

## SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF SUKUH TEMPLE RELIEF: FERTILITY SYMBOLS IN HINDU-JAVANESE COSMOLOGY

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### Abstract

A study of the reliefs at Suku Temple is needed as visual archaeological evidence of Hindu-Javanese culture through semiotic interpretation. The purpose of this study is to explain how fertility, cosmological, and religious motifs convey ritual functions and regulate sacred movements at Suku Temple. The research uses a descriptive qualitative design through on-site observation, systematic visual recording (photos, measured sketches, and panel mapping), and in-depth analysis of primary reports and the latest scientific works. The data was interpreted to identify themes and narrative structure, then read semiotically to trace denotative forms and connotative cultural meanings. The results showed an integrated sign system dominated by images of fertility and body symbolism, including *lingga-yoni*. Anthropomorphic figures, turtles, garudas, and kala heads collectively articulate cosmic balance, purification, and spiritual renewal. The spatial distribution of these motifs on terraces and gates directs pilgrims along a sequential route, transforming movement into a symbolic process of transformation and rebirth. Tantric-oriented objects further position the body as a microcosm of the universe. This study concludes that the Suku relief program is inseparable from its ritual itinerary and spatial design, reinforcing the value of archaeological iconography for the interpretation and preservation of heritage.

**Keywords:** cultural expression, Hindu-Javanese, linga-yoni, semiotics analysis, Suku Temple

### INTRODUCTION

Hindu-Buddhist Java religious architecture is not merely a decorative aspect but also a visual language with religious messages and the construction of social identity coded within it (Pratiwi, Numan, and Idham 2024). Narrative and non-narrative reliefs are used to decorate temples, as has also been found in other studies. It is also able to present religious dogma, portray morals, and uphold religious stories as immortality and stone. Visual objects like reliefs can be used to reach the system of symbols and culture of a community that existed in the past (Yixuan 2018).

The art of sacred buildings reached its height during the Majapahit era (Witama, Herwindo, and Saliya 2025). When religion and culture were closely intertwined with

political, economic, and social life. It was the wealth of the economy, dependent on agriculture and inter-local trade, that enabled patronage of sculpture, literature, and the performing arts. Even in the late 15th century, when Majapahit was in its final phase, several political and religious changes were beginning to take hold (Munandar 2023). It was also an era when several holy structures were erected that lacked the architectural features of the past. One such relic is the Suku Temple, located on the western slope of Mount Lawu in Ngargoyoso District, Karanganyar (Riyanti 2020). It is also known as the last temple in the kingdom during the late Majapahit era.

The Suku Temple designs are pyramidal, and the main building is a truncated pyramid (trapezoid) (Syafi'i 2022), which is contrary to the classical designs of the Prambanan Temple. The *sengkalan* of the various panels can be dated to 1359 Saka (1437 AD) and showed that the building was built under the reign of Queen Suhita in Majapahit (Arumsari 2023). This compound is much better offloaded with narrative relief, based on Javanese and Indian literature of antiquity, than with a semiotics. However, in this case it is the symbolism of the Suku Temple reliefs that Achmad Syafi'i (2022) has *tabula rasa* (figured out). These stories are intertwined with the non-narrative subject matter of animals, plants, and cosmic features, forming an elaborate chain of meaning.

Suku Temple could be considered unique because of its fertility *linga* and *yoni* (Rodhiyah and Hidayat 2019). Human figures with distinct images of reproductive organs, turtles, garudas and kala heads, which are the representations of the visual concept of the sacred space (Riyanti et al. 2020). The *linga* and *yoni* are symbols of Lord Shiva and his *sakti*, as per Hindu tradition, and represent the synthesis of the male and female principles as the source of life (Mulyantari and Rosilawati 2021). This is a common symbol displayed and spoken at the Suku Temple during cleansing, fertility, and childbirth. According to recent studies, *linga-yoni* designs of this location are associated with the Javanese spirituality, religious eroticism, and the perception of the body as the object of the path to spiritual perfection. Interest in Suku Temple dates back to the 19th century, when Dutch and Indonesian archaeologists began studying it, but their focus was mostly on architecture, chronology, and inscriptions (Saputro 2023). According to recent research, Suku Temple is part of the subsequent Hindu-Javanese religion, which belonged to the cult of Bima and to tantric Shaivism, and a seat of purification and *ruwatan*.

The purpose of the analysis of Syafi'i was to map out six important reliefs in the Suku Temple and offer a review of what they symbolized (Syafi'i 2022). Riyanti et al. define narrative relief as a form of moral and religious training. In comparison, the articles by Miranti and Setiawan (2020), as well as other dissertations and theses, tend to focus on the concepts of eroticism, gender relations, and the feminist interpretation of *lingga-yoni* reliefs. Nevertheless, there is little source literature that specifically addresses the complete relief system of Candi Suku as a reflection of Hindu-Javanese society through a semiotic approach, as opposed to that of the late Majapahit era (Andaka 2023). The majority of the studies end with the description of the visual image or a partial symbolic explanation. It has not been widely researched, particularly in terms of the social dynamics of change, the social-religious roles, cultural discourses, and denotative-connotative links of the reliefs (Purwanto and Titasari 2020). The advent of Islamic influence and the bargaining over religious and cultural identity in Java in the 15th century. The gap in the research is the failure to understand the reliefs not solely as a doctrinal representation of Hinduism. Nevertheless, it is a cultural text that captures evidence of anxiety, hope, and the process of adapting to Hindu-Javanese society at a certain historical transition point (Kirnawati and Annaningtyas 2020; Wicaksono et al. 2025).

In theory, the research may be used to apply the principle of semiotics, as proposed by Roland Barthes, on the analysis of relief as a sign system with multi-layers when both denotative and connotative-mythical deciphering are at play (A. F. Putri, Inayah, and Wageyono 2023). The technique that Barthes has used has been effectively used to discuss the cultural icons of the Javanese, for example, the Javanese wedding ceremony (Nata et al. 2025). Thus, it would be useful to apply the same method to visual objects like reliefs on temples. This paradigm is congruent with Clifford Geertz's perspective on culture as a system of symbols that assigns meaning to human behavior, and with the tradition of religious anthropology, which sees the practices of religion as an important experience within a system of cultural meaning (Fadil, Jamalie, and Nor 2024). The semiotics results were situated within the socio-political context of the late Majapahit era, drawing on the visions of visual archaeology and historicism. In the meantime, the Hindu-Javanese synthesis also led to the acculturation of Hindu doctrine, local mythology, and social organization, as reflected in the stories depicted in the reliefs.

Given the background outlined above, this study aims to fill a gap in the academic literature. The reliefs of Suku Temple have mostly been studied descriptively and have not been sufficiently contextualized within the social, spiritual, and cultural dynamics of Hindu-Javanese society during the late Majapahit period. The reliefs of Suku Temple should not be understood solely as expressions of visual art, but rather as a system of signs that contain symbolic and ideological meanings. Therefore, an analytical approach is needed to reveal the layered meanings embedded in their visual representations. The main issue of this research, therefore, concerns how the semiotics of the Suku Temple reliefs represent Hindu-Javanese cultural values and how these meanings were constructed, negotiated, and transformed amid socio-religious changes during a period of historical transition.

This study specifically examines how the reliefs of Candi Suku can be interpreted through semiotic analysis as a medium of cultural manifestation that reflects social and spiritual functions within late Majapahit Hindu-Javanese society. Drawing on Roland Barthes' semiotic concepts, this research seeks to elucidate the denotative and connotative meanings embedded in symbols, figures, and visual compositions, while also interpreting the myths and ideologies that underlie them. Through this approach, the study further explores the extent to which the Candi Suku reliefs reflect processes of value negotiation, symbolic resistance to classical Hindu-Javanese orthodoxy, and cultural responses to transformations in social structure and cosmological orientation at the time. Accordingly, the formulation of the research problem centers on understanding the reliefs of Candi Suku as a form of symbolic communication that represents not only belief systems but also the dynamics of cultural change and religious orientation within their historical context.

## **METHODS**

### ***Research Approach and Design***

This study employs a qualitative descriptive–interpretive approach semiotic analysis in a clearly differentiated framework to avoid conceptual overlap. Iconography was used to identify visual elements and narrative themes, while semiotic analysis, informed by Roland Barthes, interprets denotative and connotative meanings. The study aims to examine the cultural and symbolic roles of Suku Temple reliefs as expressions of late

Hindu-Javanese culture, defined here as a localized synthesis of Hindu cosmology and indigenous Javanese beliefs during the late Majapahit period. The reliefs are treated as structured visual texts, and the analysis focuses on their forms, spatial organization, and symbolic networks within their historical and cultural context (Winaya and Munandar 2021).

### ***Research Location and Objects***

The research site at the Suku Temple complex, Suku Hamlet, Berjo Village, Ngargoyoso District, Karanganyar Regency, Central Java. At the same time, the research objects are chosen reliefs directly related to the themes of fertility, cosmology, and the religious manifestations of Hindu-Javanese culture. These reliefs are linga and yoni, Garudeya reliefs, Kala heads, turtle statues, and other narrative panels with mythological or symbolic stories. The whole object is introduced as a single visual system that depicts the worldview of Hindu-Javanese society in the late Majapahit period.

### ***Data Sources and Types***

Primary data were collected through direct field observations of the relief and visual recordings in the form of photographs and sketches. A few interviews with caretakers or local informants who know about the history and traditions of Suku Temple. There was secondary data, including archaeological, historical, and theoretical literature in semiotics, such as journal articles on the subject of study.

### ***Data Collection Techniques***

The data collection methods consisted of directed field observation, focused visual documentation, and a targeted literature review, with a clearly defined scope to ensure analytical coherence. Rather than attempting to document the entire corpus of reliefs at Candi Suku, this study concentrates on selected key objects, particularly the *lingga-yoni* sculptures, as the primary focus of analysis. Field observations recorded the location, form, material, and spatial context of these selected elements within the temple structure. Visual documentation was conducted through photographic records and high-resolution outline sketches to capture significant iconographic features relevant to fertility symbolism and spatial positioning. The literature review was conducted selectively, drawing on sources

related to the temple's history and prior interpretations that specifically address *lingga-yoni* symbolism and associated reliefs. This focused approach ensures that the data collected is sufficiently detailed and analytically relevant, avoiding overgeneralization of the entire relief system while enabling a more in-depth interpretation of the selected objects.

### ***Data Analysis Techniques***

Data analysis is achieved through data organization and reduction, semiotic analysis, and hermeneutic-historical interpretation (Xiong et al. 2025; Koh and Lim 2023). Scholars divided the visual and written information by relief type and theme and used semiotics analysis to determine the figures, attributes, and stories portrayed. The purpose of Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis was to differentiate between denotative and connotative meanings and to identify the cultural myths of work in visual representations. All these findings were interpreted in the final stage to understand how Suku Temple reliefs serve as a cultural expression of the social-religious role and the dynamics of the varying values within Hindu-Javanese society.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Suku Temple as a Hindu-Javanese***

Suku Temple is one of the important archaeological sites of the late Majapahit Kingdom era, located on the western slope of Mount Lawu in Karanganyar, Central Java. Suku Temple is often positioned as a marker of the twilight phase of Hindu-Javanese civilization, as shown in Figure 1. Unlike the prominent temples of the classical era, such as Prambanan or Panataran, which emphasize architectural grandeur and epic narratives, Suku Temple presents a multi-tiered structure resembling a terraced pyramid and is decorated with reliefs that crudely visualize male and female reproductive organs. Suku Temple features a terraced, pyramid-like structure decorated with reliefs depicting male and female reproductive organs. This temple displays scenes with erotic connotations, as well as figures of gods and mythological creatures in a style that tends to be expressive and "*folksy*". It is this uniqueness that often makes Suku Temple understood as a temple of fertility as well as a ritual space that records the views of the Hindu-Javanese society at the end of the Majapahit era towards the body, sexuality, cosmology, and power. Through

semiotic, and anthropological studies, Sukuḥ Temple can be interpreted as more than a place of worship. However, as a cultural text that contains traces of anxiety, hope, and adaptation strategies of the Javanese people during a period of transition when the Majapahit political system was weakening and new religious discourses were emerging.



**Figure 1.** Sukuḥ Temple, Karanganyar, Central Java (Source: Riyanti's Documentation, 2024)

The dominance of fertility themes and explicit sexual imagery at Sukuḥ Temple supports the view that this site functioned as a kind of fertility temple during the late Majapahit period. The arrangement of male figures holding their genitals, naturalistic *lingga-yoni*, and several erotic scenes are not isolated artistic "*accidents*". Figure 2 shows part of a visual program that consciously emphasizes the generative nature of the human body as the source of life and community continuity. This is in line with the general explanation of Sukuḥ as a fertility temple that broadly depicts the themes of pre-birth life and symbolic sex education. This finding confirms that the theme of fertility is not just a peripheral aspect of the ideological and theological agenda of the Sukuḥ Temple reliefs.



**Figure 2.** Phallic Statue at Sukuḥ Temple (Source: Solo Pos, 2022)

Comparing them to the previous studies, including the description of the distinct shape and reliefs of Suku Temple by Riyanti (2018) which focuses on the architectural and semiotics peculiarities of the temple compared to the rest of Java. This paper associates all these visual arrangements with the rite and the cosmological roles of fertility that pilgrims physically embody. Likewise, the metallurgical process is related to the concept of eternity when Doncheva (2022) reads the blacksmith relief. Such harmony demonstrates that the visual program of Suku was, in fact, created to depict the process of life's transformation, not to ornament the construction. In contrast to Riyanti (2018), who also centers the attention on the correlation of metallurgy and eternity.

### ***Lingga–Yoni and the Cosmology of Balance***

The *lingga-yoni* at Suku Temple, as depicted in Figure 3, suggests that these two symbols operate within two distinct meaning ranges. They literally refer to the male and female reproductive organs, and symbolically they imply the combination of the masculine and feminine principles and the *Purusa-Prakrti* principle. Also, they signify the equilibrium of the small world (*bhuana alit*) and the big world (*bhuana ageng*). The positioning of the *lingga-yoni* on the threshold and at significant points of transition means that every action the pilgrims undertake is a sort of mini-rite of passage into the sacred space. This follows a semiotics analysis of *lingga-yoni* in different locations in Java, which focuses more on their role as constitutions of creation and cosmic relationships, rather than as sexual icons (Purwanto and Titasari 2020; Andaka 2023; Daito 2024).



**Figure 3.** Lingga-Yoni Statue at Suku Temple, Karanganyar, Central Java (Source: Wikipedia, 2012)

This study engages in the semiotic analysis of *lingga-yoni* by Daito (2024), explicitly applying Roland Barthes' framework of signification, including the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth. At the denotative level, *lingga-yoni* is understood as the visual representation of male and female reproductive organs. At the connotative level, it signifies the union of masculine and feminine principles (*Purusa-Prakrti*), symbolizing fertility, cosmic balance, and the generative force of life within Hindu-Javanese cosmology. At the level of myth, *lingga-yoni* functions as a cultural narrative that naturalizes cosmic regeneration and spiritual transformation, positioning the human body as a microcosm of the universe and legitimizing fertility rituals as part of a sacred cosmological order. By incorporating the concepts of sign, signification, and myth, this study offers a more comprehensive semiotic interpretation, addressing limitations in prior analyses that focused primarily on descriptive or symbolic readings and did not fully engage Barthes' analytical framework.

Archaeological comparisons with *lingga-yoni* findings from different regions, such as West Java or contemporary contexts, were not employed as primary analogies in this study due to significant chronological and spatial differences that may lead to interpretive inconsistencies. Instead, this research situates the *lingga-yoni* of Suku Temple within its specific historical and cultural context of the late Majapahit period. Within this framework, *lingga-yoni* is interpreted as representing the unity of divine principles and the source of life, understood through its local symbolic system and ritual function rather than through cross-regional generalization. This contextual approach ensures a more accurate and historically grounded interpretation, avoiding analytical gaps caused by disparities in time, space, and cultural setting.

This indicates that the analysis extends beyond symbolic meaning to consider ritual function; however, in this study, such an interpretation is grounded specifically in the spatial placement and contextual use of the *lingga-yoni* within the Suku Temple complex. The positioning of *lingga-yoni* at transitional points, such as entrances and terraces, as documented in the field observations, suggests its role in marking stages of ritual movement and purification. Based on these spatial and contextual data, the *lingga-yoni* can be understood as mediating the relationship among human participants, the temple's sacred space, and broader cosmological concepts, rather than being interpreted solely as an abstract symbol.

### ***Tantrism, the Body, and Spiritual Transformation***

The interpretation of Suku Temple as reflecting Tantric-oriented symbolism must be grounded in specific iconographic and contextual evidence rather than assumed associations. Previous studies have noted the presence of blacksmith (*pande besi*) reliefs and the depiction of deities such as Ganesha in proximity to these scenes, which are often associated with transformation processes and esoteric knowledge in late Hindu-Javanese religious practices (Syafi'i 2022; Munandar 2023). Iconographically, the blacksmith motif represents processes of forging and transformation, while Ganesha, as a deity associated with knowledge, thresholds, and removal of obstacles, reinforces themes of transition and initiation. However, their connection to Tantric traditions must be interpreted with caution and in the context of Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Suku Temple Relief (Source: Riyanti's Documentation, 2024)

This observation aligns with previous studies, such as Irfan et al., which associate blacksmith reliefs with metalworking as a metaphor for transformation; however, in this study, such interpretations are situated more explicitly within the framework of late Hindu-Javanese religious culture. The concept of Tantra, in this context, refers to a set of esoteric Shaivite practices that emphasize the unity of opposing forces, the use of the body as a medium of spiritual realization, and the transformation of material and physical elements into pathways toward liberation. Within the Javanese context, particularly during the late Majapahit period, these ideas were not adopted in their classical Indian form but were selectively integrated into local belief systems, resulting in a distinct Hindu-Javanese synthesis.

From an iconographic and semiotic perspective, drawing on Roland Barthes, the blacksmith scenes, fertility symbols, and bodily imagery at Suku Temple can be

interpreted at multiple levels. Denotatively, they depict activities such as metalworking and depict the human body explicitly. Connotatively, they signify transformation, regeneration, and the union of dual principles. At the level of myth, these elements construct a cultural narrative in which processes of physical transformation parallel spiritual refinement and renewal. Thus, rather than generalizing Tantra as a uniform tradition, this study understands it as a localized expression embedded in the religious practices of late Majapahit Java, where body symbolism, fertility, and transformation are integrated into a broader cosmological and ritual system (Yasa 2025; Soehadha 2013).

### ***Relief as Cultural Text: A Semiotic and Mythological***

Within the semiotic approach developed by Roland Barthes, the reliefs of Suku Temple exhibit a hierarchical structure. At the denotative level, one will only see naked bodies, sexual organs, animals, kala heads, and scenes of working blacksmiths. At the connotative level, these signs allude to concepts of fertility, protection, regeneration, and spiritual transformation. Meanwhile, in the DNA of mythology, the general visual program creates a vast narrative of the Hindu-Javanese world in crisis that needs to reassert the cosmic order. At the level of myth, in the sense proposed by Roland Barthes, the visual program of Suku Temple can be understood as constructing specific Hindu-Javanese cosmological narratives rather than a generalized notion of crisis. Denotatively, the reliefs depict explicit imagery, including *lingga-yoni*, anthropomorphic figures, animals, and scenes of craftsmanship. Connotatively, these elements signify fertility, purification, protection, and transformation. At the mythological level, they are closely related to Hindu-Javanese narratives of cosmic balance and regeneration, particularly the union of *Purusa* and *Prakrti* (as expressed in *lingga-yoni*), as well as local ritual concepts such as *ruwatan*, which emphasize purification and the restoration of harmony. In this sense, the reliefs do not merely depict isolated symbols but articulate a coherent mythological framework in which fertility and transformation function as mechanisms for maintaining and renewing cosmic order within the cultural context of late Majapahit Java.



**Figure 5.** Suku Temple Relief (Source: Riyanti's Documentation, 2024)

For example, in Figure 5, this relief depicts a larger figure on the right side wearing a crown and standing upright. Meanwhile, the three other figures in front of him are smaller and in a respectful position, illustrating the relationship between the nobility or ritual leaders and their servants or followers. At the top is an Old Javanese inscription that likely mentions the figures' names or explains the scene. On the right side, there is an element resembling a staff or banner symbol that marks the sacred space where the meeting took place. In terms of meaning, this relief can be interpreted as a depiction of the Hindu-Javanese social order, in which power, authority, and loyalty are manifested through body gestures, clothing, and proximity to the main figure within a single visual composition (Puspitasari 2021; M. I. Putri 2022).

### ***Semiotic Interpretation of Body Symbolism and Social Meaning***

From a semiotic perspective, the findings of this study indicate that representations of the body and sexuality in Suku Temple reliefs function as a system of signs embedded within late Hindu-Javanese cosmology rather than as purely anthropological or socio-political expressions. Drawing on Roland Barthes, these visual elements operate at multiple levels of meaning. At the denotative level, the reliefs depict explicit bodily forms, including reproductive organs and *lingga-yoni*. At the connotative level, these forms signify fertility, regeneration, and the continuity of life. At the level of myth, they articulate a broader cultural narrative in which the human body is positioned as a microcosm of the universe, reflecting the balance between cosmic forces and the cyclical nature of existence within late Majapahit Hindu-Javanese belief systems.

The placement of *lingga-yoni* at transitional architectural points further reinforces this semiotic function, marking symbolic stages of movement from the profane to the sacred. In this sense, the reliefs can be understood as visual structures that organize meaning and guide ritual interpretation through spatial and symbolic arrangements (Widyastuti 2017). Rather than extending comparisons to different regions or contexts, this study maintains a focused interpretation grounded in the specific historical and cultural setting of Suku Temple. Accordingly, the reliefs are interpreted as a coherent symbolic system that expresses cosmological concepts of balance, purification, and renewal, in line with the article's focus on semiotic analysis.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that a semiotic approach, drawing on Roland Barthes, provides a focused framework for interpreting the reliefs of Suku Temple as a system of signs. The analysis shows that key visual elements, particularly *lingga-yoni* and selected relief motifs, operate at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotatively, these elements depict bodily forms and ritual objects; connotatively, they signify fertility, regeneration, and the balance of dual principles; and at the level of myth, they articulate a Hindu-Javanese cosmological understanding of the body as a microcosm of the universe and as a medium of spiritual transformation in the late Majapahit context.

By concentrating on selected reliefs rather than generalizing the entire visual program, this study clarifies how meaning is constructed through specific symbols and their spatial placement within the temple. The findings confirm that the reliefs at Suku Temple are not merely decorative but function as a coherent semiotic system that encodes cultural values related to fertility, purification, and cosmic order. Thus, the main contribution of this research lies in demonstrating how semiotic analysis can be systematically applied to uncover layered meanings in Hindu-Javanese visual culture, particularly within the historical setting of late Majapahit Java.

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