

The Visuality of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* in the *Guel Dance*: A Roland Barthes Semiotic Analysis of *Kerawang Gayo*

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How to cite: Permata, M.M.B., & Setiawan, I. (2026). The Visuality of Upuh Ulen-Ulen in the Guel Dance: A Roland Barthes Semiotic Analysis of Kerawang Gayo. *Gondang: Jurnal Seni dan Budaya*, Vol 10(1): Page. 327-339.

Article History : Received: Feb 15, 2026. Revised: Apr 117, 2026. Accepted: Jun 27, 2026

ABSTRACT

Upuh Ulen-Ulen is a traditional textile of the Gayo people that holds a significant role in both customary ceremonies and the performance of the Guel Dance. Previous studies on the Guel Dance have primarily focused on its historical background, movement philosophy, and cultural identity, while research on Upuh Ulen-Ulen has generally examined its motifs and symbolic values as a cultural artifact. However, studies that specifically investigate Upuh Ulen-Ulen as a visual sign system that constructs performative meaning through its relationship with the dancer's body remain limited. This study aims to analyze how the motifs, colors, and use of Upuh Ulen-Ulen generate cultural meaning in Guel Dance performances through the semiotic perspective of Roland Barthes. The research employs a qualitative approach using visual ethnography as its primary method. Data were collected through observations of Guel Dance performances in Central Aceh and Bener Meriah Regencies, in-depth interviews with dancers, artists, cultural experts, traditional leaders, and Upuh Ulen-Ulen artisans, visual documentation, and a review of relevant literature. The data were analyzed using Barthes' three levels of signification—denotation, connotation, and myth—integrated with perspectives from visual culture and performance studies. The findings reveal that Upuh Ulen-Ulen functions not merely as a dance property but as a visual sign system that produces meaning through the interaction between the dancer's body, Kerawang motifs, colors, and the performance context. At the denotative level, Upuh Ulen-Ulen appears as a traditional textile decorated with Kerawang motifs. At the connotative level, it signifies honor, protection, spirituality, and the cultural identity of the Gayo people. At the mythological level, these meanings are naturalized through cultural practices, transforming Upuh Ulen-Ulen into a collective representation of Gayo identity. This study offers a novel contribution by positioning Upuh Ulen-Ulen as a performative artifact that generates cultural meaning through a visual sign system, thereby expanding the application of semiotic studies within the field of Indonesian traditional performing arts.

KEYWORDS

Upuh Ulen-Ulen
Guel Dance
Barthesian Semiotics
Visual Culture
Gayo Society

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional performing arts are not constructed solely through sequences of movement but also through various visual elements that function as media for the production of cultural meaning. Costumes, colors, props, stage design, and the dancers' bodies constitute interconnected systems of representation that interact to convey symbolic messages to the audience. From the perspective of visual culture, objects presented within a performance should not be understood merely as decorative elements but as cultural signs that represent the values, identities, and ideologies of the communities that produce and sustain them (Hall, 1997; Mitchell, 2005). Therefore, examining visual elements is essential for understanding how a society constructs and communicates its cultural identity through performing arts.

Within the context of Indonesian traditional performing arts, the Guel Dance is one of the most significant cultural heritages of the Gayo people, who inhabit the regencies of Central Aceh and Bener Meriah. The dance is widely recognized as a representation of the legend of the White Elephant and serves as a medium for transmitting customary values, historical narratives, and the cultural identity of the Gayo community (Permata, Setiawan, & Wirandi, 2020). A Guel Dance performance encompasses not only choreographic movements but also an integrated combination of the dancers' bodies, music, costumes, stage aesthetics, and visual elements, all of which collectively create a unified artistic expression. Within the Gayo cultural tradition, the Guel Dance is understood as a medium of cultural expression that embodies customary values, historical memory, spirituality, and the aesthetic principles of the Gayo people (Permata & Wirandi, 2022).

One of the most prominent visual elements in the Guel Dance is Upuh Ulen-Ulen, a traditional Gayo textile decorated with distinctive Kerawang motifs that occupies an important place in Gayo cultural life. Upuh Ulen-Ulen is used in various customary ceremonies, including weddings, the reception of distinguished guests, the inauguration of traditional leaders, and Guel Dance performances. Its presence demonstrates that Upuh Ulen-Ulen functions not merely as a wearable object or costume accessory but also as a symbol of honor, protection, dignity, spirituality, and the cultural identity of the Gayo people. In Guel Dance performances, the visuality of Upuh Ulen-Ulen is created through the interplay of Kerawang motifs, color composition, textile texture, and the material's response to the movements of the dancer's body. As the cloth moves through sweeping arm gestures, body rotations, and directional changes, it generates dynamic visual accents that evoke the movement of an elephant's ears or the flapping wings of a bird. These visual effects reinforce the relationship between the Guel Dance and the legend of the White Elephant, which serves as the dance's central narrative.

The relationship between the dancer's body and *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* demonstrates that dance and traditional visual art in the Guel Dance constitute an inseparable artistic unity. While the dancer's body functions as the medium of movement, *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* provides a visual dimension that reinforces the character and cultural significance of the performance. This view is consistent with Soedarsono (2002), who argues that Indonesian traditional performing arts are constructed through the integration of movement, costume, music, symbolism, and cultural values. Similarly, Hadi (2007) emphasizes that the dancer's body is not merely a vehicle for movement but also a space in which the cultural symbols of the supporting community are represented. From the perspective of visual culture, Hall (1997) explains that representation is the process through which meaning is produced by means of language, symbols, and images, enabling a society to construct its cultural identity. Mitchell (2005) further argues that visuality emerges from the relationship between visual objects, viewers, and the cultural context in which they are embedded. Accordingly, the visuality of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* lies not only in its physical appearance but also in the ways the Gayo people interpret and assign meaning to the symbols embodied within it. Furthermore, drawing on performance studies, Schechner (2013) contends that every element present in a performance possesses performative agency capable of generating cultural meaning. From this perspective, *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* can be understood as a cultural agent that connects history, customary traditions, spirituality, and the collective identity of the Gayo people within the performative space.

Previous studies on the Guel Dance have approached the subject from a variety of perspectives. Permata, Setiawan, and Wirandi (2020) examined the philosophy of movement in the Guel Dance as a representation of the cultural values of the Gayo people.

Subsequently, Permata and Wirandi (2022) analyzed the Guel Dance as an expression of Gayo cultural identity through an ethnochoreological approach. Both studies demonstrate the role of the Guel Dance as a medium for transmitting cultural heritage; however, neither investigates the visuality of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* as a system of signs that constructs meaning within the performance. In the field of visual arts, Eliya Anita (2017), in her study *Understanding the Meaning of Gayo Kerawang Motifs*, explored the philosophical meanings of Kerawang motifs as representations of Gayo cultural values. Likewise, Qismina Zahira, in her undergraduate thesis *Understanding the Development of Gayo Kerawang*, examined the transformation of Kerawang Gayo in terms of its form, function, and development within Gayo society. While these studies provide valuable insights into the symbolic meanings and historical development of Kerawang Gayo, they primarily position Kerawang as a visual art object and do not examine how its meanings are transformed when it becomes part of a performative context.

Other studies on Kerawang Gayo reveal a similar tendency. Ferawati investigated Kerawang Gayo motifs in traditional bridal attire as representations of Gayo cultural identity. Rita Fitri (2017) discussed Kerawang Gayo as a cultural symbol within Gayo wedding ceremonies. Rosdiani and Ibrahim Chalid (2022) examined the existence of Kerawang Gayo through an ethnographic approach, focusing on its production processes and the development of its motifs. Sarah Nadia and her colleagues analyzed the meanings of the five principal Kerawang motifs through their application in fashion design. Collectively, these studies have contributed to understanding the aesthetic qualities, philosophical meanings, cultural identity, and historical development of Kerawang Gayo. Nevertheless, they have not explored its relationship with the dancer's body, the performative space, or the processes through which visual meaning is constructed in traditional performing arts.

A review of previous studies reveals four major research gaps. First, existing research on the Guel Dance has predominantly focused on its historical background, choreography, movement philosophy, and cultural identity, while the visuality of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* as a constituent of performative meaning has received little scholarly attention. Second, studies on Gayo Kerawang have largely examined its motifs as products of visual art, traditional attire, and decorative ornamentation, without relating them to their performative functions within dance. Third, previous research has generally adopted ethnographic, cultural anthropological, and aesthetic approaches, whereas Roland Barthes' semiotic framework has not yet been comprehensively applied to explain the processes of signification—denotation, connotation, and myth—embedded in the visuality of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* within the Guel Dance. Fourth, no previous study has integrated the perspectives of semiotics, visual culture, and performance studies to explain how *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* functions as a performative artifact that generates cultural meaning through the interaction of motifs, colors, the dancer's body, and the performance space.

According to Barthes (1977), cultural meaning is not inherently embedded in an object but is produced through a process of signification operating at three interconnected levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. Building upon the research gaps identified above, this study offers a novel contribution by positioning *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* as a performative artifact that operates as a visual sign system within the Guel Dance. Unlike previous studies that have regarded *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* merely as a cultural symbol or a costume accessory, this research demonstrates that its cultural meanings are generated through the interaction between Gayo Kerawang motifs, color symbolism, the dancer's body, and performative practices. By integrating Roland Barthes' semiotic theory with the perspectives of visual culture and performance studies, this study provides an analytical framework that not only

identifies symbolic meanings but also explains how these symbols are produced, negotiated, and ultimately naturalized as expressions of the collective identity of the Gayo people.

Based on this framework, the present study aims to examine the visuality of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* in the Guel Dance through Barthes' three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. The findings are expected to enrich semiotic studies of Indonesian traditional performing arts while contributing conceptually to a deeper understanding of the relationships among the performing body, traditional visual art, visual culture, and the cultural identity of the Gayo people.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using **visual ethnography** as its primary research method. This approach was selected because it enables researchers to examine the relationships among visual objects, cultural practices, and the social experiences of a community through the observation of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* within the context of Guel Dance performances. According to Pink (2013), visual ethnography utilizes images not merely as documentary evidence but also as a source of data through which researchers can interpret the relationships among cultural artifacts, the body, space, and social practices. Accordingly, this approach is particularly appropriate for exploring how *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* constructs cultural meaning through the visuality of performance.

The research was conducted in the regencies of Central Aceh and Bener Meriah, Aceh Province, Indonesia, as these two regions constitute the cultural centers of the Guel Dance tradition and remain places where *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* continues to be actively used in both dance performances and various customary ceremonies of the Gayo people. Fieldwork was carried out from January to April 2025, providing sufficient opportunities to observe the use of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* across diverse cultural contexts. Research participants were selected through purposive sampling, whereby individuals possessing extensive knowledge, experience, and direct involvement with the Guel Dance and Gayo culture were intentionally chosen. The participants consisted of three Guel Dance artists, two Gayo cultural experts, two *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* artisans, and one Gayo customary leader. These participants were selected because of their comprehensive understanding of the history, functions, symbolic meanings, and cultural practices associated with the use of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* in both everyday community life and Guel Dance performances.

Data were collected through four principal techniques. First, participant observation was conducted during Guel Dance performances to examine the use of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen*, its interaction with the dancer's body, movement patterns, and the visual responses generated throughout the performance. Observations were undertaken during a number of customary ceremonies and cultural performances, allowing the researcher to document variations in the use of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* across different performative contexts. Second, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants. The interviews focused on the historical use of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen*, the symbolic meanings of its motifs and colors, its relationship to the choreographic movements of the Guel Dance, and the ways in which the Gayo community interprets the textile across various cultural practices. A semi-structured interview format was adopted to provide a consistent framework of guiding questions while allowing participants the flexibility to elaborate on their experiences and cultural knowledge in greater depth.

Third, visual documentation was carried out through photographs and video recordings of Guel Dance performances, documenting the form of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen*, Kerawang motifs, color composition, the positioning of the textile during the performance, and the interaction

between the dancer's body and *Upuh Ulen-Ulen*. Visual documentation served not merely as supplementary evidence but as a primary source of visual data, consistent with the principles of visual ethnography. The visual materials were analyzed by identifying formal visual elements, including shape, line, color, motif, texture, composition, the direction of the textile's movement, and the visual transformations that occurred throughout the performance. Fourth, a literature review was conducted on publications concerning the Guel Dance, Gayo culture, traditional visual arts, Gayo Kerawang, Roland Barthes' semiotics, visual culture, and performance studies. This review was employed to establish the conceptual framework of the study and to compare the findings with those of previous research.

Data analysis was conducted in several stages using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The categorized data were subsequently analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory through three levels of signification. The first stage involved denotative analysis, which identified the observable visual characteristics of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen*, including its Kerawang motifs, colors, textile form, modes of use, and its physical relationship with the dancer's body. The second stage involved connotative analysis, which interpreted the symbolic meanings attributed by the Gayo people to these visual elements based on interview data, field observations, and the broader sociocultural context.

The third stage consisted of myth analysis, which examined how these symbolic meanings become naturalized and accepted as integral components of the cultural identity of the Gayo people. At this stage, the analysis focused on understanding how the use of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* in the Guel Dance reproduces values of honor, spirituality, protection, and cultural identity through performance practices that have been transmitted across generations. To enhance the credibility of the study, source triangulation was employed by comparing information obtained from Guel Dance artists, cultural experts, customary leaders, and *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* artisans. In addition, methodological triangulation was conducted by comparing findings derived from participant observation, in-depth interviews, visual documentation, and the literature review. The researcher also implemented member checking by returning the preliminary interpretations to several key participants to ensure that the symbolic meanings identified remained consistent with the perspectives of the Gayo people as the custodians of their cultural heritage.

Through these procedures, this study not only describes the visual characteristics of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* but also explains how cultural meaning is constructed through the relationship between cultural artifacts, the dancer's body, and performative practices. Accordingly, visual ethnography and Roland Barthes' semiotic theory are employed in an integrated manner to reveal the processes through which meaning is produced in the Guel Dance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Upuh Ulen-Ulen as Material Culture and a Performative Artifact in Gayo Society

From the perspective of material culture, cultural objects are understood not merely as physical objects used in everyday life but as media through which social relationships are formed, cultural identities are represented, and collective memories are preserved. Miller (2010) argues that people not only create material objects but are also shaped by the objects they use in their social practices. Likewise, Ingold (2013) emphasizes that the meaning of an artifact is not inherent in its material substance; rather, it emerges through the ongoing

relationships among objects, people, and their cultural environment. Accordingly, an artifact acquires cultural significance through social practices that are repeatedly performed and transmitted across generations.

This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* as a traditional textile artifact that represents not only a material object but also a system of cultural values, collective identity, and shared memory within Gayo society. Etymologically, *upuh* means "cloth" and *ulen* means "moon," reflecting the cosmological worldview of the Gayo people, in which the moon symbolizes nobility, enlightenment, harmony, and respect. Consequently, *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* has become the highest symbol of honor bestowed upon distinguished guests, customary leaders, and individuals who have rendered significant service during various cultural ceremonies. Its existence is also closely associated with the ecological conditions of the Gayo Highlands, where the textile originally functioned as protection against the region's cold climate. Over time, however, its utilitarian function gradually evolved into that of a symbolic artifact representing honor, social status, protection, and cultural identity. This transformation demonstrates that the meaning of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* is not inherently embedded in the textile itself but is continuously produced and negotiated through historical experience, customary practices, and the social relationships that shape the cultural life of the Gayo people.

As a cultural artifact, *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* cannot be separated from the Gayo Kerawang motifs that adorn its surface. Kerawang constitutes a traditional decorative system that embodies the Gayo people's philosophy of life, customary values, and cosmological worldview. Motifs such as *Emun Beriring*, *Pucuk Rebung*, *Puter Tali*, *Peger*, and many others are not merely decorative ornaments but function as a visual cultural language that communicates values of unity, growth, protection, harmony, and the relationship between human beings, nature, and the Creator. Within customary practices, Kerawang serves as a marker of cultural identity, a medium for transmitting local wisdom, and a reminder of the customary norms that guide the social life of the Gayo people. Therefore, the presence of Kerawang further reinforces the position of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* as an artifact that simultaneously embodies historical, aesthetic, philosophical, and symbolic significance.

The transformation of the meaning of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* reaches its most dynamic form when it is incorporated into the performance of the Guel Dance. Unlike its use in customary rituals, where its function is primarily ceremonial, *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* in the Guel Dance is transformed into a performative artifact that is not merely worn but activated through the dancer's body. In this context, the textile no longer functions simply as a costume accessory; rather, it becomes a principal performative medium that contributes to the construction of choreographic structure, the quality of movement, and the visual experience of the performance. This transformation demonstrates that a cultural artifact acquires new dimensions of meaning when it is engaged within different performative practices.

This perspective is consistent with performance studies, which regards cultural objects as active participants in performative action. Schechner (2013) argues that the meaning of a performance is generated through the interaction of the body, space, objects, time, and the audience, while Fischer-Lichte (2008) maintains that aesthetic experience emerges from the reciprocal relationship among performers, performative objects, and spectators. In the Guel Dance, the relationship between the dancer's body and *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* is inherently interdependent: the body animates the textile through movement, while the textile expands the expressive potential of the body by generating dynamic visual forms. As dancers swing, extend, wrap, and manipulate *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* in accordance with the choreography, the textile creates lines, curves, volume, and visual rhythms that cannot be produced by the body

alone. Consequently, the visibility of the Guel Dance arises from the dynamic interaction among the body, movement, space, music, and *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* as a cultural artifact.

This interrelationship also shapes the choreographic meaning of the Guel Dance. Several movement sequences derive their representational power precisely from the presence of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen*, which follows and extends the trajectories of the dancer's body. For example, the extended cloth moving in harmony with sweeping arm gestures produces visual configurations that evoke the ears of the White Elephant or the flapping wings of a bird. As a result, the narrative of the performance is constructed not only through the dancer's movements but also through the visual transformations generated by the interaction between the body and the textile. Thus, meaning in the Guel Dance is produced not by movement or *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* independently, but through the performative relationship between the two.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the status of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* as a cultural artifact is not determined solely by the materiality of the textile or the aesthetic qualities of the Kerawang motifs that adorn its surface. Rather, its cultural significance has been shaped through a historical process involving geographical conditions, customary practices, the community's value system, and traditional performing arts. From the perspective of material culture, *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* functions as a medium that connects the collective memory of the past with contemporary cultural practices. Meanwhile, within the framework of performance studies, *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* is transformed into a performative medium that influences movement quality, the construction of performative space, the audience's visual experience, and the production of meaning in the Guel Dance. Accordingly, the cultural identity of the Gayo people is represented not merely through the existence of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* as a material artifact but is continuously produced and reproduced through the dynamic relationship among the textile, the dancer's body, and performative practices that have been transmitted across generations.

Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* Motifs



Figure 1. Gayo Kerawang Textile (Doc. Indra Setiawan, 2026).

The *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* shown in Figure 1 illustrates the rich aesthetic tradition of Gayo Kerawang through a symmetrical arrangement of decorative motifs, dominated by a black background complemented by embroidered patterns in white, red, yellow, and green. At the center of the textile is a circular motif that serves as the focal point of the composition, surrounded by a series of floral motifs. The right and left sides are decorated with repeating ornamental panels, creating a balanced and harmonious visual composition. The entire surface of the textile is framed by the distinctive border motifs of Gayo Kerawang,

reinforcing the overall unity of the design. Within Gayo cultural tradition, *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* is regarded not merely as a textile artifact but also as a symbol of honor, cultural identity, and respect. When incorporated into the performance of the Guel Dance, *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* becomes an integral component of the visual expression that moves in harmony with the dancer's body. Consequently, the Kerawang motifs transcend their decorative function and become a visual medium through which the cultural values, philosophical principles, and collective identity of the Gayo people are communicated to the audience.



Figure 2. Guel Dance Performance (Source: Screenshot from YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=seJrp-v6z8M>, 2026

As proposed by Roland Barthes, signs operate through three interconnected levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. At the denotative level, a motif is understood as its observable visual form. At the connotative level, the motif acquires cultural meaning through the collective experiences and shared understandings of the community. At the level of **myth**, these meanings become naturalized and are accepted as part of a cultural identity that is transmitted from one generation to the next.

A study of Gayo ornamental motifs by Setiawan et al. (2020) demonstrates that traditional decorative motifs, including Gayo Kerawang, represent the Gayo people's philosophy of life as expressed through the visual language of traditional architecture. Meanwhile, Sarah Nadia's study (2000[year]) on the application of Gayo Kerawang motifs to obi belt design shows that these motifs possess the flexibility to be adapted to new media while preserving their visual identity. The present study extends these findings by demonstrating that when Kerawang motifs are incorporated into *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* in the Guel Dance, their meanings extend beyond visual identity alone. Instead, they are continuously reproduced through the interaction among the dancer's body, movement, performative space, and the audience's perception.

The following section presents the results of Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis of the decorative motifs found on *Upuh Ulen-Ulen*, the traditional textile of the Gayo people.

Table 1. Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* Motifs of the Gayo People

Gayo Kerawang Motif	Denotation (Literal Meaning)	Connotation (Cultural Meaning)	Myth (Cultural Ideology According to Barthes)
Emun Beriring	A series of cloud forms arranged in succession.	Symbolizes togetherness, unity, and cooperation within Gayo society.	Social harmony can only be achieved when individuals move together toward a common purpose while upholding the values of deliberation and consensus.
Pucuk Rebung (Pucuk ni Tuis)	A stylized representation of a bamboo shoot.	Symbolizes growth, regeneration, education, and hope for the future.	The younger generation is expected to grow by upholding customary traditions, religious values, and moral principles as the successors of Gayo cultural heritage.
Puter Tali	Intertwining lines resembling a twisted rope.	Represents kinship, solidarity, and strong social bonds.	Family ties are regarded as enduring bonds that must remain unbroken despite social and cultural change.
Peger	A fence-like motif enclosing a geometric space.	Symbolizes protection, moral boundaries, and self-discipline.	Community life should be safeguarded by customary law, which functions as a moral boundary governing social relationships and individual conduct.
Sarak Opat	A geometric motif representing the four traditional leadership institutions of Gayo society.	Symbolizes the balance among customary authority, religion, government, and the community.	An ideal social order can only be achieved when these four pillars function harmoniously and complement one another.

Performative Integration with Guel Dance Movements

1. *Puter Tali* Motif

The *Puter Tali* motif on *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* is visually represented by intertwined lines resembling twisted ropes. In Gayo culture, this motif symbolizes kinship, solidarity, intergenerational continuity, and a collective commitment to preserving customary values. When incorporated into the Guel Dance, these meanings are embodied through rotational movements, continuous changes of direction, coordinated interactions among the dancers, and uninterrupted movement sequences that create visual patterns resembling an endlessly woven rope. The swinging motion of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* following the dancer's body further

reinforces this symbolism of interconnectedness. From the perspective of Roland Barthes' semiotics, at the Denotative level, the Puter Tali motif represents the visual image of a repeated twisted rope pattern on the textile. At the Connotative level, it signifies unity, loyalty, cooperation, and the social cohesion of the Gayo people. At the level of Myth, the motif naturalizes the belief that the strength of Gayo society derives from enduring kinship, customary traditions, and collective solidarity. Accordingly, the performative integration of the Puter Tali motif with the movements of the Guel Dance transforms the dancer's body into a medium that animates the symbol of unity while reinforcing the cultural identity of the Gayo people.

2. Pucuk Rebung Motif

The *Pucuk Rebung* motif on *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* is depicted as a stylized bamboo shoot tapering upward. Within Gayo culture, this motif symbolizes growth, regeneration, resilience, and the hope for future generations who possess moral integrity, knowledge, and the ability to preserve customary traditions. When incorporated into the Guel Dance, these meanings are expressed through bodily movements that represent the process of growth, just as a bamboo shoot develops into a strong and resilient bamboo stalk. Upward-reaching arm gestures, an upright posture, confident steps, and movement dynamics that gradually evolve from slow and restrained to powerful and expansive create a visual representation of maturity and balance. From the perspective of Roland Barthes' semiotics, at the Denotative level, the *Pucuk Rebung* motif represents the visual form of a geometrically stylized bamboo shoot. At the Connotative level, it signifies the pursuit of knowledge, resilience, wisdom, and the continuity of generations. At the level of Myth, the motif naturalizes the belief that the ideal individual is one who continuously grows intellectually, spiritually, and socially while remaining firmly rooted in cultural tradition. Its performative integration with the movements of the Guel Dance transforms the dancer's body into a medium that brings this philosophy of growth to life.

3. Emun Beriring Motif

The *Emun Beriring* motif is one of the principal decorative motifs of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen*, visually represented by a series of clouds arranged in succession. In Gayo culture, this motif symbolizes togetherness, harmony, and the spirit of mutual cooperation that forms the foundation of communal life. When incorporated into the Guel Dance, these meanings are embodied through choreography characterized by synchronized movements, rhythmic coordination, and coordinated floor-pattern transitions among the dancers. Simultaneous arm movements, synchronized changes in body orientation, and fluid movement transitions that follow the musical rhythm evoke the image of clouds moving harmoniously across the sky. From the perspective of Roland Barthes' semiotics, at the Denotative level, the *Emun Beriring* motif represents the visual form of clouds arranged in sequence. At the Connotative level, it signifies unity, solidarity, balance, and social harmony within Gayo society. At the level of Myth, the motif naturalizes the belief that an ideal society can only be achieved through togetherness, deliberation, and collective cooperation. The performative integration of the *Emun Beriring* motif with the movements of the Guel Dance transforms the dancer's body into a medium that enlivens the symbol of unity, while the flowing movement of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* evokes the visual image of clouds moving together in harmony.

4. *Peger* Motif

The *Peger* motif on *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* is visually represented as a fence-like pattern composed of geometric lines enclosing a defined space. In Gayo culture, a fence is understood not merely as a physical boundary but also as a symbol of protection, self-discipline, and the safeguarding of customary values. When incorporated into the Guel Dance, these meanings are expressed through the dancers' controlled bodily movements, including measured arm swings, firm footwork, controlled body rotations, and orderly transitions of floor patterns, thereby creating a visual representation of the fence as a protector of social order. From the perspective of Roland Barthes' semiotics, at the Denotative level, the *Peger* motif represents the visual image of a fence framing the textile. At the Connotative level, it signifies moral boundaries, steadfastness, and the protection of Gayo cultural identity. At the level of Myth, the motif naturalizes the belief that a harmonious life can only be achieved through adherence to Edet (Gayo customary law), religious values, and social norms. The performative integration of the *Peger* motif with the movements of the Guel Dance transforms the dancer's body into a medium that brings this cultural symbol to life, while the unfolding movement of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* visually reinforces the idea of customary law as a "fence" that safeguards personal dignity and maintains the balance between individuals, society, and nature.

5. *Sarak Opat* Motif

The *Sarak Opat* motif on *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* visually represents the traditional leadership system of Gayo society, consisting of the *Reje* (customary leader), *Imem* (religious leader), *Petue* (customary adviser), and *Rakyat Genap Mupakat* (the community acting through collective deliberation). This decorative motif symbolizes balance, consensus, and synergy among these four elements in maintaining social order. When incorporated into the Guel Dance, these meanings are embodied through the harmonious coordination of the dancers' movements, rhythmic unity, orderly floor-pattern transitions, and complementary movement sequences in which no single element dominates the performance. From the perspective of Roland Barthes' semiotics, at the Denotative level, the *Sarak Opat* motif represents a geometric pattern depicting the four pillars of Gayo customary leadership. At the Connotative level, it signifies the balance of authority, collective responsibility, and the harmonious relationship among customary leaders, religious leaders, traditional advisers, and the community. At the level of Myth, the motif naturalizes the belief that social order and harmony can only be achieved when each element fulfills its respective role in accordance with Edet (Gayo customary law) and Islamic values. The performative integration of the *Sarak Opat* motif with the movements of the Guel Dance transforms the dancer's body into a medium that embodies the principles of deliberation, cooperation, and collective harmony. Every interconnected movement sequence and harmonious spatial composition demonstrates that the aesthetic beauty of the performance emerges through the collaboration of all its elements, just as the *Sarak Opat* system sustains the balance of Gayo society. Consequently, the visibility of the *Sarak Opat* motif not only enhances the aesthetic qualities of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* but also communicates the philosophy of collective leadership as a living expression of Gayo cultural identity through the medium of performance

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* in the Guel Dance cannot be understood merely as a costume or a performance accessory, but rather as a cultural artifact that produces meaning through the dynamic relationship among material culture, the dancer's body, movement, performative space, and the audience's visual experience. From the perspective of material culture, the significance of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* has been shaped by the historical development, geographical environment, customary traditions, and social practices of the Gayo people that have been transmitted across generations. The meanings of honor, dignity, and cultural identity are therefore not inherent in the textile itself but are continuously reproduced through its use in various cultural contexts, particularly within the performance of the Guel Dance.

Drawing upon the perspective of performance studies, this research demonstrates that the dancer's body serves as the primary medium through which the visual meanings of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* are activated. Various movement vocabularies including Munatap, Ramalan (Elephant's Footsteps), Kepur Nunguk, Jentik Kedidi, Puter Tali, and the Opening Salutation illustrate that visibility does not arise from either the textile or the body's movements independently. Rather, it emerges through the interaction between the two in shaping performative space, rhythm, kinetic energy, and the audience's visual experience. Consequently, *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* does not merely follow the dancer's movements; instead, it actively constructs a visual narrative that represents the White Elephant, birds, acts of reverence, and other cultural symbols of the Gayo people.

Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis reveals that the colors and Kerawang motifs of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* constitute a system of signs operating at three interconnected levels of meaning: Denotation, Connotation, And Myth. At the Denotative level, the colors and motifs appear as visual elements decorating the surface of the textile. At the Connotative level, these elements represent cultural values such as courage, honor, unity, growth, protection, and harmony. At the level of Myth, these meanings become naturalized and are accepted as expressions of the cultural identity of the Gayo people. This study further demonstrates that this system of signs is not static; rather, it is continuously reproduced whenever the motifs, colors, and textile are activated through the dancer's body in

The principal contribution of this study lies in advancing the perspective that *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* functions as a performative visual agent a cultural artifact that not only represents the cultural identity of the Gayo people but also actively produces and reproduces that identity through performative practice. This finding extends existing scholarship on Gayo Kerawang, which has largely been understood as a form of traditional visual art or a cultural symbol, by demonstrating that cultural meaning is also generated through performative practices involving the dancer's body, material artifacts, performative space, and the audience's visual experience. By integrating the perspectives of material culture, performance studies, Roland Barthes' semiotics, and visual culture, this study proposes a new conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between cultural artifacts and the production of meaning in traditional performing arts.

The implications of this study suggest that safeguarding cultural heritage cannot rely solely on documenting artifacts or preserving Kerawang motifs, but must also include the preservation of the performative practices through which these cultural meanings are continually reactivated. In this regard, the Guel Dance plays a strategic role as a cultural space for transmitting and sustaining the cultural identity of the Gayo people amid the expansion of contemporary visual culture and the forces of globalization. Nevertheless, this study is limited to an analysis of the visibility of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* within a single traditional

performance tradition. Future research could therefore undertake comparative studies of the use of traditional textiles in other Indonesian dance traditions or examine the visual transformation of *Upuh Ulen-Ulen* within digital media, the creative industries, and contemporary design. Such studies would further broaden our understanding of the role of cultural artifacts as media for the production of meaning and cultural identity in the contexts of Indonesian performing arts and visual culture.

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