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ORIGINAL

The Lion That Never Lived: Global Gestalt and Hermeneutic Reading of the Singa Barong Ornament in the Javanese Keris

El león que nunca existió: Gestalt global e interpretación hermenéutica del ornamento Singa Barong en el keris javanés

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ABSTRACT

The Singa Barong engraved on the frontal base of the Javanese Keris blade, positioned above the ganja, is important because it demonstrates how a global symbol of power acquires a localized ethical meaning within Javanese culture. This study aims to explain that process by examining the visual form and symbolic function of Singa Barong and comparing it with lion representations in Asian, European, and American traditions, including the Chinese qilin and guardian lions. The research draws on primary visual data from museum collections and secondary sources on cross-cultural lion imagery. A semiotic–hermeneutic approach framed by Gestalt theory guides the analysis. Visual units, structural relations, and symbolic attributes were identified and interpreted to reveal how the unity of form shapes meaning across different cultural contexts. The results outline three key findings. First, lion images across civilizations share an identical gestalt that joins authority, vigilance, and moral discipline. Second, the Singa Barong reconfigures this archetype by emphasizing ethical self-control as the central value in Javanese thought. Third, the Keris positions the lion not as an emblem of domination but as a refined heraldic figure that affirms spiritual power through cultural wisdom. The study concludes that the Singa Barong exemplifies the convergence of global iconography and Javanese ethical philosophy. This insight contributes to a deeper understanding of how form, belief, and power interact within world visual cultures.

Keywords: Singa Barong Keris; Global Heraldry; Visual Gestalt; Transcultural Semiotics; Hermeneutic Iconology.

RESUMEN

Este estudio rastrea la visualización global del león como símbolo transcultural que El Singa Barong grabado en la base frontal de la hoja keris javanesa, situada sobre la ganja, es importante porque demuestra cómo un símbolo global de poder adquiere un significado ético localizado dentro de la cultura javanesa. Este estudio busca explicar este proceso examinando la forma visual y la función simbólica del Singa Barong y comparándolo con representaciones de leones en las tradiciones asiáticas, europeas y americanas, incluyendo el qilin chino y los leones guardianes. La investigación se basa en datos visuales primarios de colecciones de museos y fuentes secundarias sobre la imaginería transcultural del león. Un enfoque semiótico-hermenéutico, enmarcado en la teoría de la Gestalt, guía el análisis. Se identificaron e interpretaron unidades visuales, relaciones estructurales y atributos simbólicos para revelar cómo la unidad de la forma configura el significado en diferentes contextos culturales. Los resultados presentan tres hallazgos clave. En primer lugar, las imágenes de leones en diferentes civilizaciones comparten una gestalt idéntica que une autoridad, vigilancia y disciplina moral. En segundo lugar, el Singa Barong reconfigura este arquetipo al enfatizar el autocontrol ético como valor central del pensamiento javanés. En tercer lugar, el Keris posiciona al león no como un emblema de dominación, sino como una figura heráldica refinada que afirma el poder espiritual mediante la sabiduría cultural. El estudio concluye que el Singa Barong ejemplifica la convergencia de la iconografía global y la filosofía ética javanesa. Esta perspectiva contribuye a una comprensión más profunda de cómo la forma, la creencia y el poder interactúan en las culturas visuales mundiales.

Palabras clave: Singa Barong Keris; Heráldica Global; Gestalt Visual; Semiótica Transcultural; Iconología Hermenéutica.

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INTRODUCTION

In the history of world art, the lion emerges as one of the earliest and most persistent symbols used to express authority, protection, and moral virtue. Its presence can be traced back to prehistoric cave paintings such as those at Chauvet (ca. 30 000 BCE), where large felines already appeared as commanding figures within visual narratives. In ancient Egypt, the lion stood beside royal power through depictions of Sekhmet and guardian sphinxes. Mesopotamian reliefs, such as the Ishtar Gate lions of Babylon (6th century BCE), reinforced its status as an emblem of royal might. Greek and Roman civilizations continued this legacy through the Nemean lion in the myth of Heracles and through monumental sculptures that projected imperial legitimacy. These early appearances laid the foundation for a long visual tradition in which the lion became a universal archetype of ethical and political authority.

In medieval Europe, this archetype reached a consolidated form through heraldry, where the lion attained a formalized visual language. Fox-Davies[1] in A Complete Guide to Heraldry classified the lion as the preeminent charge on noble shields, and Oliver in An Introduction to Heraldry described its upright posture as an icon of vigilance and readiness to act.[2] The significance of the lion extended beyond battlefield identity; it functioned as a moral emblem that communicated courage, justice, and the obligation to safeguard the public realm. Across centuries, the lion in European art developed into an institutionalized sign system that shaped perceptions of power, hierarchy, and ethical character.

Outside Europe, the symbol also held a privileged position despite the absence of lions from the natural environments of many Asian regions. In East Asia, the Chinese shishi or guardian lion appeared in Han-era stone sculptures and architectural ornaments, later blending with dragon elements into the hybrid qilin. Zhao[3] in Asian Art Studies Journal noted that the figure served as a cosmological mediator that maintained harmony between human order and celestial principles. Through maritime exchange, the lion motif travelled to South and Southeast Asia, where local artists reinterpreted it by merging Indic, Chinese, and indigenous beliefs. In Java, the process culminated in the creation of the Singa Barong, a composite creature of lion, dragon, and bird that occupied a central position in sacred courtly artifacts, including the Keris.

Although lions never lived in the Javanese archipelago, the figure appears consistently on Keris blades, especially on the gandhik—the frontal base of the blade above the ganja. Siswanto[4] argued that the Singa Barong symbolizes the moral equilibrium expected of rulers: the power to act must remain balanced by the wisdom to restrain destructive impulses. This view resonates with earlier studies on Javanese aesthetics which emphasize that outer form always expresses inner ethics. Scholars such as Sumino[4] further explained that the Singa Barong is not merely an ornamental image but a narrative sign that encodes spiritual responsibility.

Despite extensive scholarship on heraldry and Asian mythological creatures, research on the Singa Barong remains limited. Most studies describe its morphology or classify it within typologies of Keris ornaments, yet few examine its relation to the global visual tradition of the lion. Moreover, the historical development of the lion as a symbolic element has not been integrated into discussions of the Singa Barong, leaving a conceptual gap between global iconography and local spiritual meaning. A comprehensive analysis is therefore required to understand how the universal archetype of the lion encounters Javanese philosophical thought and how this encounter produces a new visual expression of ethical authority.

The current situation of scholarship shows a disparity: European heraldry scholars have produced abundant research since the nineteenth century, East Asian guardian lion studies have grown significantly since the 1990s, and American lion symbolism has been documented through colonial art histories. Yet the Keris Singa Barong has seldom been placed within this broader transcultural field. Previous researchers have rarely compared it systematically with lion images from other civilizations, and earlier studies do not address how the Javanese version modifies the global meaning structure of the lion. This absence underscores the importance of situating the Singa Barong within a wider historical and theoretical framework that includes art history, semiotics, and cultural hermeneutics.

The justification of this study rests on three considerations. First, the Singa Barong holds cultural and spiritual significance in Java yet lacks a clear connection to the global lineage of lion symbolism. Second, the comparison of visual forms across civilizations can reveal universal patterns of moral imagination that persist through changing cultural contexts. Third, analyzing the Singa Barong through Gestalt theory and hermeneutics enables a deeper understanding of how visual forms function as ethical systems rather than as mere decorations.

Based on these considerations, the general objective of this study is to explain how the lion figure undergoes a process of symbolic transformation when it enters the Javanese cultural sphere through the Singa Barong ornament on the Keris. The study describes the visual and symbolic characteristics of the ornament, compares them with lion representations from other regions, and interprets how the Javanese adaptation constructs a distinctive moral and spiritual meaning. This approach aims to clarify the relationship among form, belief, and power within the global history of visual culture.

Literature review

Literature Exploration

The Lion Symbol in World Cultures

In global symbolic traditions, the figure of the lion is generally associated with power, majesty, and courage. Cirlot[5] described the lion as a symbol of cosmic energy and fire, a representation of the sun's strength and the vitality that protects the world from chaos. Chevalier et al.[6] noted that the lion acts as a gatekeeper, a guardian of temple entrances, palaces, and spiritual realms. In Europe, Pastoureau[7] showed that royal heraldry uses the lion as a symbol of legitimacy and dignity, such as the lion rampant found in the emblems of England and Scotland. In the Middle East, Leick[8] recorded that the lion was associated with Nergal, the Babylonian god of war and plague, reflecting a dual nature of protection and destruction.

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In the context of East and South Asia, Eberhard[9] explained that the shizi or lion in Chinese culture serves as the guardian of Buddhist temples. Coedes[10] and Eiseman[11] showed the continuity of this symbol in Southeast Asia, particularly in the figure of the Barong in Bali and the Singa Barong in Java, which combine elements of the Indian lion and local dragon.

Studies on the Keris and Javanese Semiotics

Studies on the Keris in the Nusantara region have mostly focused on material, aesthetic, and spiritual aspects. Harsrinuksmo[12] described the Keris as a sacred heirloom filled with layered meanings, with each part holding its own symbolic function. The carving represents self-control, the gandhik embodies the face of power, and the ganja serves as the existential foundation. Soedjono[13] added that the Keris is not only a weapon but also a medium of communication between humans and metaphysical forces.

Wessing[14] offered one of the key references by discussing the symbolism of Javanese weapons as manifestations of the cosmic order and royal authority. He placed the Keris within a semiotic structure that represents the relationship between the human world and the spiritual world. Sedyawati[15] viewed it as a product of Javanese spiritual culture that unites aesthetics, philosophy, and ethical conduct. From a philological perspective, Zoetmulder[16] linked the symbolism of the Keris to the Sanskrit and Old Javanese linguistic traditions that are rich in religious metaphors.

Studies on Heraldry and Symbolic Adaptation

The study of heraldry is essential to understand the visual evolution of the Singa Barong. Pastoureau[7] explained that European heraldry developed from the need to express identity and authority through symbols that could be read universally. When this heraldic concept crossed into Asia, it underwent a process of tropicalization, meaning the adaptation of symbols to local contexts as noted by Anderson[17]. In the Javanese context, this adaptation gave birth to the form of the Singa Barong, a symbol that represents not only status but also spirituality. This shift in meaning shows that Java did not simply imitate foreign symbols but transformed them into a new, syncretic cultural language.

Novelty of the Research

This study offers novelty on three main levels.

Novelty of the Object

Previous studies have mostly discussed the Keris in terms of technique, history, or mysticism, yet none have specifically placed the Singa Barong as a semiotic and hermeneutic system, a cultural text that can be read through a network of cross-continental symbols.

Novelty of the Approach

This research combines semiotic, hermeneutic, and iconographic approaches with semantic and encyclopedic tracing through lexical analysis to map the relationship between the physical form of the ornament and its symbolic meaning. The method not only describes the artifact but also reads the Keris as a symbolic text representing the Javanese worldview of courage, power, and protection.

Novelty of the Global Perspective

By comparing the meaning of Singa Barong within Asian, European, and Middle Eastern contexts, this research presents a cross-cultural interpretation showing that the lion symbol is a universal figure that undergoes creative localization in Java. In other words, the Singa Barong is positioned as a point of dialogue among civilizations, not only between the past and the present but also between East and West.

State of the Art

Table 1. Research Position

Aspect	Previous Researchers	Main Scope and Findings	Position of This Study
Global Lion Symbolism	Cirlot et al.[18] Pastoureau[7]	Explained the lion archetype as a symbol of power and cosmic energy across various cultures.	Extends this meaning into the Javanese context, emphasizing the process of symbolic adaptation through cultural syncretism.
The Keris and Javanese Semiotics	Harsrinuksmo[12] Soedjono[13] Wessing[14] Sedyawati[15]	Interpreted the Keris as a spiritual heirloom with cosmological and aesthetic meaning.	Presents a hermeneutic reading of the Singa Barong as a liminal representation between the sacred and the profane.
Heraldry and Visual Transformation	Pastoureau[7] Anderson[17]	Described heraldry as a system of political and social representation.	Shows how European heraldry was adapted in Javanese art into a spiritual and moral symbol.
Cross-Cultural Studies and Universal Semiotics	Eberhard[9] Coedes[10] Eiseman[11]	Outlined the role of guardian animal symbols in East and Southeast Asia.	Connects the Singa Barong with other guardian figures such as Sekhmet, the Foo Lion, and the Lion of Judah through comparative hermeneutics.

The position of this research is presented in table 1 below. To determine its precise place and guide the discussion toward the state of the art, the literature findings are arranged according to their central themes. Each theme is then aligned with previous studies and its scope of insights is summarized. Through this process, the position of the present study emerges clearly, supported by the identified relationship between the examined aspects and the range of findings reported in earlier literature.

Theoretical Position of the Research

Conceptually, this research is grounded in symbolic hermeneutics which aims to understand cultural objects as texts that require layered interpretation.[19] This approach positions the Singa Barong not merely as an aesthetic object but as a text containing existential metaphors of power, protection, and spirituality. The study thus expands the horizon of philology, anthropology, and traditional art studies by including a cross-cultural semiotic perspective. Therefore, this research stands between two poles. The first is viewing the Keris as a local heirloom imbued with spiritual and philosophical meaning. The second is viewing the lion as a universal symbol that continually undergoes transformations of meaning across civilizations.

Scientific Contribution

This research is expected to contribute in several ways. First, it offers a hermeneutic model for reading traditional artifacts as cultural texts. Second, it provides a cross-cultural framework for comparing protective symbols in Asian and Western traditions. Third, it strengthens the conceptual foundation of Javanese traditional art studies through a semiotic and encyclopedic approach. Fourth, it offers both empirical and conceptual references for cultural preservation based on meaning rather than form.

Research method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach within a hermeneutic and semiotic paradigm. The main focus is not on the quantification of the artifact's form but on interpreting the symbolic meanings and sign systems embedded in the Singa Barong Keris ornament. The design combines three layers of approach. The first is descriptive and visual, used to observe the structure of the ornament and the configuration of its forms. The second is semiotic and iconographic, applied to interpret the signs and symbols attached to each ornamental element. The third is hermeneutic and comparative, used to interpret the meaning of the Singa Barong symbol within global cultural trajectories. In short, this approach follows the interpretive cultural study model of Geertz[20] and the hermeneutic reading of Ricoeur[19], where cultural artifacts are understood as texts that can be read, interpreted, and contextualized.

Location, Object, and Data Sources

The research object is the Singa Barong Keris of the Mataram Sultan Agung style with thirteen curves, part of the Brojo Buwono Museum collection in Karanganyar, Central Java. It also includes other variants such as the Keris owned by Ki Purbo Asmoro with five curves from the Mataram period and another variant from the Yogyakarta collection with seven curves. The observations were conducted at three locations. The first is the Brojo Buwono Museum in Karanganyar, Indonesia. The second is the private residence of the puppeteer Ki Purbo Asmoro in Surakarta, Indonesia. The third includes several digital repositories and photographic archives of Nusantara Keris. The data sources consist of primary and secondary data. The primary data were obtained through visual documentation, detailed photographs of the ornament, and direct observation of the Keris. The secondary data were collected from Keris encyclopedias, symbol dictionaries, classical Javanese texts, and anthropological and iconographic literature from international references.

Data Collection Techniques

Visual and Ethnographic Observation

The process involved direct observation of the Keris, with systematic notes on its ornamental elements and complementary parts such as the carving or hilt, the gandhik, pamor, ganja, and others. Each part was documented through macro photographs and structural sketches for visual mapping purposes.

Literature and Lexical Study

The study explored classical references such as the Old Javanese-English Dictionary by Zoetmulder[16], Ensiklopedi Keris Nusantara by Harsrinuksmo[12], and Dictionary of Symbols by Cirlot[19]. The results were used to build a semantic and encyclopedic definition for each ornamental element.

Interviews and Focused Discussions

Interviews were conducted with the renowned puppeteer Ki Purbo Asmoro and museum curators to understand the contextual use of the Singa Barong symbol from both traditional and modern perspectives.

Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis was carried out through three reflective and spiral stages following the hermeneutic model of Gadamer[21]. The first stage was exploration, identifying the visual and material elements of the Keris. This stage produced an ornament map as presented in the Findings section. The second stage was explanation, interpreting the relationships among the elements through semiotics, especially cultural iconography. The symbolic meaning of Singa Barong was interpreted through cross-textual and cross-cultural readings. The third stage was exposition, presenting the results of interpretation in a hermeneutic reflection. The guiding research

question was how the Singa Barong conveys the relationship between power, protection, and Javanese spirituality. This stage integrates both visual and textual results within an interpretive framework.

Data Validation

The validity of the data was maintained through triangulation of sources and methods. The first was source triangulation by comparing the results of observation, literature review, and interviews. The second was theoretical triangulation by applying Peirce's semiotic theory, Ricoeur's hermeneutics, and the concept of religious iconography. The third was time triangulation by repeating the observation of the same Keris at different times to ensure the consistency of visual interpretation. In addition, the researcher practiced self-reflection to minimize subjective bias by recording the interpretation process and the researcher's position during each stage of analysis.

RESULTS

The complete appearance of the Singa Barong Keris is shown in figure 1. Further descriptions for each ornament are presented in table 2. There are several variants of the Singa Barong Keris as shown in figure 2. On the left is the Singa Barong Keris of the Mataram Sultan Agung style with five curves, richly decorated. This Keris belongs to the renowned shadow puppeteer from Surakarta, Ki Purbo Asmoro. In the center is the Singa Barong Keris with seven curves of the Yogyakarta style as noted by Supriyono E. et al.[22] On the right is the Singa Barong Keris with thirteen curves of the Mataram Sultan Agung style from the collection of the Brojo Buwono Museum in Karanganyar, Indonesia.

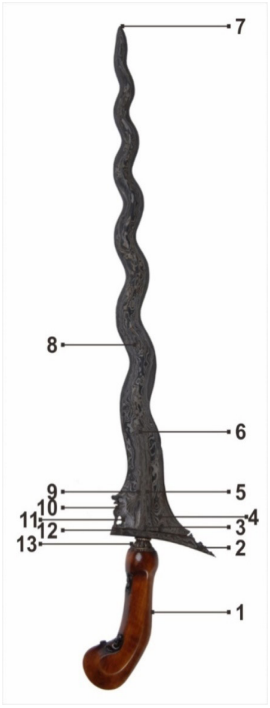


Figure 1. Map of the ornaments on the Singa Barong Keris with thirteen curves in the Mataram

Table 2. Description of figure 1

No.	Name of Ornament	Description
1	Ukiran	The handle or hilt of the Keris
2	Kepet	The tail of the Keris
3	Bungkul	The bulb-shaped base resembling a clove of garlic
4	Sor-soran	The lower part of the blade
5	Sogokan belakang	The rear groove of the blade
6	Bebel	The intersection between the front and rear grooves
7	Penetes	The pointed tip of the Keris
8	Pamor ngulit semangka	The blade pattern resembling watermelon skin
9	Sogokan ngarep	The front groove of the blade
10	Gandhik in the form of a lion	The gandhik represents the face of the Keris
11	Palus or planangan	The male element of the Keris
12	Ganja	The base or foundation of the Keris
13	Mendhak	The small ring between the hilt and the blade



Figure 2. Three variants of the Singa Barong Keris

Ornament Map and Semantic Definition of the Singa Barong Keris

Ornament Map as the Basis of Visual Findings

The mapping of the Singa Barong Keris ornaments reveals a complex visual and symbolic structure that integrates aesthetic form with spiritual meaning. Figures 1 and table 2 identify thirteen principal elements, beginning with the ukiran (hilt) and ending with the mendhak (ring). Each component operates as a structural feature and simultaneously as a symbolic marker rooted in Javanese cosmology. The gandhik, which forms the face of the Singa Barong, functions as a protective emblem linked to royal authority; Sedyawati[4] noted that this motif affirms the sovereign's role as the guardian of cosmic order. The ganja expresses the principle of balance between earthly and celestial realms and corresponds to interpretations found in earlier studies on Javanese weapon symbolism. The pamor ngulit semangka conveys harmony between the inner and outer self, echoing Soedjono's analysis of pamor as a moral statement embedded in metal.[13] When compared with similar motifs in other cultures, such as guardian figures in Chinese or Khmer weaponry. These elements reveal a shared conception of power as a force that requires moral discipline. Through these correspondences, the Singa Barong Keris presents a distinctive Javanese synthesis in which physical form, ethical teaching, and cosmological order converge within a single visual system.

The ornament map is therefore not only a map of form but also a map of meaning. It affirms that each element of the Keris is part of a symbolic grammar that reflects the Javanese worldview.

Semantic Definition

To uncover the symbolic meanings embedded in the Singa Barong Keris ornaments, a semantic and encyclopedic reading was conducted using various lexicons and classical sources. The results are presented in table 3 below.

Table 3. Semantic Description of the Singa Barong Keris Ornaments

Lexicon	Origin and Meaning	Cultural Connotation	Symbolic Function
Singa (Barong)	From Sanskrit *simha*, meaning lion or king of the forest. In Javanese iconography, the term *barong* refers to a sacred protective figure.	A symbol of courage, authority, and guardian of sacred thresholds.	Represents royal power and spiritual protective force as noted by Wessing[14]; Zoetmulder[23]
Gandhik	The front part of the Keris blade, marking the beginning of the overall form.	Representation of a human or sacred animal face.	The point where the Keris breath begins, the dwelling place of its spirit or energy as described by Harsrinuksmo[12].
Ganja	The base of the Keris that connects the blade and the handle.	An existential foundation, balancing the upper and lower realms.	A symbol of stability and the material world as noted by Soedjono[13]
Pamor Ngulit Semangka	A blade pattern resembling watermelon skin, created by layered metal forging.	Symbol of harmony between the inner and outer self, the visible and the unseen.	A representation of harmony between human beings and nature as explained by Sedyawati[15]
Palus (Planangan)	The small tip below the gandhik, phallic in form.	Symbol of life energy and regeneration.	Representation of male vitality and strength as noted by Zoetmulder[16]
Ukiran (Handle)	The hilt of the Keris, often shaped like a human head, dragon, or mythical creature.	Represents self-control, the part held by humans.	Symbol of the connection between the user and the spiritual power of the Keris as described by Harsrinuksmo[12]

This description follows the explanatory framework provided by several authoritative references, including Zoetmulder's Old Javanese Dictionary[16], which clarifies the lexical roots of key terms; Harsrinuksmo's Ensiklopedi Keris Nusantara, which outlines the formal structure of Keris components; Wessing's Javanese Symbolism in Weaponry, which interprets weapon ornamentation through cultural semiotics; and Sedyawati's Budaya Spiritual Jawa, which connects Keris imagery with Javanese spiritual concepts. Taken together, these sources show that the symbolic meaning of the Keris arises from a long-established system of signs, cosmology, and ethical values within Javanese society.

Semantic and Cultural Analysis

The word *Singa* in the context of Javanese royal heraldry undergoes a transposition of meaning when adopted into the Keris. In iconography, the lion represents the sovereign power of the king. Yet when manifested as the Singa Barong ornament, the meaning shifts toward a symbol of personal and spiritual protection as discussed by Wessing[14].

This transfer of medium marks the shift from a public symbol associated with royal authority to a personal symbol preserved as an individual heirloom. The barong form also conveys the concept of the gatekeeper, an entity positioned at the threshold between the profane and the sacred as noted by Zoetmulder[16]. It represents a protective force that blocks harmful influences while linking human existence with the metaphysical realm. Within Javanese cosmology, the Singa Barong stands as a liminal figure that connects the macrocosm with the microcosm, as described by Sedyawati[4]. The social and ritual roles of the Singa Barong Keris arise from this foundation. The Keris appears in ceremonies of coronation, marriage, and ritual purification, which confirms its function as a mediator between humans and divine forces, a point noted by Soedjono[13]. For this reason, each carving and pamor carries symbolic intention and expresses belief embedded in material form.

Affirmation of Findings

From the entire map of ornaments and semantic definitions above, it can be concluded that the Singa Barong is not a decorative motif but a sign system representing a grammar of protection, a symbolic language that defines the Keris as a meeting point between power, protection, and Javanese spirituality. The Singa Barong Keris affirms the view that art and symbol cannot be separated from the value system of the society that created them. It stands as a visual narrative of Javanese human nobility in maintaining balance between the outer and inner worlds.

DISCUSSION

The Hermeneutics of Singa Barong in a Universal Context

The Lion as an Archetype of Power and Sovereignty

Across civilizations, the figure of the lion has almost always been associated with authority, courage, and guardianship of the sacred. According to Cirlot in A Dictionary of Symbols[5], the lion is an archetype of cosmic power representing the elements of fire and the sun. In Egyptian mythology, it is linked to the sun god Ra and manifested in the form of Sekhmet, the lion-headed goddess who protects the world from chaos.

In Mesopotamian tradition, the lion symbolizes Nergal, the god of war and plague, who holds dominion over life and death.[8] Both myths display a paradox. The lion is both protector and destroyer, embodying creative and destructive powers. The association of the lion with the element of the sun also appears in European iconography. In heraldry, the upright lion or lion rampant represents bravery, nobility, and political legitimacy as discussed by Pastoureau.[7] Thus, the meaning of the lion is consistently bound to authority, both spiritual and worldly.[24]

The Lion in Asian and Southeast Asian Traditions

In East Asia, lions are not native animals but imagined creatures shaped through Indian cultural influence. In China, the shizi is known as the guardian of Buddhist temple gates, also called Foo dogs in Western terminology. Eberhard[9] explained that two lions are placed at the entrance of temples to maintain the balance of Yin and Yang, with the male holding a ball and the female holding a cub.

In India, the lion symbol has existed since the Ashokan pillars of the third century BCE, which depict four lions standing back to back above the Dharma wheel. This emblem later became the official symbol of modern India, signifying the continuity between power and wisdom as described by Coedes[10].

In Southeast Asia, the adaptation of the lion symbol produced more localized and spiritual forms. In the architecture and performing arts of Bali and Java, there appears the figure of the Barong, a hybrid of lion and dragon, the guardian of cosmic harmony as explained by Eiseman[11]. This figure is not only represented in ritual Barong dances but also appears as ornamental patterns in weapons and masks. In the context of the Singa Barong Keris, this concept undergoes a semiotic transposition from the guardian of houses and temples to a symbol of personal power engraved on the blade as discussed by Wessing[14].

The Lion as a Representation of Liminality

Within the Javanese symbolic system, the lion appears as a liminal figure positioned between the human realm and the domain of the divine. It acts as a guardian of thresholds, both literally, as seen in Asian temples, and metaphorically, as the keeper of moral and spiritual integrity. In the Javanese context, the Singa Barong is not merely a decoration on the gandhik but the guardian of the gate of power that links the user of the Keris with the unseen energy within it. This liminality aligns with Eliade's idea of the *axis mundi* that every sacred object possesses a vertical axis connecting heaven, earth, and the underworld. The Keris, as a sacred heirloom, performs this role, while the Singa Barong serves as its guardian, a symbol of courage that prevents humans from falling

into spiritual imbalance. Thus, the hermeneutic function of the lion operates on three layers. The moral layer portrays it as a symbol of courage and honor. The cosmological layer defines it as the guardian of balance between good and evil forces. The ontological layer positions it as a connecting figure between human beings and the source of divine energy.

Singa Barong and the Transformation of Symbolism in the Modern World

In modern culture, the lion symbol continues to evolve. In Europe and America, it has become a national and institutional emblem, as seen in the Lion of Judah within Judeo-Christian tradition. The British Lion symbolizes the English monarchy and appears in emblems of sports clubs and universities as a representation of courage and leadership as discussed by Chevalier and Gheerbrant.

Unlike its dominant connotation in the West, the Singa Barong in the Nusantara world continues to emphasize protection and spiritual balance. It is not a symbol of aggression but a guardian of harmony. This difference reflects the cosmological orientation of Southeast Asian societies, which tend to be relational rather than hierarchical as noted by Anderson[17]. In the Singa Barong, power is not understood as domination over others but as the ability to maintain the order of the universe. The symbol therefore transforms from a royal emblem of legitimacy into a reflection of the people's spiritual ethics.

Hermeneutic Conclusion

From this cross-cultural trajectory of meanings, it can be concluded that the Singa Barong is a universal symbol of sanctified strength through balance. It unites the aspects of protector and conqueror, courage and compassion, the worldly and the spiritual. In the Javanese context, the Singa Barong reaffirms the human role as the guardian of cosmic harmony, resonating with the cosmological principle of *manunggaling kawula lan Gusti*. This symbol affirms that traditional heirlooms such as the Keris function not only as physical artifacts but as *textus sacer*, sacred texts whose structure conveys a universal expression of power and moral order.

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that the Singa Barong Keris is a symbolic artifact containing a complex sign system in which physical form and spiritual meaning intertwine within a single semiotic structure. Through the ornament map and semantic-encyclopedic analysis, every part of the Keris, from the hilt and gandhik to the pamor ngulit semangka and ganja, serves not only an aesthetic function but also a metaphorical one, representing balance, protection, and moral strength.

The symbolic meaning of the Singa Barong affirms that the figure of the lion has been creatively adapted by Javanese culture from cross-continental traditions spanning Asia and Europe. In hermeneutic terms, the Singa Barong appears as a liminal figure, the guardian of thresholds between the sacred and the profane, between authority and wisdom. It represents a grammar of protection, a symbolic language that teaches courage within harmony rather than aggression.

The strength of the Singa Barong lies not in domination but in its ability to preserve balance. In Javanese cosmology, this aligns with the principle of *manunggaling kawula lan Gusti*, the unity of human and divine through equilibrium between the outer and inner worlds. Therefore, this research demonstrates that traditional artifacts such as the Keris are not only cultural objects but also symbolic texts that can be read as universal philosophical expressions of courage, protection, and human spirituality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research offers five recommendations. First, future studies can expand this work by comparing the Singa Barong symbol with representations of other sacred animals in the cultures of the Nusantara, such as the Naga, Garuda, or Lembu Nandini. This approach will enrich understanding of the transformation of iconography and cross-ethnic and interreligious adaptation of meaning.

Second, subsequent studies should explore the material dimension of Keris-making, especially metallurgical techniques and pamor layering. Scientific analysis of metal composition and pamor texture can reveal correlations between aesthetics and traditional Javanese technological knowledge.

Third, it is recommended to develop a visual database or digital heritage application that maps Keris ornaments and their symbolic meanings in interactive formats. Technologies such as 3D mapping or augmented reality can serve as educational tools for cultural transmission in the modern era.

Fourth, further research may trace parallels between the Singa Barong and protective figures in other spiritual traditions, such as Sekhmet of Egypt, the Foo Lion of China, the Lion of Judah in Hebrew culture, or Aslan in Western literary mythology. This perspective can enrich cross-cultural dialogue on the universal meaning of protection and ethical power.

Fifth, local governments and cultural institutions are encouraged to make the Singa Barong Keris a focus of living heritage programs. Educational activities in museums, art studios, and schools can be designed to combine symbolic narratives with the moral values contained within them. In this way, the Singa Barong will be preserved not only as an object but also as a living language of values and education.

Finally, through semiotic and hermeneutic approaches, this research affirms that the meaning of the Singa Barong Keris does not end with its form or history but continues as an existential reflection on Javanese humanity and universal humanness. In an increasingly rational world, symbols such as the Singa Barong remind us that true strength arises from balance between courage and wisdom, the two wings that allow culture to endure beyond time.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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