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Contesting the Meaning of Sound Horeg Culture in the Community of Jember Regency: A Perspective of Social Change and Collective Identity Construction

Vanis Maulana[1], Nur Dina Kamilia[2], Wafiq Ilma Maulidia[3], Sukidin[4], Amri Dhimas Maulana[5]

[1,2,3,4,5]Department of Social Studies Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Jember, Jember 68121, Indonesia.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the contestation of the cultural meaning *of "sound horeg"* in the community of Jember Regency through the perspectives of social change and collective identity construction. Using Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism and Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration as theoretical frameworks, this study aims to understand how *the* meaning *of "sound horeg"* is negotiated over time and how this cultural practice shapes and reproduces the community's collective identity. The method used is descriptive qualitative research, with data collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis. The results indicate that the meaning *of "sound horeg"* has shifted from merely serving as a sound amplification device in traditional ceremonies to becoming a symbol of identity expression, a medium for emotional release, an arena for social status competition, and simultaneously an object of moral controversy and regulation. From a social change perspective, *"sound horeg"* reflects the structure-agency duality, in which community practices both reproduce and transform the existing social order. The contestation of meaning that occurs reflects the dynamics of power in defining "legitimate" culture in Jember's public sphere.

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INTRODUCTION

Popular culture in Indonesia has always been a dynamic arena of meaning negotiation marked by contestation. Over the past decade, the East Java region particularly Jember Regency has witnessed the emergence of a highly conspicuous cultural phenomenon that has sparked widespread public debate: *sound horeg*. This term refers to the practice of using high-powered sound systems that produce extreme bass beats, causing physical vibrations in the body and surrounding structures. These audio systems are typically mounted on trucks, pickup trucks, or trailers and played during village carnivals, wedding and circumcision celebrations, Independence Day festivities, cultural parades, and even political campaigns (Fikri et al., 2025; Nurdiyanto et al., 2025; Silaturrohmah et al., 2025).

The *sound horeg* phenomenon cannot be reduced solely to an issue of noise or musical taste. It has evolved into a space for the contestation of meaning involving various social actors with differing interests and interpretations. Youth communities and sound system service providers view this practice as an expression of local creativity, a means of emotional release amid life's pressures, and a tool for building solidarity and social prestige. Conversely, some residents, religious leaders, and government officials view it as noise pollution exceeding safe thresholds, a threat to public order, and even a practice that could potentially encourage deviant behavior. The controversy reached a peak when the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) of East Java Province issued a fatwa declaring the excessive use of sound systems haram in 2025 (Silaturrohmah et al., 2025; Fikri et al., 2025).

This contestation of meaning is worth examining through the lens of social change and the construction of collective identity. The fundamental questions that arise are: How is the meaning of *sound horeg* shaped, negotiated, and reproduced through everyday social interactions in Jember Regency? How does this cultural practice reflect the duality between social structures that constrain individual actions and the agency of communities striving to transform the existing order? How does *sound horeg* serve as a medium for the construction of collective identity amid the currents of modernization and globalization that are reaching rural areas?

This study employs Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism framework, which emphasizes that meaning emerges from social interaction and is continually negotiated by the actors involved, as well as Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration, which explains the duality of structure and agency in the reproduction and transformation of social order. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study aims to describe the shifts in the cultural meaning of *sound horeg* over time and analyze them from the perspectives of social change and the construction of collective identity in Jember Regency. The findings are expected to enrich the study of local cultural sociology and contribute to the formulation of policies for the management of popular culture that are more inclusive and contextual.

Academic inquiry into sound horeg has begun to emerge in recent years, paralleling the growing popularity of and the controversies surrounding this phenomenon. Fikri et al. (2025) examine *sound horeg* as a discourse within popular culture, analyzing the responses of religious authorities in East Java through the lens of cultural criticism. Their findings reveal a symbolic conflict between the expressive values of the youth rooted in technology, freedom, and communal identity and the efforts of moral authorities to exert control over bodies, sound, and public space. Nurdiyanto et al., through ethnographic research in rural Java, position the *sound horeg* festival as both an instrument and an arena of power struggle. They argue that these boisterous celebrations transcend the realm of mere entertainment; they serve as a symbolic respite for small-scale farmers to step out of their subordinate positions within the rural power structure. Through their roles as festival committee members, operators, or performers, members of the lower classes rediscover their ability to organize and set the rules within the spaces they control.

Silaturrohmah et al. employ Durkheim's functionalist lens to analyze the *sound horeg* in rural East Java. They find that this practice strengthens mechanical solidarity through shared celebratory experiences and expressions of local identity, yet simultaneously generates social tension through noise disturbances, inter-resident conflicts, and moral debates. Auliana et al. examined *sound horeg* as a representation of adolescents' social identity in Lumajang Regency through a phenomenological approach, finding that this practice functions as a symbolic means of self-expression and shapes collective identity through the values of solidarity and social boundaries. These studies provide an important foundation but remain limited in integrating the perspectives of symbolic interactionism and structuration theory to explain the process of negotiating meaning over time and its relationship to social change and the construction of collective identity in a more comprehensive manner. This study aims to fill that gap.

Herbert Blumer formulated symbolic interactionism as a sociological perspective that emphasizes that social reality is constructed through meaningful interactions between individuals. Blumer articulated three basic premises that remain the foundation of this approach to this day. First, people act toward something based on the meaning they ascribe to that thing. "Something" here includes physical objects, other people, institutions, ideals, and even one's own body. Second, these meanings are not inherently attached to the object but emerge from the social interactions individuals engage in with one another. Third, these meanings are modified and processed through

the interpretive processes individuals undertake when facing specific situations (Blumer, 1969; da Silva, 2023).

In the context of cultural identity formation, symbolic interactionism explains that identity is not fixed or a given, but is continuously shaped and negotiated through interactions involving shared symbols. Individuals negotiate a sense of belonging within their cultural communities and express cultural affinity through language, rituals, traditions, and other cultural artifacts. Cultural identity is dynamic and fluid because it is constantly renegotiated as the social environment changes and interactions unfold (Vishnevsky & Chernova, 2021; Bourne & Elliott, 2025). Applying this theory to the *sound horeg* phenomenon allows for an analysis of how the meanings of "thundering sound," "carnival," "social status," "disruption," "creativity," and "freedom" are constructed through interactions among actors in Jember Regency. Meaning is not inherent in the sound system equipment or the bass beats themselves, but rather emerges from a process of collective interpretation that continually evolves over time, depending on the social context and the positions of the actors involved.

Anthony Giddens, through his theory of structuration, emphasizes the concept of the duality of structure. Social structure in the form of rules and resources not only constrains individual actions but also enables them. At the same time, individual practices reproduce and have the potential to transform these structures. Structures do not exist "outside" the individual as an external, coercive force, but rather "within" recurring social practices (Giddens, 1984; Steiner et al., 2022; Anam, 2025). In *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Giddens emphasizes that in the era of late modernity, self-identity becomes a reflexive project. Individuals actively reflect on and revise the biographical narratives of who they are. Collective identity, too, is no longer a given or automatically inherited; rather, it is constructed through recurring social practices and collective reflection on the group's position within the broader social structure (Ibnu, 2024). Structuration theory is relevant for understanding *sound horeg* as a practice that is simultaneously constrained by structures (religious norms, government regulations, traditional status hierarchies, middle-class aesthetic standards) and serves as a medium of agency for rural communities particularly youth and the working class to assert their presence, reclaim public space, and build a new collective identity amid rapid social change. The practice of *sound horeg* reproduces a status-competition structure based on sound volume, while simultaneously having the potential to transform the social hierarchy that has long placed them in subordinate positions.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research aims to understand the meanings constructed by the research subjects in a deep and contextual manner, rather than testing hypotheses quantitatively or measuring the frequency of phenomena. The descriptive method is used to systematically, factually, and accurately depict the shifts in the cultural meaning of *sound horeg* over time, as well as the accompanying dynamics of social change and the construction of collective identity. The research location is Jember Regency, East Java, with a focus on villages and urban areas that actively organize carnivals, parades, and community events using *sound horeg*. The selection of the location was based on the intensity of the phenomenon in this region as well as the availability of secondary data from local media and previous academic studies. Research subjects included sound system service providers, audio operators, village carnival committees, community leaders, religious leaders, security personnel, and residents affected both positively and negatively.

Data collection techniques involved three main methods. First, participatory observation of sound horeg carnivals and parades, including observations of interactions among participants, spectators, and those who felt disturbed. Second, in-depth interviews with key informants selected through purposive sampling to gain a rich understanding of the meanings they ascribe to these practices. Third, a documentary study of local and national media reports, MUI fatwas, local regulations, digital content on social media, and relevant academic literature. Data analysis was conducted interactively following the model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which involves three concurrent processes: data reduction (selection, focusing, and simplification of raw data), data presentation (organizing information into narratives and thematic matrices), and drawing conclusions/verification. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation (comparing data from different informants) and methodological triangulation (comparing results from observations, interviews, and documentation), as well as member checking by confirming findings with key informants.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Cultural Significance of the *Sound Horeg* Over Time

In the early 2000s, the use of sound systems at weddings, circumcision ceremonies, sedekah bumi (earth charity) events, and religious gatherings in the villages of East Java was still functional and relatively simple. Sound systems were used to extend the range of sound so that residents scattered throughout the village could enjoy musical entertainment, participate in religious study sessions, or listen to the takbiran. The audio equipment used was generally medium-sized, mounted on the back of a pickup truck or in a home's yard, and the volume remained within limits tolerable to most nearby residents.

The meaning attached to these devices in the early phase was that of a tool for communal communication and entertainment. There was no significant volume competition, no "sound battles," and no social prestige specifically attached to the "power" of the sound system. Social interactions were more cooperative in nature: residents helped one another in organizing community events, and the sound system served as one of the elements fostering a sense of togetherness. Within the framework of Blumer's symbolic interactionism, during this phase the meaning of the "sound system" remained relatively stable and was mutually agreed upon as a device supporting events. The process of interpreting the symbol of "loud sound" had not yet resulted in sharp contestation. The collective identity constructed through this practice was that of a village community celebrating events together, with the values of mutual aid and solidarity as its primary foundations.

A significant turning point occurred around 2014 in the Malang region of East Java. At that time, village parades began using trucks equipped with high-powered audio systems that produced extreme bass thuds. From Malang, this practice spread to Blitar, Tulungagung, Jember, Banyuwangi, and other parts of East Java, eventually reaching parts of Central Java. The term *horeg* which in Javanese means "to vibrate" or "to move" began to be associated with this practice, describing the physical effect of the vibrations produced by the extreme bass, which could be felt in the chest and in surrounding buildings (Fikri et al., 2025; Silaturrohmah et al., 2025). During this phase of transformation, the meaning of *sound horeg* began to undergo a fundamental shift. It was no longer merely a tool to support celebrations but became a symbol of social status and a competitive arena. Those who owned or could afford to rent the largest, loudest, and most "sophisticated" sound systems were considered to have higher prestige. The practice of *sound battles*

emerged competitions between groups or villages to determine whose sound was the most thunderous and whose technical execution was the best. Social interaction shifted from cooperative to competitive, and the meaning of "loud sound" was renegotiated as an indicator of success, prowess, and social standing.

From Giddens' perspective, this phase demonstrates how community agents sound system service providers, audio operators, and village youth utilize audio technology resources to both reproduce and transform social status structures at the local level. Informal rules regarding "who is the greatest" begin to take shape through repeated practice. The economic resources invested in audio equipment ranging from hundreds of millions to billions of rupiah become symbolic capital that is converted into prestige within the rural social arena. At the same time, restrictive structures also began to take effect. Residents' complaints about noise began to surface, though not as intensely as after 2020. Local authorities began to consider the need for regulation, although formal regulations remained minimal. The duality of Giddens' structure-agency model is clearly evident: the practice of *sound horeg* reproduces a new structure of status competition, while simultaneously coming into conflict with regulatory structures and norms of acoustic propriety that seek to limit it.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, *sound horeg* experienced a massive surge in popularity. A longing for crowds and collective entertainment after a period of isolation prompted both rural and urban communities to organize carnivals on an increasingly large scale. In Jember Regency, *sound horeg* has become an integral part of celebrations for August 17, village anniversaries, community events, send-off processions for Umrah pilgrims, and even political campaigns. The number of carnival participants bringing "sound horeg" setups has increased significantly, and the rental cost for a single sound system package can reach tens of millions of rupiah (Auliana et al., 2025; Nurdiyanto et al., 2025).

At this stage, the meaning of *sound horeg* has become increasingly fragmented and is openly contested. For both practitioners and enthusiasts, this practice is interpreted through multiple lenses simultaneously. First, it serves as a space for emotional release amid economic pressures, work-related stress, and the challenges of daily life. Panakajaya Hidayatullah, an ethnomusicologist at the University of Jember, notes that for some members of the community, *sound horeg* serves as a moment to express frustration and the various pressures they feel. Second, it functions as a medium for expressing the identity of the working class and rural youth, affirming their presence in the public sphere. Third, it represents a form of local creativity that blends modern technology (remixes, lighting, LEDs) with the spirit of traditional folk festivals. Fourth, it serves as a catalyst for the local economy through sound system rental services, supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and the circulation of money around the carnival site.

Conversely, for some residents, religious leaders, and officials, *sound horeg* is perceived as noise pollution that exceeds safe thresholds. A study by University of Jember students recorded noise levels reaching 95-125 decibels, far above the residential environmental threshold of 55 dB and the WHO-recommended safe noise exposure limit of 85 dB. These conditions have led to complaints of sleep disturbances, building vibrations, and a decline in quality of life. East Java MUI Fatwa No. 1 of 2025, which declares the excessive use of sound systems to be haram, reinforces this contestation, citing the elements of dlarar (harmful) and tabdzir (wasteful) (Silaturrohmah et al., 2025; Fikri et al., 2025). Within the framework of symbolic interactionism, the post-pandemic phase reveals a very high intensity of meaning negotiation. The symbol of "thunderous sound" no

longer holds a single, universally agreed-upon meaning. It has become polysemic possessing multiple, competing meanings depending on the social position, experiences, and interests of the actors interpreting it. The process of interpretation takes place not only at carnival venues but also on social media, in religious forums, within local government policy-making spaces, and in residents' everyday conversations.

Sound Horeg from the Perspective of Social Change

The social change accompanying the *sound horeg* phenomenon can be productively analyzed through Giddens's structure-agency duality. The existing social structures in Jember Regency including norms of vocal decorum inherited from tradition, traditional status hierarchies based on land and lineage, strong religious authority, urban middle-class aesthetic standards, and state regulations on public order constrain the scope of *sound horeg*. These structures provide the rules and resources that shape what actors can and cannot do. At the same time, however, the repeated practices of the community of sound system operators reproduce new structures in the form of norms of volume competition, a hierarchy of prestige based on sound prowess, networks of solidarity among sound system communities, and the collective identities of *anak horeg* or sound teams. These new structures do not entirely replace the old ones but coexist and negotiate their positions with one another. The result is a hybrid social order: on one hand, it remains bound by village and religious norms; on the other, it has adopted the logic of competition, technology-based prestige, and stronger forms of individual expression.

The agency of the village community particularly the youth and the working class is evident in their ability to leverage available resources increasingly affordable audio technology, social media as a space for promotion and documentation, and the public streets as performance venues to assert their presence. As noted by Nurdiyanto et al. (2025), *sound horeg* serves as a "symbolic pause" for small farmers and the working class to break free from their subordinate positions within the rural power structure. Through their roles as committee members, operators, DJs, or active audience members, they rediscover the ability to organize, govern, and set the rules in the spaces they control even if only temporarily.

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, social change occurs through a continuous process of reinterpreting symbols. Sounds that were once neutrally interpreted as loudspeakers have now become symbols of power, freedom, solidarity, and creativity, as well as threats, pollution, and incivility. These meanings are not fixed; they are constantly negotiated in every interaction at carnival venues, in social media comment sections, at religious study forums, at village meetings, and in local government policy-making spaces. Social change, from this perspective, is not the result of impersonal structural forces, but rather the cumulative outcome of millions of moments of interpretation and negotiation of meaning carried out by everyday actors. Social change related to *sound horeg* also reflects a shift in how communities enjoy music and entertainment. Whereas collective entertainment was previously more tied to traditional arts (gamelan, jaranan, reog) or dangdut music performed on fixed stages, today the "mobile stage" format featuring sound system trucks, digital lighting, and extreme remixes has become the primary choice. This transformation demonstrates the adaptation of local culture to modern technology, while also reflecting changes in tastes and the structure of entertainment opportunities at the grassroots level.

The Construction of Collective Identity through *Sound Horeg*

The collective identity formed through *sound horeg* is multifaceted, contextual, and constantly negotiated. For the community of practitioners in Jember Regency, participation in *sound horeg* carnivals and parades serves as a means of affirming multiple layers of identity simultaneously. First, an identity as creative villagers not as backward or passive villagers, but as those capable of adopting and modifying modern technology for the purposes of local expression. Second, an identity as bold and visible youth who dare to present themselves in public spaces, dare to compete, and dare to assert their presence amid the tide of modernization. Third, an identity as "part of a cohesive community" bound by the value of mutual aid in funding sound system rentals, pride in their respective teams, and social boundaries that distinguish "insiders" (members of the sound system community) from outsiders (Auliana et al., 2025).

Sound system communities form a network of solidarity that transcends village boundaries. They get to know one another through sound battles, share technical information about audio equipment, and support one another in organizing carnivals. This collective identity is reinforced through shared symbols: team names, lighting designs, the types of remixes played, and even the clothing styles of operators and DJs. Social media serves as a crucial space for the reproduction of this identity, where carnival videos are uploaded, shared, and commented on, thereby strengthening a sense of belonging and collective pride.

At the same time, the collective identity constructed through *"sound horeg*" is contested by other discourses and identities. Religious authorities promote an identity of a "civilized and devout community" that rejects excessive noise and behavior deemed deviant from religious norms. Local governments and law enforcement agencies construct the identity of an "orderly and comfortable city/regency" that requires regulations on volume, operating hours, and activity zones. Residents who feel disturbed construct the identity of "victims of noise pollution" who demand protection of their right to a healthy and comfortable environment. Each of these identity claims competes for legitimacy in the public sphere and the policy arena. This contestation of identities aligns with the findings of da Silva (2023) and Bourne & Elliott (2025) that cultural identities are dynamic and are continually negotiated through symbolic interactions. In the case of Jember Regency, "sound horeg" serves as an arena where various identity claims based on social class, generation, religious affiliation, and citizenship status converge and compete for recognition. There is no single, stable collective identity; rather, there is an ongoing process of negotiation, with outcomes that are always provisional and open to revision.

Implications for Understanding Social Change and Local Cultural Policy

The *sound horeg* phenomenon in Jember Regency demonstrates that social change at the local level does not always proceed in a linear or top-down manner from the center to the periphery. It emerges from the everyday practices of communities that reflexively utilize available resources (technology, social networks, public spaces, economic capital) to assert their existence and negotiate their positions within broader social structures. Social change, in this context, is the result of the work of meaning continuously carried out by local actors. The contestation of meaning that occurs also serves as a reminder that popular culture is never neutral. It is always a battleground for competing definitions of what is legitimate, civilized, creative, disturbing, or forbidden. In this context, the roles of the state, religious authorities, and civil society become crucial. Managing the sound horeg phenomenon moving forward requires an approach that balances the right to cultural expression with the protection of public comfort and health. A purely repressive approach risks

overlooking the meaning and social functions inherent in this practice for the communities that engage in it. Conversely, a purely permissive approach risks overlooking the negative impacts on affected residents.

Inclusive dialogue among stakeholders involving the sound system community, community leaders, religious leaders, law enforcement officials, and affected residents is a prerequisite for a more equitable and contextually appropriate framework for local culture. Regulations governing maximum volume levels, activity zones, and operating hours, if formulated through a participatory process, can serve as a middle ground that accommodates the interests of various parties. At the same time, it is also necessary to strengthen the community's capacity to manage their practices more responsibly, so that sound horeg can continue to function as a medium for expression and solidarity without undermining broader social cohesion.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the *sound horeg* culture in Jember Regency is a dynamic and multi-layered arena of contested meanings. Over time, the meaning of this practice has undergone significant shifts: from a functional element of celebratory events in the early 2000s, to a status symbol and arena of competition during the 2014-2019 period, and finally to an object of fragmented meanings and open contestation in the post-pandemic phase. These shifts did not occur automatically but rather through processes of interpretation and negotiation of meaning carried out by social actors in their daily interactions. Through the lens of Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism, it becomes evident that the meaning of *sound horeg* is not inherent to the object or practice itself, but is constructed and negotiated through social interactions among actors. The symbol of the "thunderous sound" becomes polysemic possessing multiple, competing meanings depending on the position and interests of the actors interpreting it. Through Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration, the *sound horeg* practice reflects the structure-agency duality: it is constrained by religious norms, government regulations, and existing status hierarchies, yet simultaneously serves as a medium of agency for the village community to reproduce and transform the social order and build a new collective identity. The construction of collective identity through *sound horeg* is multifaceted and contextual. For the community of practitioners, this practice serves as a means of affirming their identity as creative villagers, vibrant youth, and part of a cohesive community. For religious and government authorities, the same practice poses a threat to the identity of a civilized and orderly society. This contestation of identity reflects the dynamics of power in defining "legitimate" culture in the public sphere of Jember Regency.

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