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WANARA IN RAMAYANA SHADOW PLAY: REPRESENTATION OF HUMANISM, VISUAL COMMUNICATION, AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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Abstract

This study explores the representation of Wanara characters in Javanese Wayang kulit Ramayana from the perspectives of Visual Communication Design (DKV), communication science, and humanistic values. Wanara, meaning "forest man" in Sanskrit, symbolizes loyalty, bravery, physical strength, and self-sacrifice for truth, bridging animal instincts and human virtues. The research aims to analyze how visual elements like wanda, sunggingan, and tatahan convey these traits, and their contemporary relevance in Indonesian culture. Employing qualitative methods, including visual semiotics from Peirce, Saussure, and Barthes, the study examines literature, visual documentation, and media adaptations. Findings reveal that Hanoman embodies purity and devotion, Sugriwa leadership and alliance, and Anggada transformation and courage, with these characters persisting in comics, games, and branding. The study highlights Wayang kulit's role in moral education and cultural continuity, offering practical insights for heritage preservation and theoretical contributions to semiotics in traditional arts.

Keywords: *Humanism; Visual Communication; Shadow Puppets; Wanara; Cultural Relevance*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi representasi karakter Wanara dalam wayang kulit Ramayana Jawa dari perspektif Desain Komunikasi Visual (DKV), sains komunikasi, dan nilai humanis. Wanara, yang berarti "manusia hutan" dalam Sanskerta, melambangkan kesetiaan, keberanian, kekuatan fisik, dan pengorbanan diri untuk kebenaran, menjembatani insting hewani dan kebajikan manusia. Penelitian bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana elemen visual seperti wanda, sunggingan, dan tatahan menyampaikan sifat-sifat ini, serta relevansinya kontemporer dalam budaya Indonesia. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, termasuk semiotika visual dari Peirce, Saussure, dan Barthes, penelitian meninjau literatur, dokumentasi visual, dan adaptasi media. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Hanoman mewujudkan kesucian dan pengabdian, Sugriwa kepemimpinan dan aliansi, serta Anggada transformasi dan keberanian, dengan karakter-karakter ini bertahan dalam komik, game, dan branding. Studi ini menekankan peran wayang kulit dalam pendidikan moral dan kontinuitas budaya, memberikan wawasan praktis untuk pelestarian warisan dan kontribusi teoritis pada semiotika dalam seni tradisional.

Kata Kunci: Humanisme; Relevansi Budaya; Semiotika Visual; Wayang Kulit; Wanara

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the rich tapestry of Indonesian culture, Wayang Kulit stands as a traditional performance art laden with philosophical meaning and noble values. Among the various epics presented, the Ramayana story serves as the primary stage for many epic figures, including the Wanara. These monkey or humanoid monkey characters, such as Hanoman Son of Anjani, an incarnation of Lord Shiva, a loyal servant of the powerful Sri Rama, renowned for his bravery and loyalty, Sugriwa Monkey king of Kiskenda, brother of Subali, Rama's main ally in the war. Subali's younger brother who was helped by Rama to seize the throne of the Kiskenda kingdom from the hands of his angry older brother, Subali The monkey king of Kiskenda, Sugriwa's older brother. He possessed extraordinary magical powers and was renowned for his Pancasona spell. He was the father of Anggada, whom Sugriwa later defeated with Rama's help., Anggada The obedient and brave son of Subali, a young, agile and strong monkey, became Rama's trusted Senopati. He was sent by Rama as an envoy to Alengka to challenge Rahwana, Anilla A dark-colored monkey who designed the construction of the Situbanda Bridge. A powerful warlord, he was the son of Batara Antaboga (the snake king), known for his loyalty in assisting Rama's troops, and Anjani Hanoman's mother, who is also part of the Wanara tribe, are not merely supporting characters but entities symbolizing loyalty, courage, physical strength, and a willingness to sacrifice for the truth. They represent a humanistic side in a paradoxical form physically resembling monkeys but possessing human intelligence, emotions, and morality a representation rich for analysis from the perspectives of Visual Communication Design (VCD) and Communication Science.

Although the existence of Wanara in puppetry has been widely recognized, in-depth studies explicitly linking their visual representation with communication theory, semiotics, and humanistic relevance in the context of contemporary Indonesian culture still require more attention. Many studies tend to focus on narrative or historical aspects, lacking integration of how the visual design of shadow puppets actively communicates these messages to audiences across generations, and how these messages are adapted and interpreted in the modern cultural landscape. This gap indicates the need for an interdisciplinary analysis that can explain how the visual heritage of Wanara continues to function as a moral compass and a source of inspiration in the present era.

This research aims to (1) analyze the representation of Wanara characters in Wayang Kulit Ramayana from the perspective of VCD and communication science, (2) identify and dissect the humanistic values communicated through the visual design of Wanara characters, and (3) explore the cultural relevance and modern interpretations of Wanara figures in Indonesian society today. Thus, this research is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of Wanara as a bridge between tradition, aesthetics, communication, and eternal human values.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-interpretative analysis method. This type of research was chosen to allow for an in-depth exploration of the meaning and symbolism contained in the representation of Wanara in shadow puppets, as well as its interpretation in a contemporary context. The subjects of this research are the main Wanara characters in Wayang Kulit Ramayana, namely Hanoman, Sugriwa, Subali, Anila, and Anggada. The objects of research include (1) the physical visual design of the Wanara character shadow puppets (covering *wanda*, *sunggingan*, *tatahan*, proportions, gestures, and attire), (2) the narrative and philosophy of the Wanara characters in the Ramayana epic and Javanese puppetry, and (3) the manifestation and interpretation of Wanara figures in popular media and contemporary Indonesian culture.



Source: Vecteezy.com, 2026

Figure 1 Wanara Shadow Puppet Characters

The research was conducted from January to March 2024. The research location focused on literature studies and visual analysis from various relevant online and offline sources. The primary research instruments are documents, case studies, and visual observations. Documents include Ramayana epic texts, Javanese puppetry books, academic

journals, and cultural articles. Case studies include the adaptation of Wanara in comics, video games, and modern branding. Visual observations were conducted on images of Wanara shadow puppets from various sources to identify VCD elements. The sampling method used was purposive sampling, where sources were selected based on their high relevance to the research objectives, namely those discussing Wanara philosophy, shadow puppet visual design, visual communication, semiotics, and contemporary cultural adaptation.

Data collection was carried out through: (1) a comprehensive literature study of library sources to gather information about the philosophy, narrative, and meaning of the Wanara characters; (2) visual collection and analysis of images and photos of Wanara character shadow puppets to identify VCD elements; (3) searching and analyzing online media (news articles, websites, social media platforms) to identify modern interpretations and adaptations of Wanara in popular culture. Data analysis was performed using a semiotic approach from Charles Sanders Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Roland Barthes. Peirce's theory was used to unravel the logical relationship between the sign (puppet visual) and the object it represents (character traits), through the concepts of icon, index, and symbol. Saussure's theory was applied to understand the arbitrary relationship between the signifier (puppet physical form) and the signified (conceptual meaning). Meanwhile, Barthes' theory was used to explore two levels of meaning: denotation (objective visual description) and connotation (moral, philosophical, and cultural values attached to the character). The results of this semiotic analysis were then integrated with the VCD theoretical framework to explain how visual elements form effective visual communication, and linked with communication theory to understand the delivery of humanistic messages.

III. RESEARCH RESULTS

The results of this study reveal that the Wanara characters in Wayang Kulit Ramayana are a very effective medium for communicating humanistic values and morality through rich visual communication elements. The discussion is divided into three main parts: analysis of the philosophy and meaning of the Wanara characters, representation of visual communication through semiotics, and the contemporary cultural relevance of Wanara.

Analysis of the philosophy and meaning of the Wanara characters shows that each Wanara figure has a unique spectrum of values and moral messages. The term Wanara itself, derived from Sanskrit, is etymologically interpreted as "forest man." This inherently creates a

visual and conceptual duality highlighting the ability of a creature to subdue animal instincts to achieve a noble degree of humanity. Hanoman, as the most prominent Wanara, is consistently interpreted as a symbol of absolute loyalty, purity, self-control, and extraordinary spiritual strength. His selfless loyalty to Rama and his ability to control himself amidst temptation make him a role model for sincere devotion. Sugriwa, on the other hand, symbolizes leadership transformed through repentance and strategic alliance. His story with Subali is a moral lesson about ambition, misunderstanding, and the importance of wisdom in leading. Anggada, the son of Subali who later serves Rama, represents the courage of a young knight and the transformation from personal grudge to devotion to the truth. These moral messages, such as courage, loyalty, sacrifice, and integrity, are not only narrative but also deeply embedded in every visual detail of the shadow puppet.

From the perspective of Visual Communication Design (VCD), the representation of Wanara in shadow puppets is a complex and structured semiotic system. Semiotic theories from Peirce, Saussure, and Barthes provide a strong framework for dissecting how these visual signs convey messages. Denotatively, Wanara is depicted as an anthropomorphic figure with a monkey head, tail, but dressed in full knightly attire with ornaments and a crown. However, connotatively, these visual elements contain deep philosophical meanings. *Wanda*, or the facial expression of the puppet, is a crucial signifier communicating the basic character and mood. For example, Hanoman's calm yet strong *wanda* reflects his self-control. *Sunggingan*, or coloring, also has strong symbolic meaning: the white color on Hanoman symbolizes purity and spirituality, while the red color on other Wanara figures can indicate courage or a more fiery nature. *Tatahan*, or carving on the leather, as well as body proportions and gestures, provide information about social status, strength, and role in the narrative.



Source: nl.123rf.com, 2026

Figure 1 Poleng cloth worn by Hanoman and Bima

The *poleng* design on Hanoman's sarong, for instance, symbolizes his connection with Bima and the wind god Bayu. Consistency in this visual representation, as emphasized by the research of Saptodewo, F., is very important to maintain the clarity of communicating character values and philosophy to the audience. Saptodewo, F. (2013) in his work "Kajian Mitologi dan Dekonstruksi Tokoh Wayang Tetuka" also emphasizes how the process of deconstructing puppet characters through visualization can enrich the understanding of mythology and its relevance. This careful visualization is how shadow puppets preserve identity and communicate deep cultural values.

The contemporary cultural relevance of Wanara is seen from their adaptation and interpretation in various forms of modern media and social contexts. Wanara is no longer limited to the traditional shadow puppet stage but has penetrated the realm of popular culture such as comics and video games. The comic "Wanara" by Sweta Kartika is an example of how traditional characters are reinterpreted in the modern Indonesian urban landscape with science fiction elements, making it relevant for the younger generation. In the video game "Code Atma," Hanoman is present as a "Wanara" character with visuals and functions integrated into modern RPG mechanics. Additionally, the values carried by Wanara are also

adopted in the creative industry. A design studio named "Wanara Studio" uses the Wanara identity—which they interpret as a witty, reliable, and adventurous "tailed man"—to represent professionalism and creativity. Hanoman also continues to be a symbol of devotion and leadership in the context of modern management, where his traits such as loyalty and courage are considered "eternal wisdom" that can be applied to improve organizational effectiveness. Adaptations like this, including the popularization of the "Anoman Obong" story through contemporary music, show that the Wanara character has high flexibility to preserve moral and spiritual values through various communication platforms, making them a timeless vehicle for character education.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Wanara characters in Wayang Kulit Ramayana are not merely mythological figures but complex representations of humanism, courage, and devotion effectively communicated through rich visual design. Through semiotic analysis, visual elements such as *wanda*, *sunggingan*, and *tatahan* not only form an aesthetic identity but also function as strong signifiers for deep moral values. Hanoman's loyalty, Sugriwa's leadership, and Anggada's transformation are systematically transmitted, allowing the audience to internalize life lessons. Furthermore, the Wanara figures have successfully transcended traditional stage boundaries, adapting and finding significant relevance in contemporary Indonesian culture through popular media such as comics and video games, as well as becoming inspiration for creative industry identities and modern leadership models. This adaptability confirms the position of Wanara as an effective character education tool and a cultural bridge connecting past, present, and future generations. Implicitly, this research shows the great potential of shadow puppets as an adaptive visual communication medium for the transmission of humanistic values, while affirming the importance of creative efforts in preserving cultural heritage so that it remains relevant amidst the dynamics of the times.

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