

The Meaning of Symbolic Aesthetic of Basic Shapes in Sundanese Culture

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This paper aims to examine the symbolic aesthetic concepts that exist in Sundanese society and culture in West Java, Indonesia. The symbolic meaning that exists or is applied to forms that are known in art and design. With the method of interpretation and using Sundanese as a source of research, several expressions and proverbs are found that use the basic shapes, namely squares, triangles and circles. The results of this study indicate that there are symbolic meanings of the three basic forms which indicate that in Sundanese culture there is awareness of the existence of these basic forms and give them symbolic meanings. These basic forms are generally sourced from objects found in nature. The meaning of this basic form refers to a certain function that is applied according to the character of the basic form in its implementation. This symbolic meaning generally refers to efforts to create cultural values towards perfection. The meaning of this basic shape can be used for the meaning of the basic shape used in designs with a local cultural approach, especially in areas where the culture grows and develops.

Keywords: basic shapes, circle, square, triangle, aesthetic, symbolic meaning, Sundanese culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Sundanese is one of the ethnic groups in Indonesia of Southeast Asia. Most of the Sundanese people have traditionally inhabited the western part of the island of Java, which is administratively divided into two provinces, West Java and Banten (Figure 1). Culturally, the area is known by the Sundanese themselves as Tatar Sunda or Sunda land. The geography of western part of Java island is composed by natural configuration of mountains, some of them are volcanoes, and valleys that create high-low contrasts, various natural colors in the form of color gradations of leaves and trees, forming a forest that wraps around the mountain. In the valleys, there are rivers that flow from mountains to valleys and above it the tropical sun shines every day of the year so that everything is brightly lit creating a beautiful scene.

The beauty of the Sunda land panorama has earned it the nickname Parahyangan or Priangan, which means the place of the gods. For the Sundanese people, the landscape of the Sunda land is generally not only seen as a beautiful object but also provides other reflective and spiritual images such as reminiscing about past experiences, life journeys, and the greatness and majesty of God (Figure 2). Darsoprajitno (2001) explained that the geography of the beautiful natural layout of Parahyangan that is already available is what has helped shape the cultural behavior of the Sundanese people to be tolerant, appreciative and accommodating.

This beautiful natural condition creates a society that in its language repertoire has a distinctive vocabulary, namely *waas*. According to the oldest Sundanese-English dictionary, A Dictionary of The Sundanese Language of Java, (Jonathan Rigg, 1862) *waas* is explained as follows:

"said when a pleasurable feeling is caused by seeing some one or something which reminds us of what we ourselves possess, but which, for the moment, is out of our reach. A happy or pleasing remembrance or emotion regarding something which we do not at the moment see (as see a woman's gown causes sentimental emotions).



Figure 1. Map of West Java dan Banten (latitude.nu, 2012)

The beauty of nature and the romance of life in it which is contained in the word *waas*, in Sundanese culture gives birth to distinctive musical works of art with tones that tend to be melancholic as reflected in the art of harp-flute music and sound art known as *tembang Cianjuran* (song of Cianjuran style), using the place where the art developed namely Cianjur, which has the smoothest dialect of Sundanese.

On the other hand, these natural conditions also gave birth to a cheerful culture which is reflected in the existence of a humorous culture in the form of parodies that laugh at themselves, as reflected in the story of Si Kabayan. One of the stories about Si Kabayan in this context is when Si Kabayan was walking. When walking on an incline, which requires more effort, he laughs because he knows that after an uphill he will find a way down (and vice versa, when walking on a way down, which is not exhausting, Kabayan cries because he will find an uphill. These two phenomena, the melancholic song Cianjuran and the humorous parody of Si Kabayan, can be said to be paradoxical images of the two sides of Sundanese culture. According to Harsojo (in Koentjaraningrat, 2004), from their language and art and everyday attitudes, the ideal type of Sundanese people in general is optimistic, likes and is easily happy, has an open character but is often too sensitive, thus creating the term *pundung* or sulking (Wartakusumah, 2009).

According to Indonesian National Statistic Board (BPS), Sundanese people is 15.5 percent of the total population of Indonesia and the second

largest population after Javanese. Based on the way of daily life, Sundanese people can be divided into two categories. First, those who live by following the times, including the use of modern equipment, secondly those who remain faithful to the teachings of their ancestors and live in traditional way. The first, living in villages and in cities with various kinds of work, while the second lives in the traditional village area with the main job as a farmer in traditional way that is growing rice in shifting fields called huma.

From the cultural background above, this paper examines whether the Sundanese people have the concept of perfection that they create in their culture and in what form this concept is stored in the context of their lives.



Figure 2. Common West Java landscape, rice field with background mountain (travel.kompas.com, 2021)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As an ethnicity, the Sundanese have their own language which is called the Sundanese language. This language becomes their mother tongue in addition to using Indonesian language as national language or lingua franca used for official conversations and with other ethnicities, especially at school and in formal workplaces. Language is a cultural construction in which cultural wealth is stored in the form of words or terms, including vocabulary of cultural philosophy, knowledge, art and aesthetics. In every language there are expressions and proverbs. Both are in the form of fixed words or sentences that are used to convey meaning indirectly but can be understood by users of the same language.

The use of expressions and proverbs as a source of studying the concept of perfection in Sundanese culture is based on the idea that the wealth of a culture is determined by language.

Language is a medium that constructs the way a society views itself, other people, and the world. Through language, the boundaries of the breadth of the area and the critical abilities of a society are determined, especially in languages that have a number of concepts that are able to view the world widely ([Qomaruzzaman, 2003](#)). Phrases and proverbs are also that concept. Nowadays there have been efforts to collect Sundanese proverbs and expressions into books so that they become written sources, namely *Saratus Paribasa Jeung Babasan* ([Natawisastra, 1979](#)), *Babasan & Paribasa, Kebeungharan Basa Sunda* (Aji Rosidi, 2005) and as a sub-chapter in *Peperenian Urang Sundanese* ([Hidayat, et al, 2005](#)).

In the Indonesian Dictionary, an expression is defined as "a combination of words whose meaning is not the same as the combined meaning of its members." Meanwhile, according to the General Indonesian Dictionary (Badudu-Zain, 1994), is "a word or phrase that has a figurative meaning such as handling work, falling in love, rising up, scapegoating." In English, expressions are called idioms. According to the Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English ([Catherine Soanes, 2002](#)), idioms are defined as "a group of words whose meaning cannot be deducted from those of individual words (e.g. over the moon). Meanwhile, according to the Cambridge International Dictionary of English (1996), idioms are defined as "a group of words in a fixed order having a particular meaning different from the meanings of each word understood on its own". This study uses interpretation method ([Stecker, 2002](#)) to understand the meaning of proverbs found in Sundanese language as the main source.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Square

In the Sundanese language there is a proverb that uses a square shape as a symbol, that is, *hirup kudu masagi* or life must be like a square. This expression contains advice which means that life must be versatile. Another form, "*jelema masagi*" ([Natawisastra, 1979](#)) means a person who has many abilities and no deficiencies. Perfect person. Masagi comes from the word pasagi (square) which means to resemble (shape) a square (Jamaludin, 2011). The similarity in the size of the

four planes in the square is likened to various aspects in the form of actions or deeds in life which must be the same in quality and quantity. Generally this expression in Sundanese proverb is understood as a symbol for a versatile life so as to create perfection of actions or behavior in life. This proverb is a guide for the Sundanese people to become perfect people in terms of the ability to face life, including in their relationship with God. This is a concept of life in the form of efforts to achieve perfection in the form of behavior, the achievement of welfare and also piety in worshipping God.

The meaning of all-can or all-round is done in a positive sense with the main emphasis on two main aspects of human life, those are worldly life (work, human relations with humans, human relations with nature) and life in the afterlife (human relations with God). A person who is well-behaved, versatile, smart and prosperous or rich is called a masagi, the adjective form in Sundanese of pasagi or square. The similarity in the size of the four sides in this rectangular shape is likened to various aspects in the form of actions or deeds in life that must be the same in quality and quantity. Generally this expression is understood as a symbol for a versatile life so as to create perfection of actions or behavior in life.

The characteristic of a square is that all four sides are the same size. Square is interpreted as a perfect shape. A square is a regular shaped which has four equal sides and four equal angles (90 degree angles, or right angles). The form of a squared rectangle does not exist absolutely in nature. In other words, this form is a creation of the human imagination as a result of the abstraction of forms that exist in nature. Other rectangles, such as rectangles, are derivatives of this square shape.



Figure 3. Rectangular quadrangle as a symbol of perfection of action or attitude/behavior

Circle

The shape of the circle is contained in the expression "*niat kudu buleud*" (intention must be round). Intention is related to the issue of persistence of attitudes, beliefs and beliefs which ultimately lead to issues of faith or spirituality. A round shape is made of circular lines where the ends meet, with the radii from the center to each side being the same size. Round shape or circle line used as a symbol of intention or determination. Intention is related to the issue of firmness of attitude, belief and belief which in the end leads to the issue of faith or monotheism (spiritual).

When referring to the forms that exist in nature, it appears that circles exist in various objects such as the moon and sun in space, various forms of flowers-such as lotuses and some types of leaves have circular or round basic shapes. The circle shape is unique that other basic shapes do not, such as ripples on the surface of the water. When the surface of the water is disturbed, such as because an object falls on the surface of the water, around the object, due to the influence of gravity, the water reacts by forming a circle that moves in size around the object.

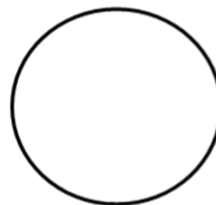


Figure 4. Circle, symbol of spiritual perfection and The water ripples form a circle.

In a wider context, outside of Sundanese culture, the circle shape has been widely used as a marker for spiritual meaning in various areas such as art, religion and ideology. For example, in the tradition of Christian/Catholic painting, to give a sacred mark to human objects, a white circle is usually given around the head (halo) (Figure 5). While in religious areas such as Islam, although there are no rules regarding symbols, the shape of the moon in an easily recognizable form, namely the crescent moon, is generally understood as an Islamic symbol (Figure 6).



Figure 5. Halo around heads in classic painting (catholicforlife.com, 2021)

A common example is as a sign of a Muslim place of worship such as the one on the top of the minaret or the roof of a mosque. Some of these symbols are equipped with a pentagon star symbol. Another example is the symbol of the Red Cross which internationally uses the shape of a cross of equal length (+) with vertical and horizontal lines of the same size in red, in Islamic societies in the Middle East using the symbol of a red crescent. The circle can be seen in nature or form that very strongly influenced and come from by natural mostly moon and sun (Wibawa, et.all, 2023).

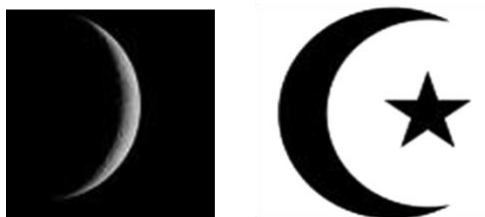


Figure 6. Crescent and and star, considered as the symbol of Islam

Triangle

In Sundanese language, there is a phrase *bale nyungcung* (building with pointy roof) and *Buana Nyuncung* (pointy realm, place of gods and hyang in traditional Sundanese cosmology). Bale Nyungcung is another name for the holy building, which is commonly refers to mosque buildings (Figure 7). In old days, sentence in Sundanese *ka bale nyungcung* (go to the mosque) in everyday conversation means “to hold the marriage ceremony”, which is generally done in the mosque. *Bale nyungcung* pointed to the model of the roof of the mosque that uses a *gunungan* (mountain-look shape) or *meru* with three stacks with a pyramid-shaped peak composed of four triangular shapes. This form can also be found on the roof of temples in Bali and tropical model buildings. The shape of a triangle in a normal position, one end of which is at the top, becomes the top so that it has an upward orientation or sky (Jamaludin, Salura, 2018).



Figure 7. A traditional mosque in Bandung West Java with a three-level 'meru' or mountain-like roof. The peak is pyramid-shaped composed of four triangles called nyungcung (kitlv.nl, 1920)

Referring to nature, the shape of the *nyungcung* or triangle is the general form of the mountain (Figure 8). Mountains play an important role in the course of Sundanese history, especially because various megalithic sites and sacred tombs are generally found on mountains (Wessing, 2006). Wessing further revealed Hidding's research (1933 and 1935) that mountains are the boundary between human settlements (settled areas) and foreign areas where human life ends and other life begins. For example, the sites of Mount Padang in Cianjur and Ciwidey, Astana Gedé Kawali in West Java Province and the Arca Domas on Mount Kendeng, Kanékés Village (Baduy) di Banten Province.

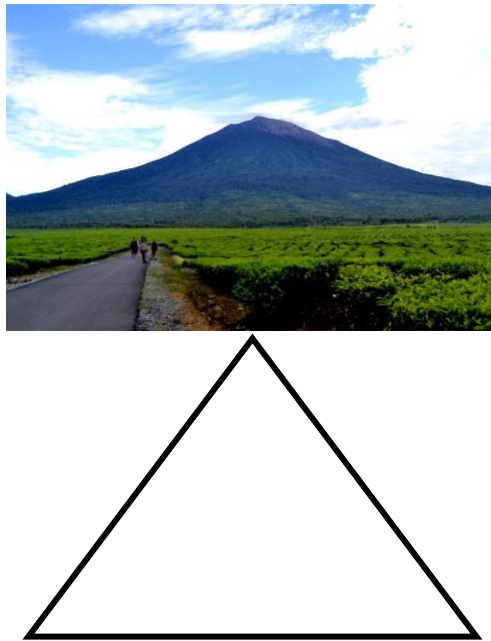


Figure 8 Triangle as the basic shape of the mountain
(Cirema mountain, anekatempatwisata.com, 2023)

According to Fadillah (2001) a number of sacred objects, especially in the form of tombs, although not at the top of a mountain, are a representation of a mountain or imagined as a mountain. Fadillah used the example of Syarif Hidayatullah's grave on a hill called Sembung in Cirebon, people call it Sunan Gunung Jati. According to Claire Holt (1967) the mountain peaks in Indonesia are widely believed to be the abode of gods and ancestral spirits. Also volcanoes are considered to have a life and spirit of their own, are revered and revered. Mountains are considered as bridges of the upper and lower worlds, therefore places of worship are erected on high places or made to imitate the shape of mountains (mountains) such as punden terraces and temples and pyramids as transcendental bridges between the upper world and the underworld (Dharsono, 2007). In the Hindu-Buddhist view, mountains are considered to play a role in stabilizing the universe (univers), supporting heaven and earth, neutralizing evil forces, chaos, instability and disorder. The mountain is a symbol of the highest power and as a binder of the universe (Snodgrass, 1985).

Another understanding or symbolic meaning of triangles is as stated by Ajip Rosidi (2008), namely that the triangular shape (in Sundanese is

called *Jurutilu*) is also used as a symbol of the vagina or yoni, the place or door for human birth. It seems that the symbol is in the form of an inverted triangle or one of the corners is located below.

From the meaning of the expression or proverb above, it appears that each of the basic forms in the aesthetic repertoire in Sundanese culture is used as a symbol that has the same meaning, namely perfection. Different forms point to different areas of perfection. Square refers to balanced actions or behavior in various aspects of life so as to create a perfect human being, round/circle as an ideological symbol, symbolizing the perfection of faith or belief and triangle pointing to a perfect or holy place.

CONCLUSION

From the description above, it appears that traditional communities have a unique ability to understand natural phenomena. They have been able to enrich the repertoire of their respective cultures by using and utilizing the natural characteristics in which they live. The visual elements of nature have been appropriately used as a symbol of the value they have created to be practiced in their daily lives. To a certain extent, it turns out that the meaning of a form created by a certain society can have the same meaning with the culture of other peoples who are even very far apart in distance. This can be seen from the notion of the shape of a circle. this seems reasonable, considering that round shapes like the sun or moon can be found in various parts of the world.

Perfection, as the life goal of traditional society has been strived in various ways, by first making a symbol, which in this case is the basic form. Apart from the development of science about forms as in mathematics, three basic forms have been present in traditional society, in this case Sundanese people, by bringing a moral message about behavior towards perfection. In addition, there is a high regard for the goddess of rice who has brought down rice and thus gave life to humans. In addition, by combining the three basic forms which mean perfection into a single form of rice container, it seems that the ancient Sundanese made something as an effort to high respect for the goddess of rice who had brought down rice and thus gave life to humans.

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