Visual Appeal and Children's Responses to Barongan Art in Gabusan Village, Blora Regency

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Abstract

The Barongan art in Gabusan Village, Blora Regency, is a local cultural heritage rich in aesthetic value. Children in Gabusan Village grow up alongside Barongan, meaning their visual perceptions are shaped by early cultural exposure. This study aims to describe the visual appeal of Barongan, examine children's responses, and analyze the relationship between these factors and their interest in appreciating traditional art. An ethnochoreological approach with a qualitative method was employed. The research focused on Gabusan Village, Jati District, Blora, with children aged 6–12 serving as the primary subjects of observation, while Barongan dancers and Barongan community leaders acted as key informants. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and visual documentation. The results indicate that contrasting colors, expressive mask forms, and the dynamic movements of the Barongan serve as the primary visual stimuli. Early exposure transforms children's initial fear into courage and admiration, while also fostering a habit of imitating the movements. Visual appeal proves effective as a medium for cultural transmission in cultivating an appreciation for the arts among children from an early age.

Keywords: *Visual Attraction, Children's Response, Barongan Art*

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country rich in traditional arts and culture, rich in historical, aesthetic, social, and philosophical values. However, the rapid development of globalization and the digital era have significantly impacted changes in people's entertainment patterns, particularly among children (Soedarsono, 2002). Today's children are more exposed to modern, technology-based entertainment and foreign popular culture, potentially diminishing their interest in their own traditional regional arts (Soedarsono, 2002). Introducing local culture from an early age is crucial because the aesthetic experiences children receive during childhood will influence the formation of their character, attitudes, and sense of pride in their national identity (Setyobudi et al., 2018).

One traditional art form that still actively maintains its existence is the Barongan performance in Blora Regency, Central Java (Jazuli et al., 2020). Barongan is a folk performing art that combines elements of dance, music, drama, attractive movement, and the use of large masks shaped like mythological animals as its main symbol (Jazuli et al., 2020). In the cultural ecosystem of Blora, Barongan is not merely presented as entertainment at celebrations or folk festivals, but has become integrated into the lives of the local community, where children have grown up and lived side by side with Barongan art since childhood. The sound of accompanying gending, the pounding of drums, and the prowess of the Barongan figure are present naturally in their social environment from an early age. The presence of this consistent tradition shapes the perception and visual sensory habits of Blora children towards their regional art.

Gabusan Village is one of the villages that still preserves the traditional Barongan art form as part of its cultural identity. This art form is not only performed at major village events but is also routinely practiced in art studios as a means of learning and preservation. One important forum that plays a role in maintaining the sustainability of Barongan art in Gabusan Village is the Abdi Joyo Studio, which serves as a training ground for dancers and preparation for performances. In this study, children aged 6–12 years were selected as the research subjects because at that age they are in a stage of sensory and emotional development that is sensitive to visual stimuli and performances. As Barongan audiences, the children showed various responses such as curiosity, admiration for the costumes and masks, courage to approach the performance area, and behavior imitating the dancers' movements. These responses became the focus of observation to understand how the experience of watching Barongan shapes the emotional and aesthetic interactions between children and the traditional arts in their environment.

Barongan art has a very strong visual appeal, such as large and expressive mask shapes, the use of striking costume colors, bold makeup, and energetic and dynamic dance movements (Suryana & Rahim, 2025). Evans (2009) also emphasized that the visual elements of Barongan, including the striking masks and costumes, are one of the main factors that make this performance attract the audience's attention. During their developmental stage, children have a very sensitive response to visual stimuli that are contrasting colors, unique shapes, and active movement (Handayani et al., 2023). In the context of children in Blora, these visual stimuli interact with cultural memories that have been formed because they have grown up with this tradition since childhood. As a result, the visual stimulus of Barongan not only triggers fear of the frightening mask form, but also develops into a sense of awe, enthusiasm, and a spontaneous urge to imitate the movements of the Barongan performers (Wulandari & Hartono, 2018). Studies on art appreciation in children indicate that children can form aesthetic judgments through the observation and interpretation of the visual elements of a work (Cunningham 1997; D'Onofrio & Nodine, 1981).

Most previous research on Barongan art has focused on specific aspects separately. (Cahyono et al., 2023) examined Barongan performances in Blora from the perspective of ritual and entertainment functions, focusing on how the magical and mystical elements in the performance

have adapted to changing times. (Jazuli et al., 2020) discussed the potential of Barongan art in developing the creative industry and local economy in Blora Regency, including how this art can become a source of income for the local community. Meanwhile, examined the development of the Barongan mask form used in the Murwakala ritual in Blora, as well as how changes in the mask's form relate to the socio-cultural context of the community (Pambudi, 2017). (Putri & Arsih, 2019) discuss the adaptation strategies employed by the Barongan Samin Edan group to attract an audience. While these studies provide a foundation for understanding the form, function, and sustainability strategies of Barongan, they do not specifically integrate the visual appeal of the performance with the emotional and behavioral responses of children in the audience.The novelty of this research lies in its focus, which integrates the visual appeal of the Barongan performance with the experiences of children who have grown up and lived alongside this art form since childhood. This research not only examines the external appearance of the performance but also examines in depth how early experiences shape the way children feel and change their emotional responses from fear to courage, appreciation for the work, and imitation behavior. Furthermore, the use of an ethnochoreological approach provides a new, more intimate and contextual perspective in exploring the cultural relations between children, Barongan dancers, and the leader of the Barongan arts community.

Based on the research gap,This study aims to describe the visual appeal of the Barongan performance in Gabusan Village, Jati District, Blora Regency andexamines the forms of emotional responses and behavior of children, and analyzes the relationship between visual appeal and children's interest in traditional arts. Using a qualitative approach with ethnochoreology methods, this study places children aged 6–12 years as the main observation subjects and Barongan dancers and the head of the Barongan arts community as key informants to provide an in-depth understanding of cultural transmission through visual experiences.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with an ethnochoreological focus to examine the visual appeal and children's responses to Barongan art in Gabusan Village, Jati District, Blora Regency. The ethnochoreological approach is used to connect the visual structure of the performance with the socio-cultural context of the supporting community. The research design used is a case study with a focus on the visual interaction of the Barongan performance and the responses of children aged 6–12 years. The research objects include the visual appeal of the performance, such as masks, costumes, movements, makeup, properties, and stage attractions, as well as children's responses in the form of emotional responses, behavior, and attention during the performance.

The research subjects were children aged 6–12 years who witnessed a live Barongan performance. Supporting informants included Barongan dancers, and the Head of the Abdi Joyo Studio, Ali Muntaha. In addition, 10 children served as research informants and were selected because they watched Barongan performances more often than other children, thus having richer experiences and responses. The research data consisted of observations of the visual elements and children's responses, interviews with children and artists, and photo and video documentation. Data collection was carried out through observation, interviews, documentation, and literature review. Observations were used to directly observe the visual elements of the performance and children's responses, interviews to explore children's perceptions and the visual and choreographic meanings of the artists, documentation to record the performance and children's responses, and literature review to strengthen the theoretical basis of the research.

Data validity was achieved through source triangulation, technical triangulation, and observational diligence. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from

children, artists, and the community, while technical triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation. Data analysis used the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which includes data condensation, data presentation, and drawing conclusions and verification. Data were grouped based on the visual elements of Barongan and children's responses, then presented narratively and in research documentation. Furthermore, the findings were interpreted from an ethnochoreological perspective to obtain research conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Visual Appeal of the Barongan Performance in Gabusan Village, Blora Regency

Based on research results, the visual appeal of the Barongan performance in Gabusan Village, Blora Regency, focuses on two elements: acrobatic movements and costumes and makeup. These two elements do not stand alone but support each other, creating an energetic, attractive performance that easily captures the attention of audiences, especially children aged 6–12.

From an ethnochoreological perspective, the visualization of the Barongan is understood not only as a beautiful display but also as part of the community's cultural experience. Children in Gabusan Village have been exposed to the Barongan from an early age through neighborhood performances and activities at the Abdi Joyo Studio. Repeated experiences enable the children to recognize the shape of the mask, the color of the costume, and the dancers' movements. Children who initially felt afraid of the Barongan mask gradually showed courage, curiosity, admiration, and a desire to imitate the dancers' movements.

The Blora Barongan performance is essentially a procession. Its presentation incorporates several elements, such as movement, accompaniment, makeup, costume, dancers, props, the performance venue, and the audience. In this study, the strongest visual elements are seen in the Barongan performers' body movements and the costumes and makeup of the characters.

a. Acrobatic movements as a visual attraction

Acrobatic movements are one of the most prominent elements in the Barongan performance in Gabusan Village. These movements include jumping, spinning, climbing, running, rolling, and head bobbing. The Barongan performers' movements are often performed with great intensity, creating a strong, agile, and unpredictable impression. Acrobatic movements not only function as a series of choreographies but also serve as a strategy to maintain the audience's attention. Changes in body level from standing, to lowering, to jumping create dynamic variations. The speed of movement and the use of large space make the performers appear larger, and are supported by the large Barongan masks. When analyzed using Slamet MD's theory of visual elements, these acrobatic movements can be seen through several elements of dance formation, namely movement, rhythm, expression, dancers, costumes, and floor patterns, which form the whole dance performance.

In Barongan art, movement is a key element that brings the characters to life and captures the audience's attention. Barongan movements tend to be powerful, fast-paced, and emphatically accentuated. Foot stomps and head movements create an impression of courage and prowess. Sudden movements also surprise the audience. For children, the rapid and fluid movements are a compelling stimulus because they differ from everyday movements. They not only watch the dancers move, but also follow their movements, notice changes in position, and anticipate the next attraction. Van Meel et al., (1993) indicate that children interpret dance expressions in different ways, depending on their age and dance experience; consequently, the movements they observe can elicit a variety of responses.

Observations showed that children responded more strongly when the Barongan performers jumped, spun, chased, or approached the audience. Some children were seen retreating when the performers approached quickly, then the audience returned to their attention. This response indicates a combination of fear and curiosity. Fear arose because of the shape of the mask and the intensity of

the movements, while curiosity arose because the acrobatic movements were considered unusual and entertaining. These findings align with studies (Cahyono et al., 2023) This demonstrates that the movements in the Blora Barongan performance are strong and energetic. Feline-like movements dominate the Barongan dance and support the agile and nimble characters. This characteristic is evident in the responsive, fast, and powerful movements.

Visually, the appeal of acrobatic movements can be explained through the following aspects.

a) Power, namely the use of great power in kicks, jumps and head movements.
b) Speed of movement, namely rapid changes in movement that create tension and surprise.
c) Level variation, namely the movement of body position from high to low or vice versa.
d) Utilization of space, namely moving and approaching the audience so that the boundary between the player and the audience becomes closer.
e) Character expression, namely the creation of a dashing, wild, brave and entertaining impression through body movements.

Thus, the acrobatic movements serve as both a marker of the Barongan character and a focal point of visual interest. These movements prevent the performance from remaining static, but rather constantly evolving, creating an intense viewing experience.

b. Costume and make-up as visual identity

Costumes and makeup are crucial elements in creating the visual appeal of the Barongan performance in Gabusan Village. Costumes serve not only as performance attire but also as a means of establishing character identity. Differences in color, shape, material, and accessories help the audience recognize the characters performing on stage.

The main attraction of the Barongan figure is its large mask, shaped like a tiger's head or a mythological beast. The mask is usually adorned with hair or feathers on the head and cloth for the body. Its large, expressive shape, resembling an animal's face, creates a powerful yet frightening impression. Studies of the Blora Barongan show that the Barongan mask has evolved in form over time, while retaining its symbolic and performance functions (Pambudi, 2017). Color is one of the visual aspects quickly captured by the audience. The use of contrasting colors, such as red, black, white, yellow, and camouflage, creates a striking appearance when viewed from a distance. Black can reinforce a sense of majesty and mystery, while red can convey boldness, strength, and aggression. The camouflage motif on the Barongan's body reinforces associations with a tiger or wild animal.

Costumes also enhance the quality of movement. The fabric worn around the Barongan's body, which moves with the performer's jumps, turns, and stomps, creates an additional visual effect. When the performer moves quickly, the fabric appears to billow and follow the direction of the movement, enhancing the performance and enhancing the acrobatic effects. For other characters, such as Warok, Jathilan, and supporting characters, costumes are used to differentiate roles and personalities. Differences in color, clothing style, head accessories, fabric, sampur, and other body parts create visual variation in the performance (Nadal & Vartanian, 2022). Research on traditional performance costumes shows that costumes can function as character identity, visual appeal, and enhance the performer's expression and movement. In the Barongan performance, this function is clearly visible because the character can be recognized even before the character begins to move. Costumes provide initial information about who the character is performing and how their character should be understood.

Makeup also plays a role in creating visual appeal, especially for performers who don't wear masks. The makeup is made more pronounced so that the dancer's expressions are visible to the

audience. The lines of the eyebrows, eyes, mustache, beard, and facial color are emphasized to create the impression of a particular character. Heavy makeup is necessary because the performance takes place in an open space and is watched by the audience from a considerable distance. For characters who wear masks, the makeup's function is not always the center of attention because the face is covered by the mask. Instead, visual expression is conveyed through the shape of the eyes, mouth, fangs, color, and ornamentation on the mask. Meanwhile, characters who don't wear masks rely more on makeup to clarify character and expression. In the Barongan performance, masked and unmasked dancers employ different visual strategies.

Costumes and makeup strongly influence children's responses. They tend to remember characters more easily based on their color, mask shape, and makeup. They also show interest in naming characters based on their appearance, such as those with red faces, large masks, or camouflage costumes. This suggests that the visuals of the performance help children identify and remember characters in the Barongan.

c. The relationship between movement, costume and make-up

Acrobatic movements, costumes, and makeup form a unified whole. Powerful movements are enhanced by large, contrasting costumes. Attractive costumes become more vibrant when moved through jumps, turns, and changes of direction. This relationship can be explained through Slamet MD's theory of performance elements. Movement is inseparable from the dancer, costume, expression, rhythm, and performance space. In Barongan, the energetic quality of movement is supported by costumes and masks as character markers, while makeup enhances the expressions of characters who do not wear masks. In dance education, movement experience and appreciation need to be understood in accordance with the characteristics of children so that their aesthetic sensitivity can develop (Yeniningsih, 2018).

Acrobatic movements serve to bring the costumes to life. As the performers perform acrobatic movements, the hair, fabric, and ornaments on the masks move, creating a greater visual effect. At the same time, the costumes' colors help the audience follow the performers' movements. The contrast between the costume's color and the performance environment makes the characters more visible. Makeup reinforces the connection between movement and character. Fast, aggressive movements appear more convincing when complemented by bold makeup. Similarly, humorous or entertaining movements can be enhanced through exaggerated makeup. Therefore, the visual appeal of the Barongan comes not from a single element, but from the interplay between form, color, movement, expression, and character.

2. Children's Responses to the Visual Appeal of Barongan

The results of interviews with ten randomly selected children showed that each child gave a different response when watching the Barongan performance. The ten children were:Dika, Bian, Radit, Daffa, Nizar, Sella, Naura, Fida, Tika, and Eka. These differences in response show that the same visual appeal can provide different experiences for each child. (Klein, 2005; Klein & Schonmann, 2009) indicate that aesthetic judgments regarding entertainment are shaped by how children perceive the action and respond to the viewing experience.

Tabel 1. Child's Response

No	Name	Gender	Age	Child's Response
1	Dika	Man	9 Years	Very enthusiastic about watching the show and chose to be at the front so that they

No	Name	Gender	Age	Child's Response
				could see the Barongan clearly.
2	Bian	Man	12 years old	Interested in the Barongan movements and tried to imitate some of the movements seen during the performance.
3	Radit	Man	10 years	Prefer to pay attention to the acrobatic movements, especially when Barongan performs attractions, such as Barongan performing the Penekan movement against the stage pillars or sound system.
4	Daffa	Man	7 Years	Show curiosity by approaching the performance area and trying to see the Barongan from close range by climbing on the corner of the stage.
5	Nizar	Man	6 Years	Interested when watching the show, but felt afraid when the Barongan moved closer to the audience so Nizar chose to keep his distance.
6	Sella	Woman	8 Years	Pay attention to the shape of the Barongan mask and costume and follow the performance from start to finish.
7	Naura	Woman	6 Years	Showing curiosity about the Barongan, but Naura was very afraid to approach the performance area.
8	Fida	Woman	9 Years	Fida showed a very happy response when she saw the Barongan performance, so Fida always came early to get a place at the front.
9	Tika	Woman	11 years old	Show interest by recording parts of the show using your phone camera.
10	Eka	Woman	12 years old	Eka showed interest in the Barongan movements and tried to follow some of the movements he saw.

These differences in responses indicate that children's experiences with the Barongan vary. Some children immediately show enthusiasm, others are drawn to imitating the movements, others spend more time observing, and still others feel fearful when confronted directly with the Barongan. These findings align with Wulandari and Hartono (2018), who demonstrated that children provide aesthetic responses through attention, expression, and imitation of the movements they see in Barongan performances.

The children's responses became more visible when they saw the Barongan up close. According to statement one of the Barongan dancers who frequently performs, many children choose to sit in the front row during the performance. Children sometimes even try to climb onto the stage due to their enthusiasm and interest in seeing the Barongan live, and some even record videos of the performance while live streaming it on TikTok. This situation shows that children are not just passive

spectators. Some children try to approach the performance out of curiosity. However, when the Barongan moves closer, their response can change. Some children remain brave enough to approach, while others choose to retreat, hide, or keep their distance out of fear.

These differences can be understood through the visual characteristics of the Barongan, which features a large mask, powerful movements, and a dominant sound signature. For children unfamiliar with the performance, this combination of stimuli can be nerve-wracking. Conversely, for children who have seen the Barongan frequently, the experience can foster courage and curiosity. These findings demonstrate that direct experience plays a role in shaping children's responses. Children who initially only watch from afar can become more accustomed to it after seeing the performance several times. Repeated experiences allow children to understand that the Barongan character is part of the artistic performance, not something to be feared. The experience of watching a live performance can be an important part of how children construct meaning from a show (Reason, 2010). Research on children's responses to puppets in live theater also indicates that children can perceive performance figures as living characters through their movements and interactions on stage (Reason, 2008).

The Abdi Joyo Studio has become a vital part of the Barongan arts community in Gabusan Village. The studio was founded in 2020 and is led by Ali Muntaha. Studio activities are related to the practice process, performance preparation, and the sustainability of Barongan activities in the community. The existence of a studio provides the community with an opportunity to observe the artistic process more closely. Children in the surrounding area can watch the performers practice, prepare costumes, and perform. This experience introduces Barongan to children's daily lives, not only when the performance is on stage, but also through the processes that occur in the community. This is important because children are introduced to the arts through direct experience (Iryanto, 2022). Children can recognize the shape of the masks, costumes, and movements through frequent exposure. Children can even develop curiosity by asking questions or trying to imitate the movements they see. The role of the studio can be a space for this process of recognition and transmission to the next generation. Research by (Arisyanto et al., 2021) shows that Blora Barongan art has a pattern of inheritance of forms and values in the community. Meanwhile, research by (Guntaris & Lanjari, 2017) demonstrates the importance of conservation strategies through the sustainability of performers, development of performance forms, and community involvement in Barongan art.

Based on the overall research results, visual appeal is related to children's responses to the Barongan. The distinctive movements attract children to the performance, while the makeup, costumes, and mask shapes make the Barongan character easily recognizable. The penemukan movement is an example of how a movement can provide strong visual stimulation. Children can feel awe when seeing the performer in a high place. The molak-malik movement attracts attention through head movements, while the junjungan movement creates a dashing impression through the raised position of one leg. These movements can then be remembered and imitated by children, as seen in Bian and Eka's responses. At the same time, the visual appearance of the Barongan can also elicit a fear response. Children who see the large mask and strong expressions up close may choose to keep their distance. This response does not mean the child is not interested in the Barongan, but rather that fear and curiosity arise simultaneously even though the child does not dare to approach.

Thus, children's responses to Barongan are the result of visual experiences that occur during the performance. Children not only see the form of the performance, but also feel the atmosphere, observe the movements, pay attention to the costumes, and interact with the performance space. These experiences can then develop into curiosity, courage, imitation, and interest in traditional arts. These findings demonstrate that Barongan has the potential to be a medium for introducing culture to children through direct and enjoyable experiences. The presence of studios, artists, and performances

in the community are supporting factors so that children continue to have opportunities to learn about Barongan art (Damayanti & Suprijanto, 2023). Therefore, the visual appeal of Barongan is not only crucial to the success of the performance but can also be part of the process of introducing and sustaining traditional arts among the younger generation. In the context of dance education, movement experience is also linked to a child's emotional development, courage, social interaction, and imagination (Kusumastuti, 2009). Findings regarding children's appreciation of virtual Ludruk performances indicate that their responses can be examined through how they interpret the symbols and the presentation format of the performance (Ongko et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion of the research, it can be concluded that the visual appeal of the Barongan performance in Gabusan Village, Blora Regency, is formed through the integration of acrobatic movements, costumes, makeup, and mask shapes which overall build the character of the performance. Acrobatic movements become one of the most dominant elements through the use of strong power, fast tempo, variations in levels, utilization of space, and movements such as jumping, spinning, running, rolling. The character of the movements not only strengthens the identity of the Barongan character, but also creates tension, surprise, and an experience that is able to capture the attention of the audience.

Costumes and makeup serve as visual identities that define each character's character. Large masks, contrasting colors, striped motifs, and various ornaments create easily recognizable characteristics, while makeup enhances the expressions and characters of the unmasked performers. The interplay between movement, costume, and makeup demonstrates that the Barongan's visual appeal is not generated by a single element in isolation, but rather through the interaction of form, color, movement, expression, and character within a unified performance.

Children's responses to the visual appeal varied, ranging from enthusiasm and curiosity and attention, mimicking movements, to fear and surprise as the Barongan dancers approached the audience with rapid movements. These differences in response were influenced by the children's experience and familiarity with the performance. Children who were familiar with the Barongan through their community or the Abdi Joyo Studio tended to show greater courage and interest.

Thus, the visual appeal of the Barongan dance serves not only as an aesthetic element and a key factor in the success of the performance, but also plays a role in the process of introducing, learning, and transmitting culture to children. Direct and repeated experiences can foster curiosity, courage, the ability to recognize characters, and a tendency to imitate movements. The existence of studios, artists, and the community are important supporting factors in maintaining the sustainability of Barongan art among the younger generation.

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