

Ajisaka in Kentrung Jatimenok: A Semiotic Exploration of Cultural Narratives and Symbolism

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Abstract

This research examines the semiotic dimensions of the Ajisaka story performed in the Kentrung Jatimenok tradition, a narrative art form originating from Java. Using an ethnosemiotic perspective, this research explores the complex cultural narratives and symbolic elements embedded in the Ajisaka story. Applying a semiotic framework, the analysis seeks to uncover the dynamic interaction between traditional performing arts and the construction of meaning in contemporary Javanese culture. The research utilizes an ethnographic approach and qualitative methods. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how traditional performances uphold cultural continuity while adapting to the evolving modern context. In addition, this research also provides insight into the role of narrative symbolism in preserving local identity. The research aims to provide a thorough semiotic analysis, bridging the gap between traditional art forms and cultural representations in the modern era.

Keywords: semiotics; cultural narratives; symbolism; kentrung Jatimenok performance.

Introduction

The interplay between traditional performance arts and the cultural identity of a community remains a vital subject of scholarly interest, particularly in regions with deep-rooted historical and cultural legacies such as Indonesia. Traditional arts not only serve as a form of entertainment but also as a medium for transmitting values, history, and ideologies across generations. Among these, *Kentrung Jatimenok*, a form of narrative performance from Jombang, East Java, occupies a unique position in the preservation of local cultural heritage. This traditional storytelling performance incorporates music and narration, embodying cultural symbols that reflect both historical continuity and communal identity.

Kentrung, which is a type of oral tradition, contains a sign in every play. Sign (representament) in a broad sense means to represent. Signs were created to convey meaning to replace the actual objects in the texts and contexts, which might be objects, things, pictures, or others that can express the meaning and idea of the sender (Samosorn S., Niyom Wongpongkum, 2024). A sign is something that can be interpreted as 'saying something' about something (Gaparov, 2021). Icon, index, and symbol are three types of signs distinguished by Peirce. All three are equally discussed in semiotic studies. An icon is a sign that has similarities between the signifier and the object, such as a photograph that has a resemblance to its object (Lindquist, 2001; Rossolatos, 2018; Trisno & Lianto, 2023; Yelle, 2016).

One of the central narratives frequently performed in *Kentrung Jatimenok* is the story of Ajisaka, a mythical figure deeply embedded in Javanese folklore. Ajisaka is widely regarded as a heroic and wise figure, whose story embodies themes of leadership, wisdom, and moral righteousness. His narrative not only reflects mythological aspects but also symbolically represents the resistance against oppression and the propagation of knowledge in Javanese society. The depiction of Ajisaka in *Kentrung Jatimenok* transcends simple storytelling; it encodes values and messages that are deeply embedded in Javanese cosmology and societal norms. This positions Ajisaka as not just a heroic figure but also a symbol of intellectual power and cultural resistance, a motif that resonates within the larger socio-political narratives of Javanese history.

Despite the profound cultural significance of *Kentrung Jatimenok*, it faces the threat of diminishing relevance, particularly among younger generations. In an era of rapid cultural

change and technological advancement, traditional art forms like *Kentrung* must contend with the challenges of modernity. One of the key problems lies in the erosion of the understanding of the semiotic codes embedded in these performances, as the symbolic and narrative elements that once conveyed deep cultural knowledge are often overlooked by contemporary audiences. Therefore, this research addresses an important gap by recontextualizing the semiotic elements of the *Kentrung Jatimenok* performance, with a specific focus on the Ajisaka narrative, in the light of ethnosemiotic theory.

The ethnosemiotic approach adopted in this study provides a unique lens through which the intersection of cultural symbols and performance can be examined. Ethnosemiotics extends beyond traditional semiotics by emphasizing the role of culture in shaping the use and interpretation of signs and symbols (Galofaro, 2012; Wissang, 2022). This approach acknowledges that semiotic processes are culturally situated and that the meaning-making processes within *Kentrung Jatimenok* performances are deeply influenced by the Javanese worldview, communal practices, and historical experiences. By employing this framework, the study moves beyond a surface-level analysis of the performance, delving into the intricate layers of cultural expression and identity that are encoded in the performance's semiotic system.

Additionally, the research brings novelty to the field by applying modern semiotic theory to an under-researched area of Indonesian traditional performance. While there have been numerous studies on *wayang kulit*, the semiotics of *Kentrung Jatimenok*, particularly in relation to the Ajisaka narrative, has not been explored in depth. This research aims to fill that gap by offering a comprehensive analysis of how symbols and signs function within the performance to convey both explicit and implicit cultural narratives. Through this approach, the study offers a fresh perspective on the role of traditional performance in contemporary society, showcasing how *Kentrung Jatimenok* continues to serve as a relevant and adaptable form of cultural communication.

The novelty of this study lies in the detailed analysis of the symbolic and cultural dimensions of the *Kentrung Jatimenok* performance, with a particular focus on the Ajisaka narrative. This exploration not only adds to the knowledge of Indonesian traditional arts, but also contributes to the broader discussion on the preservation and evolution of intangible cultural heritage in a globalizing world. In particular, this study highlights how traditional performances

can function as dynamic sites of cultural production, capable of preserving historical narratives and adapting to contemporary contexts.

By focusing on the semiotic intricacies of the performance, this study will provide valuable insights into how traditional narratives, such as that of Ajisaka, remain relevant by adapting to the shifting socio-political and cultural landscapes. Moreover, this work emphasizes the importance of semiotic literacy in understanding and preserving cultural heritage, particularly as modern audiences may lack the cultural context to fully appreciate the depth of these performances.

A key aspect of this study's novelty is its examination of symbolic adaptation within the Ajisaka narrative in the context of *Kentrung Jatimenok*. While traditional performances are often viewed as static cultural relics, this research argues that they are, in fact, evolving systems of meaning-making. The incorporation of ethnosemiotic theory allows for the investigation of how symbols and cultural messages in *Kentrung Jatimenok* have been reinterpreted over time to maintain relevance in contemporary society. This is particularly important in understanding the mechanisms through which traditional art forms resist obsolescence in a rapidly changing cultural environment.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the global discourse on semiotics by providing a comparative analysis that situates the semiotic processes of *Kentrung Jatimenok* within a larger framework of traditional performance arts. It explores how the unique semiotic strategies of *Kentrung* can offer insights into broader issues of narrative construction, cultural preservation, and identity formation. This research not only provides a detailed ethnosemiotic analysis of the *Kentrung Jatimenok* performance but also highlights the importance of semiotic understanding in preserving and interpreting cultural narratives. By focusing on the Ajisaka narrative, the study sheds light on the symbolic and cultural complexity of traditional Javanese performance art, offering both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of semiotics, cultural studies, and performance studies. The findings of this research will have implications not only for scholars of traditional performance but also for practitioners and policymakers involved in the preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study on Ajisaka in Kentrung Jatimenok: A Semiotic Exploration of Cultural Narratives and Symbolism is grounded in the semiotic theory developed

by Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce's model of semiotics is distinguished by its triadic structure, which consists of the sign, the object, and the interpretant. This framework provides a comprehensive tool for analyzing how meaning is constructed and communicated through signs within the performance of *Kentrung Jatimenok*, particularly in the narrative of Ajisaka.

Semiotic studies are inherently connected to signs, symbolic rules, and collective agreements that guide the meaning of these signs. A sign is the basic element of communication perceived through one of the human senses (Tavşan & Akbarzadeh, 2018). Each sign consists of two main components: the signifier and the signified, whose relationship is arbitrary (Khafaga, 2022), and a sign always represents something (Deely & Semetsky, 2017).

Semiotic relates to everything that can be understood as a sign (Arówóşęgbé, 2022; Elleström, 2022; Helbo, 2016; Lorusso & Sedda, 2022; Raharjo, 2019; Salem, 2021). A sign is defined as something that, based on a pre-existing social convention, represents something else. A sign represents an object or a concept (Friedman, 2019; Kraleman & Lattmann, 2013). Signs are created to convey meaning, replacing the actual object in a text and context. This could take the form of objects, images, or any other medium capable of expressing the sender's intentions and ideas. As noted by Kaewthep (Samosorn S., Niyom Wongpongkum, 2024) anything that conveys meaning is considered a sign.

This research is anchored in Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework, as this theory allows texts to be interpreted not only structurally but also provides readers with the freedom to interpret and derive meaning (Moriarty, 2002). Peirce's semiotics is particularly rich in context (Pesce, 2011), making it ideal for exploring how signs function within complex cultural narratives.

Peirce classifies signs into three categories: icon, index, and symbol (Lindquist, 2001; Rossolatos, 2018; Trisno & Lianto, 2023; Yelle, 2016). The following section provides an explanation of these three sign classifications.

a. Icon

An icon is a sign that bears a resemblance between the signifier and its object (Barham & Everett, 2021; Beynon-Davies, 2018; Raharjo, 2019; Supratno et al., 2020). For example, a photograph of a person represents the likeness between the image and its object, even though different photographic styles may exist, the face retains a resemblance to the subject. If the

photograph differs significantly from the object it represents, it cannot be considered a true photograph, as it lacks the necessary resemblance. Based on these views, it can be concluded that an icon is a sign that has a relationship of similarity between the object and its signifier, such as in the case of a photo or a map. For instance, in the Jatimenok kentrung performance of the Ajisaka story, the figure of Antaboga is depicted. Antaboga serves as an icon of a giant serpent.

a. Index

An index is a natural sign based on the inherent relationship between the sign and its referent (Barham & Everett, 2021; Juschka, 2014). An index represents its object through a direct connection between the sign and the object, and if the object is removed, the sign will also disappear. The clearest example of this is smoke, which serves as a sign of the presence of fire.

a. Symbol

A symbol is a sign that does not reflect a natural relationship between the signifier and the signified (Barham & Everett, 2021). Based on this perspective, it can be concluded that a symbol is a sign that does not inherently demonstrate a connection to its referent but carries broader meaning depending on the context. The interpretation of symbols relies on the interpreter, yet it still considers contextual meaning, which is linked to the sociocultural situation of a community.

In oral traditions, symbols have the capacity to evoke a series of abstract and invisible associations, both intellectual and emotional (Berger, 2010; Pickering, 2011). Symbols in oral traditions can take the form of both verbal and material expressions, referred to as verbal and non-verbal symbols, which include names of people, places, objects, events, proverbs, metaphors, myths, parables, riddles, advice, and expressions of belief (Hoed, 2014; Tumuju, 2014).

In the Jatimenok kentrung performance of the Ajisaka story, the symbol of *rujak cengkir* is present. In Javanese tradition, *cengkir* is an acronym for *kencenging pikir* (steadfast and resolute thinking). *Rujak cengkir* consists of various fruits, including *cengkir* (young

coconut), which combines sour, sweet, and spicy flavors. The meaning conveyed by the use of this symbol is that life is not always sweet or pleasant but also involves bitterness and hardship. However, it must always be approached with firm resolve (*kencenging pikir*), so that one is not easily swayed by circumstances and can achieve a valuable and meaningful life.

Methodology

This research employs an ethnographic approach. The ethnographic approach is utilized as a means to revive and actualize *Kentrung Jatimenok* as one of the traditional performing arts in Jombang. The choice of ethnography is based on its ability to uncover and understand the meanings within the performance, particularly those related to semiotics. The *Kentrung Jatimenok* performance of the Ajisaka story reflects the cultural values of the Jatimenok village community. Therefore, this study adopts an ethnographic approach with the empirical and theoretical aim of describing the culture of the community. This research method uses a qualitative method. Data collection procedures used observation, interviews, recording, field notes and documentation.

Analysis and Discussion

Ajisaka embodies leadership and wisdom, representing an ideal figure who harmonizes strategic thinking with ethical governance. Ajisaka's leadership is considered ideal as it successfully combines wisdom, strategy, and ethics in governance. Ajisaka is not only recognized for his role in defeating the tyranny of Dewata Cengkar but also as the creator of the Javanese script, which symbolizes knowledge and civilization. He is portrayed as a figure who utilizes intelligence, strategy, and wisdom to resolve challenges.

Ajisaka did not rely on physical strength or engage in direct combat against Dewata Cengkar but instead employed tactics and strategy. He demonstrates that an effective leader must be able to leverage knowledge and think strategically. The wisdom inherent in Ajisaka's leadership exemplifies that a leader's role is not merely to defeat opponents, but to create harmony and ensure the well-being of those they lead. This reflects the importance of a leader always thinking ahead, considering the consequences of every action, and prioritizing the collective good. Ajisaka teaches that leadership is not only about achieving goals but about how those goals are reached in the right way. Leaders like Ajisaka exemplify that power should be used to protect the vulnerable, uphold justice, and eradicate oppression. In addition to possessing profound knowledge and strategic acumen, Ajisaka was also a wise leader. His creation of the

Aksara Jawa (Hanacaraka) demonstrates his role as a visionary leader, one who not only focuses on governance but also on the intellectual and cultural development of his people.

In Javanese philosophy, *Hanacaraka* symbolizes the journey of human life, from birth, conflict, to death, emphasizing the importance of loyalty, sacrifice, and responsibility. Through *Hanacaraka*, the Javanese are taught to live in harmony with nature and God, to maintain balance between the physical and spiritual worlds, and to be steadfast in facing life's challenges with a resolute heart. Therefore, *Hanacaraka* is not only a cultural heritage but also a reflection of moral teachings and philosophy that remain relevant in contemporary Javanese society.

The philosophical teachings of life based on the *Aksara Jawa (Hanacaraka)* can be interpreted as follows: *Ha-na-ca-ra-ka* means "there is a messenger," symbolizing the breath of life tasked with uniting the soul and the body. This implies that in life, there is a higher being who entrusts life, someone who is trusted (humans), and someone who is entrusted with a duty. These three elements refer to God, humans, and the obligations of humans as creations. *Da-ta-sa-wa-la* signifies that after creation, humans must face their inevitable moment (data), meaning the time of death. Humans cannot *sawala* (resist or avoid) their fate; they must be willing to accept and carry out the will of God.

Pa-dha-ja-ya-nya refers to the unity between the giver of life (the Creator) and the receiver of life (the creature), signifying that humans must align themselves with the Creator, reflected in noble and virtuous actions. *Jaya* (victory) here represents a true and righteous victory, achieved with sincerity and not through mere triumph or unprincipled means. Finally, *Ma-ga-ba-tha-nga* expresses the acceptance of all that is commanded and prohibited by the Almighty. It means that humans must fully surrender and submit to their destiny, although they are given the right to respond to it (Nur Awaln, 2017).

Ajisaka's leadership was not only focused on the present but also oriented toward the future. By creating the *Aksara Jawa (Hanacaraka)*, he symbolized a civilization that would be passed down to future generations. This signifies that a great leader must be able to look beyond short-term interests and focus on long-term development. Ajisaka considered how cultural heritage could be preserved and serve as a foundation for his society's future growth.

The creation of the *Aksara Jawa (Hanacaraka)* by Ajisaka marked a significant shift from a society without a writing system to a more advanced civilization. Ajisaka, as a metaphorical icon, reflects a visionary leader who understood that the progress of a civilization is not

measured solely by political power or military strength, but also by the ability to leave behind a profound intellectual and cultural legacy. By introducing the *Aksara Jawa (Hanacaraka)*, Ajisaka demonstrated leadership that prioritized education, knowledge, and communication as keys to societal development.

Ajisaka's introduction of the *Aksara Jawa (Hanacaraka)* shows that a leader must have a long-term vision for the society they lead. He did not focus solely on immediate concerns, but also created something that would continue to benefit future generations. This is a crucial quality of a wise leader: the ability to look beyond the present and plan for a better future. Ajisaka understood that to advance civilization, society needed tools to document and disseminate knowledge. By introducing the *Aksara Jawa (Hanacaraka)*, he ensured that knowledge could be transmitted across generations, enriching the intellectual and cultural life of his people. In today's modern context, wise leaders are those who prioritize education, innovation, and intellectual development as integral parts of nation-building.

Conclusion

Ajisaka, as a symbol of exemplary leadership, embodies wisdom and ethical governance, and is praised for his ability to combine strategic thinking with moral leadership. His leadership is regarded as ideal for its successful integration of wisdom, strategy, and ethics. In addition to his victory over Dewata Cengkar's tyranny, Ajisaka is credited with the creation of the Javanese script, a symbol of knowledge and cultural progress. Ajisaka's leadership extended beyond immediate concerns, with a strong emphasis on future generations. Through the creation of the Javanese script (*Aksara Jawa* or *Hanacaraka*), he symbolized the foundation of a lasting civilization, ensuring that his legacy and cultural knowledge would be preserved and transmitted to future generations. Through the *Aksara Jawa (Hanacaraka)*, Ajisaka ensured the preservation and transmission of knowledge across generations, significantly enhancing the intellectual and cultural heritage of his people. In the modern era, visionary leaders are recognized for emphasizing education, innovation, and intellectual growth as essential components of nation-building.

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