

Semiotic Analysis of the Representation of Symbolic Meanings in Traditional Palembang Costumes and Attributes in the Film Gending Sriwijaya

Martha Heriniazwi Dianthi^{1*}, Aldila Vidianingtyas Utami², Ros Aini binti Ibrahim³,
Rafianto Putra⁴, Dwi Andera⁵, Ary Wahyudi⁶, Dea Ananda Putri⁷

Universitas Dehasen Bengkulu, Indonesia^{1,2,4,5,6,7}

Politeknik Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin, Malaysia³

Email: marthaherinizwidianthi@unived.ac.id^{1*}, aldilavidia@unived.ac.id²,
rosaini@ptss.edu.my³, rafiputra739@gmail.com⁴, anderadwi21@gmail.com⁵,
arywhydi01@gmail.com⁶, dheabkl1712@gmail.com⁷

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Abstract

Traditional costumes and cultural attributes serve as significant cultural symbols that embody identity, social values, and philosophical principles within a community. In cinematic productions, however, these cultural symbols are frequently reconstructed through visual narratives, potentially generating selective and ideologically shaped interpretations of cultural reality. This study aims to explore the symbolic meanings represented through traditional Palembang costumes and cultural attributes in the film Gending Sriwijaya. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, this research adopts John Fiske's semiotic framework, which examines the construction of meaning across three interconnected levels: reality, representation, and ideology. The analysis focuses on selected scenes featuring prominent elements of Palembang culture, including songket, siger, and tepak sirih. Data were collected through systematic observation, visual documentation, and an extensive review of relevant literature. The findings demonstrate that these cultural symbols function not merely as aesthetic components but also as visual signifiers of cultural identity, social hierarchy, and ceremonial traditions. At the level of reality, the film presents recognizable cultural markers; nevertheless, their portrayal remains largely confined to superficial visual representations. At the level of representation, cinematic techniques such as framing, lighting, and camera focus selectively foreground cultural symbols associated predominantly with aristocratic characters. At the ideological level, the film tends to simplify and fragment the complexity of Palembang culture by predominantly associating cultural richness with elite social groups. Consequently, the study concludes that the film presents a selective and partial reconstruction of Palembang culture, shaped primarily by narrative, aesthetic, and ideological considerations rather than providing a comprehensive representation of authentic cultural practices.

INTRODUCTION

Culture is widely understood as a system of meanings formed through human social practices and expressed through various symbolic forms, such as language, rituals, art, and traditional attire. These symbols function not only as means of communicating values and norms but also as social constructions that continuously evolve in response to changes in time and social context. In

contemporary cultural studies, symbols are no longer viewed as static entities. Instead, they are understood as part of a dynamic process of meaning production influenced by power relations, ideology, and broader social dynamics. The rapid development of information technology and mass media has further expanded the spaces in which cultural meanings are produced and disseminated. As a result, cultural representation now occurs not only through traditional practices but also through modern media platforms, particularly film (Hall et al., 2024; Kellner, 2020; Landsberg, 2015; Milestone & Meyer, 2020; Motrescu-Mayes & Aasman, 2019).

Film, as an audiovisual medium, has a strong capacity to convey messages through the integration of visual and narrative elements. This enables cultural symbols to be represented in complex ways while remaining accessible to a broad audience. Recent studies indicate that film constructs reality through systems of signs that can be analyzed semiotically, meaning that the messages conveyed are not neutral but are shaped by specific cultural and ideological frameworks (Ridwanti & Febriana, 2024). Therefore, film should be understood not only as a medium of entertainment but also as a medium of cultural representation that plays a role in shaping how audiences perceive social and cultural realities. A semiotic approach is particularly relevant to examining cultural representation in film because it enables the identification of meanings embedded in visual signs. In semiotic analysis, meaning operates at multiple levels. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a sign, connotation refers to its implied or associated meanings, and ideology refers to broader systems of beliefs and values that influence interpretation. Visual elements in film, such as costumes and cultural attributes, function as signs that communicate cultural identity. This makes them important objects of analysis for understanding how meaning is constructed and conveyed (Eriksson & O'Hagan, 2021; Kroeger, 2023; Meyer et al., 2015; Popping, 2020).

Costumes and cultural attributes in film are not merely visual complements but carry symbolic meanings related to philosophy, social status, and identity. Recent research shows that costumes and cultural attributes play a significant role in shaping representations of identity and social values communicated to audiences (Sukmono, 2024). In addition, traditional costumes in visual media often reflect cultural values while simultaneously conveying specific ideological messages that may influence audience perceptions (Amelia et al., 2024). This indicates that costumes should be understood as part of a system of signs that actively participates in the production of meaning. The study of cultural representation in film has continued to develop in recent years. Research on the short film *Lenget* demonstrates that film is capable of presenting local culture through elements such as language, traditional clothing, and social symbols, which in turn shape audience understandings of cultural identity (Eduar, 2024). These findings suggest that film does not merely reflect culture but also actively contributes to the reproduction and reinterpretation of cultural meanings. In this context, film becomes a space in which culture is not only displayed but also reconstructed according to particular narrative and ideological interests. This implies that cultural representation in film may not always correspond to actual cultural reality.

Palembang culture is a cultural heritage with a strong symbolic system, particularly in its traditional costumes and cultural attributes. Elements such as songket, siger, and tepak sirih contain symbolic meanings related to honor, prosperity, and social traditions. These symbols serve not only as markers of cultural identity but also as carriers of values transmitted across generations. Within the context of film, such symbols are often used to construct visual representations of culture and history. The film *Gending Sriwijaya* presents Palembang culture through cinematic visualization, particularly through the use of traditional costumes and cultural attributes worn or used by its characters, making it a relevant object of semiotic analysis.

However, cultural representation in film is often subject to distortion or reconstruction. As a cultural product, film tends to adapt cultural elements to meet narrative demands, aesthetic considerations, and ideological purposes. Previous studies have shown discrepancies between cultural representations in film and actual cultural practices, including differences in historical accuracy, language use, and the representation of cultural attributes (Putra & Lestari, 2023). This suggests that cultural symbols in film are not merely representations of reality but also products of constructed meanings that can influence how audiences perceive culture.

This condition highlights the importance of critically analyzing how cultural symbols are represented in film. A semiotic approach enables a deeper understanding of how meaning is constructed through visual elements and how ideology operates within representation. By examining cultural symbols at the levels of denotation, connotation, and ideology, researchers can reveal how cultural meanings are formed and communicated to audiences. Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the symbolic meanings of traditional Palembang costumes and cultural attributes in the film *Gending Sriwijaya* using a semiotic approach. The analysis focuses on three levels. The reality level examines how cultural symbols are visually presented. The representation level analyzes how these symbols are constructed through narrative and cinematic techniques. The ideological level explores the broader meanings and values embedded within these representations. Through this approach, the study seeks to understand how symbolic meanings are formed, represented, and interpreted in film as part of a broader process of cultural construction.

Based on this background, this research aims to identify traditional Palembang cultural symbols, specifically songket, siger, and tepak sirih, as they appear in the film *Gending Sriwijaya*, and to analyze their denotative, connotative, and ideological meanings using John Fiske's semiotic framework. Furthermore, this study examines how cinematic techniques, such as framing, lighting, and camera focus, contribute to the construction of symbolic meanings by revealing patterns of cultural representation created through the selective emphasis of certain cultural elements and the marginalization of others. Ultimately, this research seeks to uncover the ideological implications embedded in the representation of Palembang culture in the film, providing a critical understanding of how cultural symbols are constructed, communicated, and selectively represented through cinematic narratives. This research is expected to contribute to the development of cultural and media studies, particularly by advancing the understanding of the relationship among film, symbolism, and cultural representation. It emphasizes that cultural representation in film is not a

simple reflection of reality but a complex process shaped by social, cultural, and ideological factors. By focusing on costumes and cultural attributes, this study provides a more specific perspective on how cultural identity is constructed and communicated through visual media.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to examine the symbolic meanings represented in traditional Palembang costumes and cultural attributes depicted in the film *Gending Sriwijaya*. A qualitative approach was used because the study focused on interpreting visual signs and cultural symbols through contextual analysis rather than numerical measurement.

The study applied semiotic analysis based on Roland Barthes's framework of denotation, connotation, and ideology. This framework was used to identify the literal, associated, and broader ideological meanings embedded in the film's visual representations (Sari & Putra, 2023).

The research object was the film *Gending Sriwijaya*, while the units of analysis consisted of selected scenes prominently featuring traditional Palembang costumes and cultural attributes, including songket, siger, and tepak sirih. These elements were selected because of their relevance to representations of cultural identity, tradition, and social values.

Data were collected through observation, documentation, and a literature review. Observation was conducted by repeatedly viewing the film to identify scenes relevant to the research focus. Documentation involved capturing screenshots of selected scenes as the primary visual data. Relevant scholarly journals and previous studies were also reviewed to support the interpretation of the findings and provide theoretical grounding (Pratama et al., 2024).

Data analysis was conducted in several stages. First, relevant scenes containing cultural symbols were identified. Second, the symbols were categorized according to their types and functions. Third, their denotative meanings were analyzed based on the visual elements presented in each scene. Fourth, their connotative meanings were interpreted in relation to their cultural and social contexts. Finally, ideological meanings were examined to identify the broader values and belief systems embedded in the representations.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, source triangulation was applied by comparing the analytical results with relevant theories and previous studies. This procedure was used to ensure that the interpretations were supported by established academic perspectives and existing research (Rahmawati, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the semiotic analysis on the film *Gending Sriwijaya*, focusing on the representation of traditional Palembang costumes and cultural attributes. The analysis is structured using the semiotic framework of John Fiske, which consists of three levels: reality, representation, and ideology. The findings are organized to illustrate how cultural elements are visually presented, how they are constructed through cinematic techniques, and how broader meanings are formed through patterns of representation.

Table 1. Semiotic Analysis of Cultural Representation in *Gending Sriwijaya*

Level	Aspect	Findings (Visual Evidence)	Interpretation (Meaning Construction)	Discussion (Critical Insight)
Reality	Noble Women	Maroon kemben, gold-patterned songket, red shawl, siger, kembang goyang, layered necklaces, armlets, tanggai, tepak sirih, kneeling gestures	Visual markers of aristocracy, elegance, and ritual symbolism	Costumes function as identity markers, but representation remains surface-level without showing cultural variation
	Noble Men	Dark clothing, loose trousers, waist songket, tanjak, long necklace, keris, upright posture	Masculinity, authority, and leadership symbolism	Strong differentiation reinforces hierarchy but limits broader cultural representation
	Soldiers	Sleeveless dark outfits, headbands, weapons such as spears or swords, active posture	Strength, mobility, and functional identity	Cultural elements are minimized, focusing more on role than identity
	Common People	Faded simple clothing, minimal accessories, informal gestures	Representation of lower social class and simplicity	Absence of cultural richness creates imbalance in representation
Representation	Visual Techniques	Close-up shots on siger, necklaces, tanggai; bright lighting on nobles; dominant red and gold tones; central framing of aristocrats	Selective emphasis on specific cultural symbols	Visual strategy directs audience focus toward elite symbols, marginalizing others
	Lighting	Bright illumination on nobles, dim lighting on other groups	Hierarchical visibility in visual storytelling	Reinforces social stratification through cinematic techniques
	Framing Composition	Nobles placed at center, others as background	Centralization of cultural authority	Culture becomes associated primarily with elite figures
Ideology	Pattern of Presentation	Cultural elements appear selectively and inconsistently across scenes	Culture reduced into fragments rather than a complete system	Film constructs culture as symbolic decoration rather than lived practice
	Symbol Dominance	Repetition of certain attributes such as songket and siger	Formation of dominant cultural imagery	Leads to narrowing of cultural understanding
	Cultural Reduction	Limited variation of costumes and attributes	Simplification of cultural complexity	Film prioritizes aesthetic and narrative needs over cultural accuracy

Source: Authors' analysis based on John Fiske's semiotic framework (Fiske, 2011), 2025

Following the table, the findings demonstrate that the representation of cultural elements in the film operates through a layered and structured semiotic process that connects visual appearance, cinematic construction, and ideological meaning. Each level does not stand independently, but rather forms an interconnected system that shapes how audiences perceive and interpret cultural symbols within the film.

At the level of reality, the film presents cultural elements in a visually recognizable form through costumes and attributes associated with different social groups. Noble women are depicted with complete and elaborate attire, including *kemben*, *songket*, *siger*, and various accessories that signify status, beauty, and ceremonial value. Noble men are also visually distinguished through the use of *tanjak*, *keris*, and formal clothing that conveys authority and leadership. In contrast, soldiers and common people are portrayed with simpler and more functional clothing, with minimal cultural attributes. This differentiation creates a clear visual hierarchy that allows audiences to easily identify social roles and positions within the narrative.

However, despite the clarity of these visual markers, the representation at this level remains limited to surface appearance. The film emphasizes certain recognizable elements such as *songket* and *siger* but does not explore the diversity, variation, and contextual meanings of these cultural symbols. For instance, *songket* appears repeatedly as a dominant visual element, yet it is not presented in different forms, functions, or contexts that reflect its broader cultural significance. This indicates that cultural elements are treated primarily as visual identifiers rather than as complex cultural systems. At the level of representation, the analysis reveals that cinematic techniques play a crucial role in shaping meaning. The use of close up shots directs audience attention to specific attributes such as *siger*, jewelry, and hand ornaments, making these elements appear more important than others. Lighting further reinforces this emphasis, as noble characters are consistently highlighted with brighter illumination, allowing their costumes and attributes to stand out more clearly. Meanwhile, other characters are placed in relatively dim lighting, reducing the visibility of their cultural elements.

Framing and composition also contribute to this selective emphasis. Noble characters are frequently positioned at the center of the frame, while other groups appear in supporting or background positions. This arrangement not only reflects narrative importance but also visually prioritizes certain cultural symbols over others. As a result, representation becomes uneven, where some elements are amplified while others are marginalized or overlooked. This demonstrates that the film does not present culture in a balanced manner but constructs it through selective visual strategies that guide audience perception.

At the level of ideology, the findings indicate a deeper pattern of cultural simplification and reduction. Cultural elements are primarily attached to noble characters, creating an implicit association between culture and elite status. Soldiers and common people, on the other hand, are depicted with fewer cultural attributes, which suggests that cultural identity is not equally distributed across all social groups. This creates a narrow understanding of culture, where richness and tradition are linked predominantly to aristocracy.

In addition, the inconsistency in the appearance of cultural elements across different scenes

prevents the formation of a cohesive and continuous cultural representation. Certain attributes appear prominently in some scenes but are absent in others, resulting in a fragmented portrayal of culture. This fragmentation indicates that cultural elements are selected and arranged based on narrative and visual priorities rather than being presented as an integrated and consistent system.

Several important patterns emerge from this analysis. First, there is a clear limitation in the variation of cultural elements, which reduces the representation of cultural diversity. Second, there is a dominance of specific symbols such as songket and siger, which leads to a narrowed interpretation of cultural identity. Third, there is inconsistency in how cultural elements appear throughout the film, resulting in a lack of continuity. Fourth, there is a strong separation in cultural representation across social groups, which reinforces hierarchical distinctions and associates cultural richness with certain characters only. These findings highlight that cultural representation in the film is not a neutral reflection of reality but a constructed process shaped by visual, narrative, and ideological considerations. The relationship between the three levels shows that what is presented visually is influenced by how it is framed and ultimately by the meanings and values embedded within it. As a result, the film produces a version of culture that is recognizable but incomplete, emphasizing certain elements while excluding others.

This analysis confirms that film as a medium tends to simplify cultural complexity in order to meet aesthetic and narrative demands. Cultural elements are transformed into visual symbols that are easily understood by audiences but do not fully capture the depth and diversity of the original cultural context. Therefore, the representation of Palembang culture in the film can be understood as partial and selective, reflecting a constructed reality rather than a comprehensive depiction of cultural practices.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the representation of symbolic meanings in traditional Palembang costumes and cultural attributes in the film *Gending Sriwijaya* through a semiotic approach using John Fiske's framework. The analysis revealed that cultural representation in the film operated across three interconnected levels: reality, representation, and ideology, each contributing to the construction of meaning in a structured yet selective manner. At the level of reality, the film presented recognizable cultural elements, such as songket, siger, and tepak sirih, as visual markers of identity and social status. These elements were used to distinguish social groups, particularly noble characters from other members of society. However, the representation remained limited to surface-level appearances and did not fully reflect the diversity and contextual richness of Palembang culture. Cultural elements appeared in repetitive and simplified forms, indicating that they functioned primarily as visual identifiers rather than as representations of a complex cultural system.

At the level of representation, cinematic techniques such as camera focus, lighting, and framing significantly shaped how cultural meanings were conveyed. The film emphasized specific cultural attributes through close-up shots and strategic lighting, particularly those associated with noble characters, while other elements received less visual attention. This selective emphasis

created an imbalance in representation, in which certain aspects of culture were highlighted while others were minimized. Cultural representation was therefore guided primarily by visual and narrative priorities rather than by an intention to present the culture comprehensively. At the ideological level, the film reflected a pattern of cultural simplification. Cultural elements were predominantly associated with elite characters, creating an implicit connection between cultural richness and social hierarchy. The inconsistent appearance of cultural symbols across scenes resulted in a fragmented representation that did not form a cohesive cultural narrative. Culture was constructed as a collection of visual symbols rather than as an integrated system of meanings. These findings indicated that the film presented Palembang culture in a recognizable yet limited form. Cultural elements were shaped by narrative, aesthetic, and ideological considerations that influenced how they were selected and displayed. The resulting representation was partial and selective, demonstrating that cultural meaning in film was constructed rather than directly reflected from reality.

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