

The Presentation Structure of Lontang Dance as a Symbolic System in Cultural Communication: A Symbolic Interactionist Study of Ritual Tradition in Purwaraja, Ciamis

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Abstract

Lontang Dance, a ritual performance from Purwaraja, Ciamis, operates as a medium of cultural communication beyond its aesthetic function. Although prior studies address its symbolic meanings, limited attention has been given to how its performance structure organizes communicative processes. This study examines the presentation structure of Lontang Dance as a symbolic communication system through symbolic interactionism, cultural communication theory, and ethnocoerology. A qualitative focused ethnography was conducted using participant observation, in-depth interviews, and visual documentation, with data analyzed thematically. The findings identify four structural phases opening, core, participatory, and closing each serving distinct communicative roles: spiritual legitimation, embodied value expression, collective interaction, and social redistribution. These phases actively shape how meanings are produced and negotiated among participants. This study offers a novel contribution by positioning performance structure as an operative symbolic communication system, extending symbolic interactionism into the analysis of ritual performance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional performing arts in Indonesia are deeply embedded in systems of belief, ritual practice, and local social organization. Consequently, they function not merely as entertainment but as cultural media through which communities articulate values, negotiate religious transformations, and reproduce collective identities. Within the Sundanese cultural landscape of West Java, many ritual-based performances remain integrated into agrarian and Islamic cycles, including Lontang Dance practiced in Purwaraja Village, Rajadesa District, Ciamis Regency.

Lontang Dance is distinctive in several respects. It is predominantly performed by male dancers, which contrasts with the female-centered orientation of many Sundanese dance traditions. Its movement vocabulary draws on ibing pencak silat and tayuban, rather than more widely recognized forms such as ketuk tilu or jaipong. In addition, the dance is closely associated with ritual events such as hajat bumi, the welcoming of Ramadan, and the Mulud celebration. In these contexts, the performance is inseparable from prayer,

offerings, and collective participation, positioning Lontang Dance as a site where spiritual, social, and cultural dimensions intersect.

Previous studies have examined Lontang Dance from different analytical angles. Research by Apriani, Wasta, and Husen (2025) demonstrates that ritual elements such as baki, seeng, movement patterns, and spatial configurations are not fixed in meaning but are continuously constructed and renegotiated through interaction among performers, community leaders, and religious authorities (Apriani et al., 2025). While this study provides important insights into symbolic meaning, it primarily focuses on interpretive processes at the level of individual symbols.

Other research, such as that conducted by Yuniati (2023), has explored the structural aspects of Lontang Dance by describing its performance elements and supporting components. However, this work remains largely descriptive and does not employ a theoretical framework capable of explaining how performance structure contributes to meaning-making processes (Yuniati, 2023). Beyond the specific case of Lontang Dance, theoretical studies on symbolic interactionism emphasize that meaning is constructed through social interaction and interpretive processes (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969; Carter & Fuller, 2015). Similarly, anthropological studies of dance highlight that movement functions as a representation of cultural values and social systems (Hanna, 2010).

Research on other traditional dances, such as ronggeng, also underscores the role of performance within ritual and social contexts (Sujana, 2016; Gartika, 2017). However, these studies tend to focus on cultural function and historical development without systematically analyzing how symbolic communication operates through performance structure. More broadly, ethnographic and anthropological approaches to dance recognize performance as part of cultural systems, yet rarely integrate communication theory into the analysis of structural sequencing.

Taken together, these studies reveal a common limitation. Existing research tends to examine symbolic meaning, performance structure, or theoretical perspectives separately. As a result, the relationship between performance structure and symbolic communication remains underexplored. In particular, limited attention has been given to how the sequencing of performance phases itself functions as a system through which meaning is organized and communicated.

This study addresses this gap by proposing a conceptual shift. Rather than treating structure as a purely formal arrangement, it examines the presentation structure of Lontang Dance as a symbolic communication system. The study advances three key contributions. First, it integrates performance structure with symbolic interactionism by analyzing how meaning emerges within structured phases of interaction. Second, it conceptualizes dance as a process of cultural communication, emphasizing how meanings are enacted through performance rather than merely represented. Third, it adopts a multidisciplinary approach by combining symbolic interactionism, cultural communication theory, and ethnocoreology.

From a theoretical perspective, symbolic interactionism provides a foundation for understanding how meaning is constructed through interaction (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969; Carter & Fuller, 2015). Cultural communication theory emphasizes that ritual performance functions as a process through which shared meanings are reproduced and negotiated (Carey, 2009; Rothenbuhler, 1998). Meanwhile, ethnocoreology highlights the role of movement, spatial organization, and sequencing as embodied expressions of cultural systems (Hanna, 2010; Buckland, 2010; Royce, 2002; Desmond, 1997). Despite their

relevance, these perspectives have rarely been integrated to analyze performance structure as a communicative system, particularly in the context of Sundanese ritual dance.

Accordingly, this study aims to: (1) examine the presentation structure of Lontang Dance within its ritual context; (2) analyze how symbols embedded in each phase are interpreted through social interaction; and (3) conceptualize the performance structure as a symbolic communication system. This study contributes theoretically by extending symbolic interactionism into the analysis of performance structure, methodologically by strengthening the use of focused ethnography in embodied cultural research (Atkinson et al., 2001; Pink, 2015; Reeves et al., 2013), and empirically by offering a more integrated understanding of traditional performance as a dynamic system of cultural communication (Bojner Horwitz et al., 2022; McCrary et al., 2020).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism provides a foundation for understanding how meanings are continuously produced within social encounters. Rather than treating meaning as inherent, Mead (1934) conceptualizes action as an interpretive process, while Blumer (1969) emphasizes that meaning emerges through interaction and is subsequently modified through ongoing interpretation (Carter & Fuller, 2015; Hewitt, 2003). This perspective shifts attention from static symbols to the processes through which symbols become meaningful in specific contexts.

Developments within interactionist scholarship further highlight how micro-level interactions contribute to the reproduction and transformation of broader social structures (Fine, 1993). In embodied practices such as dance, meaning is not located solely in objects or movements but arises through coordinated action, shared attention, and situational interpretation (Whitehead et al., 2024; Bigand et al., 2024).

Applied to Lontang Dance, this approach has been used to explain how ritual elements such as *baki*, *seeng*, and specific movement patterns are continuously reinterpreted in relation to shifting religious norms and community expectations (Apriani et al., 2025; Husni, 2024). However, existing analyses remain largely focused on discrete symbols. They do not sufficiently address how the sequencing of performance itself structures interaction and channels the production of meaning. This limitation is significant, given that interaction unfolds not only around symbols, but within temporally ordered performance contexts.

Accordingly, this study extends symbolic interactionism beyond symbolic elements toward the level of performance structure, treating the sequence of ritual phases as a patterned arena in which meanings are organized, negotiated, and stabilized.

Cultural Communication and Ritual Performance

Cultural communication theory reframes communication as a process of meaning construction embedded in social practice. Carey (2009) conceptualizes communication through a ritual lens, emphasizing the maintenance of shared beliefs over the transmission of information. Similarly, Rothenbuhler (1998) argues that ritual communication operates through repetitive, symbolic actions that sustain collective identity.

From this perspective, performance is not merely expressive but constitutive: it actively produces the realities it represents. Hall (1997) underscores that representation is embedded in relations of power, while Bell (1992) and Ortner (1973) demonstrate how ritualization organizes actions, bodies, and objects into structured systems of significance. These insights suggest that meaning in performance is inseparable from how actions are ordered and enacted.

Recent empirical studies on ritual and dance further show that collective movement and participation contribute to social cohesion, emotional alignment, and shared understanding (Irving et al., 2024; Bojner Horwitz et al., 2022). However, such studies tend to emphasize outcomes such as bonding or identity formation rather than examining how internal performance structures facilitate these processes.

In relation to Lontang Dance, this gap becomes particularly relevant. While the dance has been recognized as a ritual medium for expressing communal values, limited attention has been given to how its structured phases organize communicative acts. This study therefore approaches the presentation structure not simply as form, but as a mechanism through which cultural meanings are circulated and reinforced.

Ethnochoreology and Anthropology of Dance

Ethnochoreology and the anthropology of dance position movement as an integral dimension of cultural systems. Rather than isolating dance as an aesthetic object, these approaches examine how movement, space, and performance contexts reflect and reproduce social organization (Hanna, 2010; Royce, 2002). Dance becomes a site where cultural values, identities, and cosmological orientations are embodied and enacted.

Scholars such as Buckland (2010) and Desmond (1997) further demonstrate that dance encodes power relations and processes of cultural negotiation, while contemporary work highlights the analytical potential of embodied practice in ethnographic research (Giese & Keightley, 2024; Markula & Frantsi, 2024). Importantly, this body of literature recognizes that performance is structured in temporally ordered segments, which shape both participation and interpretation.

Nevertheless, prior studies tend to emphasize choreographic patterns or symbolic meanings without fully theorizing performance structure as a communicative system. In the context of Lontang Dance, this omission is particularly notable. The sequence of ritual elements *tatalu*, prayer, *ibing*, participatory engagement, and *saweran* reflects a coherent cultural logic linking spirituality, social hierarchy, and communal reciprocity. Yet, the role of this sequencing as a mechanism of communication remains insufficiently examined.

Theoretical Integration

This study integrates three complementary perspectives to address the identified gap. Symbolic interactionism is employed to analyze how meanings are generated and negotiated through interaction among participants. Cultural communication theory frames the performance as a ritualized process through which shared values are enacted and sustained. Ethnochoreology provides the analytical tools to examine how movement, spatial organization, and temporal sequencing embody cultural systems.

By combining these approaches, the study advances a conceptual shift: the presentation structure of Lontang Dance is understood not as a passive arrangement of segments, but as an active symbolic communication system. It both emerges from social interaction and simultaneously organizes how interaction unfolds. This integrative framework directly responds to the limitations identified in previous research and aligns with the study's central aim of reconceptualizing performance structure as a locus of meaning-making.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Symbolic Communication in Lontang Dance



3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach using focused ethnography to investigate Lontang Dance as a context-specific cultural practice. Focused ethnography is particularly appropriate for examining delimited cultural phenomena within defined social settings and temporal frames, allowing intensive engagement with recurring ritual activities (Atkinson et al., 2001; O'Reilly, 2012; Hammersley, 2018).

This approach enables access to emic perspectives, embodied actions, and interactional processes that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods. Drawing on sensory and performance ethnography (Pink, 2015; Buckland, 2010; Schechner, 2002), the study attends not only to verbal expressions but also to movement, rhythm, spatial organization, and affective atmosphere as integral dimensions of meaning-making.

Research Site and Context

Fieldwork was conducted in Purwaraja Village, Rajadesa District, Ciamis Regency, West Java, which is locally recognized as a central locus for the preservation and practice of Lontang Dance. The village is characterized by a predominantly Muslim population and a socio-cultural environment in which Islamic observances are interwoven with local ritual traditions.

Data collection took place during major ceremonial events, including hajjat bumi, the welcoming of Ramadan, and the Mulud celebration. These events provided opportunities to observe Lontang Dance in its complete ritual form, enabling the identification of both recurring structural patterns and contextual variations.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling strategies to ensure relevance and diversity of perspectives. The study involved dancers, musicians, ritual specialists (kuncen), religious leaders, and community members who actively engage with Lontang Dance, either as performers or audiences.

Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals with direct experience and knowledge of the performance and its meanings. Snowball sampling complemented this process by identifying additional participants through recommendations, particularly those involved in discussions related to religious interpretation and cultural legitimacy. Total participants: 15 participants.

Data Collection

Data were generated through multiple complementary techniques to ensure depth of understanding and methodological triangulation (Atkinson et al., 2001; O'Reilly, 2012; Reeves et al., 2013). These techniques included participant observation, in-depth interviews, visual documentation, and the review of relevant documents.

Participant observation was conducted during ritual performances of Lontang Dance, covering the full cycle of activities from preparation, performance, to post-performance interaction. This approach enabled the researcher to capture the sequencing of performance phases—opening, core, participatory, and closing—as well as patterns of interaction among participants. Particular attention was given to the use of symbolic objects such as baki, seeng, and selendang, spatial arrangements within the performance area, and observable shifts in audience engagement. These observations were systematically recorded in detailed field notes, in line with ethnographic practices that emphasize thick description and contextual sensitivity (Atkinson et al., 2001; Pink, 2015).

In-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants, including dancers, ritual specialists, and community members, to explore their interpretations of symbols, meanings embedded in the performance, and experiences of cultural negotiation. The interviews were semi-structured to allow flexibility while maintaining focus on key themes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis, following qualitative interviewing standards (O'Reilly, 2012; Tracy, 2010).

Visual data in the form of photographs and video recordings were collected to support the analysis of embodied practices, including movement patterns, gestures, and spatial configurations. This aligns with approaches in sensory and performance ethnography that emphasize visual and embodied dimensions of cultural practices (Pink, 2015; Buckland, 2010). In addition, relevant documents such as previous studies and local records were reviewed to provide historical and contextual background, enabling a more comprehensive interpretation of the findings.

Ethnographic Process

The research followed an iterative process characteristic of focused ethnography, allowing continuous refinement of data collection and interpretation (Atkinson et al., 2001; Falzon, 2009). The process began with an entry stage, during which the researcher established rapport and built trust with community members through initial engagement and participation in local activities.

This was followed by a phase of immersion, involving repeated observations across multiple ritual events to identify patterns and variations in performance structure. Data were systematically documented through field notes, visual recordings, and interview transcripts to ensure consistency and traceability (Reeves et al., 2013).

Throughout the research process, reflexivity was maintained as an integral component. The researcher continuously reflected on their positionality, potential biases, and influence on the research setting, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' perspectives while maintaining analytical rigor (Pink, 2015; Tracy, 2010).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) and further refined by Nowell et al. (2017), with adjustments to accommodate the ethnographic and performance-based nature of the data. The analytical process began with a phase of familiarization, in which interview transcripts, field notes, and visual materials were reviewed repeatedly to develop an in-depth understanding of the data corpus. This was followed by an initial coding stage, where segments of data related to symbols, interactional dynamics, and performance phases were systematically identified and labeled.

Subsequently, these codes were organized into broader conceptual categories that reflected recurring patterns across the data. The analysis then progressed to theme development, in which categories were interpreted in relation to the structural phases of the performance opening, core, participatory, and closing allowing the identification of thematic patterns linking performance structure with symbolic communication processes. In the final stage, these themes were interpreted through the lens of the study's theoretical framework, particularly symbolic interactionism, cultural communication theory, and ethnocoreology. Throughout this process, analysis remained iterative, moving back and forth between data and theory to ensure coherence and depth of interpretation. The overall analytical focus was directed toward understanding how performance structure functions as a mechanism for organizing interaction and meaning-making.

Trustworthiness and Ethics

The rigor of the study was ensured through several qualitative validation strategies. Triangulation was applied by comparing multiple data sources, methods, and observational contexts to strengthen the consistency of findings. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to confirm the credibility and accuracy of the analysis. In addition, an audit trail was maintained to document the progression of data collection and analytical decisions, enhancing transparency and traceability.

Prolonged engagement in the field allowed the researcher to observe recurring patterns and variations across different ritual events, thereby improving the depth of understanding. Reflexivity was also continuously practiced to critically examine how the researcher's assumptions and positionality might influence the research process.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality was maintained where requested, and particular sensitivity was exercised in navigating cultural and religious contexts. The researcher avoided intervening in internal community debates and prioritized the well-being and dignity of participants at all stages of the research.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher occupies a semi-insider position, characterized by cultural and linguistic familiarity with Sundanese traditions while not being embedded within the core kinship structure of the research site. This position facilitated access, trust, and contextual understanding, yet also required continuous reflexive awareness. Reflexive notes were systematically maintained to evaluate how the researcher's background, presence, and interactions may have shaped both data generation and interpretation. This reflexive stance

was essential in ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in participants' perspectives while critically engaging with the research context.

4. FINDINGS

The Opening Phase (Bubuka)

Field observations consistently indicate that Lontang Dance begins with a ritual opening phase known as bubuka. This phase is initiated by the performance of tatalu, a non-verbal musical prelude played using traditional instruments. The sound of tatalu functions as an auditory cue that signals the gathering of community members and marks a temporal shift from everyday activities into a designated ritual context.

Following the musical prelude, a prayer is led by the kuncen (ritual specialist), who occupies a central role in guiding the ritual sequence. During this stage, offerings such as baki and seeng are carefully positioned near the performance area. Participants generally maintain attentive and composed postures, with minimal movement and limited verbal interaction, indicating the formal and structured nature of this phase. The spatial arrangement during this phase tends to be relatively fixed, with participants oriented toward the ritual center.

The Core Phase (Main Dance Performance)

The transition into the core phase is marked by the entrance of male dancers into the performance space, often accompanied by the kuncen, who carries symbolic items such as selendang and seeng. The performance unfolds through ibing movements that draw from pencak silat, tayuban, and local Sundanese dance vocabularies.

Observed movement motifs include sembah, selut, capang, gedut, and adeg-adeg, which are performed in sequences that combine recognizable patterns with improvisational variations. Dancers adjust their movements in response to musical tempo, spatial conditions, and the presence of spectators. The use of space becomes more dynamic in this phase, with movements expanding outward from the central area and occasionally reconfiguring the boundaries of the performance space.

The Participatory Phase (Collective Dancing)

Following the core performance, the structure transitions into a participatory phase characterized by the involvement of community members. Individuals from different age groups and social backgrounds enter the performance space and engage in more flexible and less structured movement patterns.

The spatial configuration typically shifts from a performer-centered arrangement to circular or semi-circular formations, allowing participants to move in and out of the central space. Interaction becomes more fluid, and the distinction between performers and audience members becomes less pronounced. Verbal expressions, gestures, and shared rhythms contribute to a more interactive atmosphere.

The Closing Phase (Ibing Kaul and Saweran)

The closing phase is marked by ibing kaul and the practice of saweran. During this stage, participants provide money or other forms of material appreciation to the dancers. In addition, food or symbolic items may be distributed among participants.

The tempo of movement and interaction gradually decreases, and the atmosphere shifts from structured performance to informal social engagement. Participants begin to disengage from the performance space, and conversations and casual interactions increase. This phase signals the conclusion of the ritual sequence and the transition back to everyday social life.

Summary of Performance Structure

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Lontang Dance is organized into four recurring phases: opening, core, participatory, and closing. Each phase is characterized by distinct activities, spatial arrangements, and interaction patterns. Despite minor variations across events, this structural sequence remains consistent and recognizable within the community.

Table 1. Structure of Lontang Dance Performance

Phase	Key Activities	Elements	Interaction Pattern
Opening	Tatalu, prayer	Baki, seeng	Ritual-focused, formal
Core	Ibing dance	Movement motifs	Performer-centered, dynamic
Participatory	Collective dancing	Community members	Interactive, fluid
Closing	Saweran, distribution	Money, food	Social exchange, relaxed

Discussion

Performance Structure as an Interactional Framework

The findings indicate that the structure of Lontang Dance functions as an organized framework that shapes how interaction unfolds throughout the performance. Rather than being a neutral sequence, each phase provides a distinct interactional context in which participants orient themselves, define roles, and interpret ongoing activities. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, this process reflects the continuous construction of meaning through situated interaction (Blumer, 1969).

Ritual Communication as a Structured Process

From a cultural communication perspective, the performance can be understood as a structured communicative process in which meaning is enacted across sequential phases. The opening phase establishes a shared orientation toward ritual practice, the core phase expresses cultural values through embodied action, the participatory phase enables collective engagement, and the closing phase translates symbolic meaning into observable social exchange. This progression illustrates that communication operates through ritual enactment rather than linear transmission (Carey, 2009; Rothenbuhler, 1998).

Embodied Cultural Values in Movement

The movement patterns observed in the core phase reflect culturally embedded values that are expressed through bodily action. From an ethnocoreological perspective, dance serves as a medium through which social norms and cultural identities are articulated (Hanna, 2010). The integration of pencak silat elements highlights associations with discipline and control, while tayuban influences suggest historical continuities of social interaction. These elements together contribute to the formation of recognizable cultural expressions within the performance.

Participation and Collective Meaning-Making

The participatory phase illustrates how meaning is constructed through shared involvement. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes that meaning emerges through interaction, and this phase provides a context in which participants actively engage in shaping the performance experience. The reduced distinction between performer and audience allows for more inclusive interaction, contributing to the reinforcement of collective identity and social cohesion.

Closing Phase and Social Reciprocity

The closing phase demonstrates how symbolic meanings are translated into concrete social practices. The act of saweran represents a form of exchange that connects symbolic

expression with material interaction. Within a cultural communication framework, this phase completes the ritual sequence by reinforcing social relationships and shared values through tangible actions.

Performance Structure as a Symbolic Communication System

Taken together, the findings support the argument that the structure of Lontang Dance operates as a symbolic communication system. Each phase contributes to the organization of interaction, the production of meaning, and the maintenance of social relations. This perspective extends symbolic interactionism by highlighting that structured sequences of performance can function as frameworks through which meaning is both produced and stabilized in social contexts.

Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Lontang Dance as Symbolic Communication



5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Lontang Dance in Purwaraja, Ciamis, operates as a structured symbolic communication system in which meaning is not only embedded in individual symbols but is also organized through the sequencing of performance phases. The findings confirm that the four-part structure opening, core, participatory, and closing functions as an integrated framework that shapes how meanings are produced, enacted, and shared within the community. Rather than acting as a neutral arrangement, this structure actively mediates the transition from ritual framing to embodied expression, collective participation, and social exchange.

Each phase contributes a distinct communicative function. The opening establishes a shared ritual orientation, marking the boundary between everyday and sacred contexts. The core phase articulates cultural values through embodied movement and symbolic action. The participatory phase enables collective engagement, allowing meaning to be co-constructed through interaction. The closing phase materializes these meanings through practices of giving and reciprocity, reinforcing social relationships and communal cohesion. Together, these phases form a coherent communicative cycle that links spiritual, social, and cultural dimensions of community life.

Theoretically, this study extends symbolic interactionism by demonstrating that meaning-making processes are not confined to discrete symbols such as objects or gestures but are also structured through the temporal organization of performance. The presentation structure itself can be understood as a socially constructed framework that guides interaction, stabilizes interpretation, and sustains shared meanings over time. By integrating symbolic interactionism with cultural communication theory and

ethnocoerology, this study offers a more comprehensive approach to understanding ritual performance as an embodied and communicative system.

Practically, the findings provide relevant insights for cultural preservation, arts education, and community-based cultural initiatives. Viewing Lontang Dance as a dynamic communication system highlights its role not only as cultural heritage but also as an adaptive practice that mediates ongoing negotiations between tradition and contemporary religious and social contexts. This perspective may inform more context-sensitive approaches to cultural policy, heritage management, and local educational programs.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focuses on a single community context, which may limit the transferability of findings to other regions or performance traditions. In addition, the reliance on qualitative methods emphasizes depth over breadth, potentially overlooking broader comparative patterns. Future research is therefore encouraged to conduct comparative studies across different ritual performances and cultural settings to examine the applicability of the structural-communication framework. Further studies may also incorporate mixed-method approaches to explore interactional dynamics and embodied synchrony in greater detail. Additionally, investigating the role of digital mediation in shaping contemporary interpretations of traditional performances would provide valuable insight into the evolving nature of cultural communication.

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