

POLITICAL SHAMANS IN A FOUCAULDIAN PERSPECTIVE: HOW SHAMANS REMAIN PRESENT IN POLITICAL CONTESTATION

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ABSTRACT

This article does not seek to verify whether shamans can scientifically determine electoral victory. Instead, it examines how the discourse of political shamanism is produced, justified, and reproduced as a form of practical knowledge in village-level electoral contestation. Drawing on Michel Foucault's archaeology of knowledge and genealogy of power, this study analyzes the 2021 village head election in Pangro Village, Tayu District, Pati Regency, Central Java. The novelty of this research lies in its analysis of political shamans not merely as remnants of traditional belief, but as actors embedded in local power/knowledge relations that continue to shape electoral behavior under conditions of modern democratic competition. Pangro Village is important for national political discourse because it illustrates how mystical knowledge, ritual authority, and local cultural memory remain structurally relevant in Indonesian electoral politics, including in a period when professional consultants, surveys, and political marketing are increasingly normalized. Based on semi-structured interviews with candidates, shamans, religious figures, campaign teams, and residents, supported by document review and field observation, this study finds three discursive formations that sustain the presence of shamans in politics: belief in danyang as a source of legitimacy, ritual practice as a technology of electoral certainty, and the construction of shamans as subjects whose authority is difficult to falsify. The study contributes theoretically to contemporary political science by expanding the analysis of electoral rationality beyond institutional, economic, and strategic explanations toward the cultural-discursive production of political authority.

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INTRODUCTION

The struggle for political office in Indonesia is shaped not only by formal institutions, campaign organization, material resources, and political marketing, but also by cultural practices that operate outside the language of modern electoral management. In many local political arenas, candidates do not rely solely on campaign teams, surveys, party networks, or public programs. They also consult spiritual practitioners, visit sacred sites, perform ritual obligations, and seek signs that are believed to indicate political legitimacy. These practices should not be reduced to irrational behavior or dismissed as personal superstition. Sociologically, they reflect a specific cultural repertoire through which uncertainty, competition, legitimacy, and power are interpreted by political actors and communities.

Studies on Indonesian politics have shown that mystical practices are not isolated from modern political life. Trihartono (2012) describes the presence of shamans in Indonesian elections as part of a wider political phenomenon in which supernatural authority coexists with modern campaign techniques. Zulfikar (2017) notes that local political

contestation may involve not only money, kinship, and networks, but also the services of spiritual actors. Barokah (2023) further argues that magical elements have appeared in Indonesian politics across different historical periods, indicating that mysticism is not merely a marginal village practice but part of a broader cultural structure within Indonesian political life. Such studies suggest that the relationship between politics and mysticism deserves more systematic attention, especially in local elections where social intimacy, inherited belief, and informal authority remain influential.

This broader pattern also resonates with Anderson's (1990) argument that Indonesian political authority is historically embedded in cultural languages of power, not only in formal institutions. In contemporary electoral practice, professional political marketing has become increasingly important in shaping candidate image and voter segmentation (Firmanzah, 2007) yet the persistence of mystical consultation shows that modern campaign rationality does not fully displace older symbolic repertoires. Wardhani (2021) similarly demonstrates that mystical imagination has accompanied Indonesian leadership narratives beyond the village arena, which strengthens the relevance of the Pangro case for understanding national political culture.

The endurance of shamans in politics is closely related to the social production of knowledge. In many communities, shamans are understood as figures who possess special access to unseen forces, ancestral authority, and symbolic protection. This understanding is reproduced through everyday stories, ritual practices, family memory, and communal experiences. Although the claims of shamanic practice cannot be tested using the procedures of modern science, they continue to function as socially meaningful knowledge. Modern knowledge, such as survey-based political consulting, produces legitimacy through measurement, sampling, and strategic analysis. Shamanic knowledge, by contrast, produces legitimacy through signs, rituals, inherited authority, and the belief that political success is connected to invisible forces. The two forms of knowledge may differ epistemologically, but both can shape action, expectation, and decision-making in electoral contestation.

This article focuses on Pangro Village, Tayu District, Pati Regency, Central Java, where belief in shamans, ancestral sites, danyang, and ritual practices remains influential in social and political life. The 2021 village head election became a significant case because candidates and their supporters interpreted electoral victory not only through visible political competition, such as programs, support networks, and campaign organization, but also through invisible struggles involving spiritual protection, ritual requirements, and the transfer of *pulung*. In this context, shamans may function as informal political consultants who provide advice, protection, symbolic assurance, and ritual direction.

The local setting is analytically significant because Javanese political culture contains a long tradition of interpreting social order through harmony between visible and invisible worlds. Huda (2015) traces this orientation to the historical encounter between Javanese cosmology, ancestral belief, and Islamic cultural formation, while Simuh (2003) shows that Javanese religiosity often accommodates mystical and symbolic practices within everyday social life. Mulder (2005) further explains that Javanese mysticism functions as an ideology of order, self-control, and social meaning, making it relevant for interpreting why electoral competition may also be imagined as a spiritual struggle.

The central research question is: how is the discourse of political shamanism constructed and maintained in village head elections in Pangro Village? To answer this question, the article uses Michel Foucault's concepts of archaeology of knowledge and genealogy of power. Foucault's approach is relevant because it does not ask whether a belief is true or false in a positivist sense. Rather, it asks how certain statements, practices, and institutions become accepted as truth within a particular social order. Power, in this perspective, is not limited to domination by the state or formal institutions. Power circulates through knowledge, norms, bodies, rituals, and everyday practices. Therefore, the persistence of shamans in political contestation can be understood as an effect of power/knowledge relations that make mystical practices meaningful, reasonable, and actionable for candidates and communities.

The study contributes to political science in three ways. First, it expands the understanding of electoral rationality by showing that candidates may act through cultural and spiritual reasoning rather than through instrumental calculation alone. Second, it shows that village elections are not only institutional events but also arenas where local cosmology, cultural legitimacy, and political ambition intersect. Third, it demonstrates that modern political contestation in Indonesia does not automatically replace older forms of authority; instead, modern and mystical rationalities may coexist, negotiate, and reinforce each other within local political practice.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative case-study design informed by Michel Foucault's archaeology of knowledge and genealogy of power. Archaeology is used to identify the discursive formations that make shamanic practices intelligible in the context of electoral politics. Genealogy is used to trace how these formations are historically and culturally

reproduced through stories, rituals, inherited beliefs, and relations between candidates, shamans, and villagers. This approach does not evaluate shamanic practices as scientifically true or false. Instead, it examines how such practices become accepted, repeated, and positioned as meaningful strategies in political contestation.

The research was conducted in Pangro Village, Tayu District, Pati Regency, Central Java, with field attention focused on the 2021 village head election. Pangro Village was selected purposively for three reasons. First, the village still maintains strong Javanese cultural traditions, including respect for ancestral sites and local spiritual figures. Second, mystical practices are widely discussed by residents in relation to social, economic, and political affairs. Third, the village head election provided a concrete political moment in which the relationship between candidates and shamans could be observed and reconstructed through interviews and local narratives.

Informants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling. The main criteria were direct involvement in the 2021 village head election, knowledge of local spiritual practices, or social proximity to the events being studied. The informants consisted of village head candidates, shamans involved in political assistance, religious or spiritual figures, members of campaign teams, former village officials, and local residents who witnessed or interpreted the contestation. This composition was chosen to capture multiple positions within the discourse: political actors who used shamanic services, spiritual actors who provided them, and community members who reproduced or questioned the meanings attached to those practices.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field observation, and review of relevant literature and local narratives. Semi-structured interviews allowed informants to explain their experiences in their own terms while enabling the researcher to explore comparable themes across interviews, such as danyang, pulung, ritual obligations, defeat, victory, and the authority of shamans. Because the topic involves sensitive issues such as mysticism, personal belief, electoral ambition, and accusations of supernatural attack, the researcher maintained ethical caution by avoiding judgmental language, protecting informants' dignity, and treating their narratives as social data rather than as objects of ridicule or verification.

Triangulation was conducted in three ways. Source triangulation compared statements from candidates, shamans, religious figures, campaign teams, and residents. Method triangulation compared interview data with observation and secondary literature on Javanese mysticism, political culture, and shamanism. Theoretical triangulation related the field findings not only to Foucault's power/knowledge framework, but also to concepts of symbolic power, hegemony, conformity, and political culture. These procedures were used to strengthen the credibility of the analysis and to reduce dependence on a single informant or a single interpretation.

The use of archaeology and genealogy follows Gustomy's (2009) reading that archaeological work identifies the basic materials of discourse, while genealogy connects those materials to the historical relations that make them durable. In operational terms, the analysis also follows Kamahi's (2017) interpretation of Foucauldian power as a productive relation that forms subjects, norms, and practices, rather than merely a repressive force. This methodological position helped the researcher maintain analytical distance: informants' claims were recorded as part of a regime of meaning, while the article's explanation focused on how those claims acquired social authority.

Data analysis followed three stages. First, data reduction was conducted by selecting statements and field notes related to the construction of shamanic authority, ritual practice, and electoral legitimacy. Second, data display was carried out by organizing the findings into thematic categories, particularly danyang, mindah pulung, ritual discipline, and the unfalsifiability of shamanic authority. Third, verification was conducted by comparing patterns across informants and relating them to the theoretical framework. Researcher objectivity was maintained through reflexive note-taking, separation between informant claims and analytical interpretation, and consistent use of sociological terminology rather than evaluative or sensational language.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The findings show that the presence of shamans in the Pangro Village head election is sustained by a set of interrelated discourses. These discourses do not operate as isolated beliefs. They form a cultural system that gives candidates a language for interpreting uncertainty and gives shamans a position of authority in political competition. Three main formations are particularly important: danyang as a source of political legitimacy, ritual as a technology of certainty, and the shaman as a subject whose authority is difficult to falsify.

Danyang and the cultural production of legitimacy

In Pangro Village, belief in danyang occupies a central position in the relationship between ancestral authority and political leadership. Danyang is understood by many residents as the spirit or guardian associated with a particular

territory. Although this figure cannot be verified through modern empirical procedures, it has social reality because people act, speak, and make political decisions in relation to it. In Foucauldian terms, danyang is not merely a belief object; it is part of a discursive formation that connects territory, ancestry, legitimacy, and leadership.

For candidates, visiting sacred or ancestral sites is often interpreted as a way to request permission and blessing before entering political contestation. Residents generally do not regard such visits as unusual. On the contrary, they may be seen as culturally appropriate acts for someone who wants to become village leader. This pattern indicates that leadership in Pangro Village is not constructed only through administrative requirements or campaign promises. It is also constructed through symbolic recognition from ancestral authority. Such recognition becomes a form of cultural capital that candidates try to accumulate.

The field narratives show that candidates may interpret mystical experiences as signs of political calling. One candidate, Harto, explained that before deciding to run in the 2021 election, he experienced recurring disturbances that he later interpreted, after consulting a spiritual figure, as a sign of support from danyang. This narrative is important not because it proves the existence of danyang, but because it shows how political decision-making is shaped by cultural knowledge. The decision to run was not based only on electoral calculation; it was also grounded in the interpretation of signs.

The concept of pulung further strengthens this discourse. In Javanese political mythology, pulung is commonly understood as a sign of destiny, charisma, or spiritual legitimacy attached to a future leader. In Pangro Village, candidates and residents discuss “mindah pulung”, or the transfer of pulung, as part of the struggle for leadership. This belief gives political competition a symbolic dimension: candidates are not only competing for votes but also for invisible legitimacy. Geertz's analysis of Javanese religion helps explain why such symbols remain meaningful, while Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power clarifies how recognition by a community can turn cultural signs into political authority. The effectiveness of pulung does not depend on empirical proof; it depends on collective recognition.

This reading is consistent with Pranata's (2023) explanation that pulung in Javanese mythology functions as a sign of wahyu, destiny, and political legitimacy. Geertz (1960, 2013) also shows that Javanese religious life cannot be separated from symbolic classifications that connect persons, places, spirits, and social status. In the Pangro case, pulung becomes politically effective because it is collectively recognized; following Bourdieu (1991), symbolic signs gain power when the community accepts them as legitimate markers of authority.

This finding shows that political legitimacy in Pangro Village is produced through a combination of formal, social, and cosmological sources. Formal legitimacy comes from election rules. Social legitimacy comes from support networks and community reputation. Cosmological legitimacy comes from danyang, pulung, and ancestral blessing. Foucault's framework helps reveal how these sources are not separate but mutually reinforcing. The candidate who can present himself as supported by ancestral authority gains a symbolic position that may strengthen confidence among supporters and reduce uncertainty in the campaign.

Ritual as a technology of political certainty

The second discursive formation is ritual. For candidates, ritual practice is often described as an effort, obligation, or form of spiritual discipline. It is not necessarily opposed to rational electoral strategy. Rather, it works alongside campaign organization, networking, and mobilization. In this sense, ritual should be understood as a technology of certainty: a set of actions designed to manage anxiety, reduce uncertainty, and create a sense that victory is being actively pursued through all available channels.

Ritual in this context can be read as both cultural continuity and political technique. Pradana (2021) argues that political ritual often expresses spiritual effort and the desire to stabilize uncertainty, while Haryanto (2015) places ritual within the sociology of religion as a practice that binds belief, emotion, and collective meaning. Dwiayatina's (2020) study of shamans in the 2019 Purbasana village head election provides a useful comparison, showing that prohibitions, symbolic objects, and ritual escort also appeared in another Central Javanese pilkades context. These parallels indicate that Pangro is not an isolated case but part of a wider pattern of mystical political practice in local democracy.

Informants described several ritual practices associated with the election. Harto, for example, explained that he was asked to prepare offerings and collect specific ritual materials, including soil connected to former village authority, water from a former official's bathroom channel, and coconut manggar. These items were placed in a restricted room, and access was limited. He was also given behavioral instructions on election day, including avoiding a particular seat and arriving at the village hall before sunrise. Another candidate, Moh. Ansori, explained that he worked with a shaman from outside the province and was asked to perform ritual acts such as slaughtering a chicken. The meaning of every ritual

element was not always fully understood by the candidate, yet obedience to ritual instruction became part of the political effort.

These findings show that ritual works through discipline. Candidates are asked to regulate their bodies, movement, diet, time, and space. Foucault's concept of disciplinary power is useful here because power operates not only through prohibition but also through the formation of obedient conduct. The candidate becomes a subject who must follow rules in order to become eligible for the promised outcome. The ritual produces political subjectivity: a candidate who is serious, obedient, spiritually prepared, and aligned with unseen authority.

The candidate's obedience can also be explained through conformity. Hanurawan (2014) explains that conformity emerges when individuals adjust behavior to norms considered appropriate by a group or authority. In Pangro, ritual compliance becomes a political norm because candidates, shamans, and supporters share the assumption that failure to obey instructions may weaken the candidate's chance of victory.

At the same time, ritual can be analyzed through Gramsci's concept of hegemony. The authority of the shaman becomes effective because the candidate accepts the ritual order as meaningful. The relationship is not maintained by physical coercion. It is maintained by consent, belief, expectation, and the fear that failure to obey may lead to defeat. The shaman's instruction becomes powerful because the candidate recognizes it as necessary. In this way, mystical authority is socially produced and internally accepted.

The findings also indicate that mystical contestation is imagined as both defensive and offensive. Candidates and campaign teams spoke of supernatural disturbances, attacks, and protection. In this discourse, elections are not only competitions over public support but also struggles over invisible security. The shaman may therefore function as a protector, strategist, and interpreter of danger. This role resembles the work of a political consultant, but the tools are different: instead of surveys, issue mapping, or campaign messaging, the shaman uses ritual, signs, spiritual reading, and symbolic protection.

Ritual practice therefore cannot be understood merely as folklore. It is a political mechanism through which uncertainty is managed, authority is recognized, and candidates are disciplined. Its persistence shows that modern electoral politics does not automatically eliminate local cosmology. Instead, political actors may combine modern and mystical strategies when they perceive both as useful in the pursuit of power.

The unfalsifiable authority of the shaman

The third formation concerns the position of shamans as subjects whose authority is difficult to falsify. In the narratives collected, shamans are often constructed as actors who can provide protection, prediction, and guidance. When a candidate wins, the victory may be interpreted as evidence of the shaman's effectiveness. When a candidate loses, the defeat may be explained as the candidate's failure to obey instructions, insufficient seriousness, or disruption by other forces. This interpretive pattern protects shamanic authority from direct contradiction.

The case narrated by Sutinah illustrates this mechanism. She explained that a candidate under her guidance was required to wear janur as a belt for one week before election day. The candidate later removed it because of discomfort. According to Sutinah, this act disrupted the ritual process and became the reason for defeat. She also described a ritual sign in which a glass of water spilled, which she interpreted as an indication that the candidate would lose. In this explanation, defeat does not disprove the shaman's authority; it confirms the importance of obedience. A similar logic was expressed by another shaman, Nardi, who emphasized synchronization between the shaman's spiritual effort and the candidate's compliance.

This pattern reflects what Foucault calls the production of truth within a regime of knowledge. The truth of shamanic practice is not established through external verification. It is sustained by an internal logic that explains both success and failure. This logic is socially persuasive because it is consistent with prior beliefs about ritual discipline, unseen power, and the moral quality of candidates. The shaman becomes a figure whose statements are difficult to challenge because they are embedded in a broader cultural system.

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power also helps explain this process. Symbolic power works when those subject to it recognize its legitimacy. Candidates who seek shamanic assistance already enter a field in which the shaman's words are meaningful. The dowry or payment given to shamans is not merely an economic transaction; it is also recognition of symbolic authority. The candidate pays not only for service but for access to a form of knowledge believed to be unavailable through ordinary political channels.

The authority of shamans is therefore reproduced through a cycle of recognition. Candidates seek shamans because they believe shamans possess power. Shamans give instructions that candidates interpret as necessary. Community narratives circulate stories of success, failure, disturbance, and protection. These stories then reinforce the belief that

shamans remain relevant in political contestation. The cycle becomes a discourse that survives because it is continually performed.

Discussion: political rationality beyond institutional modernity

The findings from Pangro Village challenge a narrow understanding of political rationality. From an institutional perspective, village head elections are formal democratic mechanisms governed by rules, procedures, candidacy, voting, and administrative legitimacy. From a political marketing perspective, candidates compete through image, networks, resources, and strategy. However, the Pangro case shows that electoral rationality may also be cultural and spiritual. Candidates act rationally within the world of meaning that they inhabit. If danyang, pulung, and ritual are socially recognized as relevant to leadership, then seeking shamanic assistance becomes a culturally intelligible strategy.

This does not mean that mystical claims must be accepted as empirically true. Rather, it means that political analysis must take seriously the social effects of belief. Beliefs shape confidence, obedience, campaign decisions, relations between actors, and interpretations of victory and defeat. The power of shamanism lies not only in what shamans claim to do, but in how candidates and communities organize political meaning around those claims.

The Pangro case also reveals that modernity does not simply replace tradition. Professional consultants, surveys, and campaign techniques may become more common, but older forms of symbolic authority may remain active, especially in contexts where uncertainty is high and cultural memory is strong. In this sense, political shamanism is not a residue outside modern politics. It is part of a hybrid political field in which institutional procedures, cultural legitimacy, and spiritual authority interact.

This hybridity is visible in the coexistence of political consultants, survey logic, and mystical advisers. Trihartono (2012) identifies this coexistence as a distinctive feature of Indonesian electoral politics, while Barokah (2023) emphasizes that magical elements have been repeatedly attached to political authority across regimes. Wardhani (2021) further suggests that mystical narratives surrounding leadership continue to circulate because they offer symbolic explanations for charisma, protection, and political destiny.

Theoretically, the case supports Foucault's argument that power is productive. Power produces subjects, truth claims, disciplines, and practices. Shamans are not powerful only because they dominate candidates; they are powerful because a discourse exists that makes their authority meaningful. Candidates are not passive victims; they participate in reproducing the discourse by seeking guidance, obeying rituals, and narrating outcomes through the language of mystical legitimacy. Power therefore circulates between shamans, candidates, supporters, and communities.

At the same time, the findings can be read through Gramsci and Bourdieu to enrich the Foucauldian analysis. Gramsci helps explain how consent sustains the authority of shamans. Bourdieu helps explain how symbolic capital becomes politically valuable when recognized by the community. Together, these perspectives show that political shamanism is not simply a private belief but a social practice that organizes legitimacy, obedience, and authority in local democracy.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the presence of shamans in Pangro Village's political contestation is sustained by a durable formation of local knowledge. The 2021 village head election shows that candidates do not interpret victory only through formal rules, campaign strategy, or voter support. They also interpret it through danyang, pulung, ritual discipline, and shamanic authority. These elements form a discourse of victory through shamanic paths that remains meaningful even in a period of modern electoral management.

Using Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, the study identifies three central formations: danyang as a source of cultural legitimacy, ritual as a technology of political certainty, and the shaman as an authority whose truth claims are difficult to falsify. Using genealogy, the study shows that these formations are rooted in Javanese cultural memory, ancestral authority, and repeated political practice. The relationship between shamans and candidates is therefore not an accidental or isolated phenomenon. It is a productive power relation in which both parties participate: candidates seek certainty and legitimacy, while shamans reproduce their symbolic authority through ritual guidance and interpretation.

The implication for Indonesian political studies is that electoral behavior cannot be explained only through institutions, money politics, patronage, or campaign professionalism. Local cultural knowledge also shapes political action. In village democracy, legitimacy may be produced through a combination of administrative procedure, social recognition, and cosmological belief. This finding encourages political science to develop a broader understanding of rationality, one that recognizes how actors make decisions within culturally specific regimes of truth.

Future research can expand this study in several directions. Comparative studies across villages or regions could examine whether similar formations appear in other cultural settings. Further research may also investigate how voters, women, youth, religious leaders, and election organizers interpret the presence of shamans in political contestation. Quantitative or mixed-method studies could explore whether belief in mystical legitimacy influences voter confidence, candidate image, or campaign mobilization. Finally, future studies may examine how digital media transforms the circulation of mystical political narratives in contemporary Indonesian elections. In addition, future research should examine how references to national political mysticism, Javanese symbolic power, and local ritual authority are translated into everyday electoral behavior, so that the relationship between bibliography, field evidence, and theory becomes more systematically integrated.

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