

# THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF DANCE MOVEMENTS IN THE BELIAN RITUAL IN NORTH PETAJAM PASER REGENCY: A ROLAND BARTHES SEMIOTIC STUDY

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## Abstract

The Belian Ritual is a traditional healing ritual practiced by the Paser ethnic community in North Petajam Paser Regency, combining spiritual, social, and cultural elements. One of the main components of this ritual is dance movement, which functions not only as an aesthetic expression but also as a medium of symbolic communication containing the cultural values and beliefs of the community. This study aims to describe the forms of dance movements and analyze the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings contained in the dance movements of the Belian Ritual based on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive method. Data were obtained through observation, in-depth interviews, documentation, and literature review. The research informants consisted of belian (ritual leaders), traditional leaders, cultural practitioners, and members of the community who support and participate in the Belian Ritual. Data analysis was conducted using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model and subsequently interpreted through Roland Barthes' concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth. The results show that the dance movements in the Belian Ritual consist of several main forms that function as a medium for healing, paying respect to ancestors, seeking protection and safety, and maintaining a balanced relationship between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm. At the denotative level, the movements are interpreted as a sequence of bodily movements performed during the ritual procession. At the connotative level, the movements contain symbolic meanings that represent the spiritual and cultural values of the Paser community. At the mythical level, the dance movements construct collective beliefs concerning cosmic harmony, the legitimacy of the belian as a spiritual mediator, and the Belian Ritual as a means of restoring the balance of life. This study demonstrates that Roland Barthes' semiotic theory is capable of comprehensively revealing the symbolic meanings of dance movements and contributes to the development of performing arts studies and the preservation of the intangible cultural heritage of the Paser ethnic community.

**Keywords:** Belian Ritual, dance movements, symbolic meaning, Roland Barthes' semiotics

## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country characterized by extensive cultural diversity. This diversity can be observed through languages, customs, belief systems, arts, traditional ceremonies, and various forms of cultural practices passed down from one generation to the next. Culture serves not only as the identity of a particular community but also as a guideline for social life. In many traditional communities, cultural practices are closely connected to the ways in which people understand their environment, human beings, ancestors, and forces that exist beyond everyday life. One form of culture that demonstrates these interconnected relationships is traditional ritual practice. Traditional rituals are essentially more than ceremonial activities performed based on customary practices. They encompass a set of rules, symbols, actions, and values that are understood by the communities that practice them. From an anthropological perspective, rituals can be understood as symbolic processes that function to maintain a balanced relationship between humans, nature, ancestors, and spiritual forces (Turner, 1969). Therefore, the elements contained within a ritual have interconnected functions and meanings. Bodily movements, music, chants, costumes, properties, and the use of space can serve as signs that convey particular messages to members of the community who understand the cultural system.

One traditional ritual that is still practiced by the Paser ethnic community is the Belian Ritual in North Petajam Paser Regency, East Kalimantan. The Belian Ritual is known as a healing tradition that combines spiritual, social, and cultural elements. In its implementation, the ritual is led by a belian, accompanied by various supporting elements such as chants, music, costumes, properties, and dance movements. These elements cannot be separated

from one another, as each contributes to establishing the atmosphere and structure of the ritual. Dance movement is one of the important elements of the Belian Ritual. The movements performed by the ritual practitioners are not merely bodily movements with aesthetic value, but also constitute a form of symbolic communication. Certain movements are performed at specific stages of the ritual, accompanied by music and chants, and are closely related to the objectives of the ritual. Through these movements, the community expresses prayers for protection, respect for ancestors, hopes for healing, and the desire to maintain harmonious relationships between humans, the environment, and the spiritual realm.

The presence of movement within the ritual demonstrates that the human body can serve as a medium for conveying cultural messages. Movements that appear physically simple may possess broader meanings when placed within the cultural context of the Paser community. Footsteps, stomping, hand movements, body movements, body rotations, the sounds of bracelets, and floor patterns can all be understood as signs. The meaning of these signs is determined not only by the form of the movements but also by the circumstances in which they are performed, who performs them, and how the community interprets them. Amid the ongoing process of modernization, the understanding of the symbolic meanings of dance movements in the Belian Ritual has begun to shift. Ritual movements tend to be understood merely as a series of traditions passed down from generation to generation without an understanding of the cultural messages and philosophical values they embody. This shift in understanding may pose a challenge to cultural preservation, as the continuity of a tradition depends not only on the repetition of its forms but also on the ability of subsequent generations to understand the reasons, values, and meanings underlying these practices.

In addition, previous studies on the Belian Ritual have predominantly focused on ethnographic aspects, social functions, and ritual music, whereas studies specifically examining dance movements as a cultural sign system remain very limited. This condition indicates the need to explore the symbolic meanings of dance movements in greater depth. Such a study is important because dance movements can serve as an entry point for understanding how the Paser community constructs and maintains a system of meaning within the ritual. Roland Barthes' semiotic approach is considered relevant for examining this phenomenon because it is capable of revealing meaning at multiple levels. Barthes distinguishes meaning through the concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the direct meaning or what is visibly represented by a sign. Connotation refers to additional meanings that emerge based on experiences, values, and cultural associations. Meanwhile, myth refers to the process through which certain cultural meanings become collectively accepted beliefs and appear as something natural or self-evident (Barthes, 1968, 1972). From this perspective, the dance movements in the Belian Ritual can be interpreted as a series of cultural signs. At the first level, the researcher can describe the concrete forms of the movements. At the subsequent level, these forms are associated with the spiritual and cultural values that exist within the Paser community. Furthermore, the interpretation can be directed toward the collective beliefs formed through ritual practices that are repeatedly performed. Thus, Barthes' theory can help explain the relationship between the forms of dance movements and the community's belief system.

Several previous studies have applied Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to analyze the symbolic meanings of dance movements, such as the study by Basri and Sari (2019) on the Remo Dance and Fajri et al. (2023) on the Bedug Kerok performance. However, no study has specifically analyzed the dance movements in the Belian Ritual of the Paser community using Roland Barthes' framework of denotation, connotation, and myth. This research gap provides an important basis for conducting the present study. Based on the foregoing discussion, this study aims to describe the forms of dance movements and analyze the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings contained in the dance movements of the Belian Ritual in North Penajam Paser Regency. This study is expected to enrich semiotic studies in the field of performing arts, document knowledge concerning ritual dance movements, and contribute to the preservation of the local cultural heritage of the Paser community.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive method. The qualitative approach was used because the study focuses on understanding the meanings, experiences, and cultural contexts embedded in the dance movements of the Belian Ritual. Symbolic meanings cannot be adequately explained solely through numerical measurements; rather, they need to be understood based on information obtained through observations of ritual practices and explanations provided by individuals who possess knowledge of and participate in the tradition. The descriptive method was employed to provide a systematic description of the forms of dance movements and the meanings contained within them. The description focuses not only on the visible bodily movements but also on the context in which the movements are performed. Thus, the study seeks to describe the relationship between the forms

of movement, stages of the ritual, music, chants, costumes, properties, and the space in which the ritual is performed, so that the resulting interpretation remains within the context of the Belian Ritual.

The research was conducted in North Penajam Paser Regency, East Kalimantan, which is an area where the Belian Ritual is practiced as part of the cultural heritage of the Paser ethnic community. The research site was selected based on the existence of the Belian Ritual practice and its relevance to the objectives of the study. This location provides the social and cultural context necessary to understand dance movements as an integral part of the ritual system. The research data consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through field observations and in-depth interviews with the belian as the ritual leader, traditional leaders, cultural practitioners, and other individuals with knowledge of the implementation of the Belian Ritual. The primary data served as the basis for identifying the forms of dance movements and obtaining explanations regarding the meanings attributed to these movements by the community.

Secondary data were obtained from various sources, including literature, documents, archives, photographs, and audiovisual recordings related to the Belian Ritual and Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. Secondary data were used as supporting materials to strengthen the understanding of the research object and the theoretical framework employed. The use of secondary sources also assisted the researcher in situating the research findings within the broader context of performing arts and cultural studies. Data collection techniques included observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted by examining the forms of dance movements, ritual structure, use of properties, music, costumes, and the context in which the ritual was performed. The observations were conducted to obtain an understanding of the movements as they occurred in actual practice, including patterns of repetition, movement directions, bodily activities, and the relationship between the movements and other ritual elements.

In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. This technique provided informants with opportunities to explain their experiences and understanding of the Belian Ritual more extensively. The interviews focused on the forms and functions of the movements, their symbolic meanings, the relationship between the movements and the stages of the ritual, and the beliefs underlying their performance. The information obtained was subsequently used to assist in interpreting the signs at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth. Documentation was used to supplement the data in the form of photographs, videos, documents, and field notes that supported the analysis process. Documentation is particularly important in research on movement because movement is a phenomenon that takes place over a specific period of time. Notes and recordings can assist the researcher in recalling the forms of movement and the context in which they were performed during the analysis process.

Data analysis was conducted interactively through the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, as proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). During the data reduction stage, data related to the forms and meanings of the movements were selected and categorized. Data that were not directly relevant to the focus of the study were not included as a primary component of the interpretation. During the data display stage, information concerning the forms of movement and their meanings was systematically organized so that the relationship between the field data and the theoretical framework could be clearly identified. Subsequently, conclusions were drawn based on the patterns identified in the data. The interpretation was then conducted using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory through three levels of meaning, namely denotation, connotation, and myth.

Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and technique triangulation by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from the belian, traditional leaders, cultural practitioners, and members of the supporting community. Meanwhile, technique triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained through observation, interviews, and documentation, thereby ensuring that the data used in the analysis were reliable and accountable.

## RESULTS



The findings of the study indicate that dance movements in the Belian Ritual constitute an integral part of the healing ritual practiced by the Paser ethnic community in North Penajam Paser Regency. The ritual movements function not only as aesthetic expressions but also as a medium of symbolic communication that connects humans with ancestors, nature, and spiritual forces. Therefore, the presence of movement cannot be separated from the objectives and structure of the Belian Ritual. The forms of movement identified include the opening movement (ngarang), foot stomping (ngengka), movements that produce the sound of bracelets (rekesekek), as well as various hand, foot, and body movements and circular floor patterns performed repeatedly in accordance with the accompaniment of ritual music and chants. Each form of movement occurs within a specific context and is related to the stages of the Belian Ritual.

The opening movement (ngarang) holds an important position as it constitutes part of the initial sequence of ritual movements. At the denotative level, this movement can be observed as a bodily activity that marks the beginning of a particular sequence. However, within the ritual context, the opening movement also indicates readiness to enter the ritual space and atmosphere. Thus, the observable form of the movement acquires additional meaning when associated with the overall structure of the ritual procession. The foot-stomping movement (ngengka) is a form of movement that emphasizes foot activity and bodily rhythm. Visually, this movement can be understood as a foot movement performed with a certain degree of force or emphasis. The presence of stomping within the ritual sequence demonstrates that the body and rhythm play an important role in creating the ritual atmosphere. When performed together with music and chants, the movement becomes part of a broader form of symbolic communication.

The rekesekek movement produces sounds through the bracelets or properties used during the ritual. At the denotative level, the sign takes the form of bodily movement that produces sound. However, the sound that emerges simultaneously with the movement adds another dimension to the ritual performance. Movement and sound become an integrated whole that strengthens the atmosphere of the ritual procession and demonstrates that ritual properties function not merely as visual accessories but also participate in the construction of signs. In addition to these forms of movement, there are hand, foot, and body movements, as well as circular floor patterns that are performed repeatedly. Repetition indicates the existence of regularity in the performance of the ritual. The circular patterns also demonstrate that the use of space constitutes part of the movement structure. Therefore, the interpretation of movement needs to consider the body and space simultaneously, as both contribute to the formation of symbolic messages.

At the denotative level, dance movements are understood as a sequence of physical activities that are visibly performed during the ritual procession, such as footsteps, hand movements, body rotations, the use of ritual properties, and floor patterns surrounding the ritual space. At this stage, the researcher focuses on what can be directly observed and described without providing further cultural interpretation (Barthes, 1977). Denotation constitutes an important stage because it provides the foundation for subsequent interpretation. Before interpreting a particular movement as a symbol of protection, purification, respect, or healing, the physical form of the movement must first

be identified. In this way, the analysis can distinguish between the description of the movement and the cultural meaning attributed to it by the community.

At the connotative level, each movement contains cultural and spiritual meanings believed by the Paser community. These movements symbolize prayers for protection, processes of self-purification, respect for ancestors, the invocation of supernatural forces, and hopes for healing and balance in life. These meanings do not emerge automatically from the forms of movement but are constructed through the experiences and cultural system of the community (Barthes, 1972). Connotation demonstrates that a movement may have different meanings when placed within different cultural contexts. In the Belian Ritual, movements acquire meaning because the community associates them with the purpose of healing and spiritual relationships. Therefore, dance movements can function as a medium of communication that conveys messages without necessarily relying on verbal language.

At the mythical level, the study found that the continuous repetition of ritual movements constructs collective beliefs within the community concerning a harmonious relationship between humans, nature, and the spiritual world. Dance movements are no longer understood merely as ritual activities but also as representations of cultural values that legitimize the position of the belian as a spiritual mediator and reinforce the belief that healing can be achieved through cosmic balance (Barthes, 1972). In Barthes' understanding, myth is not merely a traditional story but a way in which a culture makes certain meanings appear natural and accepted as something normal or self-evident. In the Belian Ritual, the repeated practice and community acceptance of the meanings attributed to the movements demonstrate how cultural beliefs are maintained. Thus, dance movements become part of the mechanism through which cultural values are reproduced from one generation to the next.

Overall, the findings of the study confirm that dance movements in the Belian Ritual constitute a cultural sign system containing multiple layers of meaning. These meanings include literal, cultural, spiritual, and collective-belief dimensions. The semiotic analysis based on Roland Barthes' theory demonstrates that movement does not merely convey visual forms but also reflects the worldview of the Paser community. These findings reinforce the position of the Belian Ritual as a cultural heritage of significant value for preserving local cultural identity. Understanding movement as a sign can help communities and researchers recognize that the dance elements within the ritual embody cultural knowledge that needs to be documented and transmitted to future generations. Therefore, the study of movement is not only of academic importance but is also relevant to the cultural sustainability of the Paser ethnic community.

## **DISCUSSION**

Dance movements in the Belian Ritual cannot be understood merely as a sequence of aesthetic movements but rather as a system of signs containing religious, social, and cultural meanings. Each movement performed during the ritual procession has a specific function corresponding to the stages of the ritual, thereby forming a symbolic structure that represents the relationship between humans, nature, ancestors, and the spiritual world. This finding reinforces the view that ritual dance serves as a medium of cultural communication through which the values, beliefs, and identity of the supporting community are conveyed (Hadi, 2007; Turner, 1969).

In the context of the Belian Ritual, the body serves as the primary medium for conveying symbolic messages. Foot, hand, and body movements, along with the use of ritual properties, form a nonverbal language that is understood through the community's cultural system. This demonstrates that communication within the ritual does not occur solely through chants or verbal expressions but also through bodily actions performed according to specific patterns. Movement becomes significant because it is capable of connecting physical experience with spiritual beliefs. The relationship between movement and other ritual elements is also an important aspect of the discussion. Movements performed simultaneously with music and chants create a context that facilitates the interpretation of the signs. Costumes and properties further reinforce the identity of the performers and the atmosphere of the ritual. Thus, dance movements do not stand alone as an artistic form but constitute part of an interconnected ritual performance system.

The analysis using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory demonstrates that the meaning of dance movements operates through three levels of signification, namely denotation, connotation, and myth. These three levels do not exist independently but form a gradual relationship. Denotation provides the basic form of the sign, connotation assigns cultural values to the sign, while myth demonstrates how cultural meanings develop into collective beliefs. At the denotative level, movement is understood as a physical activity that is visibly performed during the ritual, such as footsteps, hand movements, body rotations, the use of properties, and floor patterns. This meaning is descriptive because it represents the form of movement as observed during the ritual procession (Barthes, 1977).

This stage is important to provide the researcher with a clear basis for distinguishing the form of movement from the interpretation of its meaning.

At the connotative level, movement acquires meaning based on the value system of the Paser community. Movements that physically take the form of steps, stomping, swinging, or rotations can be understood as symbols of respect for ancestors, self-purification, prayers for protection, healing, and efforts to maintain a balanced relationship between humans and spiritual forces (Barthes, 1972). This demonstrates that the meaning of movement is constructed through the cultural experiences of the community. This connotative interpretation also demonstrates that the Belian Ritual has a social dimension. When the community understands and accepts the symbols used in the ritual, a shared body of knowledge is established, enabling the ritual process to continue. Movement becomes one of the means through which ritual practitioners and the supporting community are brought together through a shared cultural experience.

At the mythical level, the study found that the continuous repetition of ritual movements has shaped collective beliefs that are accepted as cultural truths by the Paser community. Dance movements are understood not merely as elements of a performance but as a medium possessing spiritual power that supports the healing process and maintains cosmic harmony. From Barthes' perspective (1972), myth operates by naturalizing cultural constructions so that they appear normal and self-evident. The belief in the position of the belian as a spiritual mediator constitutes an important aspect of this mythological interpretation. The belian is not merely regarded as a person who performs the movements but holds a particular position within the ritual structure. This position gains legitimacy through ritual practices that are repeatedly performed and accepted by the community. Thus, dance movements also contribute to the formation of representations concerning the role of the belian in the ritual process.

The belief in the importance of maintaining balance among humans, nature, and the supernatural world also demonstrates that the Belian Ritual embodies a holistic worldview. Humans are not positioned as independent entities but as part of a broader network of relationships. The movements repeatedly performed within the ritual space become representations of efforts to maintain these relationships. Therefore, movement symbols can be understood as part of the community's way of perceiving life and balance. This study also demonstrates that dance movements function as a medium for transmitting cultural knowledge across generations. Through the repeated performance of the ritual, the community not only preserves the forms of movement but also transmits religious values, social solidarity, respect for ancestors, and the cultural identity of the Paser ethnic community. This transmission process takes place through direct experience and community participation in cultural practices.

These findings are consistent with Schechner's (2006) view that ritual constitutes restored behavior, namely cultural behavior that is repeatedly performed and transmitted, thereby contributing to the continuity of tradition. In the context of the Belian Ritual, the repetition of movements serves as one of the means of preserving both the form and meaning of the ritual. When movements are repeatedly learned, performed, and understood, the cultural knowledge embedded within them has a greater opportunity to remain alive. From the perspective of cultural preservation, the findings demonstrate that documentation of movements needs to be accompanied by documentation of their meanings. If only the forms of movement are documented without explanations of their contexts and meanings, some aspects of cultural knowledge may be lost. Therefore, semiotic studies can contribute by explaining the layers of meaning embedded in artistic and ritual practices.

Thus, the semiotic reading of movements in the Belian Ritual reveals the relationship among the body, symbols, beliefs, and identity. Denotation provides an account of what the body performs, connotation explains the cultural values and associations attached to the movements, while myth demonstrates how these meanings develop into collective beliefs. These three levels make dance movements an important component of the cultural system of the Paser community.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that dance movements in the Belian Ritual of the Paser ethnic community in North Penajam Paser Regency constitute a cultural sign system that functions not only as an aesthetic element but also as a medium of spiritual communication and a representation of cultural values. Each movement possesses a symbolic function related to the healing process, respect for ancestors, prayers for protection, and efforts to maintain a balanced relationship among humans, nature, and the spiritual world. The forms of movement identified include the opening movement (ngarang), foot stomping (ngengka), movements that produce the sound of bracelets (rekesekek), as well as various hand, foot, and body movements and circular floor patterns. These forms are performed within the ritual context and are accompanied by music and chants. This demonstrates that movement constitutes an integral part of the structure of the Belian Ritual and cannot be separated from its other ritual elements.

Based on Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, the meaning of dance movements in the Belian Ritual operates through three levels of signification. At the denotative level, movement is understood as a physical form that is visibly performed during the ritual. At the connotative level, movement represents the religious, social, and cultural values embedded within the Paser community. Furthermore, at the mythical level, the repetition of ritual practices constructs collective beliefs concerning the importance of cosmic harmony, the legitimacy of the belian as a spiritual mediator, and healing as part of the community's belief system (Barthes, 1972). The findings also demonstrate that the meaning of movement cannot be separated from the overall ritual context. Movement, music, chants, costumes, properties, floor patterns, and stages of the procession mutually support one another in forming a symbolic communication system. Therefore, understanding movement in the Belian Ritual requires attention to the broader cultural context so that its interpretation remains grounded in the experiences and beliefs of the supporting community.

The Belian Ritual also plays an important role in the transmission of cultural knowledge. Through the repetition of ritual practices, the community preserves not only the forms of movement but also religious values, social solidarity, respect for ancestors, and the cultural identity of the Paser ethnic community. Thus, the existence of the Belian Ritual is significant for the sustainability of local culture. Based on these findings, the preservation of the Belian Ritual should not be limited to maintaining the form of its implementation but should also include the preservation of knowledge concerning the symbolic meanings embedded within it. Documentation of movement forms, the context of their performance, and explanations of their cultural meanings can constitute an important part of efforts to preserve this knowledge so that it remains accessible and understandable to future generations.

This study also demonstrates that Roland Barthes' semiotic theory can serve as an approach for understanding performing arts situated within a ritual context. This approach enables researchers to view movement not merely as a visual form but as a sign containing multiple layers of meaning. Therefore, further research on the Belian Ritual can be developed through studies of other ritual elements or through more in-depth field research examining the relationships among movement, music, chants, and the beliefs of the community.

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