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# Iconography: Sundanese Calligraphy as Artistic Expressions of Identity

**Agung Zainal Muttakin Raden[1,2]✉, Rustopo Rustopo[1], Timbul Haryono[3], Dendi Pratama[4]**

[1]Institut Seni Indonesia Surakarta, Indonesia
[2]Universitas Indraprasta PGRI Jakarta, Indonesia
[3]Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia
[4]Politeknik Bina Madani, Indonesia

## Abstract

The Sundanese script is one of Indonesia's traditional scripts. The existence of Sundanese script is still being preserved by cultural activists and the Sundanese script literacy community, one of which is through calligraphy in Sundanese script. This article will analyze the calligraphy of Sundanese script by Edi Dolan posted on his social media. The Sundanese calligraphy that will be discussed is in the form of puppets, animals, and humans. The Sundanese calligraphy will be reviewed through an iconographic approach. Iconography has three levels in analyzing objects, namely (1) Pre-iconography, which is to describe the formal aspects of the object; (2) Iconography, which is to interpret images, stories, and metaphors; (3) Content analysis through revealing the intricacies of the object. The results of the research elaborate on the formal aspects found in Sundanese calligraphy objects, resulting in multidimensional interpretations built on images, stories, and other multidimensional object meanings, thus showing a complete correlation of all these aspects in expressing Sundanese identity.

**Keywords:** artistic, calligraphy, expressions, identity, Sundanese script

## INTRODUCTION

Language and ethnicity are related to inherent identity, with language being a differentiator from other ethnicities. Javanese and Sundanese are two ethnicities that inhabit the island of Java, and both have similarities. The Javanese and Sundanese have very similar cultures, languages, and cuisines, and the Sundanese is the tribe inhabiting the western Java region (Syam et al., 2021). The characteristics can be seen when the entire Sundanese cultural artifacts are collected, then look for patterns underlying fixed formation.

Sundanese people are people whose mother tongue is Sunda. Through the language of Sundanese cultural values are expressed. The Sundanese people reveal their values through everyday behavior, through the objects they create. Language and artifacts are manifestations of the collective values of Sundanese society. Cultural forms are analyzed to find basic patterns that become ideas and values expected to be realized in everyday life (Su-

mardjo, 2003, p. 297).

One of the collections of Sundanese society is the script. The Sundanese script that develops today is different from Sundanese script in the 14th century to the 18th century but has the same function as a visual representation of language. Sundanese script has differences in form with other regional scripts in Indonesia. Sundanese script can be expressed in various media and forms, including Sundanese script fonts and calligraphy. Sundanese calligraphy forms object that look interesting and beautiful.

In writing calligraphy, parts of the artist's body include the head, eyes, hands, fingers, and arms. The movements are real-time and highly dynamic. Calligraphy with geometric shapes can influence emotions and character, creating aesthetically beautiful art (Kao et al., 2021).

The calligraphic letters are in the form of the visual art instrumentation and figuration (Meliha, 2013). Calligraphy is one form of art displayed in a variety of cultures and languages. Calligraphy is a form technique to make beautiful handwriting (Raden et al., 2019). Each calligraphy has distinctive features and a different appearance that shows the authenticity of the culture and language.

Calligraphy is a craft that has had ties to life, human beings, religion, and communications since the cave times. Thus, it has served as a vehicle where respect, knowledge, identity, and life have been deeply embedded throughout generations (Boukerroui, 2013). Calligraphy is a form of creative design. A wide variety of compositional expressions that involve repetitive forms and depictions that aim to develop, adapt and refine. A calligraphic composition is composed of elements (letters) and relations (relative arrangement of the letters) defining an overall organization (Moustpha & Krishnamurti, 2001).

A calligram is a calligraphy that forms an object. These objects include living things, imaginary creatures, and buildings in the form of puppets. Calligrams or figural calligraphy are most often connected to the Turkish art of the 16th century (Meliha, 2013). Figurative calligraphy consists of many styles and shapes. Types of figurative calligraphy include: (1) Anthropomorphic calligraphy, humans as objects in calligraphy; (2) Zoomorphic calligraphy, animals as objects in calligraphy; (3) Botanical Calligraphy, plants as objects in calligraphy; (4) Architectural calligraphy, buildings and man-made objects as objects in calligraphy; (5) Landscape Calligraphy, earth, mountains, and oceans as objects in calligraphy; and (6) Arabic calligraphy, geometric elements and asymmetrical shapes as objects in calligraphy.

The Sundanese script calligraphy that will be analyzed in this article is the work of a calligrapher named Edi Dolan. Apart from being a calligrapher, Edi Dolan is also an artist. The calligraphy works were uploaded on his social media. Besides showing beauty, this Sundanese script calligraphy artwork also introduces the Sundanese identity of the formed letters and figures.

## METHOD

This article uses Erwin Panofsky's iconography analysis. Panofsky argues that iconography is that branch of the history of art that concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form (Panofsky, 1972, p. 3). This theory consists of three levels of approach in conducting studies. The three levels of the approach can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 describes the various levels Panofsky uses to analyze iconography. Iconography has three levels for analyzing a work of art. The first level is called primary or natural subject matter analysis or pre-iconographic analysis. This level study is based on a formalistic aspect such as line, shape, color, and texture. Besides the studies' formalistic aspect, this level also used perceptual aspects like harmony, rhythm, balance, and proportion.

**Table 1.** Erwin Panofsky's Analysis

| Object of Interpretation | Act of Interpretation |
|---|---|
| Primary or natural subject matter, (A) factual, (B) expressional constituting the world of artistic motifs. | Pre-iconographical description (And pseudo-formal analysis.) |
| Secondary/conventional subject matter, constituting the world of images, stories, and allegories. | Iconographical analysis in the narrower sense of the word |
| Intrinsic meaning or content, constituting the world of "symbolical" values. | Iconographic interpretation in a deeper sense (Iconographical synthesis.) |

Source: (Musa & Abdullah, 2017)

Perceptual aspects are required to support formalistic aspects.

The second level is called secondary or conventional subject matter analysis, also known as an iconographic description analysis. This level reveals the second meaning: an interpretation of images, stories, and metaphors. The secondary subject matter will be studies of Sundanese calligraphy with text, image, and multidimensional relationships.

The third level is intrinsic or content analysis or iconological interpretation. Iconology interpretation aims to embody intrinsic meaning and values of arts phenomenon (Panofsky, 1972, pp. 6–7). The meaning contained in each Sundanese calligraphy in this article will be analyzed.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

**Sundanese Calligraphy**

The forms of Sundanese calligraphy that will be analyzed are taken from Edi Dolan's social media. Edi Dolan's calligraphy works are very much with various scripts, for example, Javanese script, Pegon, and Sundanese script. However, only Sundanese calligraphy will be analyzed in this article. The reason to select this artwork is to view related in the form, script, and Sundanese identity. Sundanese identities on social media have a relationship with all aspects like a region aspect, identity, and Sundanese culture. In the world of social media, Sundanese culture gets important attention and emphasis in every discussion. This is based on the activities of social media users built based on Sundanese cultural elements (Iskandar, 2012, p. 111).

Social media provides experiences and new ways for a community to interact, communicate, and exchange information. All that can create a visual identity to present a Sundanese identity within the community. Generally, Sundanese people are proud of their regional cultural identity. But, Sumardjo argues, Sundanese society will disagree when asked what Sundanese cultural identity is. (Sumardjo, 2003, p. 297).

**Jampe (Spell)**

The first work is entitled *jampe,* or known as the spell. *Jampe* is a word in the form of a spell that is thought to have supernatural energy.



**Figure 1**. The character of Semar is arranged in calligraphy Sundanese script with the words composed as "jampe"

Figure 1 shows a Sundanese calligraphy called *jampe* (spell). The *jampe* text that reads the words *jampe-jampe harupat, geura cageur geura tobat* (mantra of hope, get well soon, repent soon) is composed of wayang figures. The figurative calligraphy is formed from curved lines with a thin, thick contrast. The texture contained in the calligraphy is a smooth pseudo texture. The background color of this calligraphy

is light brown with black ink. The arrangement of the Sundanese script to form a figure produces harmony so that the shape of the figure can be expressed. Rhythm consists of repeating curved lines on the stomach and on the back. Symmetry balance shows in this Sundanese Calligraphy with the axis located in the middle of the paper, making this calligraphy look proportional. The thin-thick contrast in the strokes that form the head and hands gives a picture of complete proportions. The shape of Semar in the puppet morphic calligraphy is easily recognized. This can be seen from the anatomy of his body which has a distinct identity (Raden & Qeis, 2019).

This Sundanese calligraphy forms the figure of Semar. Semar is a *punakawan* figure in puppet stories. This figurative calligraphy is called puppet morphic calligraphy. The style used in these puppet morphic is experimental calligraphy done by the artists, creating a contemporary calligraphy style (Raden & Qeis, 2019). Javanese spiritual places Semar as a very wise figure that has a lot of expertise (Halimah et al., 2020). Semar also has an understanding of the culture of *Triloka* (the three worlds), consisting of the world of gods, giants, and humans (Raden & Qeis, 2019). Semar is a loyal figure accompanied by Pandavas. Semar is a wise figure and also accompanied Pandavas; thus often asks for advice and consideration of the problems that occur.

Semar, sometimes also called Ki Lurah Semar also known as a great teacher or leader (*Pamong Agung*) or Kyai Semar, is also a great teacher or leader for others. Semar represents a tutor and leader, a guide of physical and spiritual of all *ksatria* (Habsy, 2017).

The Semar form depicted in this calligraphy comprises the words *jampe-jampe harupat geura cageur geura tobat*. This mantra has a meaning to heal the soul caused by one's own behavior that is contrary to the teachings of God. Repentance means returning along the path of God or to the path of righteousness. Semar's figure was chosen for this form because Semar is the most respected figure. Semar is also con-

sidered a divine revelation (*cahaya ilahi*) to form good morals (*welas asih, gotong royong*), merciful, and human-oriented (Habsy, 2017).

The interpretation of this calligraphy is self-reflection. The healing of the soul can only be done by carrying out real repentance, by not repeating it again. This mantra is very popular among the Sundanese people. *Jampé-jampé harupat* is an incantation or song that is usually sung or spoken by parents to their children. This mantra is usually chanted for a small child to grow up soon and be able to run. Growing up and running here means a child who is ready to face life in the future, but in this calligraphy, the artist changed the mantra a little to respond to the current phenomenon in Indonesia. Mantra is considered to have magical powers; people who read it have spiritual power, and those who are chanted will feel the impact. This mantra is transformed into the form of Semar calligraphy. This form of expression comes from Indonesian local wisdom and the embodiment of divinity.

### *Edun* (Crazy)

The second work is entitled *edun*. *Edun* is an admiration for something positive or to express something chaotic in a society.



**Figure 2**. Rahwana character is composed in calligraphy Sundanese script with pupuh asmarandana titled "Edun"

Figure 2 shows a Sundanese calligraphy which is formed from the text *edan-edan jaman akhir, banyak yang bertingkah gila, yang sakit jiwa melongo, kalah saing jatah peran, jin setan jingkrak jingkrak, tambah teman sorak seru, sang alim takut kuwalat* (Crazy in the end times, many are acting crazy, mentally gawking, losing their competitive role. The demon genie is prancing, added cheerful friends. The pious was afraid of misbehaving), is composed of wayang figure.

This figurative calligraphy is formed from curves and straight lines with a thin-thick contrast. The textures contained in the calligraphy are the pseudo-smooth texture, the brush strokes and the motifs on the head. The background color of this calligraphy is light brown, with black ink and red ink. Sundanese scripts are arranged into a form that produces harmony so that the shape of the figures can be expressed. The rhythm in calligraphy is the repetition of curves to the left and right sides of the body and hands. Symmetry balance shows in this figure with the axis in the paper's middle. The thin-thick contrast on the strokes of the head and hands shows complete proportions.

The figure formed in this calligraphy is *Dasamuka* (ten faces), or known as Rahwana. Rahwana, the King of Alengka in Nusantara's wayang story, is the king of the three worlds. Jinns, demons inhabit the lower realm, the center realm is inhabited by humans, and the upper realm is the nature of the Gods. Rahwana was a hermit and devoted worshiper of Shiva (Murtana, 2018). Rahwana is a symbol of authority with a giant character as well as an antagonist in the Ramayana story.

Rahwana is also famous in India and Sri Lanka. Rahwana in Sri Lanka apart from being a giant and a demon king is also said to be a speaker of the hela language, which is a non-Sanskrit native language of Sinhala, and also the ruler of Lanka, which is many times larger than the island of Sri Lanka (Sanmugeswaran et al., 2019). In Hindu mythology, Rahwana is also known as the multi-headed rakshasa (de-mon) king.

The interpretation between the text and the visualization of the figure of Rahwana is related. Rahwana as the king of the giants and giants has a greedy temperament. The words that make up the figure of Rahwana are a traditional Sundanese poem known as a *pupuh*. Pupuh is poetry in Sundanese language performed as a song (*sekar*) according to rules about certain sentence patterns (Damayanti & Nurgiyantoro, 2018).

This calligraphy describes a phenomenon that is happening today. The weak literacy culture makes it easy to be provoked. Thus, many people compete unhealthily, easily deceived, which ultimately makes the situation chaotic. This interpretation of the Sundanese *Dasamuka* calligraphy is the opposite of the Sundanese Semar calligraphy. The other hand, Semar emphasizes merciful cooperation, while *Dasamuka* emphasizes hatred and divisiveness.

### *Jago* (Rooster)

The third work is entitled *Jago. Jago* is defined as a rooster. The rooster is an animal symbol in various cultures, beliefs, and religions.



**Figure 3**. The character of the Rooster is composed in calligraphSundanese script with the text titled "Jago".

Figure 3 shows a Sundanese calligraphy formed from the text of Aing Jagona Jago, Cag (I am the champion of all the masters, bear in mind that). This cal-

ligraphy is included in zoomorphic calligraphy. In Zoomorphic Calligraphy, an animal is made to be the object calligraphy (Raden et al., 2019).

The figurative calligraphy is formed from curved lines with thick-thin contrast. The texture contained in the calligraphy is a smooth pseudo texture. The background color of this calligraphy is light brown with black ink. Sundanese scripts are arranged into a form that produces harmony so that the shape of the figures can be expressed. Rhythm in calligraphy is the repetition of the curves in the tail. The asymmetry balance shown in this figure with the visual weight is predominantly on the right of the image. The stroke on the head, beak, comb, wings, tail, and legs shows complete proportions. This Sundanese calligraphy is formed from the text of *Aing Jagona Jago, Cag* (I am the champion of all the masters, bear in mind that).

The interpretation of the rooster is that there are various kinds of cultures, beliefs, and religions. According to folklore in Chiangrai, the Achaeans divide chickens into three classifications; the first is red jungle fowl, which is a chicken from the spirit world for consumption, not for rituals; the second is decoy chicken which has a higher status because it is between the spirit world and humans, the third is kampung chicken, which is a chicken from the human world. This type of chicken is often used for consumption and offerings in rituals that serve as intermediaries between the Akha tribe and ancestral spirits (Sujachaya & Sitisarn, 2005).

Chinese culture believes chickens to be unmistakable, confident, courageous and perfectionist creatures. Historically, the symbolism of the chicken presented a sacred meaning as a representation of strength. The people of the Nusantara archipelago raised roosters in interesting folk tales such as Cindelaras, Ciung Wanara, and I La Galigo. The people of the Nusantara archipelago view the rooster as an animal that symbolizes strength, power and courage.

## Jaipongan (Sundanesse Dance)

The fourth work is entitled *Jaipongan*. *Jaipongan* has roots in *ketuk tilu*, an umbrella term for various West Javanese social dance traditions (Spiller, 2011).



**Figure 4**. The female character dancing jaipongan is composed in calligraphy Sundanese script with the text titled "Jaipongan".

Figure 4 shows a Sundanese script calligraphy formed from the *Jaipongan* text (Sundanese dance). Jaipongan is a combination of *ketuk tilu* dance and *pencak silat* (martial arts). Jaipongan is purely Indonesian or, more properly speaking, Sundanese in origin and style (Manuel & Baier, 1986).

This figural calligraphy looks like a dancing icon. This calligraphy is formed from curved lines with a thin, thick contrast. The texture contained in the calligraphy is a smooth pseudo texture. The background color of this calligraphy is light brown with black ink. Sundanese scripts are arranged into a form that produces harmony so that the shape of the figures can be expressed. Rhythm in calligraphy is the repetition of curved lines in the hands and feet. Symmetry balance shows in this figure with the axis in the paper's middle. The thin-thick contrast on the head, hands and feet strokes shows complete proportions. This figurative calligraphy is formed from the word *jaipongan*.

The interpretation of *jaipongan* is a dance that has aesthetic values, dynamic and intense movements that reflect the character of Sundanese women. *Jaipongan* dance is an association medium formed

by the people's entertainment situation consisting of the presenter and the audience simultaneously (Nurhasanah, 2018). *Jaipongan* is constantly identified with sensual and erotic dancing. *Jaipongan* dance is an expression of gratitude and patience, associated with agrarian society with the process of *melak* (planting) and *metik* (picking or harvesting). The movements in *jaipongan* consist of fast and slow movements. Fast movement is a symbol of gratitude, while slow movement is a symbol of patience. *Jaipongan* dance is a symbol of fertility.

Apart from being an artistic expression, the four pictures by Edi Dolan also function as an expression of Sundanese identity. Efforts to maintain local culture in the global era need to be made, so the discourse on identity becomes important. The current cultural phenomenon arises when screen media spreads in human life. The screen display wants to motivate that the image has an advantage over the text. The transformation from a written-based culture to an image-based culture opens a new chapter in communication called hyper-visual language (Song, 2012, p. 12). Social media is a new vehicle for expressing and appreciating one's identity in the global community. Mirzoeff argues, by visual technology, I mean any apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil painting to television and the internet (Mirzoeff, 2009, p. 3).

The reinvention of Sundanese culture and identity unconsciously appears on social media and arises from individual ideas to developing phenomena. In delivering visual ideas, social media bridges the gap between the past and present. It also provides an aesthetic experience for its users, exchanges pictures and information, and builds linear communication between the account owner and the network of friends within. Jenks argues culture is a more manifest and collective category. Culture resulting from human interaction includes interactions and thoughts in technology channels (Jenks, 2017, p. 10).

Information technology has led to a digital era culture called cyber-culture. Furthermore, communication and interaction are built through virtual spaces (cyberspace). The Sundanese script is present on social media in the form of identity reinvention in the global era. Cyber-culture is a vehicle for transferring real cultures to access these artifacts directly.

## CONCLUSIONS

Sundanese people are people whose mother tongue is Sunda. Their characters and language are different from other ethnic scripts. Sundanese script has a rigid form, in contrast to Javanese script, which has a dynamic form. It can be used on digital devices to communicate and as a medium of artistic expression.

Calligraphic letters are in the form of visual art instrumentation and figuration. Calligraphy is a craft that has had ties to life, human beings, religion, and communications since the cave times. The Sundanese script calligraphy that will be analyzed in this article is the work of a calligrapher named Edi Dolan.

Edi Dolan's works above prove the existence, identity and expression of Sundanese calligraphy on social media. The use of Sundanese script in calligraphy prioritizes aesthetic aspects and artistic values, which are the final achievement of a work. On the other hand, in the field of language and communication aspects of information and clarity of messages are very important. For this reason, strict writing rules are regulated to prevent disinformation and miscommunication.

The use of Sundanese script in calligraphy works is intended to achieve artistic value. Therefore, strict writing rules are not required. Artisans experimented and explored shape, size, and character markers. The results of experimentation and exploration are figures. The results of experimentation and exploration are figures. Exploration is carried out to create visually inspired by the current phenomenon, aesthetic experience of the artisan, and relations between text and figures. Apart from

artistic and aesthetic achievements, preserving identity through Sundanese script calligraphy is the more important value.

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