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Liminality and Semiotic Meaning in the Brendung Rain Ritual of Sarwodadi Village, Pemalang

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ABSTRACT

Rain-invoking ritual performance in the agrarian villages of Java's north coast has been documented largely as an inventory of mystical content, with little attention to how its meanings are produced or why they take the form they do. This article examines Brendung, a ritual performance from Sarwodadi Village, Comal Subdistrict, Pemalang Regency, Central Java, built around a puppet of coconut shell and bamboo dressed as a woman and held to be entered by ancestral spirits while it dances. The study describes the form of the performance and analyses the meaning it carries for the community that sustains it. It combines Victor Turner's account of ritual process and liminality with Roland Barthes's semiotics of denotation, connotation, and myth, drawing on participant observation in Sarwodadi, interviews conducted in November 2020 with the fourth-generation ritual leader, two village officials, and a spectator from outside the village, and study of the village archive and photographic documentation. The performance is found to follow a threefold temporal structure: the lengthy preparation and purification of the puppet constitute separation, the trance dance constitutes liminality, and the closing invocation and the return of the puppet to storage constitute reaggregation. Read semiotically, the beliefs attached to the ritual, above all the rule restricting ritual leadership to one founding lineage, function less as supernatural claims than as the mechanism through which the community restores an ordinary social order that liminality had briefly suspended. Myth and ritual phase are therefore shown to be structurally interdependent rather than separable objects of study.

KEYWORDS

calendrical rite
Javanese cosmology
Pemalang
spirit possession
theatrical sign system

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INTRODUCTION

Brendung is a ritual performance from Sarwodadi Village, Comal Subdistrict, Pemalang Regency, Central Java, built around a puppet whose head is carved from a coconut shell and

whose body is a bamboo frame dressed as a woman. The puppet, called Juleha by its ritual leader (*mlandhang*), is believed to be entered by an ancestral or angelic spirit (*widadari*) during the performance and to dance on its own once possessed. The *mlandhang* directs the entire process: preparing the puppet, applying its make-up and costume, arranging the offerings (*sesajen*), purifying the puppet at a sacred site, inviting the spirit to enter its body, and eventually releasing the spirit at the performance's close. A group of five to six female singers (*sinden*) accompany the puppet's dance with invocatory chants (*tembang*), while musicians play a small ensemble of percussion instruments. Brendung is never performed in an arbitrary place: four sites in Sarwodadi Village — Candi Kaso, the village crossroads, the village hall, and the yard of a resident named Casmadi — are regarded by the community as haunted (*angker*) and are the only locations where the ritual may properly take place.

Traditional art typically grows out of an ethnic environment shaped by magical belief, gratitude, and a community's sense of beauty (Sedyawati, 1981), and is inseparable from the everyday life of the people who sustain it (Bastomi, 1988). Brendung fits this description precisely: it was created in response to a prolonged drought as a plea for rain and fertile land, and it survives today chiefly as an expression of gratitude to the Creator. Following Victor Turner, a performance of this kind qualifies as ritual because it is a dramatised religious behaviour that carries its participants into vital contact with a transcendent reality (Turner, as cited in Dillistone, 2006). Turner further distinguishes passage rites, experienced once in a lifetime, from calendrical rites, which recur periodically and may be experienced repeatedly (Turner, 1982); Brendung belongs to the latter category, staged every year at the start of the planting season (*tandur*) and again after the harvest, and additionally during long droughts to summon rain and soil fertility.

Scholarship bearing on a performance of this kind falls into two lines that have rarely met. The first documents the mystical or symbolic content of Javanese village ritual and argues for its preservation. Brendung itself has been examined in this vein by Aprilianie (2016), who studied the mystical values contained in the performance through a descriptive-qualitative approach and concluded that the tradition should be preserved, developed, and disseminated more widely; comparable work on ritual in the same coastal region reads such practices as expressions of a Javanese cosmology in which the visible and invisible worlds form a single continuous whole (Widyatwati, 2014). This line of work establishes what the signs of a ritual are taken to mean, but treats those meanings as an endpoint — an inventory to be catalogued — rather than as a system whose production can be explained.

The second line supplies the analytical apparatus that the first lacks. Theatre semiotics has developed a systematic account of how performance signifies (Elam, 1991; Esslin, 1991), and Barthes's model of denotation, connotation, and myth has been adapted extensively within Indonesian scholarship as a procedure for reading cultural texts (Berger, 2000; Kurniawan, 2001; Zaimar, 2008; Hermawan, 2011; Wibowo, 2013), including its application to theatre, dance, film, and *wayang purwa* (Sahid, 2004, 2019). In parallel, performance studies has argued that the boundaries of a performance event are a matter of interpretation rather than fixed fact (Murgiyanto, 1998, 2018; Schechner, 2006, 2007), and ritual theory has supplied a phase model of how such events unfold in time (Turner, 1969, 1982; Winangun, 1990). Applied to Javanese ritual performance, however, these instruments have tended to be used one at a time: a study reads a ritual either as a sequence of phases or as a system of signs, rarely as both (Sathotho, 2010).

The gap is therefore not an absence of publications on Brendung but a deficiency in what they can explain. Existing work on the performance treats its mystical content as a fixed inventory to be catalogued and preserved, and does not engage the ritual's temporal structure — its movement from ordinary life into a liminal, spirit-possessed state and back again. Conversely, ritual-theatre scholarship that does model that movement has not asked what work the ritual's

own signs perform within it. Neither line can account for the most striking feature of Brendung: that its most insistent beliefs concern not the rain it petitions but who may lead it and from what materials it may be made. This article is the first to read Brendung through a ritual-phase model and a semiotic model simultaneously, and thereby to show that its myths are not free-floating beliefs but the mechanism by which the ritual's own liminal phase is closed.

The study accordingly pursues two questions: what form does the Brendung performance take, and what meaning does it hold for the community that sustains it? It aims to demonstrate that Brendung's layered meanings are not incidental decoration but are structurally tied to the ritual's passage through separation, liminality, and reaggregation.

METHOD

Research Design and Approach

The study was designed as qualitative descriptive research combining ethnographic fieldwork with semiotic analysis, a pairing chosen because the two research questions are of different orders: the first asks what happens and in what sequence, which requires observation, while the second asks what the sequence means to those who stage it, which requires a procedure for reading signs. Two theoretical frameworks were employed. Victor Turner's theory of ritual process, and in particular his threefold structure of separation, liminality, and reaggregation and his concept of *communitas* (Turner, 1969, 1982; see also Winangun, 1990, for an Indonesian-language exposition), supplied the temporal frame. Roland Barthes's semiotics of denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1964, 1972; Hartley, 2010) supplied the interpretive procedure. Neither framework was brought to bear at the collection stage, where description was kept as close to observed and reported detail as possible; both were applied at the second stage of analysis, once the performance's elements had been classified.

Site, Period, and Participants

Fieldwork was conducted in Sarwodadi Village, Comal Subdistrict, Pemalang Regency, Central Java, with the interview phase concentrated in a five-day period in early November 2020. Observation covered the Brendung performances the author was able to attend, together with their preparation, at the sites where the ritual is staged. Because Brendung is performed only at fixed points in the agricultural calendar, stages and events falling outside the research period — among them the replacement of the coconut-shell head and the disrupted performance of 2010 discussed below — are known through the retrospective accounts of informants rather than through direct observation, a mixed evidential basis this study makes explicit rather than presenting all description as first-hand.

Four informants were selected by role, on the criterion that each occupied a distinct position in relation to the ritual. Taryo, the fourth-generation *mlandhang* and the only person who directs the whole sequence, was interviewed on 2 November 2020. Gelegar Prakoso, head of the village hamlet, and Subagyo, head of village government affairs, were interviewed on 5 November 2020 as officials whose knowledge of the ritual is administrative rather than liturgical. Mujiono, a spectator from outside Sarwodadi, was interviewed on 6 November 2020 in order to obtain an account from someone positioned beyond the supporting community. All informants agreed to be identified by name.

Data Collection

Three techniques were used. Participant observation followed the ritual's stages from the construction and dressing of the puppet, through the *penjamasan* purification and the trance dance, to the closing invocation and the puppet's return to storage; it produced field notes on sequence, timing, and the conduct of performers and audience, together with photographic

documentation of the preparation and the dance. In-depth, semi-structured interviews produced the *mlandhang*'s account of Brendung's origin, procedure, and meaning, and the officials' and the outside spectator's accounts of the ritual's place in village life; the interview guide covered origin narrative, ritual procedure, the meaning attributed to each material element, conditions of efficacy, and succession. Documentary and literature study produced the village archive record of Sarwodadi's area, land use, and toponymy (Village Archive of Sarwodadi, 2014), photographic documentation of earlier performances held by the *mlandhang*, and the secondary literature on ritual, performance studies, and semiotics reviewed above.

Data Validation and Analysis

Credibility was established by source triangulation and by repeated observation. The *mlandhang*'s account of procedure and meaning was compared against the accounts of the two village officials and against that of the outside spectator, and points on which the four diverged — most notably the significance attached to the ritual by those outside the supporting community — are reported as divergences rather than resolved into a single version. Observation across more than one staging allowed incidental variation to be distinguished from the ritual's stable, recurring structure. Where a claim rests on a single retrospective account, this is stated in the text.

Analysis proceeded in three stages. The first classified the performance's constituent elements — word, tone, mime, gesture, movement, make-up, hairstyle, costume, properties, setting, lighting, music, and sound effect — using Tadeusz Kowzan's thirteen-category system of theatrical signs, which separates auditive from visual signs and signs attached to the actor from signs external to the actor (Aston & Savona, 1994, as cited in Sahid, 2019). The second stage read each classified sign through Barthes's model of denotation, connotation, and myth, while simultaneously mapping the performance's temporal sequence onto Turner's threefold structure. Kowzan's categories and Barthes's model are not interchangeable: the former supplies an inventory of what counts as a sign in the first place, the latter the interpretive procedure applied to each sign once identified, so the two were used in sequence rather than as alternatives. The two theoretical frameworks, by contrast, were applied jointly: Turner's structure located each classified sign within a phase, and Barthes's model was then applied to the signs falling within that phase, which allowed the analysis to ask not only what a given sign means but at which point in the ritual's passage that meaning becomes available, and to whom. The third stage related the semiotic findings back to the ritual's social function for the Sarwodadi community.

Research Ethics and Positionality

No institutional review board governs research of this kind at the author's institution, and consent was therefore secured directly. Each informant was told the purpose of the research, the use to which the material would be put, and the intention to identify participants by name, and each gave informed consent on those terms. Consent to photograph the preparation and the performance, and to publish images in which performers appear, was obtained from the *mlandhang* on behalf of the ritual's performers and from the individuals depicted. The mantras and *tembang* are recited publicly before an audience and are not restricted material; no text identified by the *mlandhang* as reserved has been reproduced here.

The author's position as a student in the Department of Theatre at Institut Seni Indonesia Yogyakarta, rather than as a member of Sarwodadi's community, shaped both access and interpretation. It permitted a systematic, semiotically informed reading of the performance's sign system, while making the analysis dependent on the *mlandhang* and village officials for the emic understanding without which such a reading would risk mistaking the researcher's categories for the community's own. Where the interpretation offered below departs from the

community's own account — as it does in reading the succession rule as social mechanism rather than supernatural fact — this is marked in the text as the author's reading.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Brendung as a Calendrical Rite: Historical and Social Context

Sarwodadi is a village in Comal Subdistrict, Pemalang Regency, Central Java, located roughly seven kilometres inland from the island's north coast, with an area of about 200 hectares, of which 58 per cent is rice field. The name Sarwodadi — from the Javanese *sarwo* ('all') and *dadi* ('becomes' or 'succeeds') — expresses a hope that everything the village undertakes, above all its harvest, will succeed, reflecting the village's agrarian character (Village Archive of Sarwodadi, 2014). Although most residents are Muslim, belief in ancestral and unseen spirits remains strong, sustained by a Javanese cosmology that does not divide reality into separate, disconnected domains but perceives the visible and invisible worlds (*jagad gedhe* and *jagad cilik*) as a single continuous whole (Widyatwati, 2014). Brendung stands as one expression of that unity.

According to the account preserved by the *mlandhang* lineage, Brendung was created in the 1800s by a farmer named Tawi during a prolonged dry season that was destroying Sarwodadi's crops. One night, Tawi found a coconut that had fallen to the ground on a Friday *Kliwon* — a night regarded in Javanese reckoning as auspicious for contact with the unseen. He carried it home, removed its flesh and water to leave only the shell, and with several companions built a doll from the shell and a frame of bamboo. As he worked, Tawi spontaneously chanted verses that would become the mantras still recited today, asking that rain fall and the fields regain their fertility. The doll began to move by itself; Tawi and his companions lifted it from the ground, and it began to dance until the possessing spirit departed — shortly afterward, heavy rain fell. From that event, Tawi began staging the ritual every year at the onset of the planting season and after harvest, as an expression of gratitude to the Creator (Taryo, personal communication, 2 November 2020).

The doll was later identified as a female spirit, a *widadari*, because it danced most vigorously when held by male performers rather than female ones, and Tawi accordingly named it Juleha and began dressing it as a woman. The name Brendung itself derives from local Sarwodadi usage, where it denotes a woman who is excessively made-up or over-adorned — a description Tawi applied once he judged that the spirit possessing the puppet dressed and behaved as such a figure would (Taryo, personal communication, 2 November 2020). As Islam spread through Sarwodadi toward the end of the nineteenth century, Brendung's costume changed with it: the puppet came to be dressed in a child-sized Muslim gown (*gamis*) and headscarf (*kerudung*), a visible record of the ritual's accommodation to the village's new religious life without abandoning its older, animist core. The *mlandhang* role has since passed down through four generations of Tawi's direct descendants; according to the current *mlandhang*, the office cannot be transferred outside the family line, since Brendung will simply refuse to move if an outsider attempts to lead it — a claim this study returns to below as a myth that does specific social work.

Ritual in general, according to Bustanuddin (2007), is performed to secure abundant fortune from an undertaking, whether through rites marking a change in life-cycle status — birth, marriage, death — or through rites intended to ward off misfortune. Turner's distinction between passage rites and calendrical rites (Turner, 1982) refines this further: where a passage rite marks a single, unrepeatable transition in an individual's life, a calendrical rite recurs on a fixed cycle and may be experienced by the same person many times over. Brendung's timing — staged at the onset of planting and again after harvest, and additionally during prolonged drought — places it unambiguously within the calendrical category: it does not mark any

individual's unique transition but the community's shared, recurring relationship to the agricultural year, repeated in the same form from one generation to the next. This finding qualifies Aprilianie's (2016) treatment of Brendung as a repository of mystical value: the value is not stored in the performance but generated by its recurrence, which is why an inventory of beliefs taken outside the cycle that produces them cannot account for their persistence.

The Structure of the Performance: Separation, Liminality, and Reaggregation

Performance, in Sal Murgiyanto's formulation, is a process that requires time and space and possesses a beginning, a middle, and an end; the boundaries between preparation, staging, and aftermath are not fixed but shift according to the observer's vantage point (Murgiyanto, 2018). Because Brendung's preparation is lengthy, laden with sacred value, witnessed by a large audience, and tied to specific places, this study treats that preparation as part of the performance proper rather than as separate backstage activity. Read this way, Brendung's three-part temporal structure corresponds closely to the threefold structure Turner identifies in ritual generally: a phase of separation from ordinary, everyday reality; a liminal phase in which the ritual subject occupies an ambiguous state that is neither here nor there; and a phase of reaggregation, in which the subject is reincorporated into everyday communal life (Turner, 1969). Brendung enacts this sequence not through a human novice but through the puppet itself, with the surrounding community sharing in each phase as witnesses and, at times, as participants.

Performance studies and the boundaries of the Brendung event

Richard Schechner maps performance studies as a broad fan spanning play, games, sport, popular entertainment, the performing arts, ritual, and the performance of everyday life, with theatre occupying only one narrow slice of that fan (Schechner, 2007). Brendung sits close to the ritual end of the fan while sharing formal features with theatre — a demarcated time and place, distinguishable roles, and an audience expecting something out of the ordinary — which licenses reading it through categories developed for theatrical performance, such as Kowzan's sign system, without treating it as theatre that merely borrows ritual imagery. Because performance studies treats an event's boundaries as a matter of interpretation rather than fixed fact (Murgiyanto, 1998; Schechner, 2006), this study includes the *penjamasan* purification and the dressing within the performance proper rather than as preparatory activity outside it, since sacred value, sustained audience attention, and location-specific action are already at work from the moment the bamboo frame is first assembled.

Separation: the preparation of Brendung

The separation phase begins well before the performance proper and consists of five steps: constructing the puppet's frame, dressing and adorning it, arranging the *sesajen* offerings, purifying the puppet (*penjamasan*) at a sacred site, and finally carrying it to the performance ground. Every step is accompanied by mantras recited by the *mlandhang*, since, in his words, asking something of the unseen requires care at every stage if the request is to be granted.

The puppet's head — the coconut shell — is treated as its most important and least frequently replaced part; it is stored in a sacred place in the village and ritually cleansed every eve of the month of *Suro*, which allows a single shell to last for decades. When a shell finally needs replacing, the *mlandhang* must wait alone beneath a coconut tree at the sacred site through an entire Friday *Kliwon* night for a coconut to fall; only a coconut that falls on that specific night, offered together with seven-coloured flowers, incense, and rosewater, is considered fit to become Brendung's head. The bamboo body frame, tapering to a point, is remade more often — once a year, on the eve of *Suro* — together with the puppet's costume; its hands, once rigid and shaped like the letter T, are now formed from stuffed doll hands bound with cloth, a

modification made after the stiffer original hands had repeatedly struck and injured performers and spectators during the dance.

Dressing follows a fixed order: the frame is first wrapped in white cloth, then dressed in a child's outfit — commonly a pink party dress, a Muslim gown, or a prayer garment — and finally given a painted face of white powder, rouge, lipstick, eyebrows, and eyeshadow, completing its identity as a beautiful young woman. Figure 1 shows the *mlandhang* at this stage of the preparation.



Figure 1. The *mlandhang* dressing the Brendung puppet in its white veil and gown before a performance.

Photograph by the author, Sarwodadi Village, Pemalang, November 2020. Reproduced with the consent of the mlandhang.

Once dressed, Brendung is placed on a *tampah*, a woven bamboo winnowing tray, together with its *sesajen*: women's clothing, coins, a dance sash (*sampur*), cosmetics, red-and-white porridge, black coffee, cigarettes, eggs, seven-coloured flowers, incense, and rosewater. These offerings are explained by the *mlandhang* as a guest's due: the ancestral spirits invited to enter Brendung's body are treated as honoured guests, and a host must provide for a guest's needs. The dressed puppet and its offerings are then carried to Candi Kaso, a site believed to hold the remains of Sarwodadi's ancestors, where it undergoes *penjamasan* — ritual purification — for three days and three nights, ideally timed to coincide with the full moon, which the *mlandhang* associates with heightened spirit activity. Purification, in the *mlandhang*'s account, both eases the spirits' entry into the puppet's body at the performance itself and serves as a formal invitation for them to attend.

Throughout this stage, the boundary between ordinary and sacred time and space is already dissolving: the *mlandhang* withdraws to a haunted site to wait through the night, the puppet's mundane materials — coconut shell, bamboo, food, cloth — are progressively set apart for exclusively ritual use, and the surrounding community gathers to witness a process that no longer belongs to ordinary daily life. This is precisely what Turner (1969) describes as separation: a passage out of the profane world and into the sacred. It is worth noting how

much of Brendung's duration this phase consumes. Where Turner's canonical examples treat separation as a brief threshold crossing preceding a long liminal interval, here the proportions are reversed: separation extends over days while liminality lasts at most a few hours. The reversal is intelligible once the ritual subject is an object rather than a person — a puppet has no social identity to be stripped away and must instead be constructed, materially, before it can become liminal at all.

Liminality: the trance and the dance

When the puppet is lifted from the *tampah* and carried to the performance ground, Brendung enters what this study identifies as its liminal phase in Turner's sense: a threshold state that is betwixt and between ordinary categories, no longer simply an object and not yet fully a person, no longer simply part of Sarwodadi's daily reality and not yet returned to it. The *sinden* open with an invitation chant urging the spirits to descend quickly, naming forty *widadari* and asking that, once they have entered Brendung's body, they induce it to dance:

> *Mbok Brendung temuruna, age-age pumpung sore, widadari patang puluh, yen wis manjing […]*
> ('Brendung, come down now, while the day is still young; forty widadari, once you have entered [...], and dance.')

A second chant, sung once possession has begun, shifts from invitation to warning: it reminds the audience of karma and courtesy, cautioning them not to mock Brendung, since doing so is believed to provoke serious consequences. A third chant reaffirms that forty-nine spirits have entered the puppet's body, nine of them said to stand beside it, while the *sinden* praise Brendung's beauty. Across all three chants, the recurring instruction is the same: watch your words, and treat the unseen with the respect due a guest.

As the chanting continues, Brendung begins to move on its own; two to four performers, sometimes drawn from the audience, then lift and support it, taking turns as fatigue sets in. Once possessed, the puppet is markedly heavier than before, and it dances far more vigorously when held by men than by women — a difference the *mlandhang* and community attribute to the femininity of the possessing spirits. The music mirrors this ambiguous, in-between state: at the outset it keeps a steady, ordinary tempo, but as possession intensifies it grows louder and progressively irregular, heightening the audience's tension and anticipation, before slowing again as the spirits begin to leave.

Spectators, too, are drawn into the liminal condition: they must guard their speech and conduct throughout, since discourtesy risks being chased by the puppet, fainting, or becoming possessed themselves. In 2010, a performer who set the puppet down out of exhaustion before the spirits had finished departing triggered a mass possession among nearby spectators, which the *mlandhang* resolved only by lifting Brendung again and chanting the spirits back into its body (Taryo, personal communication, 2 November 2020); recounted a decade after the fact by a single informant, the episode is reported here as an illustration of how the community itself narrates liminal disorder, rather than as an independently verified event. Turner's point that liminal subjects are stripped of their ordinary attributes and rendered ambiguous applies here at two levels simultaneously: the puppet itself, an inanimate object turned dancer, and the community of onlookers, who for the duration of the dance are neither wholly separate from nor wholly merged with the sacred force moving through Brendung's body. The performance is judged successful only when this liminal disorder resolves on its own terms — when the possessing spirits depart of their own accord — and is judged to have failed, withholding its hoped-for blessing, if the sequence is disrupted or forced.

This shared vulnerability is what allows the liminal phase to generate what Turner (1969) calls *communitas*: a spontaneous, unstructured bond among participants who would not otherwise be linked by kinship, age, or status, produced precisely because the ritual has temporarily suspended the everyday distinctions that ordinarily separate them. In Brendung, *communitas*

is visible in the fact that performers supporting the puppet are drawn indiscriminately from the crowd rather than from a fixed troupe, and in the fact that possession, when it spreads beyond the puppet itself, does not respect the audience's ordinary social distinctions of age or standing in the village. The 2010 incident illustrates the same point from its disruptive side: once the ritual sequence was broken, the undifferentiated, contagious quality of liminality became a hazard rather than a shared experience, requiring the *mlandhang* to actively re-impose the boundary between puppet and spectator that the performance had deliberately dissolved. Winangun's (1990) reading of Turner treats *communitas* as the positive content of liminality, the condition the ritual exists to produce; the Sarwodadi material qualifies that reading by showing that the same undifferentiation is valued and feared at once, and that a specialist must remain on hand throughout to contain what the ritual has released.

Reaggregation: closing and return

Brendung's dance ends only when the possessing spirits choose to leave its body, at which point the puppet is returned to the *tampah* and the *mlandhang* recites a closing mantra of thanks for the spirits' attendance and participation. The *mlandhang*, *sinden*, musicians, and other performers then thank the assembled residents for their part in the ritual, and the puppet is carried back to a dedicated room in the *mlandhang*'s house — a room said to have been designated for this purpose since Tawi's time — where it and the ritual's equipment are stored until the next performance.

This closing sequence completes the passage Turner describes as reaggregation: the ritual subject, and with it the community that has shared its liminal condition, is reincorporated into ordinary daily life, its transitional ambiguity resolved and its sacred materials returned to safe-keeping until the cycle recurs at the next planting or harvest season. Reaggregation in Brendung is thus marked twice over: through words, in the closing mantra and the cast's thanks to the audience, and through space, in the puppet's return to a room set apart for that purpose. Table 1 summarises how each of the three Turnerian phases corresponds to a stage of the performance, its principal signs, and its approximate duration.

Table 1. The three phases of the Brendung ritual and their principal signs

Turnerian phase	Performance stage	Principal signs	Approximate duration
Separation	Frame-making, dressing, *sesajen*, *penjamasan*	Mantra; costume; make-up; offerings; sacred site	Up to several days (*penjamasan*: 3 days, 3 nights)
Liminality	Invocation, possession, trance dance	*Tembang*; accelerating music; erratic movement; audience conduct	Up to about 2 hours
Reaggregation	Closing mantra, thanks, storage	Closing mantra; return of the puppet to its storage room	Brief, a matter of minutes

Source: compiled by the author from field data and from Taryo (personal communication, 2 November 2020).

The Sign System of the Brendung Performance

Before Brendung's signs can be read for their denotative and connotative meaning, they must first be identified as a system. This study follows Tadeusz Kowzan's classification of thirteen theatrical sign categories, which groups word, tone, mime, gesture, movement, make-up, hairstyle, and costume as signs attached directly to the actor, and properties, setting, lighting, music, and sound effects as signs originating outside the actor (Aston & Savona, 1994, as cited in Sahid, 2019). Kowzan further separates these thirteen categories into auditive signs — word, tone, music, and sound effect — and visual signs, with the actor serving as the principal site for both spoken text and visual signification (Sahid, 2019). The premise that a performance can

be exhaustively decomposed in this way derives from the wider tradition of theatre semiotics (Elam, 1991; Esslin, 1991), and its application here is set out in Table 2.

Table 2. Kowzan's thirteen theatrical sign categories applied to Brendung

No.	Sign category	Type	Location	Example in Brendung
1	Word	Auditive	Actor	*Mlandhang*'s mantras; *sinden*'s *tembang*
2	Tone	Auditive	Actor	Shift from invitation to warning
3	Mime	Visual	Actor	Stylised gestures once possessed
4	Gesture	Visual	Actor	Puppet's arm and head movement
5	Movement	Visual	Actor	Erratic dance once possessed
6	Make-up	Visual	Actor	White powder, rouge, lipstick
7	Hairstyle	Visual	Actor	Veil and styled hair
8	Costume	Visual	Actor	Child-sized *gamis* and *kerudung*
9	Properties	Visual	Outside actor	*Sesajen* on the *tampah*
10	Setting	Visual	Outside actor	Four sites regarded as haunted
11	Lighting	Visual	Outside actor	Full moon during *penjamasan*
12	Music	Auditive	Outside actor	*Kenong*, *jemblung*, and *kendang* ensemble
13	Sound effect	Auditive	Outside actor	Audience cheers and applause

Source: category labels adapted from Aston and Savona (1994), as cited in Sahid (2019); Brendung-specific examples compiled by the author.

Applied to Brendung, the auditive signs are dominated by spoken text: the mantras recited by the *mlandhang* and the *tembang* sung by the *sinden* run continuously from the preparation stage to the performance's end, joined at times by spectators' spontaneous cheers. These verses have remained fixed since Brendung's creation and denote, most simply, an invitation and accompaniment to the ritual; the Javanese in which they and the surrounding chatter are spoken further denotes the performance's regional setting in Central Java, while the audience's habitual Javanese sociability — captured in that same chatter — carries a more connotative sense of a community bound together by talk. Music and unarticulated vocal sound (the *kenong*, *jemblung*, and *kendang* percussion, together with the audience's applause) construct the performance's atmosphere: a steady tempo denotes simple accompaniment, while the accelerating, irregular rhythm that accompanies possession connotes both the presence of the spirits and, more broadly, the exuberance with which Javanese communities greet an offering made to the Creator.

Visual signs, meanwhile, intersect with both space and time. Kowzan's model implies that a visual sign only signifies once it is anchored to a particular time, or to a particular time and place together (Sathotho, 2010), and the *penjamasan* is precisely such an anchor: it is the point at which the puppet, its offerings, and the sacred site converge for three days and three nights, drawing a steady stream of spectators. The materials of the *sesajen* illustrate what Marco de Marinis calls a multilayered entity (Marinis, 1993, as cited in Sathotho, 2010): an item such as an egg or a length of cloth first exists as an ordinary material with an everyday denotation — food, clothing — is then set apart as a *sesajen* with a shifted meaning, and finally takes on a further meaning once assembled into the offering as a whole, three successive layers of signification built onto the same physical object. This layering is the very mechanism that, in Barthes's model, converts a denotative sign into the signifier of a connotation, and it is to that model the discussion now turns.

Working through Kowzan's remaining categories, mime, gesture, and movement belong almost entirely to the puppet, whose jerking, unpredictable motion is the single most legible marker of possession; make-up, hairstyle, and costume concentrate on transforming coconut shell and bamboo into a recognisable young woman through white powder, drawn eyebrows, a beauty mark, a veil, and a padded chest. Among signs outside the actor, properties are supplied by the *sesajen* on the *tampah*; setting by the four haunted sites, chosen for perceived proximity to the unseen rather than practical convenience; lighting by the full moon under which *penjamasan* is timed; and sound effect by the audience's own applause and cheering. Distributed this way, Brendung confirms Kowzan's observation that a production need not depend on elaborate external staging to generate a dense, multi-layered sign system: the puppet and its handlers carry most of the interpretive weight, with setting and properties functioning less as scenery than as further, spatially fixed conditions for possession to occur at all. This distribution also marks a departure from the theatrical cases for which Kowzan's inventory was devised, where the actor's body supplies mime, gesture, and movement directly. In Brendung those three categories are borne by an object that cannot produce them, and are therefore read by the audience as evidence of an agency other than the handlers'. The inventory transfers to ritual performance, but the actor slot is filled by something that signifies precisely by not being an actor.

Semiotic Analysis: Denotation, Connotation, and Myth

Roland Barthes's semiotics of culture rests on the proposition that every system of signification contains an expression (E) and a content (C), joined by a relation (R) (Barthes, 1964). At the level of denotation, this relation is direct: the physical sign of Brendung is joined to its most immediate content, one of Pemalang Regency's local cultural traditions. But that denotative sign, taken as a whole, simultaneously functions as the signifier of a second, connotative content — for instance, that Tawi's long spiritual labour justifies restricting the *mlandhang* office to his descendants. This connotative sign, in turn, becomes the signifier of a myth: the belief that the puppet embodies Dewi Sri, the goddess of fertility. The model has been applied in this two-storey form across a substantial Indonesian-language literature (Berger, 2000; Kurniawan, 2001; Zaimar, 2008; Hermawan, 2011; Wibowo, 2013), and it organises the discussion that follows.

Denotation: the first order of signification

At its most immediate level, Brendung denotes a local cultural tradition of Sarwodadi Village, Pemalang Regency, and, for visitors from outside the village, a form of entertainment staged annually. More specifically, the performance denotes a rain-invoking ritual, a request for soil fertility, a request for healing, career advancement, or a marriage partner, and an expression of thanks for a good harvest — the full range of petitions villagers bring to the ritual. For farmers among the audience, Brendung denotes a channel through which the Creator may be asked to favour the coming harvest; for outside spectators, it denotes chiefly an annual entertainment, without necessarily registering the connotative or mythic meanings layered beneath that surface.

The same first-order meanings extend to the ritual's materials. Among the *sesajen*, eggs, chicken, and red-and-white porridge denote foodstuffs; banana leaf denotes food wrapping; the *sampur* sash denotes a strip of cloth used for dancing; coins denote a medium of transaction; cosmetics denote instruments for a woman's toilette; the *tampah* denotes a tray for separating rice from its husk; and incense denotes an implement of prayer. In the puppet's construction, the coconut shell denotes simply a part of a coconut, ordinarily used as fuel; the bamboo frame denotes *bubu*, a fish trap; and the puppet's long, enveloping clothing denotes clothing's most basic function of covering the body. The four performance sites denote nothing more, at this first level, than ordinary points in the village's geography — a crossroads, a hall,

a private yard, an old shrine — and the full moon under which purification is timed denotes simply a phase of the lunar cycle, without yet carrying the significance either acquires once read connotatively.

Connotation: the second order of signification

Where denotation is close to universal, connotation is available chiefly to those positioned within the ritual's particular social construction; the same sign, placed in a different setting, would not necessarily carry the same second-order meaning (Sathotho, 2010). Table 3 sets out the connotative meanings Sarwodadi's community attaches to the principal *sesajen* elements, alongside their plain, denotative sense.

Table 3. Denotative and connotative meanings of the Brendung offerings (*sesajen*)

No.	Element	Denotative meaning	Connotative meaning	Note
1	Egg	Foodstuff	Bond between ancestors and heirs	—
2	Chicken	Foodstuff	Bond between ancestors and heirs	—
3	Red-and-white porridge	Foodstuff	Unity and peace	Commonly used as an offering in Javanese ritual
4	Banana leaf	Food wrapping	A form of respect toward the Creator	—
5	*Sampur* sash	Dance sash	A vehicle by which the *widadari* return home	A long, narrow sash used for dancing
6	White colour on the sash	A colour	Purity	As in the white field of the Indonesian flag
7	Coins	Medium of transaction	Prosperity	—
8	Cosmetics	Tools for applying make-up	A gift for the *widadari*	—
9	*Tampah*	Tray for separating rice from husk	Home	—
10	Incense	Prayer implement	An invitation to unseen spirits	Also used by Hindu worshippers

Source: compiled by the author from interviews with Taryo (personal communication, 2 November 2020).

Beyond the offerings, connotation attaches to the puppet's frame and dress. The coconut-shell head, positioned as the highest point of the body, connotes the Creator, while the frame's tapering, pointed form connotes humanity's relation to the Creator. The puppet's Islamic dress connotes Brendung's transformation as Islam arrived in Sarwodadi — ritual and religion developing side by side rather than in competition. The black clothing worn by the male performers connotes their identity as Brendung's core cast, distinct from the *sinden*'s free choice of dress. Facial expressions among audience and performers — happiness, tension, fear — denote simple enthusiasm at the surface but connote the range of ways human beings express what they feel. Even the puppet's unpredictable, jerking movement, which denotes that a spirit has entered its body, connotes something further: that the entering spirits, like people, are emotionally varied and sometimes temperamental, a reading the *mlandhang* offers from his own long experience handling the puppet.

Myth: the third order of signification

For Barthes, myth is a second-order system of communication built on top of connotation: it does not invent new signifiers but takes an already-connoted sign and turns it into the signifier of a new, naturalised message, converting what is in fact cultural and constructed into something that appears simply given (Barthes, 1972; Hartley, 2010). Four myths recur in accounts of Brendung.

The first concerns succession: informants hold that only Tawi's direct descendants may become *mlandhang*, because Tawi's long spiritual labour in creating Brendung bound him to a pact with the unseen that only his line can honour. The second concerns materials: the coconut shell used for Brendung's head must come from a coconut that falls specifically on a Friday *Kliwon* night, since only then will spirits enter the puppet's body easily. The third concerns place: Brendung must be performed at one of four sites in Sarwodadi believed to be haunted, or the spirits will not properly possess the puppet. The fourth concerns identity: the spirit inhabiting Brendung is widely held to be not merely a *widadari* but an incarnation of Dewi Sri, the goddess of soil fertility.

Read denotatively, each of these myths simply states a supernatural condition of ritual efficacy. Read as myth in Barthes's sense, they do something further: they naturalise an arrangement that benefits a narrow group. The succession myth and the Friday *Kliwon* requirement both make it structurally difficult for Brendung's leadership and materials to pass outside Tawi's line, which this study interprets as a means of keeping the tradition, and the authority attached to it, within a single family even as the wider society moves toward forms of office that follow merit or election rather than descent. The haunted-site requirement and the surrounding aura of mysticism function similarly as an attraction, drawing spectators who might otherwise treat the performance as ordinary entertainment. This reading departs from Aprilianie's (2016), which records the same beliefs as constituents of Brendung's mystical value; the difference is that a belief catalogued as value cannot be asked what it does, whereas a belief read as myth can.

The fourth myth, Brendung's identification with a fertility goddess, draws on a widely shared symbolic association between women and the natural world, in which nature is figured as feminine and women as sustained by qualities that let them create life and provide sustenance (Stefani, 2009). In Greek belief this role belongs to Demeter; in Java, to Dewi Sri; further along Pemalang's north coast, the *lingga-yoni* artefact at Linggo Asri and the Sintren performance tradition make the same association through women's bodies, exactly as Brendung does. The comparison to Demeter is drawn at the level of symbolic structure rather than historical connection — the two traditions share no direct lineage — but the recurrence of a protective, creative Great Mother figure across otherwise unrelated cultures and periods is itself suggestive of how readily fertility comes to be figured through the feminine (Stefani, 2009).

Myth, liminality, and the reproduction of social structure

Read separately, Barthes's semiotics and Turner's ritual theory account for different aspects of Brendung: one for its layered meanings, the other for its temporal shape. Brought together, they clarify why Brendung's myths take the particular form they do. During the liminal phase described above, Brendung suspends the ordinary categories that organise daily life in Sarwodadi: an inanimate coconut-shell puppet becomes an agent that dances and chases; gender is unsettled, since a female spirit is said to move more freely through male performers' bodies than through women's; and the everyday distinction between performer and spectator loosens, as onlookers may themselves be drawn into possession. This is the *communitas* discussed above — a levelling, undifferentiated condition that liminality produces by temporarily dissolving the structure of ordinary social life.

Ritual, however, does not leave communities in that undifferentiated state; reaggregation requires that ordinary structure be restored, and Barthes's myths are precisely the mechanism that accomplishes the restoration. The succession myth reasserts, immediately after a rite that has scrambled ordinary hierarchies of agency and gender, that ritual authority itself remains hereditary and closed to outsiders. The Friday *Kliwon* requirement reasserts, after a rite that any villager might in principle witness or even help perform, that only one family may supply the ritual's essential material. In this light, myth in Brendung functions as the mechanism of reaggregation itself: it is the discourse through which the community, having passed through an interval in which its ordinary structure was suspended, re-establishes and naturalises that same structure as self-evidently necessary. What denotation frames as supernatural obligation, and connotation frames as sentiment and reverence, myth resolves into social order.

This finding both confirms and extends Turner's account. It confirms his claim that reaggregation is a distinct and necessary phase rather than a mere cessation of the liminal one, and it extends the account by identifying what reaggregation consists of at the level of meaning, which Turner's phase model leaves largely unspecified. It also qualifies the Indonesian semiotic literature that applies Barthes's third order to cultural texts (Kurniawan, 2001; Zaimar, 2008; Sahid, 2019): myth there is typically read as an ideological residue attached to a text, whereas here it is datable to a phase of an event and functional within it. It is worth being precise about who the community is at this point. The levelling experience of liminality is genuinely shared by everyone present, but the structure that reaggregation restores is not neutral, and the myths that accomplish the restoring disproportionately secure the position of one lineage rather than the community's interests taken as a whole. Reading Brendung this way answers the study's second research question directly: the performance's meaning for its supporting community lies not only in what its signs denote and connote, but in how its myths do the structural work of returning a liminal, boundary-dissolving performance safely back into everyday social life.

The Function of Brendung for Its Supporting Community

In traditional societies, theatre's social function is bound up with ritual, prayer, magic, and ceremony (Gurvitch, as cited in Sahid, 2017); in more liberal or capitalist societies its function shifts toward entertainment, and in more centrally organised societies toward education and political messaging, though in practice most societies, Indonesia included, draw on all three functions at once, much as the ritual *wayang kulit* play Murwakala combines the warding-off of misfortune with moral instruction and entertainment (Sahid, 2017).

For Sarwodadi Village, Brendung's primary function is religious and agricultural: a means of requesting soil fertility and rainfall, and of giving thanks once the harvest is secured. For residents and outside visitors alike, it additionally functions as a distinctive form of entertainment built around spirit possession, drawing large and varied audiences and, in the process, generating a modest commercial benefit for its performers. This study further reads Brendung as serving a function of continuity: it reassures a modern community, in an era when many rituals are being abandoned as archaic, un-Islamic, or simply implausible, that unseen forces remain active and responsive, while reminding Sarwodadi's residents that their heritage requires active maintenance if it is not to be lost.

As one spectator from a neighbouring village observed, some outside audiences experience Brendung purely as entertainment involving spirit possession, without engaging its deeper significance for Sarwodadi itself (Mujiono, personal communication, 6 November 2020) — a reminder that denotation, connotation, and myth are not equally available to every member of Brendung's audience, but are distributed according to a spectator's position inside or outside the community that sustains the ritual. A performance is judged to have succeeded only when its full sequence, from preparation through possession to closing, unfolds without

interruption and the expected signs of possession appear; judged incomplete or improperly executed, it is expected to withhold the blessing the community seeks.

This distribution of meaning also helps explain Brendung's continued vitality in a period when comparable rituals elsewhere in Java have fallen away, abandoned as relics of a pre-modern past, as inconsistent with a more textually orthodox Islamic practice, or simply as fewer people credit the unseen beings they address. Sarwodadi's persistence with Brendung, alongside rather than against the Islam most residents practise, suggests its function has adapted rather than merely survived: where it once answered a practical anxiety about drought, it now additionally marks local identity and inherited memory. The point bears directly on Aprilianie's (2016) recommendation that the tradition be preserved, developed, and disseminated more widely. If what sustains Brendung is the completeness of its passage rather than the inventory of its mystical content, then dissemination that extracts the visible elements — puppet, costume, chants — for display outside the agricultural cycle and away from the four sites would preserve the signs while dismantling the structure that makes them mean anything.

CONCLUSION

Brendung is a calendrical rite, in Victor Turner's sense, that unfolds through three phases: a separation phase comprising the lengthy preparation, dressing, and purification of the puppet; a liminal phase in which the puppet, possessed by ancestral spirits, dances in a state that suspends the ordinary categories of agent, gender, and audience; and a reaggregation phase in which the spirits depart, the community is thanked, and the puppet is returned to storage until the next performance. Read through Roland Barthes's model, its signs operate on three levels at once: a first, widely shared level identifying the performance as a local tradition and a rain-and-fertility ritual; a second, community-specific level in which its materials and gestures carry sentiments of respect, hospitality, and purity; and a third, mythic level in which beliefs about hereditary succession, ritually significant materials, haunted performance sites, and a possessing fertility goddess naturalise a particular social arrangement.

The two readings are not parallel descriptions of the same object but explain each other. Brendung's myths are the mechanism by which Sarwodadi's community re-establishes its ordinary social structure once the levelling experience of liminal possession has passed; myth, in other words, is what reaggregation looks like at the level of meaning. The theoretical contribution of the study lies here: it specifies the content of a ritual phase that Turner's model names but leaves largely empty, and it relocates Barthesian myth from an ideological residue attached to a text to a datable, functional moment within an event. Brendung is accordingly not merely a ritual to summon rain but a recurring means by which a community dissolves and then restores its own social order, and the restoration it performs is not neutral: it returns authority to the lineage that has held it for four generations.

For the community, its custodians, and those responsible for heritage policy, the practical implication is that efforts to sustain Brendung should attend not only to its visible elements — the puppet, the costume, the chants — but to the full three-phase structure that gives those elements their meaning, since a performance abbreviated, relocated, or reordered for display would risk losing the very passage through which the ritual does its social work.

The study is limited in ways that bear on how far these claims travel. It rests on a single site and on interviews concentrated in one five-day period, and several episodes central to the analysis — the replacement of the coconut-shell head, the disrupted performance of 2010 — are known only through retrospective accounts, in one case from a single informant. The four informants, moreover, do not represent the full range of positions within Sarwodadi: no woman among the *sinden*, and no member of a household outside the *mlandhang*'s line, was interviewed at length, which matters particularly for a finding about whose interests the

ritual's myths secure. Research that would test the argument should therefore begin with sustained fieldwork across a full agricultural cycle and with informants drawn from beyond the ritual's core personnel, and might then extend the reading comparatively, to other coconut-puppet and spirit-possession traditions along Java's north coast, in order to establish whether myth performs the same reaggregative work where succession is not confined to a single family.

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Ethical approval and informed consent. No institutional review board with jurisdiction over ethnographic research of this kind operates at the author's institution, and no approval number is therefore available. Informed consent was obtained orally from all four participants, who were told the purpose of the research and agreed to be identified by name and quoted. Consent to publish photographic documentation of the performance, including images in which performers appear, was obtained from the *mlandhang* and from the individuals depicted.

Data availability. The field notes, interview recordings and transcripts, and photographic documentation underlying this article are held by the author and may be consulted on reasonable request, subject to the consent conditions described above. The undergraduate thesis from which the data derive is held in the library of Institut Seni Indonesia Yogyakarta.

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