

Communicating Gender in Javanese Wayang Wong: A Semiotic and Historical Analysis of Cross-Gender Performance

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how gender is constructed, communicated, and historically transformed in Javanese wayang wong through a network of simultaneous semiotic channels. The communication phenomenon at the center of the study is the persistence of cross-gender performance in a traditional theatrical form whose meanings are shaped not only by bodily signs, costume, vocality, and spatial arrangement, but also by Javanese cosmology and changing political contexts. Using a qualitative design based on documentary research and textual analysis, the study draws on ethnographic studies, historical accounts, performance documentation, and heritage records related to wayang wong in Central Java. The analysis combines theatre semiotics, gender performativity theory, and postcolonial historical interpretation, with data organized through movement, costume, vocal, spatial, and contextual sign systems. The findings show that gender in wayang wong is communicated as an embodied cultural language rather than a fixed biological category, and that the *alus/kasar* cosmological framework is more decisive than the female/male binary in organizing meaning. Practically, the study supports more contextual interpretation, preservation, and performance pedagogy in traditional arts. Its limitation lies in the reliance on documentary rather than field-based audience data, while its originality lies in positioning cross-gender performance as a historically dynamic communication system grounded in local cosmology rather than merely as theatrical role reversal.

Keywords: Cultural communication; Javanese theatre; performance semiotics; *wayang wong*

INTRODUCTION

Wayang wong is a classical Javanese dance drama derived from *wayang kulit* narratives and historically cultivated in the royal courts of Yogyakarta and Surakarta (Soedarsono, 2007; Sahid, 2013). As a performance tradition, it communicates through multiple simultaneous semiotic channels, including movement, gesture, costume, makeup, sound, and spatial arrangement (Kowzan, 1968; Sahid, 2013; Soedarsono, 2007). Its expressive power comes from the interaction of those channels, which may reinforce one another or create productive tension rather than complete consistency (Barthes, 1964; Hughes-Freeland, 2008).

Within this system, gender does not appear as a fixed biological or social essence. Instead, gender signification is produced through choreography, costume, makeup, vocal quality, and spatial positioning, then interpreted through culturally learned Javanese aesthetic and cosmological codes (Barthes, 1964; Sahid, 2013). The performer's body therefore functions as the primary medium for encoding and transmitting cultural meaning (Kowzan, 1968; Schechner, 2002). This premise is especially important because *wayang wong* communicates less through explanatory dialogue than through embodied, codified performance language.

One of the most distinctive aspects of *wayang wong* is its long-standing practice of cross-gender performance. Historical court performances often placed male performers in refined female roles, while women in *langendriyan* and later productions portrayed refined male heroes and rough male characters (Emigh, 1996; Okado, 2011; Hatley, 1994; Rhodes, 2023). These practices cannot be understood as simple substitution, because they carry meanings related to aesthetic order, spiritual hierarchy, courtly legitimacy, and cultural authority (Okado, 2011; Rhodes, 2023).

The state of the art may be grouped into three broad strands. First, theatre semiotics explains how meaning in performance is generated through a system of interacting signs rather than through language alone, making it especially useful for analyzing movement, costume, staging, and visual symbolism in traditions such as *wayang wong* (Barthes, 1964; Kowzan, 1968). Second, gender performativity theory helps explain how gender is enacted through repeated bodily acts, although that framework does not always fully account for ritualized and culturally specific performance traditions (Butler, 1990; Salih, 2002; Hughes-Freeland, 2008). Third, historical and

postcolonial studies show that Javanese performance traditions developed within changing political conditions, including colonial rule, nationalist reconstruction, and modern intercultural circulation (Pemberton, 1994; Winet, 2010; Rhodes, 2023).

Several studies provide key foundations for the present article. Okado (2011) shows that cross-gender expression in *langendriyan* follows a cultural logic in which femininity, masculinity, and demonic force are not reducible to the biological sex of the performer. Hughes-Freeland (2008) demonstrates that cross-dressing in the dances of Didik Nini Thowok reflects wider negotiations of genre, legitimacy, and identity. Pemberton (1994) and Winet (2010) situate Javanese performance within broader struggles over authority, historical continuity, and postcolonial meaning. Sahid (2013), Kowzan (1968), and Barthes (1964) provide conceptual tools for understanding how performance generates meaning through the interaction of signs.

Even with those contributions, an important research gap remains. Existing studies often treat cross-gender casting as a gender problem, an aesthetic convention, or a historical curiosity, but fewer studies integrate semiotic analysis, Javanese cosmology, and historical transformation into one communication-centered explanation of how cross-gender performance becomes intelligible in *wayang wong*. What remains unresolved is how multiple sign channels work together, how the *alus/kasar* framework organizes gender intelligibility, and how the meanings of cross-gender performance change over time while preserving formal continuity.

This article therefore addresses three questions. First, how does *wayang wong* construct gender meaning through multiple semiotic channels? Second, how does the *alus/kasar* framework regulate and explain cross-gender roles? Third, how do the meanings of cross-gender performance shift across historical contexts? The objective is to explain cross-gender performance in *wayang wong* as a cultural communication system rather than merely as theatrical role reversal. The significance of the study lies in its contribution to performance studies, cultural communication, and the contextual preservation of traditional performing arts.

A communication-centered reading is especially valuable because it shifts attention from the question of whether cross-gender performance is acceptable to the question of how it becomes meaningful within a specific symbolic order. In *wayang wong*, signs do not function in isolation;

movement, costume, space, and narrative relations create a layered grammar through which the body communicates refinement, roughness, discipline, danger, prestige, and emotion. This means that gender is better approached here as a semiotic effect produced inside a culturally specific performance system than as a direct reflection of universal gender categories.

The article also responds to a broader theoretical issue. Much modern gender theory begins from assumptions shaped by Euro-American social life, especially the centrality of the male/female binary and the everyday reiteration of gender norms. Javanese performance complicates those assumptions because it places gender inside a larger cosmological order where moral and spiritual value may organize bodily expression more strongly than anatomical sex (Pemberton, 1994; Hughes-Freeland, 2008). The study therefore does not reject gender performativity theory but tests its reach and limits in a different cultural field (Butler, 1993; Wang & Xu, 2025).

A further reason for examining *wayang wong* lies in its historical durability. Cross-gender performance has survived colonial pressure, nationalist reinterpretation, postcolonial transformation, and contemporary intercultural experimentation, which suggests that its meanings are historically mobile rather than fixed once and for all (Pemberton, 1994; Winet, 2010; Rhodes, 2023). Rather than treating tradition as a static repository of the past, the article approaches *wayang wong* as an active system that continues to generate new meanings in changing social and political circumstances.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach grounded in Gadamerian hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1960; Debesay et al., 2008; Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). This paradigm is appropriate because the research concerns meaning, interpretation, and historical transformation rather than measurement or statistical explanation (Collins & Stockton, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Hermeneutics is especially useful because the study works with textual, visual, and historical materials whose meanings must be read in relation to wider cultural frameworks rather than treated as self-evident.

The research is designed as a documentary and textual study of Javanese *wayang wong*. This design is suitable because the research questions focus on how gender meaning is constructed and interpreted within a performance tradition and how those meanings shift historically. To answer those questions, the study combines three analytical lenses: theatre semiotics, gender performativity theory, and postcolonial historical analysis (Barthes, 1964; Kowzan, 1968; Butler, 1990; Pemberton, 1994; Winet, 2010).

The data consist of two broad categories of sources. Primary materials include ethnographic accounts of *wayang wong* and *langendriyan*, photographic and video documentation of performances, UNESCO heritage records, and palace-related documentation (Okado, 2011; Hughes-Freeland, 2008; Soedarsono, 1984; Soedarsono, 2007; UNESCO, 2003). Secondary materials include scholarly works on Javanese theatre, gender, semiotics, colonial history, and postcolonial cultural politics (Pemberton, 1994; Winet, 2010; Rhodes, 2023; Sahid, 2013; Schechner, 2002). Together, these materials make it possible to trace not only the formal structure of performance signs but also their historical reinterpretation.

The principal instrument of the research is the researcher as interpreter of texts, documents, and performance records. Supporting analytical instruments consist of semiotic coding categories derived from theatre semiotics, including movement, facial expression, gesture, makeup, hairstyle, costume, spatial position, and narrative context (Kowzan, 1968; Barthes, 1964). These categories enable the analysis to move from isolated observations to patterned interpretation by identifying how different channels work together to generate gender meaning.

The analytical process proceeds through four stages. First, semiotic coding is conducted to identify signs that communicate gender through movement, costume, vocality, spatiality, and context (Kowzan, 1968; Barthes, 1964). At this stage, denotative description and connotative interpretation are distinguished so that visible features can be linked to culturally recognized meanings. Second, the coded signs are interpreted through the *alus/kasar* framework to understand how Javanese moral and spiritual distinctions organize performance meaning (Pemberton, 1994; Hughes-Freeland, 2008; Okado, 2011). Third, those practices are read within colonial, nationalist, postcolonial, and contemporary contexts to identify how cross-gender performance acquires

historically specific meanings (Gadamer, 1960; Debesay et al., 2008; Winet, 2010). Fourth, the findings are placed in dialogue with Butler's gender performativity theory to assess both convergence and divergence (Butler, 1990; Wang & Xu, 2025).

Methodological rigor is maintained through triangulation across semiotic, interpretive, and historical approaches, systematic attention to conflicting evidence, and transparent documentation of analytical stages (Denzin, 1978; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study does not assume that all sources will agree, and it treats contradiction as analytically useful rather than methodologically problematic. The research also acknowledges its limitations, especially its reliance on documentary sources, its focus on Central Javanese court traditions, and the interpretive position of the researcher.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Gender as a Multi-Semiotic Communication System

The results show that gender in Javanese *wayang wong* is communicated through five interrelated semiotic channels: visual-kinetic, visual-sartorial, acoustic, spatial, and contextual channels. As Kowzan (1968) and Sahid (2013) explain, performance meaning emerges through the interaction of several sign systems rather than through dialogue alone. In *wayang wong*, this means that gender appears as a layered communicative effect rather than as a direct reflection of biological sex.

Visual-Kinetic Channel

The visual-kinetic channel is the most prominent medium of gender articulation. Okado (2011) and Hughes-Freeland (2008) identify three codified movement vocabularies that structure this process: *beksan putri*, *beksan putra alus*, and *beksan putra gagah*. According to Okado (2011), *beksan putri* is characterized by fluid movement, a low center of gravity, restrained facial expression, and controlled grace, all of which communicate refined femininity and inward discipline. Hughes-Freeland (2008) explains that *beksan putra alus* retains inward control while adding greater alertness and directional assertion, thereby signifying refined masculinity.

Pemberton (1994) describes *beksan putra gagah* as angular, upright, and forceful, communicating roughness and outward power. These findings indicate that movement style is linked more strongly to moral-spiritual character than to the biological sex of the performer.

Visual-Sartorial Channel

The visual-sartorial channel also plays an important role in the construction of gender and character. Pemberton (1994) and Sahid (2013) show that costume, color, ornament, jewelry, and makeup form a relatively stable sign system in which red signifies demonic roughness, blue and green indicate refinement, gold marks elevated or divine status, white suggests purity, and black signals degradation. In her study of *langendriyan*, Okado (2011) notes that female performers portraying demonic male roles combine feminine makeup with exaggerated demonic visual markers. This combination produces a composite form of signification that does not fit neatly into a simple masculine-feminine binary.

Acoustic, Spatial, and Contextual Channels

The acoustic channel does not primarily distinguish male and female characters through vocal register. As Okado (2011) and Hughes-Freeland (2008) explain, vocal performance in *wayang wong* follows the melodic structure of *tembang macapat* rather than a strict male-female vocal opposition. Sahid (2013) argues that vocal delivery communicates emotional state, narrative importance, and moral character more than the performer's biological sex.

The spatial channel further shapes meaning through bodily trajectory and occupation of space. Kowzan (1968) and Pemberton (1994) indicate that *alus* characters move in measured and restricted pathways, while *kasar* characters occupy broader space and move more expansively and unpredictably. The contextual channel is equally important because, as Kowzan (1968) and Sahid (2013) suggest, the same gesture or posture may carry different meanings depending on the narrative situation, character type, and relations among characters. As a result, audiences interpret gender through the combined operation of movement, costume, voice, space, and dramatic context.

The Primacy of the *Alus/Kasar* Framework

Across all five channels, the results indicate that the *alus/kasar* cosmological framework functions as the main organizing principle of gender signification in *wayang wong*. Pemberton

(1994), Hughes-Freeland (2008), and Okado (2011) all suggest that performance style is determined more strongly by a character's moral-spiritual status than by the binary distinction between male and female. For that reason, a refined male hero may be performed through *beksan putri* vocabulary, while a female demon may be represented through rough male-coded movement, costume, and spatial patterns, as Okado (2011) demonstrates.

Historical Transformation of Cross-Gender Performance

The results also show that cross-gender performance has persisted across different historical periods, although its meanings have shifted over time. Pemberton (1994) and Okado (2011) indicate that, in nineteenth-century colonial court contexts, male performers portraying refined female roles communicated courtly authority, symbolic refinement, and cultural legitimacy at a time when political power had become increasingly constrained. Okado (2011) and Rhodes (2023) show that *langendriyan* emerged as an all-female *Mangkunegaran* innovation that projected a distinctive and progressive court identity. Rhodes (2023) further notes that, in post-independence and commercial settings, women increasingly took on refined male roles, reflecting broader shifts in gender participation and public cultural life. Hughes-Freeland (2008) and Winet (2010) demonstrate that, in contemporary intercultural performance, cross-gender practice has become part of wider artistic dialogue beyond its original court framework.

Discussion

Gender as an Embodied Communication System

These results support the argument that gender in *wayang wong* functions as an embodied communication system rather than as a fixed identity. Barthes (1964) and Kowzan (1968) argue that performance meaning is produced through interacting signs, and the present findings confirm that gender in *wayang wong* is generated through the cumulative operation of gesture, costume, vocality, spatial organization, and narrative context. This explains why cross-gender performance remains intelligible within the tradition rather than being perceived merely as theatrical inversion.

Theoretical Implications of the *Alus/Kasar* Framework

The findings reinforce the importance of the *alus/kasar* cosmological framework. Pemberton (1994) and Hughes-Freeland (2008) have shown that Javanese performance is shaped

by moral, spiritual, and aesthetic classification, and this study extends that insight by demonstrating how the framework structures gender signification across multiple semiotic channels. In this sense, gender in *wayang wong* is not removed from performance, but repositioned within a larger symbolic order in which refinement and roughness are more decisive than anatomical sex. This result challenges universalist assumptions in gender theory that treat the male-female binary as the dominant organizing structure across cultures.

Relation to Gender Performativity Theory

The study both supports and complicates Butler's theory of gender performativity. Butler (1990) argues that gender is enacted rather than naturally given, and the evidence from *wayang wong* supports that view because gender is clearly performed through repeated and codified bodily acts. At the same time, Hughes-Freeland (2008) and Wang and Xu (2025) suggest that performativity does not always operate through continuous everyday reiteration in the same way across cultural settings. In *wayang wong*, gender performance is temporary, ritually bounded, and culturally licensed within a theatrical frame, so a performer who enacts *beksan putri* does not necessarily destabilize everyday social identity.

Comparison with Previous Studies

Compared with earlier studies, this research offers a more integrated explanation of cross-gender performance. Okado (2011) focuses strongly on *langendriyan*, Hughes-Freeland (2008) emphasizes genre and cross-dressing, and Pemberton (1994) and Winet (2010) highlight historical and political dimensions, but this study brings those strands together through a communication-centered framework. By connecting semiotic channels, cosmological classification, and historical transformation, the study clarifies not only that cross-gender performance exists in *wayang wong*, but also how it communicates meaning and why that meaning can change while formal continuity remains.

Historical Meaning and Communication

The historical dimension is especially important for applied communication. Pemberton (1994), Rhodes (2023), and Winet (2010) indicate that cross-gender roles did not communicate exactly the same thing in colonial courts, *Mangkunegaran* innovation, postcolonial performance,

and contemporary intercultural practice. However, the practice remained culturally legible because its intelligibility rested on durable semiotic and cosmological structures even as its social and political meanings shifted. This suggests that tradition should be understood not as static repetition, but as controlled transformation within a recognizable symbolic system.

Applied Communication Implications

The applied communication implications are substantial. Sahid (2013) and Schechner (2002) imply that, for arts pedagogy, *wayang wong* should be taught not merely as a technical repertoire of movements, but as a communication system in which bodily expression, costume, staging, and narrative context work together to produce meaning. UNESCO (2003) and Winet (2010) further suggest that heritage preservation should not focus only on visible form, because doing so risks separating performance from the symbolic logic that makes it intelligible. Finally, Pemberton (1994) and Hughes-Freeland (2008) show that gender expression in performance cannot be interpreted solely through modern Western categories, since embodiment and identity may be organized by very different symbolic orders in different traditions.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that gender in Javanese *wayang wong* functions as a cultural communication system rather than as a fixed biological identity or a universal model of performativity. Cross-gender roles become intelligible because meaning is produced through five interrelated semiotic channels: movement, costume, voice, spatial arrangement, and context. The analysis demonstrates that the *alus/kasar* cosmological framework is more decisive than the male/female binary in shaping gender signification, while the historical dimension shows that the meanings of cross-gender performance have shifted across colonial, nationalist, postcolonial, and contemporary contexts.

The article makes a theoretical contribution by advancing a communication-centered understanding of performance in which gender is treated as a historically situated semiotic practice. It makes a practical contribution by supporting more contextual performance interpretation, preservation strategies, and pedagogical approaches in traditional arts. Its main

limitation is the reliance on documentary materials rather than direct audience reception or field-based ethnography. Future research can extend this discussion through live performance observation, performer interviews, and audience studies across regional variations of Javanese theatre.

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