

## The System of Symbols in the Iconography of Works of Javanese Art and Culture

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### ABSTRACT

The Javanese culture is one of the exotic pinnacles in human civilization. Its long journey has given rise to a variety of cultural products that are full of symbolic nuances. Symbols in the form of works of art are presented not only as a visual attraction or a medium carrying interpretative messages but also convey the essence of life. Javanese symbols are not intended to represent what is already happening but what is hoped will happen. They are the crystallization of hopes and desires. The system of symbols is not intended to bring something to mind but rather to act as a guideline for a value system so that its hopes and desires will transpire. What is manifested in the presentation of the symbols is not the real truth because reality far exceeds the boundaries of visual reference.

**Key Words:** Culture, Iconography, Java, Art, Symbols

### INTRODUCTION

The Javanese culture is one of the exotic pinnacles of human civilization that was built from local potential integrated with various new incoming beliefs over a period of time spanning several centuries. The empirical series in the process of adaptation, the emotional bonds formed by tragedy, the ethos of the spirit of mythology, natural disasters, social conflict, and history itself have created a sensitivity to cultural instinct that has been implemented in a wide range of its cultural products. These complex and lengthy cultural experiences have produced works of culture that not only function pragmatically as a medium for life but are also a way to reach a pinnacle of civilization and ideological orientation. These works are a reflection of the sophistication of the minds and feelings of the Javanese people, which terminologically has managed to reach a level of work with classical and noble values. The main characteristic of the classical value of Javanese cultural works is its artistic and aesthetical substance, which is almost impossible to process any further to become better or more beautiful; the exquisite nature of these works has all but reached the most essential and universal level of ideological conception. In a cultural context, these works have become a "value system" which has been used as a reference and even a source of guidance for the lives of the Javanese people from one generation to the next. The various forms and variants of these works include *tembang*, *gamelan*, *wayang*, *batik*, *keris*, and so on, all of which have a functional range that stretches from an immanent to a transcendental level. Joseph Fischer states that works of culture (art) in the Nusantara (Indonesia), especially in Java, have three main characteristics: they are always associated with mythology, are part of a ritual procession, and are rich in meaning and symbolic content (Fischer, 1994: 2).

Studying the world of symbols in works of Javanese art and culture is a field of exploration which not only endeavours to interpret the meaning contained therein but also to understand the 'desire' (urge) or the 'power of the message' that wishes to be presented, because the world of Javanese symbols is more than simply the representation of a conception; it is also the result of the crystallization of a diachronic ideology. This is what enables the symbols in these works

of art to endure and be passed down from one generation to another. The nature of Javanese symbols as being acceptable and valuable from age to age means that they are often stigmatized as traditional works of art, but in essence they are not only artefacts inherited from past generations but also a “system of symbols” which is sustainable and from which each generation can discover new values based on the context of the era.

## METHOD

The method used for studying the characteristics of symbols in works of Javanese art and culture cannot be limited to a single theoretical approach because this would be insufficient for addressing the nature of these works of art as an accumulation of textual, ethnographic, and ideological problems, as well as a crystallization of thoughts and feelings. Therefore, three kinds of theoretical approach are used: (1) A theory of Iconographical Analysis (Panofsky, 1982: 28-41), for the textual study, which includes three stages: Pre-iconographical description, Iconographical analysis, and Iconological Interpretation; (2) A theory of Ethnography (Spradley, 1980: 162-165) for the cultural context, which comprises six levels: Universal Statements, Cross-Cultural Descriptive Statements, General Statements about a Society or Cultural Group, General Statements about a Specific Cultural Scene, Specific Statements about a Cultural Domain, and Specific Incident Statements; and (3) Hermeneutic Dialectics to study ideological values with the following three stages: *Bildung*, *Sensus communis*, *Urteilkraft* (Judgement), and *Geschmack* (Taste) (Gadamer, 1989: 3-37).

## DISCUSSION

### Characterization of the Iconography of Javanese Symbols

The system of cultural values is the most abstract level in the customs of a particular cultural area, and consists of a conception that exists in the minds of most members of a community about things that are considered to be of great value in their lives. This system functions as the highest guideline for human behaviour. Kluckhohn writes that all cultural value systems in all cultures throughout the world are concerned with five basic problems: (1) the essence of human life, (2) the essence of human work, (3) the essence of human position in space and time, (4) the essence of the relationship between human beings and their surroundings, and (5) the essence of the relationships between human beings (Koentjaraningrat, 1981: 190-191, and 1994: 25-28). The value system of a cultural area is an ‘abstract domain’ which nevertheless has ideological power. Its substance is not in a systematic factual form but in the form of symbols that are open to different perspectives of interpretation. The final target is not the accuracy of interpretation but the inspirational power for building a better life. The basic nature of Eastern (specifically Javanese) symbolism has a different inclination from the symbolism of the West. Western symbols tend to be a representation of “the symbol from” or a reflection of something that already exists, while Eastern symbols tend to be “the symbol to” or oriented towards something that is desired or hoped for (see Budi, 2002: 255-256). In a similar explanation, Jacob Sumardjo states that the world of Western symbolism always refers to a memetic correspondence with another Reality, hence Indonesian symbols refer directly to this “other reality” without connecting them to the empirical material (Sumardjo, 2013: 11).

Meaning can be contained inside symbols, such as in Javanese symbols that are performed as a part of various rituals and are always associated with the myths which formed the basic idea for their creation. Symbols summarize what is known about the world as it is, summarize the quality of emotional life it supports, and guide a person in how to act in the world. During the

long journey of Javanese civilization, numerous symbols have appeared and developed, and some have even been mythologized. The clearest insight is that these symbols are a reflection of Javanese values and even of the metaphysical views of the Javanese (Geertz, 1973: 129-132).

Efforts to understand the sense of quality of a work of art cannot be separated from its basic thought pattern and existential system (Gadamer, 1989: xxvii). In the overall cultural context, works of art are created to accommodate an awareness to help understand the *weltgefuhl* (sense of world) that wishes to be expressed so that in turn, forms of intellectual knowledge are not presented freely, and even irrational expression becomes commonplace as a way of expressing feeling. A work of art is the perception and feelings that are made visible from its cosmology (Holt, 2000: xxviii).

A number of examples of iconographical presentation in Javanese works of culture that can still be appreciated as symbols up to the present time are:

No	Presentation of Form of Symbol	Comparative Reflection	Interpretation of Substantial Meaning	Interpretation of Essential Meaning
1	<i>Motif Kembang-pari</i> (The rice-flowers motif in the Pattern of <i>Batik Sidomukti</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• rice flowers</li> <li>• clump of rice</li> <li>• rice</li> <li>• rice warehouse</li> </ul>	Abundant harvest	The symbol of hope for a prosperous life
2	<i>Motif Sulur</i> (Vines plant motif in the Pattern of <i>Batik Sidomulyo</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• vines plant</li> <li>• cassava plant</li> <li>• garden</li> <li>• fertile plants</li> </ul>	Fertility	The symbol of life expectancy in fertility
3	<i>Motif Sawat</i> atau <i>Lar</i> (Wings or Wing motif)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• bird's wings</li> <li>• eagle</li> <li>• Wishnu Gods</li> <li>• Heaven</li> </ul>	Spirituality	The symbol of kindness and glory
4	<i>Keris</i> (The Javanese traditional weapon)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Snakes</li> <li>• Flames</li> <li>• running water</li> <li>• wind</li> </ul>	Various forms of potential natural energy	Various forms of potential natural energy
5	<i>Gunungan</i> or <i>kayon</i> (The main puppet shaped like a mountain)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• montain</li> <li>• Kalpataru tree</li> <li>• Borobudur temple</li> <li>• Philosophy:</li> </ul>	Revered and exalted place	The symbol of consciousness of the universe

		Triloka- tribuana		
6	Wayang Bima or Werkudara	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nose: old grindstone</li> <li>• Eyes: glared</li> <li>• 5 fingernails: weapon (<i>Kuku Pancanaka</i>)</li> <li>• Clothes: square pattern</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The long life experience</li> <li>• The Carefully</li> <li>• The five principles of Islam</li> <li>• Distinguis hing good and bad</li> </ul>	The character symbol of a knight, not a depiction of a human
7	<i>Nasi Tumpeng</i> (rice shaped as a cone)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Borobudur stupa</li> <li>• Egyptian Pyramids,</li> <li>• Mosque Dome, Church Dome.</li> </ul>	The symbol of awareness of vertical and horizontal relationships	Symbol of a 'password' to interaction with God

Based on the examples above, thought patterns can be identified which show that the final target in the presentation of the shape and form of Javanese symbols undergoes a transformation of the symbolic values that surpass the visual signs (iconography) based on the visualization used.

### System of Symbols in Works of Javanese Art and Culture

No artist of the religiously vital cultures of the past ever produced his work of art with any other intention than that his creation should be received in terms of what it says and presents and that it should have its place in the world where men live together (Gadamer, 1976: 4-5). The most simple and basic understanding of the word "tradition" is *traditum*, which means: anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present (Shils, 1981: 12). Tradition is not only a series of events that is recognized but also a great expression that can be understood (Wiensheimer, 1985: 205).

The ethics of Javanese tradition are centred on affection without being hedonistic: emotional calm, a balance of certain affections, and a strange spiritual stillness are the psychological conditions considered important, along with signs of a noble character to achieve the true meaning of feeling. Despite the tendency to be speculative, understanding feeling as *séjatining rasa* enables the development of a complex phenomenological analysis because essentially "feeling" and "meaning" become one (Geertz, 1973: 134-135).

Whatever the form of presentation in the process to promote symbols and meanings, it will be meaningless if these symbolic works of art are unable to build a space for "transactional values". In the context of culture, values are always associated with epistemological truth,

good ethics, and aesthetic beauty. A value is an empirical quality which is developed through a process of interactive experience between the subject and the object. A value is not something that is to be looked for or found but rather the act of giving or creating the value of an object that is interpreted or understood (Kattsoff, 1992: 327-340). A value system is a systemic pattern which provides intrinsic values and extrinsic values with a "transactional" power. The same is true for a system of symbols; Javanese symbols are not an artistic or aesthetical attraction but intended to develop new thoughts and feelings which in turn give rise to new values for the appreciator.

Art is tied to truth. The adequate expression of truth can only be thought, which communicates itself in ideally clear and distinct propositions. Art is essentially sensuous (Harries, 2009: 8). Javanese culture is not restricted to cultural activity in a territorial sense but is a space for "thoughts and ideas" that are developed evolutively by adapting, withstanding, and orienting in the context of awareness of the microcosm and macrocosm. Every noble work of art in the view of Javanese ethno-iconology is a reflection of the thought patterns, behaviour patterns, and true life of the Javanese.

The opinion of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel positions fine art as something that is honoured and respected, when dealing with the morality of a society. Fine art is not real art till it is in this sense free, and only achieves its highest task when it has taken its place in the same sphere with religion and philosophy, and has become simply a mode of revealing to consciousness and bringing to utterance the Divine Nature, the deepest interests of humanity, and the most comprehensive truths of the mind (Hegel in Harries, 2009: 8).

In *The Death of Metaphysics; the Death of Culture* (Cherry, 2006), it is explained that most Western symbols are created to communicate or convey a message or meaning to the reader, to show the authority of a position, as an abstraction of power of an existence, a suggestive value of an ideology, and the (doctrinative) power of force of a hegemony. This is somewhat different from the Javanese culture, where symbols are created in connection with the pragmatic interests of the symbol itself. The empirical domain in Javanese symbols is not as metonymy (a reminder of something), but rather to create a new experience, for new power. Javanese symbols are not to remind or strengthen visual appearance but to create a new power, to accumulate or create "energy of enlightenment" which for all intents and purposes no longer has any connection with the visual form of the source of its idea.

The Javanese mind is an exploration of energy – not only immanent material energy but also the result of sublimation of a wide range of constituent elements. The condition of nature, anxiety, mythology, anthropological evolution, history, tragedy, expectation, ideology, and irrational phenomena come together and sublimate to form a metaphysical energy in creating room for symbolic awareness. An emotional calmness is needed to understand Javanese symbols and a spiritual appreciation is required to discover their depth of meaning. The understanding of 'Javanese works of art' is not limited to the aesthetics of logic but also includes the higher aesthetics of meta-logic; these works are not personal products but the works of communal views and expression that have become universal. This means that every work created is not the realization of an idea but a requirement for controlling the thoughts and feelings to present "energy of desire or will".

The sign of success in understanding the Javanese culture is to understand the "Javanese mind", and the essence of a person's mind is its "feelings". Cultural texts and artefacts are not the essence of Javanese culture, and even social facts that are labelled as "tradition" are not yet a complete reflection of the Javanese mind. The Javanese mind needs a representation of

its sociological form and facts, but in truth it is like an iceberg that floats in the sea; there is a much larger part underneath the surface, and this is where the true essence of the Javanese mind exists. This is the meaning of the words written by one of the great Javanese literary masters, Pujangga Besar Jawa, Ranggawarsita: “*kang katon kuwi dudu, kang têmên durung katon*” (that which is visible is not, what is real has not yet appeared) (Ismaniyah, 2013: 9).

## CONCLUSION

The Javanese culture is one of the exotic pinnacles in human civilization that was built from local potential integrated with various new incoming beliefs. The Javanese have developed instinctively not only based on what they think but also on what they feel. The formulation of a vast array of experiences and life expectations is reflected in various symbols. The symbols in their works of art have been passed down to guide the wandering of the new “thoughts” and “feelings” of subsequent generations. The system of symbols in the Javanese culture is not an area for a structural study relying solely on logic and empirical truth; it is an area for exploring philosophical interpretation and metaphysical contemplation. The world of Javanese symbols is not something that is perceptible but has a potential spirit for realizing desires.

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