

A Peircean Semiotic Approach to Cultural Pedagogy: *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* as an Indigenous Learning System

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Abstract

In the face of an increasingly homogenized and digitized educational paradigm, this study reconsiders indigenous modes of learning through the semiotic lens of Charles Sanders Peirce. Focusing on *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur*—a traditional masked performance from Jombang, East

Java—the research explores how meaning, ethical consciousness, and cultural knowledge are produced through performative sign processes. Employing a qualitative semiotic analysis of textual, visual, and musical materials, the study examines the interaction of icons, indexes, and symbols within the ritual context of performance. The findings reveal that *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* functions as a living pedagogical system wherein gestures, masks, and rhythms mediate moral reflection and social learning. Through Peirce's triadic model, the performance enacts a participatory form of education grounded in the Javanese epistemic triad of *cipta–rasa–karsa* (thought–feeling–will). This indigenous semiotic pedagogy dissolves the boundaries between cognition and embodiment, art and ethics, suggesting that learning emerges through semiosis—an ongoing interpretive engagement with cultural signs. The study contributes to the decolonial rethinking of education by positioning indigenous semiotic systems as vital frameworks for moral imagination and communal knowledge in the modern world.

Keywords: Peircean semiotics; indigenous pedagogy; *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur*, cultural learning; decolonial education.

Introduction

In an era increasingly defined by digitized knowledge and homogenized educational frameworks, there is an urgent need to revisit the epistemological roots of learning embedded in local cultural systems. Contemporary education, largely shaped by Western rationalism, often privileges cognitive abstraction and standardized knowledge while marginalizing embodied, symbolic, and communal modes of knowing. This imbalance has produced what may be termed

a “semiotic disconnection” — a detachment of meaning-making from the lived realities, rituals, and cultural symbols that once formed the moral and epistemic foundation of indigenous communities. Within this context, *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur*, a traditional masked performance from Jombang, East Java, offers a fertile site for re-examining how meaning, knowledge, and moral consciousness are cultivated through performative and symbolic mediation (Yanuartuti, 2018).

Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur is more than an aesthetic spectacle; it is a living semiotic system in which every gesture, mask, musical rhythm, and narrative fragment functions as a sign that communicates ethical and cosmological knowledge (Yanuarti setyo dkk., 2017). The performance embodies a pedagogical process grounded in participation, interpretation, and affective resonance rather than in abstract instruction. In this sense, it enacts what can be called a form of *cultural pedagogy*—a way of teaching and learning rooted in collective memory and ritualized experience. Yet, despite its pedagogical richness, studies on *Wayang Topeng* have tended to focus either on its historical and anthropological dimensions or on its artistic expressions, leaving the semiotic mechanisms of its pedagogical power largely unexplored.

The Peircean theory of signs—comprising the triadic relation between *representamen*, *object*, and *interpretant*—provides a conceptual framework through which this pedagogical logic can be more precisely understood (Friedman, 2019; Kozintsev, 2018; Peirce, 1902; Prihatin et al., 2025; Rossolatos, 2018). Peirce’s semiotics, with its dynamic and processual nature, views meaning not as a fixed code but as an unfolding semiosis—a continuous process of interpretation and re-interpretation. When applied to *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur*, this framework illuminates

how cultural knowledge operates through chains of signification that engage both performers and audience in a participatory act of learning. Each symbolic gesture, musical cue, and narrative transformation serves as a sign that invites interpretation, thereby activating cognitive, ethical, and emotional engagement.

From a pedagogical standpoint, this process mirrors the logic of dialogic and experiential learning: understanding is not transmitted but constructed through interpretive interaction. The semiotic encounters within *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* thus reveal an indigenous epistemology that resists the dichotomy between knowing and doing, cognition and embodiment. This epistemic model demonstrates that education in the indigenous sense is inseparable from culture—it is an ongoing semiosis that sustains moral values, social cohesion, and ecological awareness through performative participation.

However, despite the global recognition of indigenous arts as repositories of wisdom, few studies have systematically analyzed their pedagogical functions using a semiotic perspective. Research in Southeast Asian performance traditions often remains descriptive, focusing on ritual or historical narratives without unpacking the underlying semiotic structures that generate learning and meaning. Moreover, in the field of semiotics itself, education has rarely been theorized as a process of semiosis, where meaning-making serves as a form of learning. This lacuna underscores the need for a theoretical integration between semiotics and pedagogy—a framework this study seeks to advance.

Accordingly, this article employs a Peircean semiotic approach to explore *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* as a model of indigenous learning. By examining the performative interaction of icons, indexes, and symbols within its ritual context, the study aims to uncover how cultural knowledge is mediated and internalized through signs. The discussion situates *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* within broader debates on cultural pedagogy and decolonizing education, arguing that indigenous semiotic systems such as this one offer vital alternatives to the cognitive and representational biases of modern schooling. Ultimately, the paper proposes that understanding education through the logic of semiosis allows us to reconceptualize learning as a dynamic, participatory, and culturally embedded process—one that bridges the moral imagination of tradition with the interpretive freedom of modern thought.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic theory of semiosis, which conceives meaning as a dynamic interplay between the *representamen* (the form of the sign), the *object* (the referent to which the sign points), and the *interpretant* (the understanding or effect produced by the sign) (Arówóşęgbé, 2022; Asritisthia et al., 2021; Deely & Semetsky, 2017; Elleström, 2022; Gaparov, 2021; Kralemann & Lattmann, 2013; Yelle, 2016). Unlike structuralist models that fix meaning in binary relations, Peirce's framework situates meaning within an open and infinite process of interpretation. In this sense, semiosis is not a static code but a living process—one that continuously generates understanding through experience, emotion, and habit formation. Knowledge, from a Peircean standpoint, is thus not transmitted as information but constructed through the ongoing negotiation of signs in relation to context and community.

When applied to cultural pedagogy, this theoretical lens reveals learning as a process of *semiotic participation* rather than formal instruction. Education in this sense occurs through interpretive engagement with signs—rituals, narratives, symbols, gestures, and sounds—that embody a community's moral and cosmological order. Peirce's notion of *habit formation* resonates strongly with indigenous systems of knowledge, where repeated symbolic enactments, such as storytelling, ritual, and performance, cultivate ethical and cognitive habits that sustain cultural continuity (Feodorov, 2017). Through semiosis, individuals learn not only *about* their culture but *within* it, forming interpretive habits that shape ways of knowing and being.

Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur exemplifies this triadic logic of semiosis in its performative structure. The masks serve as icons, visually resembling mythic characters and moral archetypes; the gestures, rhythms, and spatial cues operate as indexes, signaling emotional or ritual intensity; while the narrative and philosophical messages function as symbols, encoding abstract moral and cosmological ideas. Within the performance, these layers of signification engage both performers and spectators in interpretive acts. The audience, through their emotional resonance and moral reflection, becomes the *interpretant* in Peirce's triadic relation—transforming aesthetic experience into ethical and epistemic understanding. Thus, meaning in *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* is not imposed but co-created through dialogic participation, enacting a form of *learning-by-interpretation*.

This dynamic corresponds to what may be described as a semiotic ecology of learning—a pedagogical environment in which knowledge emerges through continuous interaction between signs, bodies, and communities (Campanella et al., 2022). The performance space becomes a site

where cognitive, ethical, and spiritual awareness are intertwined, reflecting Peirce's idea that learning is essentially a process of habit change brought about by new interpretations. The triadic relation (representamen–object–interpretant) thus evolves within a participatory framework: the representamen appears as performative signs (masks, music, movement); the object as cultural values and cosmological principles; and the interpretant as the community's internalized understanding and moral insight. Through this recursive semiosis, *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* functions as a living classroom, where learning unfolds through affect, embodiment, and collective reflection.

In this integrated model, Peircean semiotics and indigenous pedagogy converge to demonstrate that semiosis itself constitutes a form of education. The process of interpreting cultural signs—through performance, ritual, and participation—cultivates interpretive habits that sustain moral imagination, social cohesion, and ecological awareness. This framework, therefore, positions *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* not merely as an artistic or ritual practice but as an indigenous learning system, one that bridges cognition and embodiment, tradition and reflection. By understanding education through the logic of semiosis, we uncover a mode of learning that is dialogic, participatory, and culturally embedded—offering an alternative epistemology to the abstraction and individualism of modern schooling.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design grounded in Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory to analyze *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* as a model of indigenous learning. The

purpose is to investigate how meaning and knowledge are produced through the dynamic interplay of signs—icons, indexes, and symbols—within the traditional masked performance.

The data sources consist of textual, visual, and performative materials, including performance transcripts, video recordings, and cultural documentation that capture the narrative structure, gestures, masks, and musical elements of *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur*. These materials are analyzed as a system of signs that encode ethical, philosophical, and pedagogical meanings.

The analytical procedure follows Peirce's triadic model of signification, which comprises the *representamen* (the form of the sign), the *object* (the referent or idea represented), and the *interpretant* (the meaning generated through interpretation). Each element in the performance—such as mask colors, bodily movements, and rhythmic sequences—is treated as a representamen that leads to interpretants shaped by cultural knowledge and communal understanding.

The analysis proceeds through three main stages:

1. Identifying and categorizing key signs that structure the performance;
2. Examining their relationships within the narrative and symbolic framework; and
3. Interpreting the chains of semiosis that reveal the process of cultural learning and moral reflection.

Through this Peircean semiotic analysis, the study conceptualizes *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* as a pedagogical process where meaning is continuously produced and reinterpreted. Learning, in this sense, is not a transfer of information but an ongoing *semiosis*—a participatory engagement with symbols that embody the epistemological and ethical values of the community.

Analysis and Discussion

The semiotic landscape of *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* reveals how a traditional performance encodes moral and philosophical values through interconnected systems of signs—visual, auditory, and performative. Viewed through Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of icon, index, and symbol, the masks, colors, gestures, and rhythms of *Wayang Topeng* operate as vehicles for indigenous pedagogy that nurture emotional intelligence, ethical balance, and ecological awareness. This section examines how these semiotic dimensions collectively form a cultural pedagogy rooted in Javanese epistemology.

The mask (*topeng*) functions as the most immediate iconic sign, visually resembling emotional and moral archetypes. Within the *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* repertoire, two major mask types dominate: *Topeng Putra Alus* and *Topeng Sabrang*. *Topeng Putra Alus* represents refined male characters—figures of virtue and wisdom such as Panji Inukertapati, Gunungsari, Angling Darma, and Raden Said. These masks are typically smooth-faced, narrow-eyed, and painted in light or white tones, iconically reflecting inner serenity and the triumph of rationality over desire. In Javanese moral philosophy, whiteness connotes *kesucian*—purity of thought and noble restraint. The audience's interpretant thus links the visual calmness of the mask to the ethical ideal of *budi luhur* (noble character), transforming aesthetic appreciation into moral reflection.



Figure 1. Masks of the *Sabrang* category in *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur*.
(Photo: Setyo, 2013, in *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur Jombang* by Setyo Yanuartuti)



Figure 2. Masks of the *Putra Alus* category in *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur*.
(Photo: Setyo, 2013, in *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur Jombang* by Setyo Yanuartuti)

Conversely, *Topeng Sabrang* represents the antagonistic characters—kings and warriors from the kingdom of Sabrang, such as Klana Sewandana, Patih Sundulmega, Tumenggung Pancatraga, Pancatnyawa, Magang, and the Sabrang soldiers. These masks are strikingly red, with bulging

eyes and fierce expressions. In Peircean terms, the red mask acts as both an icon of vitality and an index of emotional turbulence, signaling the presence of *nepsu*—uncontrolled passion and aggression. The intense color draws attention to the dangers of unrestrained desire, transforming the spectacle into a lesson on moral discipline. The visual dialectic between the white *Putra Alus* and the red *Sabrang* masks constructs an ethical pedagogy of balance (*keseimbangan*), teaching the audience to harmonize reason and emotion, serenity and strength.

Beyond color and form, the musical accompaniment serves as an indexical system that directs emotional and narrative interpretation. The rhythm of the *kendhang* (drum) and the cyclical structure of *gamelan* music index shifts in mood and moral tension. Slow, meditative rhythms accompany reflective or sacred scenes, while rapid percussive patterns highlight moments of conflict or divine intervention. The sonic texture thus guides audience response through affective resonance rather than verbal instruction. This aligns with Peirce's conception of meaning as a process of *habit formation*—the repetition of sensory and emotional patterns that cultivate ethical sensibility. Through rhythmic participation, spectators learn the ethics of patience, harmony, and respect for cosmic order, embodying what Javanese pedagogy calls *ngrasa*—to feel as a form of understanding.

Gestural movements and choreography also carry symbolic depth. The measured, controlled motions of *Putra Alus* figures symbolize *tata krama* (social decorum) and self-discipline, while the exaggerated, vigorous gestures of *Sabrang* characters express chaos and moral imbalance. These bodily expressions form a visual grammar of ethics, where each movement conveys cultural lessons. Within Peirce's framework, such gestures evolve from iconic representation (mimicking emotional states) toward symbolic abstraction (communicating moral principles).

The performance thus transforms corporeal movement into moral reasoning—a mode of embodied learning through which audiences internalize values via visual and kinesthetic engagement.

Color, sound, and movement are further unified through the narrative structure of *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur*, which dramatizes the eternal tension between passion and wisdom, individual desire and communal harmony. Each semiotic layer—mask, music, and story—interacts within a shared symbolic economy where meaning emerges relationally. The audience does not passively decode these signs but participates actively in their interpretation, guided by collective memory and cultural ontology. The result is a dynamic exchange of meaning that integrates emotional, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of learning.

At a deeper philosophical level, the performance embodies what Peirce termed synechism—the principle of continuity between material signs and mental interpretation. In *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur*, the boundary between art and life becomes fluid: performance reflects social ethics, while daily conduct mirrors aesthetic discipline. This continuity situates the performance as a living educational system that preserves indigenous epistemology while adapting to modern contexts. Through its semiotic complexity, the community rehearses the values of *rukun* (social harmony), *andhap asor* (humility), and ecological responsibility.

In this sense, *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* can be understood as an indigenous semiotic pedagogy—a cultural model of learning that integrates sensory, emotional, and intellectual cognition. Learning unfolds through three semiotic pathways paralleling Peirce's triad: (1) iconic learning, through observation and imitation of moral exemplars; (2) indexical learning, through emotional attunement and situational awareness; and (3) symbolic learning, through interpretive

reasoning and ethical reflection. These intertwined processes cultivate holistic human development grounded in the harmony of *cipta* (mind), *rasa* (feeling), and *karsa* (will).

From a theoretical standpoint, this indigenous model reflects dialogical education rooted in lived experience and cultural consciousness, emphasizing mutual participation between the performer and the community. *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* embodies this approach, where performative semiosis transforms education into a participatory act of moral and cultural co-creation.

Furthermore, this semiotic framework contributes to the broader movement of decolonizing knowledge by validating indigenous epistemologies as legitimate systems of understanding. By situating *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* within a Peircean perspective of semiosis, the study reveals how local traditions express universal learning principles without being subsumed under external paradigms. Interpretation thus becomes an act of epistemic sovereignty—where meaning-making sustains both cultural survival and moral cultivation.

Ultimately, the semiotic analysis reveals that *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* is not merely performative art but a living pedagogical system translating Javanese moral philosophy into embodied experience. Its signs function as conduits of ethical reflection, emotional harmony, and communal learning. Through this system, the Javanese community sustains its moral imagination while engaging in a continuous dialogue between tradition and modernity. In a world increasingly defined by digital abstraction and standardized education, *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* stands as a testament to the enduring power of signs to teach—not through instruction, but through participation, feeling, and shared interpretation.

Conclusion

The semiotic inquiry into *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* discloses that indigenous performance is not merely a repository of symbols, but an active field of pedagogy in which meaning is lived, felt, and enacted. Through the triadic relations of icon, index, and symbol, the performance transforms aesthetic form into ethical consciousness, allowing moral reflection to emerge through rhythm, color, and gesture. Learning, in this sense, is not the acquisition of information but a process of attunement—a dialogic encounter between sensory experience and moral imagination.

Within this continuum, *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* embodies the Javanese ideal of *cipta-rasa-karsa* as an epistemic triad, where cognition, emotion, and will are harmonized through semiotic participation. This indigenous logic of knowing challenges the compartmentalized frameworks of Western pedagogy, revealing instead a moral ecology in which signs are not abstract representations but living mediations between humans, nature, and the sacred. Ultimately, the study affirms that *Wayang Topeng Jatiduwur* stands as a decolonial semiotic practice—one that sustains cultural identity through performative interpretation. Its enduring vitality lies in its capacity to translate ethical thought into embodied action, renewing communal wisdom through shared signs. In a time increasingly defined by abstraction and disembodiment, such performances remind us that meaning, when rooted in lived practice, remains the most profound form of learning.

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