

# Correlation of Color Symbolism in Guel Dance Costumes and Movement in the Gayo Community

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## ABSTRACT

The *Guel* Dance, a traditional performing art originating from the Gayo culture in Central Aceh, Indonesia, is a captivating yet underappreciated cultural heritage. Although the dance is practiced within the community, many remain unfamiliar with its intricate visual and symbolic elements, such as the elaborate costumes, decorative patterns, properties (*ulen-ulen*), and especially the use of specific colors. These colors go beyond mere ornamentation—they act as visual metaphors and spiritual expressions, communicating profound cultural values. In Gayo culture, visibility is deeply meaningful and not simply decorative. Each design and color carries symbolic significance, inherited and sustained through generations, forming a rich semiotic system. The *kerawang* embroidery, a hallmark of Gayo visual identity, exemplifies this symbolic tradition. Despite its cultural importance, the role of color in the *Guel* Dance remains largely misunderstood by both dancers and musicians, often resulting in performances that lack harmony between costume visuals and dance expression. This research seeks to uncover and clarify the functions and meanings of visual elements—particularly color—in the performance of the *Guel* Dance. It investigates how colors and patterns in costumes are interwoven with movement, spiritual values, and ritual practices of the Gayo people. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach with a visual ethnographic model, the study documents how visual elements function in artistic performances and cultural rituals. This research identifies five primary colors in *Guel* dance costumes—red (courage), green (fertility), yellow (wisdom), black (authority), and white (purity). These colors are not arbitrary; they correspond to specific movements and spiritual expressions within the dance. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural meanings embedded in Gayo traditional arts and emphasize the need for preserving and recontextualizing these values through synchronized and informed performances.

## KEYWORDS

Guel Dance, Element, Clothing, Color, Correlation

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## INTRODUCTION

Aceh culture is a culture that originates from a rich heritage of past values that are deeply rooted in Islamic principles. Aceh Province, located at the northern tip of Sumatra Island, has a long history of how the inheritance and preservation of cultural identity have been carried out, making Aceh culture distinctive and unique. There are several important aspects of Aceh culture, such as the use of various languages from the 14 ethnic groups residing in Aceh, customary values, diverse forms of art and culture, traditional clothing, traditional houses, and traditional attire. Aceh culture also has a wealth of artistic traditions, one of which is the Gayo ethnic group, known for its distinctive representation of the cultural values of the Aceh highlands. The Gayo ethnic group, which is the focus of this research, inhabits the central highland region of Aceh. One of the well-known arts from

the highland area is the Saman dance from the Gayo Lues region, and in the Takengon area of Aceh Tengah Bener Meriah, there is the Guel dance.

Guel dance is a dance that uses lace costumes. Guel dance tells the story of two siblings who are separated but then reunited, one of whom has transformed into a white elephant, where Guel means to sound or ring. So far, the researcher has conducted several studies on Guel dance but has not yet researched the aspects of costumes and colors present in Guel dance, the structure of patterns and colors of the costumes that correlate symbolically with the movements performed in the dance. Guel dance costumes are often used in important traditional ceremonies such as welcoming distinguished guests or traditional weddings. The use of this costume symbolizes the guests and represents social status. The Gayo lace fabric, as an elemental part of the Guel dance performance, serves as a property that functions not only as an aesthetic structure but also as a component that supports the pattern structure in the dance movements.

In the Guel Dance performance, the show begins with the sound of the flute and the gegedem or Gayo drum, welcomed by *jangen/* with the distinctive Gayo melody and *sebuku/* lamentation. The content of the verses and *sebuku* chanted in the Guel Dance carries contextual and situational messages. The middle part of the performance starts with the *munatap* scene, which initiates interaction between the two dancers as they begin to respond to each other. In this section, there is also imitative interaction to coax the elephant to follow the previously performed *Sengeda* movements. In the closing part of the dance, *Sengeda* successfully conquers the white elephant with harmonious movements, following the path home together during the welcoming ceremony for certain distinguished guests or at wedding celebrations. At the end, the dancers present *upoh ulen-ulen* to the guests or the bride and groom as a symbol of honor and nobility.

In the Guel Dance performance, the opening is marked by the sounds of the flute and gegedem or *Gayo* drum, welcomed with *jangen/* with the characteristic Gayo melody and *sebuku/* lamentation. The content of the lyrics and *sebuku* sung in the Guel Dance carries contextual and situational messages. The middle part of the performance begins with the *munatap* scene, which initiates interaction between the two dancers as they start to respond to each other. In this section, there is also imitative interaction to coax the elephant to follow the previously performed *Sengeda* movements. In the final part of the dance, *Sengeda* successfully conquers the white elephant with harmonious movements, following the path home together, during the welcoming of certain distinguished guests or at wedding celebrations. At the end, the dancers present *upoh ulen-ulen* to the guests or representatives as a symbol of honor and dignity.

Gemstone Star 2020, the title of the philosophy of the Sining dance in the Gayo community in this research discusses the elements that consist of dance movements, floor design, makeup, costumes, performance venues, props, and accompanying music. This research uses qualitative research methods. This study concludes that the movements found in Sining dance are mimetic and spontaneous, and tend to depict balance. It uses Gayo lace costumes, accompanied by traditional music and Gayo traditional musical instruments. With two adult male dancers. Using *ulen-ulen* fabric, this research has similarities in location and type of Gayo tradition studied in this research, mentioning the costumes used without specifying the meaning and color of the costumes worn; the difference with further research will discuss how colors can be applied to the form of the dance itself.

In the research of the star gem titled 'The Philosophy of Guel Dance in the Gayo Community', it discusses more closely the stages that must be passed in the Guel dance or as the foundation of the Guel dance itself. Guel has a storyline that becomes the order and necessity of the philosophy that must be traversed when performed by incorporating certain principles demonstrated through body movements in four stages, namely, the staring stage, *redep/dep*, *ketibung*, and *cicang Nangka*. This research also discusses how the philosophy present in the stages of the dance differs from subsequent research, which examines how the correlation of colors in the Guel dance becomes an important aspect to be understood in addition to understanding the philosophy in its stages alone; however, color is an important part of a sign.

In Monita's 2021 research titled 'Guel Dance as the Identity of the *Gayo* Community', this study discusses the *Guel* Dance, which is currently developing rapidly in society, and the community is able to recognize that the dance originates from the *Gayo* region. This research examines how the

*Guel* dance is embedded and becomes part of the identity of the *Gayo* people, exploring the social life of the community and *Gayo* customs. However, this research does not discuss at all the colors present in the *Guel* dance costumes. Unlike previous studies, the researcher will discuss the correlation between *Guel* dance costumes and the colors of those costumes, so that they can be appropriately applied to the movements of the *Guel* dance.

In addition to the storyline of the *guel* dance performance, there is also a visual structure that complements this dance performance. The structure that supports the *guel* dance performance includes intricate costumes with ornamental motifs, dance properties (*ulen-ulen*), and the use of certain colors, which also serve as a medium for spiritual communication in symbolic form. In the *Gayo* community, visibility has a profound function; it not only serves as decoration but also carries meanings that have been inherited from previous generations to the next, passed down through generations. This research will discuss how the functions and meanings of colors relate to the movements of the *guel* dance. The correlation provides insights into how variables interact and influence each other within a system of signs in the form of different representations, yet still within a cohesive and complete meaning. This is similar to the concept of "language" in the context of verbal language, where certain elements are used to communicate ideas, feelings, or concepts to the viewer. By understanding the system of signs, artists can more effectively convey messages to the audience. (Indra Setiawan Volume 7, Number 1 January 2025 (13-19).

This research aims to examine the correlation of color with the dance movements of *Guel* as an artistic expression in the color correlation of *Guel* dance visuals in the *Gayo* community. The focus of this study is on understanding visual elements such as color, enabling dialogue with the community and the artists themselves, to comprehend the color correlation in the application of movements performed in dance performances, where color serves as a sign and symbol in certain conditions and cultures, movement motifs, properties, and how these elements are interpreted in a symbolic form. The main issue that underlies this research is how these forms of visualization and color emerge and play a role in dance movement practices, customary life, and how they are represented in the *Guel* dance form. Furthermore, the metaphorical expression of the artwork can represent the meaning of the values of the relationship between humans, nature, and the spiritual world. Thus, through this research, it is possible to understand the color of the dance costumes in relation to the movement colors produced by the *Guel* dance itself as a cultural unity that holds meaning.

## METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a visual ethnography model to document and understand the artistic expressions in the performances conducted by *Guel* dancers. This model aims to explore the elements of visual color present in *Guel* dance costumes and in the ritual aspects of *Gayo* culture, such as costume colors that reflect symbolic values in *Guel* dance. The visual ethnography framework developed by Pink (2007) is used as a methodological foundation to examine cultural representation through visual media in specific social contexts. This approach allows for an understanding of artistic expression as part of the symbolic structure in the ritual life of indigenous communities. Related literature is used to trace the visual and symbolic patterns of *Guel*, based on previous studies (magfhirah murni vol). The research locations include Bener Meriah and Central Aceh. Both locations were chosen because they actively preserve and perform *Guel* dance, as well as interpret its symbolic meaning based on local customs and spirituality. This analysis process refers to Clifford Geertz's (1973) symbolic theory. and the concept of cultural structure according to Koentjaraningrat (2009). Through this method, the research is expected to capture the depth of visual meaning and the accompanying social context comprehensively.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 1. *Guel* Dance Costume

The *Guel* dance performance is carried out by two dancers playing the roles of *Sengeda* and *Bener Merie* (the embodiment of the white elephant performed by one of the dancers). The color worn by *Sengeda* is predominantly black, while *Bener Merie* is dressed in white. In the study of art

philosophy, design objects can be observed as something that contains symbolic meaning, social meaning, cultural meaning, aesthetic meaning, economic meaning, consciousness-raising meaning, or religious meaning (Venny Agustin Hidayat Volume 15 No 1 April 2020). From the perspective of art philosophy, the design objects in this performance contain various interconnected meanings. Besides symbolic meaning, this performance also holds social meaning that strengthens the relationships among community members, as well as cultural meaning that reflects the identity and uniqueness of the community. The beauty of movement and color in this dance showcases aesthetic values that invite artistic appreciation, while from an economic standpoint, this performance has the potential to be a source of livelihood for artists and their supporters. Furthermore, the Guel dance also serves as a medium for consciousness-raising and spiritual reflection that connects humans with religious values and the mystical powers revered in local traditions.

An important supporting element in the Guel dance performance is the costumes worn by the dancers. These costumes not only serve as a complement to the appearance but also contain deep concepts, forms, and meanings. The costume design in Guel dance is known as Gayo embroidery, which is a cultural heritage of the Gayo people. This costume concept is specifically designed to reflect the identity and character of each dancer, while also enhancing the visual beauty of the performance. Every detail in the costume has aesthetic and symbolic functions that reinforce the meaning of the dance. The two Guel dancers wear the same costume in form, while the difference lies in the colors and headbands they wear. The dancer portraying Sengeda wears a costume in a basic black color, while the dancer portraying Bener Meriah wears a white costume. These colors not only distinguish their characters but also symbolize certain values such as balance and duality.

The attire worn in this dance includes: (1) a headband (bulang cekarom) for the Sengede dancer made of black fabric tied around the head, with the end of the fabric hanging down on the right side. This headband signifies a brave character. The White Elephant headband (pengkah) is red and forms a triangle tapering upwards, symbolizing a majestic character akin to a king or noble. (2) The side cloth (upuh awak) is tied/wrapped around the waist with Gayo woven fabric; in the past, the fabric was secured using a belt (genit rante) wrapped around the waist to reinforce the side cloth. (3) The lower part consists of pants (seruel) in black/white, reaching ankle length made from cotton fabric embroidered with green, red, and yellow woven patterns. (4) For the White Elephant character dancer, a white cloth (upuh ulen-ulen) adorned with Gayo embroidery, measuring 2 meters in length, is worn. (5) The princess dancer wears a black kurung blouse embroidered with Gayo patterns, with black fabric and a headscarf, signifying Islam as the religion and law in the life of the Acehnese community.



Image 1, costume of the guel dance performance  
Left and right are vibrant colors on the right

If observed closely, a pair of dancers in the same attire symbolizes the unity of the soul. Physically, they appear as two, reinforced by the different colors of their clothing, black and white, which explain the concept of balance. In fact, if examined, all these symbols exist within each human being. Masculinity, gentleness, arrogance, sincerity, greatness, sincerity, humility, and so forth are natural or inherent traits of humans. In this dance, the opoh ulen-ulen, a long cloth adorned with typical Gayo motifs and colors, serves as a symbol of honor where each guest present will be draped



over the shoulder as a sign of welcome, honored as a guest, protected, and all good things are bestowed upon those adorned with the opoh ulen-ulen. In ancient times, a person wearing Gayo embroidery meant that they understood all Gayo customs. The Guel Dance is one of the dances originating from the Gayo community. The Guel Dance itself is a symbol representing the identity of the Gayo people. In every combination of movements in this dance, there are symbols that convey the attitude of the Gayo people when establishing relationships with others, characterized by respect and harmony. In the past, Gayo embroidery was worn only by certain individuals such as kings and respected figures; currently, Gayo embroidery has developed and can be worn by all layers of society (journal v05 Surniani et al.).

## 2. Properties

The motifs in Gayo embroidery are very important elements and serve as a distinctive identity in the art and culture of the Gayo people in Aceh, Indonesia. Gayo embroidery itself is a traditional embroidery art that is usually applied to woven fabrics or traditional clothing, especially on the Gayo women's traditional dress known as inang-inang. The motifs that adorn this embroidery not only function as mere decorations but are also rich in profound philosophical meanings. Each pattern and design in Gayo embroidery is inspired by various elements from the surrounding nature, such as flora and fauna, and reflects the social life and cultural values upheld by the Gayo community. Thus, Gayo embroidery is not just a textile art piece, but also a medium that conveys stories, teachings, and cultural identities that have been passed down through generations.



Figure 2. Ulen Ulen

Tabel 1. Some popular motifs in Gayo carvings along with their meanings

The name of the motif is	Meaning
<b>Ulen Ulen.</b>	
1. Emun Berangkat (Awan Berarak)	• Symbolizes high hopes and aspirations as well as a life journey full of hope.
2. Rebung	• Symbol of growth and progress; depicting the younger generation that is growing and developing.
3. Pucuk Rebung	• A symbol of humility and a spirit of learning, as well as harmony in social life.
4. Bunge Kala (Bunga Kala)	• A mythical flower that symbolizes strength and protection from negative influences.
5. Itik Pulang Petang	• Symbolizes order and regularity, depicting a society that lives in harmony and peace.
6. Tapak Gajah	• A symbol of strength and authority, often associated with leaders or public figures.
7. Leter/Leret	• Parallel lines that symbolize firmness, loyalty, and principles of life.

8. Mata Itik • Symbolizes caution and vigilance.

#### Characteristics of Gayo Lace Motif:


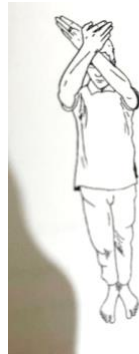


- Bold and contrasting colors, such as red, yellow, green, and black.
- Symmetrical and geometric, yet elegant and meaningful.
- Sewn by hand with intricate hand embroidery techniques.

### 3. Color

Guel dance is not only a performance of movement art, but also a reflection of the philosophical life of the Gayo people. The relationship between the meaning of color and dance movements in Guel is very close, where color is not just a visual element, but also acts as a symbol that strengthens the expression and message conveyed through dance. The dancers utilize a deep understanding of the meaning of color to integrate it into every movement, resulting in a performance full of meaning and beauty. These colors are not only seen in dance motifs, but also adorn traditional clothing, jewelry, and decorative elements in traditional houses, strengthening the symbolic and aesthetic impression in the overall cultural context of the Gayo people. Rules and techniques are used to achieve the quality of expressing feelings in realizing the content that is to be expressed (Magfhirah Journal November 2020 Gorga Journal).

Gayo Kerawang, as one of the traditional arts typical of the Gayo community in Central Aceh, is an important medium in conveying the values and character of the community through its colors and motifs. using visual achievements that will display the character of Aceh, this can be seen in the visual processing method as the uniqueness of Aceh in illumination (Andeska Niko Jurnal 2019), so is the case with the color of a dance costume that appears not only as a visual with personal desires but as a uniqueness of a particular culture in this openwork not only functions as decoration, but also contains deep symbolic meaning, which reflects the philosophy of life, beliefs, and social identity of the Gayo people. Thus, Gayo openwork is not just a woven or embroidered cloth, but is a cultural heritage that communicates the characteristics of society through a combination of colors and patterns, which continue to be preserved from generation to generation. these motifs not only function as decorative elements, but also carry deep symbolic meanings that connect society with ancestors, supernatural spirits, and the universe (Abdul Majid Jurna 2024).

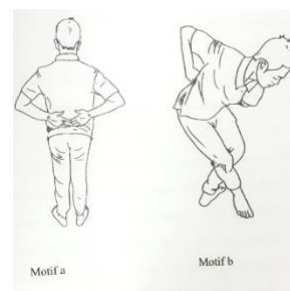
Tabel 2. Identification of colors in clothing and their correlation to Guel dance movements

Warna	Makna	Gerak
<b>Merah</b> 	<p>Enthusiasm, courage, and strength Influence on community character: Gayo society is recognized as a brave, strong, and highly spirited group in facing various life challenges. In the context of the Guel Dance, the color red represents movement, passion, and courage. This color symbolizes the blazing spirit and the body movements of the dancers who dance rhythmically and powerfully, along with the rhythm of traditional music. Red symbolizes life and strength of the soul, which is reflected in every step, flapping of the wings (on the bird costume), and swinging of the body while dancing.</p> <p>Performing a Jumping Movement simultaneously swinging and waving the Ulen Ulen. The legs bend and land and the feet in the position take a horse-horse stance. This movement is called the Kepur Nunguk Movement</p>	
<b>Hitam</b> 	<p>Solidity, authority, and depth of thought. Impact on the character of society: The color black symbolizes strength and firm principles in life. The Gayo people highly respect customs and norms, and have strong views. The color black in the Guel Dance movement is symbolized in the <i>munatap</i> movement</p>	

### Putih



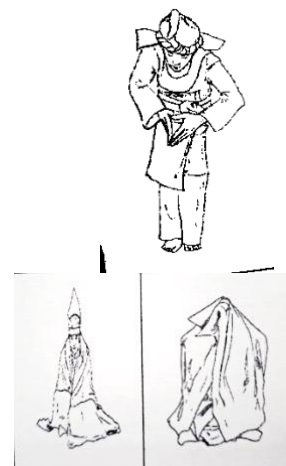
Purity, honesty, and sincerity influence the character of the community: The color white reflects the character of the Gayo community who are honest, sincere, and maintain moral values in social interactions. In the sense that the dance itself depicts two strong and loyal brotherhood relationships, between sengada and bener ceria which are represented in the form of *Sining* movements.



### Kuning



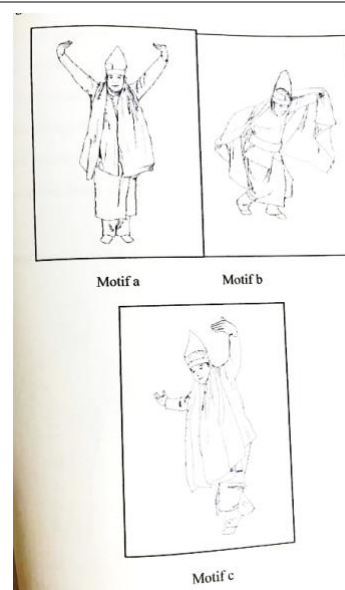
Wisdom and dignity. Impact on the character of society: The yellow color symbolizes the dignity and wisdom of the Gayo people, especially in the structure of customs and deliberation. The movement in this dance is the Salam Semah Movement



### Hijau



Fertility, peace, and harmony with nature. The application of the story to the movements performed is harmony when performing movements between music and dance and harmony symbolizes fertility, life, peace, harmony, and connectedness with nature. In various cultural traditions, green is considered a calming and hopeful color, often associated with growth, survival, and the blessings of nature. The movements displayed between sengeda dancers when responding to sengeda dancers and performing the Ketibung movement, this movement is an expression of gratitude, joy and happiness. The movements performed tend to be free but still take motifs and develop parts of the existing guel dance movements. This green color is also a symbol of fertility from the Gayo region itself which supports the Gayo community, most of whom make a living as farmers, maintain respect for nature and live in harmony with nature. The movements performed tend to imitate nature, the bends of tree branches when blown by the wind, such as the bends performed by the dancers when moving, and some imitative movements such as elephant and bird movements.



## CONCLUSION

The use of symbolic colors functions as an expression in dance movements as a response in carrying out dance movements, dance costumes become an important element of dance performances that are not just costumes for performances but also the reason why the dance exists. The colors found in the guel dance costumes are, red, symbolizing passion and courage. Yellow wisdom, white purity, black firmness, green fertility. Referring to Clifford Geertz's thoughts on symbols as a

network of meaning, as well as Koentjaraningrat's view of culture as a value system that is manifested non-verbally, this study emphasizes that visuality in the gael dance actively contributes to shaping social reality. The visual elements of color not only function as aesthetic decoration in clothing, but are also connected to spirituality and social systems. Color becomes the main goal to strengthen the collective identity of a particular culture in its society.

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