociality, where emotional responses help keep tradition alive even without ritual performance.

#### **Identity marking in a multicultural urban landscape**

The third structure, identity marking, reflects how listeners interpret Betawi incantations as audible indicators of Betawi cultural identity. This interpretation was observed not only in interviews but also in public performances such as ondel-ondel appearances, cultural festivals, and school programs.

Studies on Betawi cultural forms show similar shifts. Nugraheni and Latifah (2021) document how ondel-ondel transformed from a ritual guardian figure into an urban identity icon. More recent research finds that cultural actors deliberately employ Betawi artistic elements to maintain visibility amid Jakarta's demographic pressures (Callula, Nolani, & Ramadhan, 2024). The present findings show that incantations play a comparable role, functioning as identity cues that evoke recognition even when detached from ritual context.

This aligns with sociolinguistic perspectives that treat sound as a sign of group belonging. Blommaert (2019) argues that language features carry ideological meanings that help groups position themselves in multicultural settings. Participants' descriptions of Betawi incantations as "kedengarannya Betawi banget" suggest that vocal qualities such as accent, rhythm, and tone operate as cultural identifiers.

#### **Recontextualization rather than disappearance**

Across the findings, it becomes clear that Betawi incantations have not vanished but have been recontextualized. Urban anthropology emphasizes that cities are sites of cultural transformation rather than cultural decline (Hannerz, 1992; Low, 2017). In Indonesia, heritage preservation increasingly occurs through community museums, festivals, and digital archiving initiatives (Mahendra, Putra, & Yusuf, 2025).

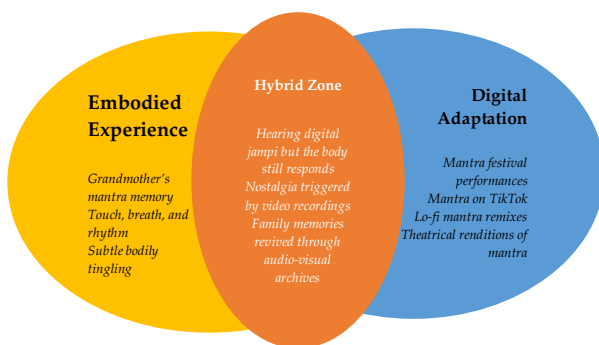
This study contributes to that perspective by showing that recontextualization is not merely functional but experiential. Even when jampi-jampi Betawi appear in casual or mediated settings, they evoke bodily familiarity, emotional warmth, and identity awareness among listeners. Such experiential continuity echoes patterns documented in other Southeast Asian oral traditions, where sound and affect help sustain cultural meaning despite changing environments

(Barwick, 2020; Puspitasari et al., 2024; Yuwono et al., 2025).

### Integrating embodiment, affect, and identity

The three experiential structures (performative traces, affective resonance, and identity marking) do not operate independently. They reinforce one another. Sensory familiarity triggers emotional attachment, which in turn strengthens identity recognition. This pattern aligns with Csordas's (1994) view of embodiment as the ground where meaning, memory, and identity converge.

Betawi incantations thus remain meaningful in Jakarta today not because people retain detailed ritual knowledge but because listeners experience them bodily and emotionally. This reinforces the claim that oral tradition is not merely verbal but deeply experiential and social. Figure 3 represent domain concept of cultural transmission and media engagement.



**Figure 3.** Embodied experience versus digital adaptation in Betawi Mantras

### Conclusions

This study examined how Betawi incantations continue to be experienced in contemporary Jakarta after separating from their original ritual settings. Using descriptive phenomenology, the analysis revealed that jampi-jampi Betawi remain meaningful through three essential experiential structures that consistently appeared across interviews, observations, and digital materials. These structures are performative traces rooted in rhythm and vocal texture, affective resonance shaped by warmth, humor, and nostalgia, and identity marking that allows listeners to recognize Betawi cultural presence within a diverse urban landscape.

The findings demonstrate that the vitality of Betawi incantations today does not depend on ritual authority or magical function. Instead,

meaning is sustained through bodily familiarity, emotional connection, and cultural signaling. Even when heard in casual, mediated, or entertainment-oriented contexts, the incantations trigger embodied memory and affective responses that reaffirm listeners' sense of belonging. These results support broader research in oral tradition, cultural memory, and urban heritage, which highlights the role of sensory forms and emotional experience in sustaining cultural practices amid social change.

This study shows that the separation of Betawi incantations from their ritual background represents not a decline but a transformation. As Jakarta evolves, the incantations adapt by circulating through festivals, classrooms, digital platforms, and community performances, allowing them to continue functioning as cultural anchors. Their endurance demonstrates how oral traditions can remain relevant by shifting from sacred performance to everyday cultural experience. The findings contribute to discussions in phenomenology and oral tradition studies by demonstrating that embodied experience and affective memory are central to how cultural forms persist. The study confirms that sound, rhythm, and vocality can carry cultural meaning even when detached from ritual function, reinforcing theories that treat oral tradition as an experiential rather than merely textual phenomenon.

The continued resonance of Betawi incantations suggests that cultural preservation strategies should prioritize embodied and affective engagement. Programs that encourage listening, performing, or recontextualizing incantations in creative ways may be more effective than approaches focused solely on archiving texts. Festivals, school programs, community workshops, and digital storytelling platforms can serve as productive spaces for sustaining interest and intergenerational transmission. As Jakarta continues to expand and diversify, policies to strengthen local identity can benefit from acknowledging the importance of intangible cultural expressions such as jampi-jampi Betawi. Urban cultural planning often prioritizes visual heritage, yet this study shows that sonic heritage is equally important in shaping belonging. Supporting Betawi vocal forms in public events, media content, and



cultural education may enhance community cohesion. Future studies may explore comparative cases from other Indonesian or Southeast Asian traditions to understand how recontextualized incantations function across communities. Research could also extend to younger generations to examine how digital media reshapes the experience of oral traditions. Ethnographic work focusing on performance, voice training, and new cultural expressions may further illuminate how these incantations evolve.

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