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by Turnitin Official

Submission date: 17-Sep-2026 03:34PM (UTC+0700)

Submission ID: 3034363131

File name: dwikahadinata_LO_Sawitri_publish_1_.docx (175.45K)

Word count: 4841

Character count: 31244

Cultural Semiotics Analysis of Traditional Bantengan Art: Exploring Function, Symbolic Meaning, Moral Significance, and Existence

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Published: 30/04/2024

How to cite (in APA style):

Khasanah, S. U., Bagea, I., Fatmasari, R. K., & Renawati, P. W. (2024). Cultural Semiotics Analysis of Traditional Bantengan Art: Exploring Function, Symbolic Meaning, Moral Significance, and Existence. *Retorika: Jurnal Ilmu Bahasa*, 10(1), 101-112. DOI: <http://10.55637/jr.10.1.9336.101-112>

Abstract- This study examines the traditional Indonesian Bantengan art through the perspective of cultural semiotics, focusing on its functions, symbolic depth, moral values, and contemporary survival. Utilizing a qualitative methodology centered on participatory observation, the research involves various community stakeholders in Mojokerto and Malang, including traditional elders, artists, religious figures, and local residents. By employing rigorous observation, interviews, and field documentation, the study investigates how Bantengan has adapted to the socio-political and economic shifts driven by globalization. The results underscore Bantengan's complex role as a medium that cultivates resilience, solidarity, and courage, historically rooted in the resistance against colonial rule. Despite modernization, Bantengan remains a vital and enduring practice in Malang and Mojokerto, highlighting its unbroken cultural continuity. Ultimately, this research offers a profound understanding of traditional arts, shedding light on their historical significance and dynamic presence within modern Indonesian culture.

Keywords: Cultural Semiotics Analysis, Existence and Moral Significance, Function and Symbolic Meaning

I. INTRODUCTION

Bantengan is a traditional art form that not only preserves a wealth of symbolism and heritage but also mirrors the intricate dynamics of its society. By blending elements like jaranan, pencak silat, and distinct dance choreography accompanied by vibrant musical instruments, Bantengan delivers an engaging audiovisual experience that captivates audiences (Jonathan et al., 2012; Faris et al., 2017; Anam et al., 2019; NEGORO & Rizal A, 2020; Afifah & Irawan, 2021; Asri et al., 2023). Beyond being a

fundamental piece of East Javanese heritage, Bantengan serves as a reservoir of moral teachings and symbolic meaning, playing a vital role in sustaining traditional values and fortifying cultural identity. Consequently, as a unique performance art native to regions like Malang and Mojokerto, Bantengan provides a compelling subject for cultural semiotic analysis.

In Malang and Mojokerto, Bantengan performances integrate local storytelling with music and dance (Qonitati; Desprianso, 2013; Umbar, 2015; Fadeli et al., 2023). Performers wear

traditional masks and costumes, executing choreographies to the rhythm of classical instruments such as the demung, saron, and kendang. These performances are central to various community events, including cultural festivals, religious rituals, and traditional celebrations (Radhia, 2019). Bantengan functions as more than mere entertainment; it is an active vehicle for transmitting moral lessons, promoting local heritage, and reinforcing community identity.

Because Bantengan performances are deeply embedded with multifaceted functions, moral messages, and symbolic meanings, cultural semiotics provides an ideal framework to decode these complexities. Furthermore, it is essential to explore how this traditional art sustains its existence in the current era of globalization. Passed down through generations in East Java, Bantengan is rich in cultural symbols. The prominent symbol of the bull (banteng) represents power, courage, and fortitude, often portrayed through majestic postures that echo masculine bravery. The dancers' movements further encode symbols related to courage and daily life. Beyond the bull, Bantengan incorporates various elements representing East Javanese societal values, such as the specific meanings attached to costume colors, musical rhythms, and choreographic gestures that communicate distinct messages to the audience.

Beneath its striking visual presentation, Bantengan conveys profound moral themes. Narratives of sacrifice, solidarity, and bravery are intricately woven into the dances and storylines, highlighting the core values revered by the East Javanese people. A cultural semiotic analysis uncovers these hidden symbols and illuminates the moral foundation of the community. Bantengan acts as a vessel for moral education, cultural articulation, and identity reinforcement. Analyzing this art form reveals the complex interactions between costumes, music, gestures, and symbols. From the commanding presence of the bull to the meticulous dance routines, Bantengan creates a multi-layered symbolic environment. Grasping the moral and functional significance of Bantengan allows society to deeply appreciate and preserve this enduring ancestral legacy.

By investigating Bantengan's persistence amid globalization and technological advancement, this study seeks to understand how the art form adapts to contemporary

changes. Cultural semiotics not only translates symbolic codes but also provides profound insights into the morality and cultural intricacies embedded within the performance. This approach reveals how Bantengan mirrors the social norms, beliefs, and value systems of East Java. Every visual element, costume, and movement carries deep significance that can be systematically analyzed. Additionally, this semiotic perspective helps trace the historical evolution and adaptation of the art form over time.

There is a noticeable void in research applying cultural semiotics to traditional Bantengan art, resulting in gaps regarding its existence, moral significance, symbolic meanings, and social functions. This lack of focused study has limited the understanding of Bantengan's profound cultural impact. While some literature touches on related subjects, it often misses the specific complexities of Bantengan. For example, Andriansyah (2021) identified three core values of local wisdom—human-environment relations, interpersonal dynamics, and human-divine connections. Similarly, Sinaga (2022) explored four crucial elements, including the Biblical interpretation of Bantengan and the role of Christian catechesis in relation to occultism. Baiti Wistyoningsih (2020) highlighted the diverse myths surrounding Bantengan, detailing their personal, social, and religious depths. Despite its traditional role in economic support and entertainment, Bantengan showcases the adaptability and resilience of local communities, serving as a rich resource for cultural education.

Other studies have utilized similar analytical frameworks. Lasino et al. (2023) and Saud et al. (2023) applied cultural semiotics and hermeneutics to analyze cultural meanings and song lyrics. Research on intercultural communication and cultural contexts by Hairus Salikin et al. (2021), Muta'allim et al. (2021), Irsyadi et al. (2022), and Yudistira (2023) has significantly contributed to understanding cultural values during globalization. Moreover, studies by Muta'allim et al. (2020, 2021, 2022), Yudistira et al. (2022), and Haryono et al. (2023) have explored the role of language in fostering tolerance, education, and social harmony. Further research by Akhmad Sofyan et al. (2022), Merizawati et al. (2023), Irsyadi (2023), Mahardhani et al. (2023), Julhadi et al. (2023), Dumiyati et al. (2023), Suryanti et al. (2023), and Karuru et al. (2023) has provided deep insights into how language facilitates humane and effective communication across various domains, including politics, film, Islamic boarding schools, and diverse cultural settings.

Despite this extensive body of literature, specific research examining the existence, morality, symbolic meanings, and functions of Bantengan art remains elusive. Although Bantengan has been performed for centuries, a comprehensive understanding of its cultural dimensions is still lacking, and many communities remain unaware of its deep symbolic and moral significance in the modern globalized era. Consequently, this study is highly motivated to investigate the existence, moral significance, symbolic meanings, and functions of Bantengan art in the Malang and Mojokerto Regencies. The primary research question addresses what these functions, symbols, and moral values are, and how the art form sustains itself today. To answer this, a cultural semiotics approach is essential. This method allows for a rigorous analysis of Bantengan's components—narratives, music, costumes, and movements—to reveal their underlying moral and symbolic significance. Furthermore, it aids in understanding Bantengan's resilience and adaptation in the face of globalization. This study is anticipated to significantly advance the comprehension of Bantengan and its embedded moral and cultural values, while also raising public awareness about the necessity of safeguarding traditional arts and local heritage against globalizing forces.

Cultural semiotics is an academic field that investigates how signs and symbols transmit meaning within a culture, examining the use and comprehension of actions, gestures, images, and language in specific contexts. It explains how these elements encapsulate societal norms, values, and concepts, and how their interpretation drives cultural understanding and communication. Mastering cultural semiotics allows researchers to untangle the fluid and complex nature of human culture and its function in forging collective identity and understanding. This study utilizes C.S. Peirce's Semiotics theory as its foundational framework. Known for its extensive applicability, Peirce's theory focuses on the triadic relationship between the interpretant, object, and representamen, while also factoring in the subjective nature of interpretation.

II. METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative methodology to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the existence, moral values, symbolic depth, and societal functions of

traditional Bantengan art within the Malang and Mojokerto Regencies. Such an approach enables an in-depth exploration of the intricate cultural contexts and complex phenomena inherent to the performance. Primary data were sourced directly from live Bantengan performances in these regions, supplemented by interviews with key stakeholders—including artists, cultural observers, religious leaders, and local community members. Furthermore, secondary data were gathered through document analysis to bolster the empirical findings.

1. The data collection strategies utilized in this research encompass:
2. Active Field Observation: The researcher engaged in direct, participatory observation of the performances, meticulously documenting the moral, symbolic, and functional aspects depicted within the art form.
3. In-depth Interviews: Dialogues were held with various community members, artists, and local figures across Malang and Mojokerto to capture their beliefs, perspectives, and understanding of Bantengan's cultural relevance.
4. Literature and Archival Review: Academic publications, historical archives, and cultural artifacts were systematically reviewed to construct a solid contextual and historical foundation for the study.
5. Analytical Processing and Verification: Data integrity was ensured through rigorous cross-verification for accuracy and consistency. The gathered information was then coded and analyzed to extract dominant themes, underlying meanings, and structural patterns related to the art form in alignment with the research objectives.
6. Result Dissemination: The study's conclusions are systematically articulated—often aided by visual diagrams and tables—to clearly convey the ongoing relevance, symbolic richness, and moral impact of Bantengan in the designated regencies, thereby enriching the broader discourse on local cultural heritage.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION RESULT

The investigation confirms that Bantengan is far more than a cultural relic; it embodies profound moral lessons, symbolic meanings, and diverse social functions that chronicle the historic bravery, mutual sacrifice, and solidarity of the people during

their resistance against Dutch colonization. Moreover, the art form remains a vibrant and thriving tradition in both Mojokerto and Malang, underscoring its indispensable value and continuity in regional heritage. The findings also reveal that Bantengan has dynamically evolved, adapting its interpretation and presentation to navigate contemporary socio-economic shifts, political developments, and the overarching influences of modern technology and globalization.

DISCUSSION

The Functions of The Traditional Art of Bantengan

In contemporary settings, Bantengan frequently serves as a celebratory centerpiece for communal milestones, enlivening events such as circumcisions, weddings, and other public festivities. Culturally, it acts as a behavioral compass for its supporting community, continuously instilling the virtues of unity, collective harmony, and mutual assistance (gotong royong). Operating across multiple societal and cultural dimensions, the diverse roles fulfilled by the traditional Bantengan art are systematically summarized in the subsequent table.

Table 1.1: The Functions of The Traditional Art of Bantengan

Data Code	Functions	Interpretation or Explanation
FTAB01	Entertainment	A primary purpose of Bantengan is to amuse the local public. It is frequently featured in cultural festivals, religious gatherings, and traditional celebrations to create a vibrant and joyful atmosphere for the audience.
FTAB02	Cultural Education	Bantengan acts as a medium for learning and preserving local history, traditions, and cultural values. By depicting significant regional myths and stories, the performance helps transmit and safeguard the community's cultural heritage.
FTAB03	Rituals and Ceremonies	The art form is deeply integrated into specific traditional and sacred rituals. It is often performed during important dates in the local cultural or religious calendar, holding profound spiritual value for its practitioners.
FTAB04	Community Identity Strengthening	Bantengan serves as a cultural emblem for particular ethnic groups and communities. Engaging in and watching this art form fosters social cohesion, reinforces communal bonds, and deepens the people's attachment to their roots.
FTAB05	Tourism and Local Economy	In certain regions, Bantengan has the potential to boost the local economy and tourism. The performances draw visitors eager to experience authentic local culture, which in turn stimulates revenue through the sale of related tourism services and traditional crafts.
FTAB06	Modern Entertainment	Beyond its customary roles, Bantengan has been modernized to fit contemporary urban events and broader cultural festivals. This adaptation turns it into an engaging spectacle that appeals to diverse audiences from various backgrounds.

Table 1.2: Symbolic Meaning in Traditional Bantengan Art

Data Code	Symbols	Meaning
SM01	<i>Topeng Bantengan</i>	This mask signifies the resilience and collaborative spirit of the indigenous people during the colonial era. The bull was chosen as a symbol because it is widely recognized as an animal that embodies strong solidarity and unity..
SM02	<i>Topeng Macan</i>	The tiger mask represents the colonial authorities, illustrating dominance and supreme power within the jungle hierarchy where all other creatures yield to it. This metaphorically depicts the colonizers' oppressive control over the natives, operating under a brutal "law of the jungle."
SM03	<i>Topeng Kera</i>	Portraying the deceitful elements of society, the monkey symbolizes opportunists who exploit the struggle between the locals and the colonizers for their own benefit. Monkeys represent trickery, often manipulating conflicts or feigning support to advance their selfish agendas.

SM04	<i>Solah Bantengan</i>	This movement embodies the indigenous resistance against colonial rule. The incorporation of pencak silat (traditional martial arts) into the bull's choreography reflects the historical reality where unarmed locals relied on their martial skills as their primary defense, symbolizing unyielding courage
SM05	<i>Solah Macan</i>	The tiger's dance, which constantly pressures the bull, illustrates the intense military and political suppression enforced by the colonial regime. The agile and aggressive movements symbolize the colonizers' tactical superiority and solid defensive capabilities
SM06	<i>Solah Kera</i>	The monkey's erratic and sly movements during the battle represent divisive factions that thrive on discord. It highlights the presence of provocateurs who take advantage of the vulnerabilities of both warring sides, sometimes acting as proxies to fulfill their hidden motives..
SM07	Musical Melodies	The accompanying music symbolizes the relentless spirit of the people's rebellion. In a Bantengan performance, the music must play continuously without pause, reflecting the enduring and inextinguishable determination of the Indonesians to fight until independence was won.
SM08	Prayers and Invocation of Spirits	The prayers uttered during the performance represent the community's profound hope and spiritual plea for triumph over the colonizers. Concurrently, the invocation of spirits highlights their strong belief in ancestral intervention and guidance in their fight for freedom.
SM09	Possession	Trance or possession signifies direct divine and ancestral intervention, rendering the performance wild and uncontrollable. The bull is particularly prone to possession, illustrating that the ancestors actively bestowed their spiritual strength upon the indigenous fighters to protect the nation's sovereignty.
SM10	Victory of the Bull	The inevitable triumph of the bull at the climax of the show symbolizes the ultimate victory of righteousness, while the defeated tiger represents vanquished evil. This recurring victory serves as an enduring communal prayer and a timeless assertion that good will always conquer tyranny.

Table 1.3: The Moral Significance of Traditional Bantengan Art

Data Code	Significance Values	Exposition or Reason
MS01	Mutual Cooperation	The essence of teamwork and communal solidarity is clearly demonstrated as all performers, musicians, and organizers seamlessly collaborate to execute the Bantengan procession throughout the village.
MS02	Beauty	Aesthetic beauty is showcased through the integration of authentic Javanese elements, including vibrant costumes, intricately carved masks, and the harmonious, captivating melodies played by the gamelan ensemble accompanying the dancers.
MS03	Truth	The value of truth is depicted through the performers' intense dedication during the mock battle. When the Banteng (representing the oppressed natives) defeats the Tiger (representing the colonial oppressors), it vividly reinforces the moral conviction that truth and righteousness will ultimately triumph over wickedness.
MS04	Goodness	Goodness is embedded in the very origin of Bantengan, which was created to inspire and train the indigenous population to bravely confront their colonizers. This virtue is prominently displayed as the heroic bull persistently fights to vanquish the villainous tiger.
MS05	Responsibility	The virtue of responsibility is personified by the Bantengan handler or fighter (pendekar). This individual bears the heavy burden of managing the possessed bull, ensuring that its wild movements remain safely controlled to protect the surrounding audience.
MS06	Religious	Religious devotion is evident in the prayers and supplications directed to the Almighty God before every rehearsal and live performance. This consistent practice of seeking divine assistance underscores the community's total reliance on the Creator.
MS07	Faith	Faith is reflected in the strong belief of the performers and the local community (such as in Claket village) in the supernatural realm. They acknowledge the existence of unseen beings created by God. The narrative structure also serves as a reminder to maintain unwavering faith in God's supreme authority over all creations, including spirits and jinn.
MS08	Evil	The concept of evil is personified through the roles of the Tiger (the oppressive colonizer) and the Monkey (the manipulative instigator). Their deceitful, arrogant, and disruptive actions serve as a moral warning, illustrating behaviors that breed tension, suffering, and societal disharmony.

The Survival and Contemporary Challenges of Bantengan Art

In the face of globalization, the traditional art of Bantengan demonstrates remarkable resilience, largely due to the active engagement of communities in Mojokerto and Malang who frequently feature it in both formal ceremonies and local festivals. This dedication is further bolstered by recruitment efforts, the emergence of new art troupes, and governmental recognition through various awards.

However, a distinct divergence has emerged between classical and modernized performances: The Classical Approach: Traditionalists preserve trance and possession scenes as vital markers of spiritual authenticity. The Modernized Approach: Contemporary groups often omit these mystical elements to focus on choreographic aesthetics and structured entertainment, making this version heavily preferred for official government functions.

Technological advancements present a double-edged sword; while globalization poses cultural threats, social media platforms and online video sharing offer unprecedented opportunities to engage younger demographics and elevate the art form on a global scale. The long-term vitality of Bantengan depends on collaborative support: governments must provide funding and promote cultural tourism, educational and non-governmental institutions must facilitate skill transmission, and artists must pioneer innovative fusions of traditional practices with modern multimedia.

Cultural Adaptation and Evolution Amidst Globalization

Bantengan has significantly transformed its content, techniques, and public perception in response to modern socio-economic and political shifts.

Social and Political Adaptations: The performance has evolved to incorporate contemporary messages, such as environmental conservation and peacebuilding, aligning with modern societal demands. Politically, it navigates between enduring governmental scrutiny and acting as a democratic medium for public critique and civic expression.

Economic and Technological Adaptations: To survive the competitive entertainment market, the art form has increasingly relied on digital marketing, modern technology, and corporate sponsorships. Furthermore, cross-

cultural exchanges facilitated by the internet have reshaped how Bantengan is interpreted and influenced by external cultures.

From a semiotic perspective, this ongoing evolution underscores the performance not merely as entertainment, but as a profound reflection of East Javanese identity, morality, and historical resistance. The masks, choreography, and gamelan music collaboratively communicate enduring virtues like truth, solidarity, and courage, proving that Bantengan can modernize without losing its foundational cultural roots.

IV. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, a cultural semiotic analysis reveals that Bantengan is a complex narrative tapestry that encapsulates Javanese historical struggles and ethical philosophies, notably the perpetual conflict between virtue and vice. Its continued existence in the globalized world is a testament to dedicated community preservation, adaptive collaborations, and governmental support.

Acknowledging certain methodological, analytical, and contextual limitations in the current study, future scholarship should employ deeper ethnographic and interdisciplinary frameworks to fully capture the art form's cultural nuances. By identifying and addressing these research gaps, academics and practitioners can better harness Bantengan as an empowering educational tool, ensuring that its rich cultural legacy continues to instruct and inspire forthcoming generations.

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