

Analysis of Symbolic Interactionism in Lontang Dance: Cultural Meaning and Social Dynamics in Purwaraja Village, Ciamis Regency

Arni Apriani¹, Asep Wasta², Wan Ridwan Husen³

¹²³Program Studi Pendidikan Seni, Drama, Tari dan Musik, Universitas Muhammadiyah Tasikmalaya

Email : aprianiarni@gmail.com

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Abstract

Lontang Dance is a traditional Sundanese art form that developed in Purwaraja Village, Ciamis Regency, and functions as a medium for spiritual and social communication within the community. This study analyzes the symbolic meaning of Lontang Dance through the perspective of symbolic interactionism developed by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, the study involved participant observation (n=32 participants), in-depth interviews with traditional figures and artists, and visual documentation. The analysis shows that cultural symbols such as the tray, seeng, and ibing movements in Lontang Dance are constructed through a dynamic and ongoing process of social interaction within the community. These symbolic meanings undergo modification and negotiation to maintain religious relevance without eliminating local cultural identity. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how cultural realities are constructed through human interaction and emphasize the importance of local cultural preservation in the context of modernization. This research opens new perspectives in the study of symbolic anthropology and local culture-based arts education.

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Corresponding Author:

Arni Apriani

Universitas Muhammadiyah Tasikmalaya

Email : aprianiarni@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Local culture is a priceless heritage passed down from generation to generation by ancestors and serves as an important identity in the social life of Indonesian society (Sumaryono, 2011). One cultural expression that still survives in the Sundanese tradition in West Java is the Lontang Dance, which developed specifically in Purwaraja Village, Rajadesa District, Ciamis Regency. This art not only functions as a form of entertainment at cultural events, but also serves as a medium of spiritual and social communication filled with deep symbolic meaning for the local community (Rahardjo, 2017).

The Lontang Dance's performance structure exhibits a unique character that distinguishes it from other Sundanese dance forms. Unlike ronggeng (traditional dances performed by women), in the Lontang Dance, men are the primary actors. The movements are not derived from ketuk tilu (dance) or jaipong (traditional dance), but are instead adapted from ibing pencak silat and tayuban, transformed to suit the local cultural context. This art form is often performed during important traditional rituals such as hajat bumi (a thanksgiving for agricultural produce), welcoming the month of Ramadan, and the Mulud celebration, a key socio-spiritual moment for the community (Irianto, 2017).

In practice, the Lontang Dance always features specific symbolic elements such as a tray (baki), seeng (offerings), traditional music accompaniment, and prayer rituals. The people of Purwaraja Village believe these symbols serve as a means of spiritual communication with their ancestors and as a means of honoring them in prayers for their harvest. However, the existence of these ritual symbols is not free from socio-religious controversy. Some groups in society, particularly those who adhere to strict religious interpretations, consider the use of offerings and ritual symbols to be a deviation from their understanding of Islamic teachings (Qomar, 2022).

As a result of this contestation over meaning, the Lontang Dance experienced a significant decline in its existence. The dance's fan community faced social pressure and the threat of cultural discontinuity. However, thanks to the resilience of local figures and artists, the Lontang Dance was eventually repackaged and renegotiated to become accepted by all levels of society while maintaining its authentic cultural and spiritual values. This restructuring process demonstrates the complex social dynamics involved in the construction of cultural meaning.

In this study, symbolic interactionism is a highly relevant approach to analyzing the phenomenon of restructuring and constructing meaning. The symbolic interactionist approach, particularly the theory developed by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, rests on the fundamental idea that social and cultural reality is not objective and fixed, but rather actively constructed and constructed through the process of symbolic interaction and communication between individuals within their communities (Blumer, 1969). With this perspective, the meaning of cultural symbols in the Lontang Dance can be traced and understood through the complex interaction process between community members who collectively and contextually interpret these symbols.

The symbolic interactionist approach not only views art from an aesthetic or historical perspective, but also emphasizes the process of giving meaning to symbols through social interactions that occur between individuals in society. According to Mudjia Rahardjo, the symbolic interactionist approach emphasizes the subjective aspects of micro-social life, where individuals interpret symbols as part of an interaction process rich in social and cultural meaning (Rahardjo, 2017). With this in-depth study, it is hoped that it will open a more positive and contextual understanding between local cultural traditions and the socio-religious life of the community environment.

Problem formulation

1. How is the symbolic meaning of the Lontang Dance interpreted by the people of Purwaraja Village through their social interaction process?
2. What forms of social interaction and negotiation of meaning are formed through the social practice of Lontang Dance in the context of community life?
3. How can the symbolic interactionism approach explain the socio-cultural dynamics and adaptation process in the Lontang Dance?

Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Interactionism

The Basics of Blumer's Theory

Herbert Blumer, an American sociologist who developed the theory of symbolic interactionism, established three basic premises that form the foundation of this approach (Blumer, 1969): Premise 1: Meaning as the Basis for Action: Humans act based on the meaning they assign to things. In the context of the Lontang Dance, dancers act based on the meaning they attribute to cultural symbols such as trays, seeng, and specific movements. Premise 2: Meaning Through Social Interaction: The meaning of a symbol is not intrinsically attached to the object itself, but

rather emerges and develops through the process of social interaction between individuals. The meaning of the tray in the Lontang Dance, for example, is produced through ongoing dialogue between artists, traditional leaders, and community members. Premise 3: Modification of Meaning Through Interpretation: The meaning of a symbol is constantly modified and reinterpreted through the interpretive process carried out by each individual in a specific context. The process of restructuring the Lontang Dance to align with religious values demonstrates this modification of meaning.

George Herbert Mead's Perspective on Social Action

George Herbert Mead, Blumer's predecessor, emphasized that human social action proceeds through four sequential stages (Irianto, 2017): first, impulse, where a stimulus or need drives an individual to act. In the Lontang Dance, this impulse can stem from the need to celebrate a land event or honor ancestors. Second, perception, where individuals capture and understand these stimuli based on their experience and knowledge. Dancers identify cultural symbols relevant to the ritual event. Third, manipulation, where individuals select and respond to stimuli in ways learned through social experience. The specific movements in the Lontang Dance are the result of this manipulation process. Fourth, consummation, where the action is completed, and the meaning of the action is constructed through interactions with other individuals in the community. A Lontang Dance performance is "completed" when the entire community recognizes and gives meaning to the art.

State of the Art and Research Novelties

Although Sundanese traditional art has been the subject of numerous anthropological and ethnographic studies, specific academic research on the Lontang Dance using a symbolic interactionist approach has never been conducted before. Previous studies have focused more on the theory of symbolic interactionism in general or on other traditional arts in West Java, such as wayang kulit (shadow puppetry) or reog Ponorogo. The novelty of this research lies in three aspects:

1. Application of the Symbolic Interactionism Framework in the Context of Lontang Dance Art: This study is the first to use Mead and Blumer's theoretical framework to analyze the symbolic meaning and social dynamics in Lontang Dance in depth and systematically.
2. Analysis of the Process of Negotiating Meaning in the Context of Religious Pluralism: This study specifically explores how the people of Purwaraja Village negotiate the meaning of traditional culture with contemporary religious values, an aspect that is rarely studied in Sundanese anthropological literature.
3. Contribution to the Development of Local Culture-Based Arts Education: This research paves the way for the development of arts curriculum and learning modules that are contextual and relevant to local culture, supporting the cultural preservation agenda and increasing cultural awareness of the younger generation.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with ethnographic methods (Zuchdi & Ayu, 2019). Ethnography was chosen because it allows researchers to holistically and in-depth record the experiences, beliefs, knowledge, and social practices of the Purwaraja Village community regarding the symbols in the Lontang Dance. This method provides flexibility to explore the complex meanings that emerge within specific sociocultural contexts.

Research Location and Subjects

Research Location: Purwaraja Village, Rajadesa District, Ciamis Regency, West Java Province, Indonesia. The selection of this location is based on the fact that Purwaraja Village is the main place of origin, development, and preservation of Lontang Dance in the context of Sundanese society. Research Subjects: A total of 32 participants with the following characteristics: 8 Lontang Dance dancers/artists (aged 25-65 years), 6 traditional leaders and village elders (aged 55-80 years), 10 community members who are active in traditional rituals and celebrations, 8 members of the general public who interact with Lontang Dance in their daily lives

Data Collection Techniques

Participatory Observation

Researchers were directly involved in various traditional activities and Lontang Dance performances over 4 months (February-May 2025). These observations included the Lontang Dance rehearsal and preparation process, the earth ritual, and other traditional events. Interactions between artists and community members before, during, and after the performance. The use of cultural symbols (baki, seeng, traditional musical accompaniment). Observation Notes: Researchers made structured field notes that included detailed descriptions of the context, participants, symbols used, and observed social interactions.

Interview

In-depth interviews were conducted with key informants to gain a deeper understanding of the interpretation of specific symbols in the Lontang Dance:

Informant Group	Amount	Interview Focus
Dancer/Artist	8	The meaning of the movement, the tray/seeng symbol, and the experience of conveying culture
Traditional Figures	6	History of Lontang Dance, ritual function, and religious views
Active Community Member	10	Participation in rituals, cultural meaning, and contemporary relevance
General public	8	Perceptions of Lontang Dance: contribution to cultural identity
Total	32	

The interviews were semi-structured, with interview guidelines allowing for further exploration based on the informant's responses. Each interview lasted 45–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the informant's permission.

Visual Documentation and Semiotic Analysis

Visual documentation includes HD photography and 4K videography of Lontang Dance performances. Documentation of cultural symbols (baki, seeng, costumes, musical instruments). Documentation of socio-ritual contexts. Recording of narratives by traditional figures regarding symbolic meaning.

Literature Study

Theoretical references on symbolic interactionism (Blumer, Mead, Irianto). Ethnographic studies and qualitative methodology. Literature on Sundanese traditional arts and cultural anthropology. Local documents on the history of the Lontang Dance.

Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out inductively following an ethnographic approach (Zuchdi & Ayu, 2019; Qomar, 2022) through the following stages:

Stage 1: Data Reduction

Collected data (field notes, interview transcripts, photographs, videos) were sorted and filtered to identify relevant and meaningful data based on the research questions. Less relevant data was discarded while maintaining the integrity of the findings.

Stage 2: Coding and Categorization

Data were transcribed and coded to identify key themes based on: Symbolic meaning: What symbols are identified? How do people interpret them? Interaction processes: How do social interactions shape these meanings? Cultural negotiation: How are meanings modified in the context of religious contestation?

Stage 3: Display Data

The data is arranged in narrative form, direct quotes from informants, descriptive tables, and flowcharts to facilitate understanding of the patterns that emerge.

Stage 4: Conclusion, Drawing, and Interpretation

Interpretations are conducted with reference to Blumer and Mead's symbolic interactionism theory. Conclusions are drawn through relational analysis between empirical data and theoretical constructs.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Structure and Function of Lontang Dance in Community Life

The results of the observations show that the Lontang Dance has a performance structure consisting of three main parts:

Table 1. Visual Symbol Structure of Lontang Dance

Show Section	Duration	Function	Main Symbols
I. Opening Ritual (Reading of Prayer)	10-15 minutes	Inviting blessings and spiritual protection	Prayer posture, accompanied by tatalu (traditional vocal music)
II. Core Dance (Ibing Lontang)	20-30 minutes	Expression of gratitude and communication with ancestors	Adaptation movements of pencak silat, tray, and seeng (offerings)
III. Closing (Distribution of Blessings)	5-10 minutes	Spread blessings to all attendees	Distribution of blessed food, a touch of hands

No	Visual Elements	Detailed Description	Symbolic Meaning
1	Male Dancer	Head with headband; body with white and black batik cloth; ibing movements (pencak silat + tayuban)	Spiritual communication with ancestors (vertical dimension)
2	Tray (Ritual Tray)	Flower and rice leaf decoration; offerings of rice, fruit, and tobacco; positioned in front of the dancer	Respect, offerings, and invocation of traditional values
3	Musical Accompaniment	Vocals <i>SCROLL</i> ; instruments: zither, drum, flute	The unity of human voice & instruments, enhancing the ritual atmosphere
4	Ritual Space	The audience forms a circle around the dancer, a collective space	Social solidarity & community involvement (horizontal dimension)
5	Temporal Dimension	The interaction between old traditions and modern practices	Cultural continuity from generation to generation

Symbolic Meaning in Lontang Dance: A Symbolic Interactionism Perspective

A thorough analysis of the interview data reveals that the symbols in the Lontang Dance do not have fixed or universal meanings, but are dynamically constructed through community interactions. This finding fully aligns with Blumer's second premise about how meaning emerges from social interaction.

Tray: Symbol of Respect and Spiritual Mediation

The objective definition of a tray is a traditional tray decorated with flowers, rice leaves, and containing offerings (rice, fruit, tobacco).

Construction of Meaning Through Social Interaction:

The results of interviews with traditional leaders (TA-05, female, 72 years old) show:

"The tray is not just an ordinary tray. The tray is a 'door' that opens communication between us, our family, and our deceased ancestors. When placed in front of the dancer, the tray says 'thank you' to those who have given us this produce."

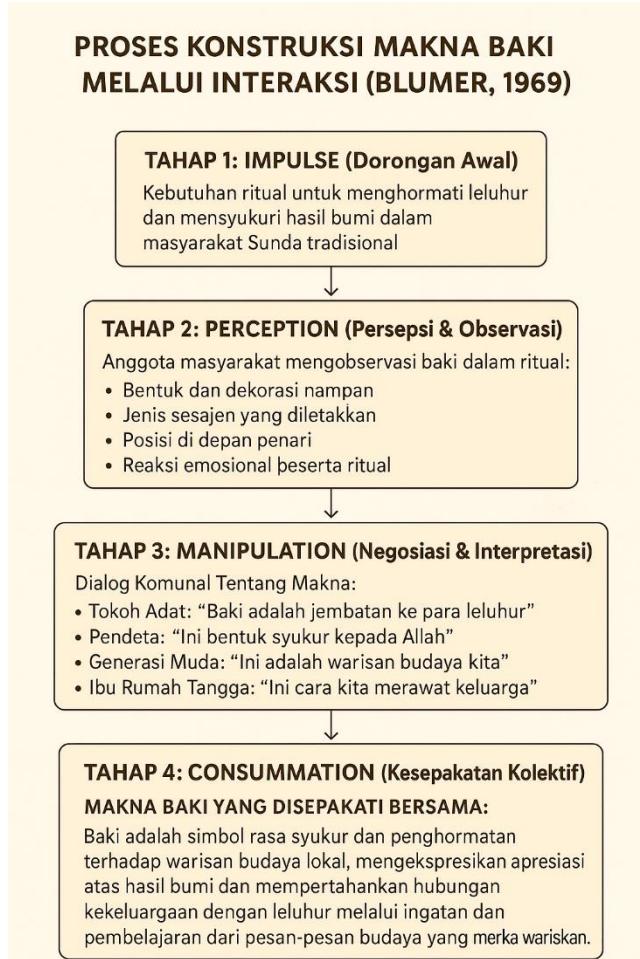
This meaning is reinforced through communal interactions. During a hajat bumi (earth celebration), all female family members work together to prepare trays. This preparation process involves the transmission of knowledge from mothers to daughters about the "correct way" to assemble trays. The meaning of trays is not explicitly explained, but is captured through observation and participation in this social activity.

Modification of Meaning in the Context of Religious Contestation:

In the process of adapting to meet religious objections, the meaning of the tray underwent reinterpretation. A progressive local leader (PL-03, male, 58 years old) explained:

"We've changed the way we talk about trays. People used to say, 'This is for our ancestors,' but now we say, 'This is an expression of gratitude to God for the fruits of the earth, and we honor our ancestors by remembering their life lessons, not by worshipping them."

Diagram 1. Process Flow of Modifying the Meaning of Tray



Ibing Movement (Body Movement) Expression of Male Identity and Courage Observation of Movement Structure.

Movement	Local Name	Symbolic Meaning (according to informants)	Social Context
1	Put Your Attitude	Readiness and resilience to face challenges	Opening dance
2	Forward-Backward Steps	Perseverance and flexibility in following the rhythm of the community	The whole show
3	Body Turn	Holistic awareness of the spiritual and material world	Middle part
4	Tawur (Spread)	Distribution of blessings and goodness to others	Cover
5	Hand Chase	Receiving positive energy from ancestors	As the music rises
6	Chest Cover	Protection of the heart and sincere intentions	End of movement

A main dancer (P-01, male, 38 years old) explains:

"In the Lontang Dance, men dance, not women. This expresses that in Sundanese tradition, men also have a responsibility to preserve and communicate cultural values to others. The movements are bold, yet respectful to ancestors."

This gender meaning is constructed through contrast with other Sundanese dance forms (ronggeng and ketuk tilu), which are dominated by female dancers. The uniqueness of the Lontang Dance as an art form featuring men as the main protagonists creates a symbolic message about the distribution of cultural roles and responsibilities among male and female community members.

Ritual Space of Communal Solidarity Circle and Collective Participation

Spatial observations in each observed performance revealed that the participants (dancers and audience) formed a consistent spatial pattern: the dancer was at the center of the circle, while the audience surrounded her in a circular formation. This formation was not merely coincidental, but had deep symbolic meaning.

Analysis of Meaning Through Spatial Social Interaction:

Traditional figure (TA-02, male, 76 years old) said:

"The circle is no coincidence. It means that no one is superior to anyone else in this moment. Everyone, from young to old, from rich to poor, is equally a part of this ritual. The dancers represent us all in communicating with our ancestors, but that doesn't mean they are more important."

This egalitarian meaning is reinforced through participatory practices. Community members are not merely passive spectators but actively contribute food to prepare offerings. They follow the tatalu accompaniment by singing along. They receive blessings from the dancers at the end of the performance (hand touches, prayers). These participatory practices construct the meaning that the Lontang Dance is a collective activity that builds and maintains communal solidarity.

Figure 1. Spatial Interaction Flow in Lontang Dance.



Negotiating Meaning in Religious Contestation: Contemporary Cultural Adaptation

One of the most significant findings of this research is the in-depth documentation of how the Lontang Dance undergoes a process of negotiating meaning in responding to religious objections.

Historical Context of the Contest

Before 2010, the Lontang Dance experienced a period of serious marginalization when some local religious groups considered the use of offerings and ritual symbols to be a form of "bid'ah" (innovation in worship deemed to deviate from Islamic teachings) or even "shirk" (associating others with Allah). As a result, the number of Lontang Dance events decreased drastically, and the younger generation began to forget about this art form.

Mechanism of Negotiation of Meaning

The process of restoration and reinterpretation of the Lontang Dance clearly demonstrates how Blumer's third premise about the modification of meaning through interpretation applies in real social practices.

Strategy 1: Reframing Terms and Language

Dialogue with local spiritual leader (PS-02, Imam aged 55 years) shows:

"We are not eliminating offerings, but we are changing the way we talk about them. Instead of saying 'this is for the ancestral spirits,' we are saying 'this is our gratitude to God, by respecting the cultural heritage passed down by our pious predecessors.'"

This linguistic strategy allows cultural practices to continue while being aligned with stricter religious interpretations.

Strategy 2: Integration with Local Islamic Narratives

Traditional figure (TA-04, female, 68 years old) explained:

"We began by telling the story that our ancestors were believers who practiced Islam according to their cultural context at the time. Honoring them is part of honoring the Islamic teachings of filial piety and respect for heritage."

This strategy involves reinterpreting history and cultural genealogy to position the Lontang Dance as an integral part of local Islamic tradition, rather than as something that contradicts it.

Strategy 3: Distinguishing between Form and Substance

A highly educated young figure (TM-06, male, 42 years old, bachelor's degree) said:

"The form of the offerings or the musical accompaniment may be adjusted, but the essence of the Lontang Dance—an expression of gratitude, respect for heritage, and communal solidarity—is what is important to preserve. By understanding this, we can adapt without losing our cultural identity."

Table 2. Comparative Meaning Before and After Reinterpretation

Dance Elements	Traditional Meaning (Pre-2010)	Contemporary Meaning (Post-2010)	Interaction Status
Offerings (Tray/Seeng)	"Offerings to the ancestral spirits"	"Expression of gratitude to God; cultural respect"	Debated ↔ Negotiated
Prayer in Dance	"Request to the ancestors"	"Pray to Allah while remembering the lessons of our ancestors."	Clarified ↔ Contextualized
Ritual Participants	"A large family that communicates with the spirit world"	"A community that celebrates shared identity and heritage values"	Inclusive ↔ Open to interpretation
Conclusion of the Ritual	"Ancestors receive offerings and give blessings."	"Communities together remind commitment to cultural values."	Transformed ↔ Socially reinforced

Social Interaction Process: Intergenerational Cultural Transmission

One important dimension of this research is the documentation of how the meaning of the Lontang Dance is transmitted from one generation to the next through specific social interaction processes.

Embodied Learning

Observations of the Lontang Dance training process indicate that learning does not occur through the explicit transmission of verbal knowledge, but rather through direct participation and observation in social activities. A mother who taught her child the Lontang Dance (Mrs. S-03, age 52) explained:

"I don't tell my child, 'This movement means this.' He will see me dancing, he will feel the music, he will feel the emotion of the ritual. The meaning will come to him through experience, not through words."

This perspective is fully consistent with Mead's idea that humans learn through the process of interpretation in social interactions, not just through the transfer of information.

Negotiating Meaning Between Generations

Interestingly, the younger generation (aged 18-35) exhibits a different interpretation pattern than the older generation (aged 60+). The younger generation tends to emphasize the dimensions of "cultural heritage" and "local identity" rather than the dimension of "spiritual communication with ancestors."

A young dancer (P-03, male, 26 years old) stated:

"For me, what's important is that the Lontang Dance is a unique expression of our Sundanese culture. I want my generation to know that we have something valuable and beautiful to preserve. Whether my ancestors are watching me, I don't know for sure, but what's clear is that when I dance, I feel connected to my cultural roots."

These differences in interpretation do not indicate cultural damage or degradation, but rather a dynamic process of meaning construction that is consistent with Blumer's theory.

Theoretical Implications and Academic Contributions

Empirical Validation of Symbolic Interactionism Theory

This study provides strong empirical evidence for Blumer's three basic premises in the context of local traditional arts.

1. Premise 1 is proven that the actions of artists and community members in the Lontang Dance are based on the meanings they attribute to cultural symbols. The change in the meaning of offerings from "offerings to spirits" to "expressions of gratitude to God" results in significant changes in the way they perform rituals.
2. Premise 2 demonstrates that these meanings are not intrinsically inherent in symbols, but rather emerge and are constructed through social interactions between artists, traditional figures, spiritual leaders, and community members. The lengthy negotiation process demonstrates how meaning is the result of collective dialogue.
3. Premise 3 proves that meaning is constantly undergoing modification along with changes in social context, especially in response to religious objections and generational changes.

Contribution to the Study of Sundanese Cultural Anthropology

1. This research expands the corpus of knowledge on Sundanese traditional arts by providing a previously unavailable in-depth analysis. Specifically:
2. Ethnographic Documentation: This research provides detailed documentation of the Lontang Dance, including its symbolic, historical, and social function aspects that can serve as a reference for future generations.
3. New Theoretical Perspective: The application of symbolic interactionism opens up new ways to understand traditional arts, not only as static cultural artifacts, but as dynamic and continuously evolving social processes.

Implications for Local Culture-Based Arts Education

The findings of this study have important practical implications for the development of arts education curricula.

Implications	Details	Practical Applications
Contextual Learning	The meaning of the Lontang Dance cannot be understood without the local socio-religious context.	Integrate arts learning with learning about local cultural and historical contexts.
Communal Participation	Meaning is constructed through active participation, not through passive transmission.	Involve the community in the learning process, not just teachers and students
Pluralistic Sensitivity	Negotiating meaning demonstrates the need for sensitivity to differences in religious interpretation.	Teach appreciation for diverse views on cultural heritage.
Embodied Learning	Meaning is acquired through bodily experience, not just through verbal description.	Prioritize hands-on learning over abstract theory

4. CONCLUSION

This research has shown that the Lontang Dance is more than just an aesthetically appealing traditional art form. Through the lens of symbolic interactionism, the Lontang Dance is revealed as a dynamic social process in which cultural meanings are constructed, negotiated, and continuously modified through interactions between community members. The symbols in the Lontang Dance (baki, seeng, ibing movements, circle space) do not have fixed meanings, but are constructed through a complex and ongoing process of social interaction. The process of negotiating meanings carried out by the community in responding to religious objections shows that culture is not something that is passively accepted, but is actively produced and reinterpreted by social actors. Cultural transmission between generations occurs through embodied learning (body learning) in the context of social participation, not through the transfer of explicit knowledge. The uniqueness of the Lontang Dance in the context of traditional Sundanese art, especially the appearance of men as the main dancers and the egalitarian ritual structure, reflects specific meanings about social roles, gender identity, and communal solidarity.

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