



Deconstructing Symbols and Meanings in the Kecak Dance

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ABSTRACT

Initially, tourists visited the village where the group resided to witness the Kecak dance. However, the dance's popularity grew, and it became a feature in various events. Tourists could now enjoy Kecak performances at destinations like Uluwatu, Tanah Lot, Batubulan, and others, which provided dedicated spaces for these performances. The Kecak dance, born out of creative cultural expression, became a unique art form showcased specifically for tourists. The choreography in Kecak dance is divided into five parts. In this choreography, all elements in the Kecak performance interact, creating a message directed to the audience. In dramaturgical analysis, it's important to note that Kecak Dance focuses on the aspects of performing arts. It is a dance highly specific to Balinese culture with unique characteristics reflecting their identity and cultural heritage. In the analysis of the staging of Kecak Dance using Symbolic Interactionism Theory, it portrays human life from a Hindu perspective consisting of Suka (joy), Duka (sorrow), Lara (pain), and Pati (death). The characters in Ramayana represent the qualities of protagonists and antagonists, which then interact with each other, giving rise to new universal values, such as Loyalty. Understanding the message in Kecak dance can be enhanced by increasing the involvement of tour guides as providers of additional information to tourists. Additionally, providing brochures containing synopses of the Ramayana story or the plot of Kecak dance in foreign languages during the performance can help the audience understand the presentation more easily, allowing the art to be fully appreciated.

Keywords: Symbols, Meanings, Kecak Dance.

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BACKGROUND

In the 1930s, Bali's tourism sector began to open up, attracting tourists intrigued by sacred dances. However, logistical challenges arose as these dances weren't performed at all times. In response, a German artist residing in Ubud, Walter Spies, envisioned creating a dance suitable for tourists. After witnessing the Sanghyang Jaran dance, a sacred ritual in Pura Goa Gajah, Bedulu, Gianyar, Walter Spies contacted I Wayan Limbak, a Balinese dancer. Together, they modified the Sang Hyang Jaran into the Kecak dance, initially involving 40 performers from Bedulu. The vocal composition "Cak cak cak" was introduced, chanted in unison. I Wayan Limbak, with Walter Spies, not only contributed to the vocal aspect but also diligently expanded the dance's movements. Over time, Kecak evolved from a simple performance to one incorporating various actions such as lying down, raising hands, and even simulated sleep. Another artist, I Gusti Kompyang Gelas from Bona Village, Gianyar

Regency, joined the group, spreading the Kecak dance to other regions. Its initial performance was in the village of Bona in Gianyar.^{1,2}

Initially, tourists visited the village where the group resided to witness the Kecak dance. However, the dance's popularity grew, and it became a feature in various events. Tourists could now enjoy Kecak performances at destinations like Uluwatu, Tanah Lot, Batubulan, and others, which provided dedicated spaces for these performances. The Kecak dance, born out of creative cultural expression, became a unique art form showcased specifically for tourists. Many Balinese villages embraced the Kecak dance, presenting it to tourists in places like Bona, Blangsinga, Kemenuh, Bedulu, Singapadu, Batubulan in Gianyar, Kedaton, Sanur, Sumerta, Bualu in Denpasar, and others. Consequently, the Kecak dance entered the market economy as an art commodity, buyable and sellable. This artistic creation ventured into the capitalist realm, promoted to tourists through advertising,

tour packages, and electronic media as a symbol of Bali's identity. The Kecak dance, particularly known for its Ramayana stories, meaningful movements, and distinctive costumes, communicates non-verbally through facial expressions, spatial arrangements, timing, movements, and costumes—all interconnected in the dance performance.³

Issues arise when the international commodification of the Kecak dance occurs, attracting diverse ethnicities worldwide to Bali and establishing it as a premier tourist destination. The Kecak dance becomes integral to Bali's identity in introducing its art to global tourists. The mass tourism packaging of the Kecak dance, however, brings about a loss of meaning, often overlooked by foreign tourists as communicators in the dance's message delivery process. This paper delves into the analysis of symbols in the Kecak dance, interpretations, and the communication process within Kecak performances as a facet of performing arts and a means of cultural expression.

Employing a semiotic approach to unveil symbols in the Kecak dance and utilizing Symbolic Convergence Theory and Dramaturgy Theory to comprehend how these symbols contribute to shaping messages for the communicators.

KECAK FROM THE LITERARY PERSPECTIVE

As per Erawati (2019), the Kecak dance initially comprised a male choir transforming vocals into a rhythmic energy emitted by each performer.⁵ This concept derived inspiration from the Sanghyang Jaran dance, a sacred ritual reserved for specific occasions to dispel plagues. The genesis of the Kecak dance traces back to the Sanghyang ritual in the Ramayana narrative. This ritual seeks to summon ancestral spirits and communicate with Sang Hyang Widhi, conveying the collective hopes of the community. Usually performed in an unconscious state, the dance serves as a medium to communicate with the divine, with its sacred aspects directed towards trance or masolah, representing a supernatural immunity to fire.

According to Seriasih (2019), the Kecak Dance, also known as the Fire Dance, serves as mass entertainment. Executed by numerous male dancers without the accompaniment of instruments like the gamelan, they form a circular pattern while chanting the rhythmic sounds of “cak, cak, cak” and raising their hands. The name “Kecak” is derived from this rhythmic chant. Apart from the “cak, cak, cak” chant, the dancers are accompanied by the jingling sound of ankle rattles tied to dancers playing Ramayana characters like Rama, Shinta, Rahwana, Hanoman, and Sugriwa. Seated in a circle, the dancers wear checkered cloth around their waists resembling a chessboard and are bare-chested. Within this circle, the dancers perform a series of dances depicting episodes from the Ramayana story, where a group of monkeys assists Rama in battling Rahwana to rescue Shinta from his clutches.⁶

SYMBOLS IN THE KECAK DANCE

Examining the costumes from a symbolic perspective, the Kecak dance attire carries



Figure 1. The Kecak dance, born out of creative cultural expression, became a unique art form showcased specifically for tourists.⁴

diverse meanings. The colors indicate social status or grandeur, while the patterns signify beliefs or cultural elements. Men encircling the bonfire wear traditional Balinese attire, including a sarong and sash with a black and white checkered pattern, complemented by ankle rattles. Dancers portraying Ramayana characters wear costumes resembling the characters they represent (Rama, Sita, and Hanoman). The attire for cak dancers uses poleng fabric in black, white, and gray, symbolizing the duality of human nature—good and bad. The black and white represent the Rwa Bhineda symbol, while gray serves as a harmonizing color.

Kecak dancers also wear a pamor, a white mark on their foreheads, signifying a connection to the Almighty to ensure an undisturbed performance. Shinta, the Kecak dancer, wears yellow and green, symbolizing peace and loyalty. Rama, represented in green, signifies wisdom and power. The laksamana dancer in yellow represents joy and cheerfulness. Rahwana, in red, symbolizes arrogance and aggression. Hanoman, in white, symbolizes the good-hearted monkey, and the costume represents a monkey. There are 6 main types of equipment and properties in the Kecak dance. Each property has different functions and uses. The first one is Firewood, Kecak dance is also known as the fire dance because one of the properties used in this dance is firewood made from coconut belts. In

this dance, there is a sacred attraction where dancers step on firewood barefoot. So, this attraction feels mystical, and the dancers do not feel pain while stepping on it. Second is Frangipani Flowers. Frangipani flowers are also tucked behind the ears of the Kecak dancers. Balinese people believe that frangipani flowers are tools for connecting with nature and are considered bringers of enlightenment and goodness. Next, the third is Jingling Bracelets. jingling bracelets tied to the wrists or ankles of the dancers as musical accompaniment because they produce beautiful and quite loud sounds. Kecak dancers must also use pamor, which is a white mark placed on the foreheads of the dancers. This signifies a connection to the Almighty so that when they perform, no supernatural beings disturb them.⁷

The fifth property is Shawl. Dancers sitting in a circle or accompanying the dance will wear a sarong or shawl in black and white, shaped like a chessboard. Of course, this shawl is not worn without meaning. The typical Bali shawl symbolizes the concept of Rwa Bhineda believed by the Balinese people. Last but not least, Offering Place. Bali is famous for its offerings, and we can find offerings anywhere. This includes in the Kecak dance, where offerings are used as properties that make the dance more sacred and mystical. Offerings themselves are believed to bring luck and ward off misfortune.^{8,9}

INTERPRETATION OF SYMBOLS IN THE KECAK DANCE DRAMA

Nonverbal communication in the Kecak dance holds unique and complex meanings. Here are some meanings of nonverbal communication in the Kecak dance performance. Hand movements in the Kecak dance convey various meanings, such as upward movements signifying a request, downward movements indicating rejection, and forward movements signifying invitation or urging. Facial expressions in the Kecak dance also carry diverse meanings; a smile indicates joy or agreement, while a frown signifies disagreement or anger.¹⁰

Furthermore, body movements in the Kecak dance also convey distinct meanings, such as body gestures toward someone signifying respect or admiration, and body movements directed outward indicating rejection or warning. Communication in Kecak Dance is a traditional dance originating from Bali, Indonesia. This dance possesses strong cultural and spiritual elements. Communication in Kecak Dance to the audience is usually mass-oriented and generally one-way. However, on some occasions, interactive activities with the audience are carried out in specific performances. As a dance rooted in the Sanghyang tradition, transcendental communication becomes a phenomenon in Kecak dance performances, although it is not a prerequisite in every presentation.¹¹

Transcendental communication refers to communication or interaction with the spiritual world or higher dimensions. In Kecak dance performances, transcendental communication usually occurs through movements, sounds, and rhythms produced by the dancers and the male choir sitting in a circle. They create the repetitive rhythmic sound “cak” that depicts the epic story of Ramayana. During the performance, dancers and the male choir create an atmosphere that connects the human world with the spiritual world. In certain scenes, dancers take on the roles of mythological characters such as Rama, Sita, or Hanuman. Through powerful and expressive dance movements, they communicate with these characters and the spiritual entities they represent. In specific moments, dancers may also experience trance or transcendence, entering a

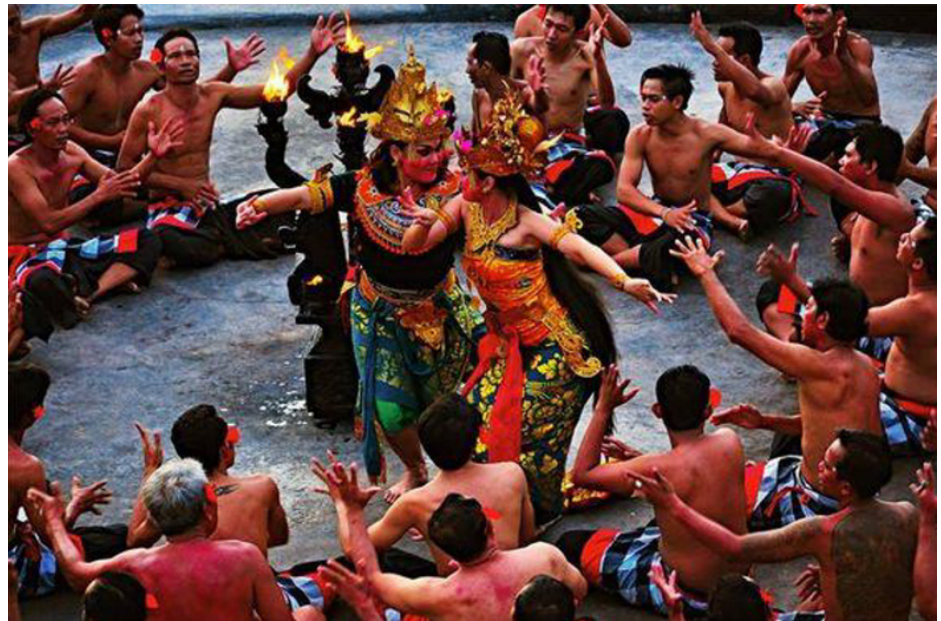


Figure 2. The Kecak dance, particularly known for its Ramayana stories, meaningful movements, and distinctive costumes, communicates non-verbally through facial expressions, spatial arrangements, timing, movements, and costumes.¹²

meditative state or connecting with spiritual energy. They can access spiritual power and radiate it through intense body movements and facial expressions. This results in transcendental communication between the dancer and the spiritual entities present in the performance.^{13,14}

Overall, transcendental communication in Kecak Dance creates an atmosphere that allows dancers and audiences to connect with the spiritual world, experience higher energy, and delve into deeper meanings of the mythological stories conveyed through this dance. Transcendental communication refers to a form of communication that goes beyond physical or material boundaries, connecting individuals with the spiritual or transcendent dimension.

DRAMATURGICAL ANALYSIS IN KECAK DANCE

Dramaturgical theory is a sociological theory developed by the prominent sociologist Erving Goffman, as explained in his book “Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” (1959). Goffman describes dramaturgy as the drama of life presented by humans. Dramatic situations seemingly happening on a stage serve as illustrations to depict individuals and their interactions

in everyday life. Kecak Dance is a traditional dance from Bali, Indonesia, known for the use of the vocalization “Cak” produced by a group of male dancers sitting in a circular formation. Although Kecak Dance is more recognized as a dance, several drama theories can be applied to its performance.

There are several dramatic components within Kecak Dance. From a Collaborative Perspective, Kecak Dance involves collaboration among a large group of male dancers. They must work harmoniously to create coordinated vocal patterns and movements. Collaborative drama theory emphasizes the importance of teamwork and harmony in creating a strong and effective performance. Then, from a Movement Perspective, movements in Kecak Dance are crucial. Dancers portray characters, stories, and emotions through their body movements. Movement drama theory focuses on physical expression and body language as means of communication in drama. Dancers in Kecak Dance must be sensitive to the movements they produce to communicate the story and emotions to the audience.¹⁵

From a Narrative Perspective, Kecak Dance typically depicts stories from the Ramayana, such as Rama’s journey in search of Sita. Narrative drama theory relates to the story structure, characters,

and plot of the performance. In Kecak Dance, the audience can follow the story presented by dancers through movements, vocalization, and interactions between characters. Furthermore, from a Ritualistic Perspective, Kecak Dance has roots in the beliefs and religious practices of Bali. This performance is often linked to rituals and religious ceremonies, such as the Kecak ceremony in Hindu temples. Ritualistic drama theory views drama as a form of ritual with spiritual or religious purposes. In Kecak Dance, ritualistic aspects may be reflected in the use of music, movements, and vocalization to create an experience that evokes a sense of grandeur and sacredness. It's essential to note that Kecak Dance itself focuses more on the performing arts aspect than formal drama theory. It is a dance highly specific to Balinese culture with unique characteristics reflecting their identity and cultural heritage.¹⁷

According to George Herbert Mead, symbolic interactionism theory involves social interaction occurring through the use of symbols that have meaning. These symbols can create meaning that triggers social interaction between individuals. For example, symbolic interactionism theory in everyday life is when we are shopping, and there are attendants offering various products. Therefore, in this situation, we position ourselves as consumers. This interaction gives meaning to a role and activity for each individual. In a Kecak dance performance consisting of five parts, including the part when Shinta is first abducted, the second part when Shinta is being abducted by Rahwana and Hanoman appears, the third part when Rama approaches Rahwana's kingdom, the fourth part when the war has begun, and the fifth part when Rama wins the war and successfully saves Shinta, each part has its own meanings conveyed through facial expressions and movements.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion of symbols and meanings in the Kecak Dance, it can be concluded that Kecak Dance is a form of Performance Dance (*Balih-Balihan*) as it can be performed without being bound by sacred space and time. However, it should be acknowledged that Kecak Dance has a

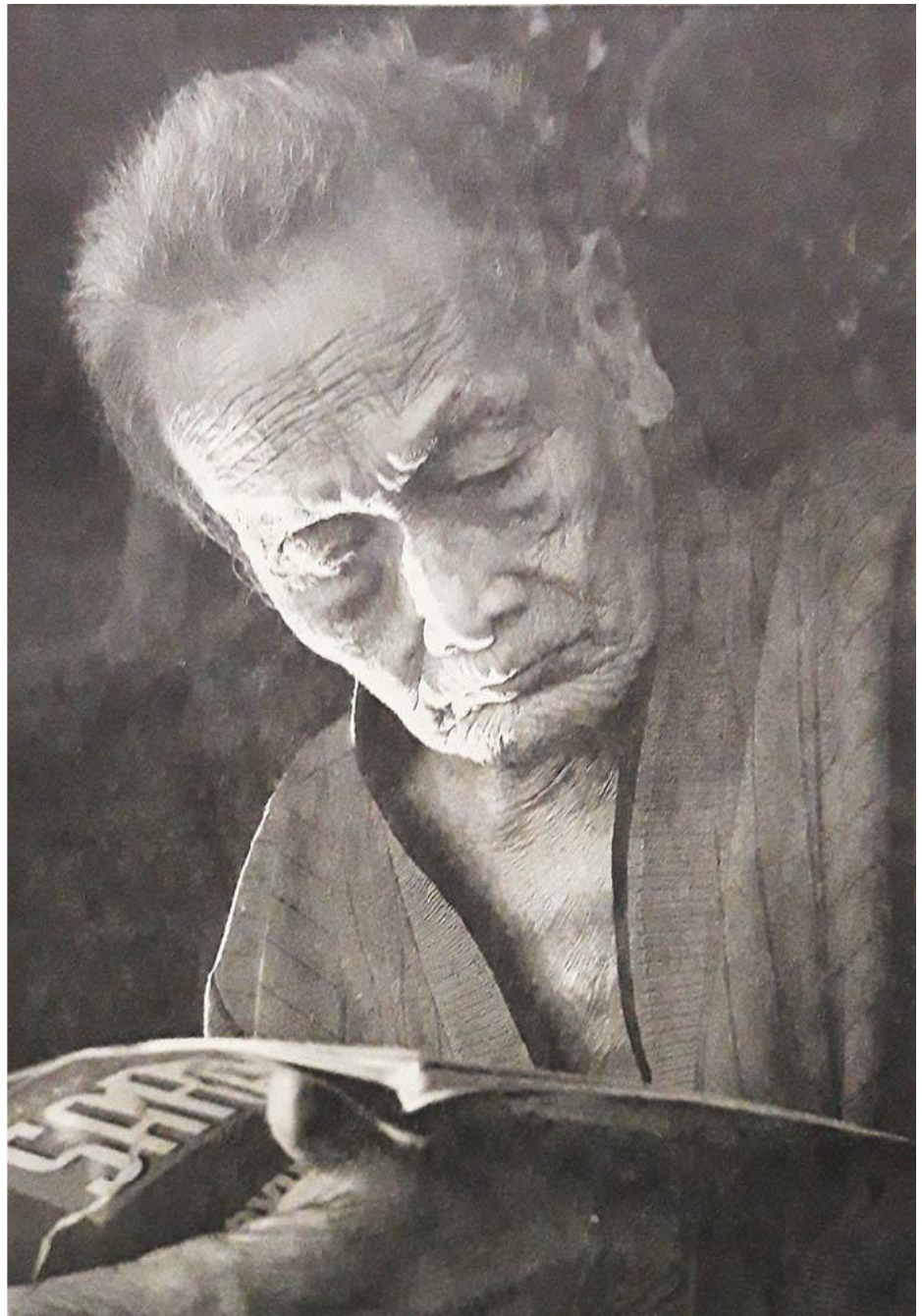


Figure 3. I Wayan Limbak, the choreographer of Cak Dance.¹⁶

strong connection with Sanghyang Jaran Dance, as it originated as a sacred dance that later transformed into a profane art form. In the performance of Kecak dance, there are nonverbal symbols that can be observed from the color of the costumes, makeup, expressions, movements, and other supporting properties in its presentation. The choreography in Kecak dance is divided into five parts. In this choreography, all elements in the Kecak performance interact, creating a message

directed to the audience. In dramaturgical analysis, it's important to note that Kecak Dance focuses on the aspects of performing arts. It is a dance highly specific to Balinese culture with unique characteristics reflecting their identity and cultural heritage. In the analysis of the staging of Kecak Dance using Symbolic Interactionism Theory, it portrays human life from a Hindu perspective consisting of *Suka* (joy), *Duka* (sorrow), *Lara* (pain), and *Pati* (death). The characters in Ramayana

represent the qualities of protagonists and antagonists, which then interact with each other, giving rise to new universal values, such as Loyalty. Understanding the message in Kecak dance can be enhanced by increasing the involvement of tour guides as providers of additional information to tourists. Additionally, providing brochures containing synopses of the Ramayana story or the plot of Kecak dance in foreign languages during the performance can help the audience understand the presentation more easily, allowing the art to be fully appreciated.

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