

Narratives of Wantilan, Meaning, and Social Interaction in The Wayang Kulit *Bagong Gendro* Performance and The Film *Punokawan*

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Abstract

This study explores the comparative representation of Punakawan characters in two different media: the *Porongan-style wayang kulit* performance *Bagong Gendro* by Ki Suwoto Gozali, and the film *Punokawan* directed by Andi Fikri. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, the research reveals both denotative and connotative meanings in *wantilan* (character-specific expressions) as a cultural sign system that encodes myths about sexuality, the origin of life, humor, and social values in East Javanese society. In the wayang performance, bodily symbolism and sexual references function as philosophical metaphors for life. Meanwhile, in the film, Petruk and Bagong appear as egalitarian and humorous figures, reflecting the open and intimate communication style of the Sidoarjo community. The study concludes that both traditional performances and contemporary films act as vehicles for conveying myths and social ideologies, adapted to their respective cultural contexts.

Keywords: Porongan Wayang, Punakawan, Film, Roland Barthes' Semiotics, Myth, East Javanese Culture

1. Introduction

Wayang kulit (shadow puppetry) is a traditional performing art that serves not only as entertainment but also as a rich medium of symbolic expression and cultural narrative. One particularly noteworthy variant is the *gagrak Porongan style* from Sidoarjo, East Java, which has developed independently, outside the dominant influence of the Surakarta and Yogyakarta courts. This style is characterized by its use of regional language, visual distinctiveness of puppets, and localized storytelling that resonates with the egalitarian spirit of coastal communities. A prominent example from this style is the performance of *Bagong Gendro* by *Ki Suwoto Gozali*, which places the Punakawan characters—traditionally side figures—at the center of the narrative.

The Punakawan, usually portrayed as comic relief or philosophical advisors in classical *wayang* tales, experience a significant shift in function within *Bagong Gendro*. Here, Bagong is no longer merely a jester but emerges as a defender of justice, striving to help Dewi Srikandi who is caught in a troubling situation. This narrative transformation becomes even more

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compelling when compared with the film "*Punokawan*" by Andi Fikri, which focuses on *Petruk*, another member of the Punakawan, as he grapples with existential and social challenges in a contemporary setting. Both works offer reinterpretations of the Punakawan figures, shaped by their respective mediums—traditional stage and film—and reflect evolving layers of meaning.

To explore these shifting meanings, this study adopts the semiotic approach of Roland Barthes. Barthes conceptualizes signs as a relationship between the signifier and the signified, and introduces the notion of *myth* as a second-order semiotic system (Barthes, 2007). Within this framework, the Punakawan are not merely fictional characters, but also cultural signs that carry ideological significance. A Barthesian analysis, therefore, provides a deeper reading of how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and mythologized in both traditional and contemporary cultural texts.

This research aims to examine how the symbolic meanings of the Punakawan—particularly Bagong and Petruk—are reimagined in two distinct mediums, and how the process of myth-making unfolds within both traditional performance and modern film. By comparing these two forms of representation, the study seeks to uncover broader insights into the transformation of symbolic meaning within Indonesia's evolving cultural landscape.

More specifically, this study will examine three main aspects: *wantilan* (distinctive verbal expressions), the messages conveyed, and the social relationships among characters in both works. *Wantilan* refers to the habitual phrases or signature expressions consistently spoken by certain characters, serving as linguistic identity markers and character traits. In the *Bagong Gendro* performance by Ki Suwoto Gozali, for example, the character Semar always opens his speech with the phrase "*Mlegegeg ugeg-ugeg*," while Begawan Drona typically begins with "*Poprong-poprong, waluh gembol monyor-monyor*." These expressions not only strengthen character portrayals but also reflect the distinctive oral aesthetics of wayang kulit gagrak Porongan, setting it apart from the courtly wayang traditions of Surakarta and Yogyakarta.

In contrast, in the film "*Punokawan*" by Andi Fikri, the form of *wantilan* shifts to reflect the colloquial speech of contemporary Javanese society, especially among younger generations. The character Petruk often opens his lines with phrases like "*Sik ya, rek*" ("Wait a sec, friend") or "*Sekedhap nggih*" ("Just a moment, please"), capturing the tone of modern East Javanese everyday conversation. Meanwhile, Bagong in the film plays the role of comic relief and emotional support, frequently teasing and entertaining Petruk when he is feeling down. The social relationship between these two characters reveals a close emotional bond, while also illustrating values of friendship within a modern context.

Through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, this study will analyze how *wantilan*, interpersonal dynamics, and ideological messages function as signs that form layers of myth. By comparing traditional stage performance and contemporary cinematic expressions, this research aims to reveal how the symbolic meanings embedded in the Punakawan characters are continually negotiated, inherited, and transformed in response to changing times and media forms.

2. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using the method of semiological analysis based on the theory of Roland Barthes. According to Barthes, semiology is the study of signs in social life, which does not stop at literal meaning (denotation), but also investigates connotative or mythical meanings—the ideological structures that operate beneath seemingly

natural signs. As Barthes (2007) stated, “*myth is a type of speech*”, a form of communication that cloaks cultural meanings within systems of signs that appear ordinary or self-evident.

Within this framework, both the traditional wayang performance and the contemporary film are seen as cultural texts that produce signs through language, symbols, and visuals, carrying particular social meanings. A sign, according to Barthes, consists of a *signifier* and *signified*, and when lifted to a second level, forms a *myth*—a constructed meaning shaped by ideological forces (Barthes, 2007; Chandler, 2007).

The objects analyzed in this study are: The Porongan-style Wayang Kulit performance titled *Bagong Gendro* by Ki Suwoto Gozali, analyzed through video documentation and character dialogues; the film “Punokawan” by Andi Fikri, examined through script analysis, visual elements, and the character dynamics, particularly between Petruk and Bagong.

The analysis follows Barthes' semiological method as outlined in Barthes (2007) and Chandler (2007), consisting of: Identification of key signs in both texts, including *wantilan* (verbal expressions), character interactions, and visual cues; Denotative analysis, which interprets the literal or surface meaning of the expressions, actions, or visuals; Connotative or mythological analysis, which uncovers the symbolic or ideological meanings, such as representations of resistance, humor, class, or cultural transformation; Comparative analysis between the two media: examining how each medium constructs and transforms meaning differently, reflecting shifts in sociocultural context.

3. Results and Discussion

A. *Wantilan* as a System of Signs in Porongan-style Wayang Kulit

The *Porongan-style wayang kulit* performance by Ki Suwoto Gozali showcases a distinctive use of spoken language, especially through *wantilan*—recurring phrases or expressions that serve as markers of character identity and convey symbolic messages. In the context of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory (2007), these utterances operate not only at the denotative level, but also at the connotative or mythical level, revealing embedded ideologies related to culture, sexuality, and the origins of life. The following are three key *wantilan* expressions identified and analyzed from the performance:

“*Acoh bopong, lole-lole pring gantil buntute napa?*” Literally translated as “*Acoh bopong, my child, my child, a single bamboo stalk with a tail, what is that?*”—this phrase is delivered in a humorous tone by a Punakawan character but symbolically refers to male identity. The bamboo stalk with a tail metaphorically represents the male genitalia, locally known as *peler*. Within Barthes' framework (2007), this expression becomes a second-order system—a *myth*—where the bamboo is no longer just a plant, but a signifier of masculinity, identity, and the male generative symbol. The utterance naturalizes gender identity through a symbol rooted in local culture. As Barthes states, “*myth transforms history into nature*” (2007, p. 129), and in this case, the cultural significance of gender becomes naturalized through metaphor.

“*Oweloho oweloho, waluh gembol monyor-monyor?*” This can be translated as: “*Oweloho oweloho, a gourd tucked inside the shirt, bulging and round?*” Connotatively, it refers to women's breasts, which remain visible even when covered. The expression, although suggestive, is delivered with comedic flair and metaphorical nuance. The deeper meaning points to female fertility and femininity, both essential themes in Javanese agrarian culture. Barthes notes that “*myth is speech stolen and restored*” (2007, p. 131), in that bodily features

once considered private or taboo are transformed into symbols of pride and life-giving power within this cultural performance.

"*Gedebok bosoh konyor-konyor, jember kiwer-kiwer, ula blus enake blus*" This phrase explicitly describes sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. However, in the performance, it is not framed as vulgar or indecent, but rather as a symbol of creation and human origin. According to Ki Suwoto Gozali, this act is "a sacred event" that should be respected, not considered taboo. Barthes asserts that myth "inoculates the real with the clarity of the natural" (2007, p. 142). In this sense, sexuality is framed as part of the cosmic order—not merely a biological act, but a cultural and spiritual event that gives birth to life. This kind of expression is a local cosmogonic narrative—a story of the origin of life told through symbols and metaphor.

B. Symbolism, Sexuality, and the Myth of Life

The three *wantilan* expressions above reveal how Porongan-style wayang kulit uses humor, bodily imagery, and wordplay to deliver philosophical teachings on life, gender, and fertility. Unlike the more refined and formal courtly styles (Surakarta/Yogyakarta), the Porongan tradition is open, egalitarian, and rooted in the vernacular.

Through Barthes' semiotic lens, these *wantilan* are not merely entertaining speech but are mythical signs that encode local ideologies and philosophical views. As Barthes puts it, "myth is depoliticized speech—it naturalizes what is historical" (2007, p. 143). Topics like sex, the body, and birth—often avoided in formal discourse—are reframed in this context as central, even sacred, elements of human existence.

C. Character and Speaking Style in the Film Punokawan

The film *Punokawan* by Andi Fikri presents the characters Petruk and Bagong with a lighthearted, expressive, and humorous style. Petruk is portrayed as a cheerful, enthusiastic, but sometimes clumsy character, while Bagong is simple and witty, often responding to Petruk's concerns with comedic remarks that lighten the mood. Their interaction reflects the open and humorous character of East Javanese society, particularly in Sidoarjo.

The following dialogue illustrates this dynamic:

Petruk: "I'm really confused, bro. Ningsih wants to get married soon."

Bagong: "Hahaha! You, Truk, getting married? You can't even walk straight without hitting a pole, let alone plan a wedding! Hahaha, you might even say the wrong name during the vows!"

Petruk: "Well, you're right. I've been thinking of it all as a joke. But you're right, too. What matters is that I'm ready to take responsibility and make Ningsih happy."

Bagong: "But Truk, don't forget! On the big day, stay focused. Don't end up marrying the wrong person! Hahaha!"

At the denotative level, this dialogue simply depicts a man feeling pressured by an impending wedding, while his friend offers light-hearted teasing. However, at the connotative level, this exchange becomes a cultural sign that represents a typical form of social communication in Sidoarjo and East Java—where emotional openness is often channeled through humor, jokes, and casual conversation.

Barthes' Semiotic Analysis: From Sign to Myth. According to Barthes (2007), myth is a form of speech composed of three components: Signifier: the form (e.g., words, expressions, visuals), Signified: the literal meaning of that form, Myth: the cultural or ideological meaning behind the sign.

In the dialogue above, the humorous exchange between Petruk and Bagong constructs a myth of emotional support and communal resilience through humor. Comedy becomes a

cultural tool for processing psychological burdens and restoring emotional balance. Barthes wrote that, “*Myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things*” (Barthes, 2007, p. 110). In other words, this type of open and playful communication is not random—it reflects a deeply rooted social construction in Javanese daily life.

Sidoarjo–East Java’s Social Interaction Style. East Javanese society, especially in coastal and urban areas such as Sidoarjo, is known for being egalitarian, direct, emotionally expressive, and humorous (Koentjaraningrat, 2002; Mulder, 1994). The Petruk–Bagong dynamic demonstrates a horizontal, non-hierarchical communication style, where emotional expression is not restricted by formalities or social rank. “In East Javanese communities, especially in coastal and tapal kuda regions like Sidoarjo, people are more direct, outspoken, and less formal compared to the refined, hierarchical style of Central Java.” (Mulder, 1994, p. 63)

Therefore, Punokawan offers a reimagining of the traditional Punokawan characters—not merely as court jesters, but as representatives of everyday people, who resolve their issues through friendship, honesty, and humor. These values resonate strongly with the contemporary social fabric of East Java.

4. Conclusion

The *wantilan* expressions found in the *Bagong Gendro* performance do more than reinforce character through speech; they form a system of signs rich in symbolic and mythological meaning. Ki Suwoto Gozali, through his storytelling style, conveys deep themes of life, sexuality, and human existence in a way that is both communicative and culturally resonant. Through Barthes’ semiotic analysis, we can conclude that these *wantilan* operate as living myths, continuously shaping and preserving local wisdom through the medium of traditional performance.

Through Barthes’ semiotic lens, the comedic interaction between Petruk and Bagong is more than simple entertainment—it is a system of signs that reflects the social identity of East Javanese society. Humor and teasing are symbols of emotional closeness, social bonding, and shared resilience—making them vital tools in how problems are discussed and digested within this cultural context.

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