ETNOREFLIKA: Jurnal Sosial dan Budaya
Volume 14, Nomor 2, Juni 2025: 239–246
10.33772/etnoreflika.v14i2.3025

ISSN: 2252-9144 (Cetak)
ISSN: 2355-360X (Online)

Representation and Regulation: Understanding Foods Served in Wayang Kulit Performances in Malang and Jombang

Rasyid Fahmi Suroso[1], Edi Dwi Riyanto[2], Nadya Afdholy[3]

[1, 2, 3] Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Airlangga
Dharmawangsa Dalam Street, Universitas Airlangga Campus B,
Surabaya 60286, Indonesia
[1]Correspondence Email: rfsuroso@gmail.com

Received: March 24, 2025; Revised: June 11, 2025; Accepted: June 18, 2025

Copyright © 2025 The Author
This is an open-access article
under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License

How to cite (APA): Suroso, R. F., Riyanto, E. D., Afdholy, N. (2025). Representation and regulation: Understanding foods served in wayang kulit performances in Malang and Jombang. *ETNOREFLIKA: Jurnal Sosial dan Budaya, 14*(2), 239-246. https://doi.org/10.33772/etnoreflika.v14i2.3025.

ABSTRACT

This study investigates foods served in wayang kulit performances in Malang and Jombang, employing the circuit of culture perspective as a methodological framework. It delivers an overview of the representation and regulation of foods served in wayang kulit performances. Data collection techniques consist of observation, documentation, and semi-structured interviews with two dalangs (shadow puppet masters), one in Bareng, Jombang, and the other in Blimbing, Malang. By analyzing foods served in wayang kulit performances in the circuit of culture, this study aims to provide more interpretations of the situation.

Keywords: circuit of culture; foods; wayang kulit; representation; regulation

INTRODUCTION

Wayang is the Old Javanese (*Jawa Kuna*) term for "shadow" (Supendi, 2007). *Bayangan* is the equivalent of the word in Indonesian. *Kulit* refers to "leather," specifically cows and buffaloes. *wayang kulit,* in a general sense, is a Javanese traditional shadow puppetry in Indonesia, notably on the island of Java. Based on the material they are made of, *wayang kulit* is one of several variations of *wayang* plays performed in Indonesia. The others include but are not limited to, *wayang wong* (a group of people portraying *wayang* characters dressed up to resemble them), *wayang golek* (three-dimensional puppets), and *wayang beber* (*wayang* in the form of sheets containing paintings with stories).

The most noticeable distinction between *wayang kulit* and other forms of *wayangs* (puppetry) is, one, the material from which they are made. Two, in *wayang kulit* plays, the *dalangs* can only control the puppets' hands, unlike *wayang wong*, in which the head, hands, and feet can all be moved entirely. On top of that, it differs

from *wayang beber,* which is completely immobile since it is in the form of painted scrolls.

As one of Indonesia's most well-known traditional theatre performances, *wayang kulit* plays a significant role in Javanese culture (Thiruchelvam & Abdullah, 2019). *Wayang kulit* is not only utilized as a storytelling instrument to recount the Mahabharata, Ramayana, or panji sagas but also has symbolism and lofty values.

In the context of traditional performing arts like wayang kulit, food possesses a function that is primarily socio-cultural rather than biological. Its presence at various performance stages is significant to the event's structure. It serves as a mechanism to demonstrate respect for ancestors, symbolize prosperity, and strengthen social solidarity among the involved community.

Certain food items presented during *wayang kulit,* such as *tumpeng* or *jajan pasar*, function as a semiotic system. Beyond displaying local cuisine, these items serve as a medium for communicating specific values, spiritual concepts, and appreciation for the performers. Consequently, food is not a peripheral element but an essential component that fundamentally shapes the symbolic and compositional dimensions of traditional performing arts in Java.

In the East Javanese tradition of *wayang kulit*, food preparations are critical not merely as a logistical supplement but also as a manifestation of local customs that ensure the performance's continuity. The preparation is frequently organized through a community-based system of reciprocity, illustrating collective participation in the event. This system also formally acknowledges the puppeteer, musicians, and guests, whose attendance is required for the all-night performance. The role of food gains further ritualistic significance in specific ceremonial contexts within East Java. Food is functionally transformed into a sacred offering for performances as part of a *ruwatan* (purification ceremony) or other major rites. This highlights its capacity to operate within social and spiritual frameworks, depending on the specific cultural event.

The researchers also find it essential to discuss food since a few decades ago or so, many people lost track of where their food comes from (Wirzba, 2011). People have no sense of the need to know precisely what they put in their mouths. However, the irony is that virtually every group we belong to, including family, tradition, nation, area, religion, and neighborhood, regulates food to some extent. This paradox shows the disconnection between individual food consumption and the collective frameworks that give food its cultural and symbolic significance. Modern societies often treat food as a commodity, stripped of context and history. Traditional art performances such as wayang kulit demonstrate how food remains deeply embedded in communal rituals, moral systems, and spiritual practices.

Research on *wayang*, chiefly *wayang kulit*, is worth further exploration for countless reasons. However, two significant points stand out: firstly, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has accredited *wayang kulit* as one of the twenty-eight Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity on 7 November 2003. Although this recognition on a global scale is exceptional, it also means the need to preserve it as best as we possibly could. Secondly, and most importantly, *wayang kulit* is a unique form of traditional

storytelling native to Indonesia, specifically Java. *As* a traditional puppetry art, wayang has unrivaled creativity and depth compared to Chinese and Indian art (Brandon, 1970).

Numerous scholarly works have addressed significant areas of *wayang*, such as *wayang kulit* and conservation practice (Reumont, 2022), *wayang wong bocah* and art preservation (Hartono, Nuryani, & Kusumastuti, 2022), wayang in worldwide settings (Cohen, 2007), *wayang golek* and character education (Halimah et al., 2020), *wayang purwa* and social roles (Ras, 2007), *wayang* and its values (Dwijonagoro, 2014). Moreover, several academic publications have also employed the circuit of culture to examine Real Madrid and its organizational values (Garcia, 2020), traditional theatre excursion (Wita & Apip, 2020), Beijing Olympics *Fuwa* mascots (Ding & Thompson, 2013), evolving human dimensions of wildland fire (Champ & Brooks, 2008), an advertisement for New Zealand national rugby team (Scherer & Jackson, 2008), and the WHO smallpox eradication campaign (Curtin & Gaither, 2006). However, very few, if any, scientists and researchers have investigated wayang and the circuit of culture. As far as we know, no prior research has applied the circuit of culture to evaluate food served in *wayang kulit* performances.

This study employs the 'circuit of culture' as its primary analytical framework, a theoretical model originating within cultural studies. While this framework has been effectively applied to analyses of media products and advertising, this research extends its utility to culinary practices. By developing this approach, the study examines the foods integral to wayang kulit performances in Malang and Jombang.

By applying the circuit's key concepts of representation and regulation, the analysis demonstrates that food is an active agent in shaping local culture rather than merely reflecting it. This perspective clarifies the diverse functions of food within wayang kulit performances. It further reveals how seemingly mundane activities—such as food preparation, sharing, and eating—are fundamentally linked to the broader processes of cultural reproduction, negotiation, and transformation.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative research method and uses Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis as a research design. Thematic analysis is employed to discover, review, and present the themes. This study is designed to identify foods served and its roles in *wayang kulit* performances in Malang and Jombang. This research also intends to discover the philosophical meanings behind those foods.

The research's informants are two *dalangs* from Blimbing, Malang, and Bareng, Jombang. Mr AB has been in *Dalang* for more than a year. He is a staff at one of the history education museums in Malang. Mr HC, on the other hand, is a civil servant and has been a *dalang* in Jombang since 1997. The two informants represent contrasting generational and experiential backgrounds, which offer rich perspectives on how food functions within the performance of wayang kulit in their respective regions. Their differing perspectives enable the researchers to explore how local interpretations of food traditions evolve over time and how individual

agency interacts with collective cultural frameworks within the living tradition of wayang kulit.

Semi-structured interviews are employed as the primary instrument of this study. The researchers utilized semi-structured interviews in which the interview questions were developed before being asked to the informants. The interviews underlined food provided in *wayang kulit* performances, the food providers (are those donations from attendees or event planners or other parties?), food distribution (to whom the food is given?), the purpose of the food (is the food for humans or else?), the philosophical meanings behind those foods and the list goes on.

The researchers use four out of six steps of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). Step one is to get acquainted with the data. Self-familiarizing with the data is one of the most fundamental processes. The next step is to search for themes. It is indispensable to perform an exhaustive analysis of the themes. The next step is to name and define the themes; the last step is to produce the report.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Wayang kulit is more than simple shadow puppetry; it is a living embodiment of Indonesian heritage, breathing life into epic narratives, moral philosophy, and enduring cultural identity. These performances transcend mere episodic entertainment throughout Javanese society, from rural villages to urban centers. They are, instead, an integral component of the community's social and spiritual existence, serving as a potent medium that fosters intergenerational connection through shared stories and collective values."

Within this tradition, food serves as a vital centerpiece, transforming the performance into a holistic communal rite. The foods provided are not merely for physical nourishment; they are a rich language, symbolizing respect, fostering social bonds, and honoring the performers and attendees alike. The presence and quality of the food carry a profound social weight, reflecting the host's generosity and the event's significance.

The responsibility for the foods creates a symbiotic relationship between the individual and the collective. While a single host or family bears the cost as part of a sacred rite of purification, the entire community rallies in support. Neighbors and relatives contribute their labor in a cooperative effort to prepare and serve the food, a tradition that reinforces social solidarity and exemplifies a profound form of community participation.

The element of representation provides a clear foundation for comprehending the food offered in *wayang kulit* performances. In this instance, at least seven foods are suitable for analysis. The first is *tumpeng* (a heap of cone-shaped rice that represents a mountain), one of the most popular foods on the island of Java whenever there is a ceremonial event. Mr. AB contends that there are several kinds of *tumpeng*, including *robyong* (there is oil at the four corners of tumpeng), *megono* (made with white rice and an egg at the top of tumpeng), *punar* (side dishes made with fried soya beans and *abon*/shredded meat), and *kendhit*

(two-thirds white rice and one-third yellow rice). *Tumpeng* is a sign of gratitude, a symbol of the human relationship with God and their fellows.

The second is *polo gumantung* (hanging fruits, such as pumpkin and mango) and *polo kependem* (fruits or produce buried in the ground), such as cassava and potatoes. *Gumantung* signifies our reliance on God. Meanwhile, *kependem* or down to earth tells us to act sincerely, kindly, and without retaliation. The third is *rojo molo* bananas, which are offered during ruwatan (a ceremony established to liberate or release someone from an unfavorable or harmful punishment or curse), and *talun* bananas, which are offered during other rituals. Generally, two bunches of bananas are provided, signifying a state of balance. The bananas open upwards to represent our hands reaching towards the sky, expressing appreciation to God.

The fourth is *jenang sengkolo* or *jenang abang puteh*. *Jenang* is the Indonesian term for porridge (made from rice, brown sugar, and grated coconut). *Sengkolo* refers to misfortune and disaster. In Javanese society, *jenang sengkolo* is specifically provided to prevent bad luck. It signifies harmony and symbolizes human beings' origin, which originates from sperm and ovaries.

The fifth is *sego golong*. *Golong* means groups, and *sego* is a Javanese word for rice. *Sego golong* is essentially rice served in groups. In Javanese tradition, *sego golong* is a sign of strong determination. The sixth *is gecok bakal,* which consists of eggs, *setaman* flowers (jasmine, rose, *kenanga*/ylang ylang, etc.), fruits, spices, and herbs (ginger, turmeric, etc.). *Gecok/cok* implies an origin, while *bakal* denotes a beginning. *Gecok bakal* symbolizes the beginning of a life that starts from nothing into existence.

The seventh is *ayam ingkung*. "Ingkung" is derived from the Javanese terms "ingsun" and "manengkung," which translate to "I pray quietly, solemnly." *Ayam ingkung* is a whole chicken served with its innards. It is the primary side dish served for *tumpeng*. Cooked with spices and coconut milk, the food is made from free-range chicken. The rooster with its head bowed represents the family members who lower their heads in prayers to ask forgiveness for those who have passed away. In contrast, a rooster's head turned back represents humanity's constant need to reflect on their lives and express gratitude for the things they possess.

Three roles are identified for traditional Javanese food: daily food, food in ceremonies, and food for offerings (Haryono, 1997). Daily food is typical food that is generally consumed by the wider community. Food in ceremonies is served during events/ceremonies to honour a particular occasion. Food for offerings is intended to be served to the spirits or respected ancestors. According to Mr HC, the word "sesaji" or "sesajen" derives from the word "saaji," which signifies to exalt, to glorify.

Mr AB implies two primary classifications for food in shadow puppet shows: profane and sacred food. In this context, "profane" refers to something commonplace that can be consumed daily rather than something incongruous or disrespectful of religion or God. These foods fulfill a practical function: to provide sustenance for those involved in the often lengthy and overnight performance of wayang kulit, thereby supporting the physical needs of the community engaging with the event.

On the other hand, sacred food possesses a higher significance and is worth more than mere sustenance. There are two types of sacred food in wayang kulit performances: food that is acceptable to eat and food that is prohibited to eat.

Food intended for the human participants—the performers and invited guests—is ritually blessed and designated for communal eating. Conversely, a separate category of food, though also consecrated, is offered exclusively to ancestral spirits and other non-human entities. This practice is a venerable local tradition, and the food becomes a sacred object forbidden to mortals. Breaching this prohibition is believed to result in adverse spiritual consequences for the individual, such as experiencing sawanan or entering an involuntary trance.

Snacks and staple food are the two categories into which profane food falls. In shadow puppet shows, the snacks differ depending on the area in which the food is served. *Nogosari*, a traditional wet cake made from rice flour wrapped in banana leaves, and *koci-koci*, a traditional steamed square-shaped cake made from sticky rice flour, are the typical snacks served in mountainous areas like Malang, Klaten, and Nganjuk. Snacks in coastal areas such as Surabaya are, for example, fried bananas and *ote-ote*, a traditional food made with wheat flour and prawns. Usually, the person making the wish (*hajat*) provides the staple food, while their family and/or neighbors provide the snacks.

Within the *wayang kulit* traditions of Malang and Jombang, food is not a peripheral component but a central element that gives voice to cultural meaning, spirituality, and social bonds. Its function extends far beyond physical consumption; it becomes a representation of local identity—a canvas for values inherited, contested, and regulated by the community. This is most evident in the division between sacred and profane dishes. This practice maps the community's universe of meaning and reveals the intricate systems of social governance embedded within these cultural performances.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that food serves as a crucial cultural element within the context of wayang kulit performances in Malang and Jombang, functioning not merely as physical nourishment but also as a site of symbolic representation and socio-cultural regulation. In Malang and Jombang, the representation of food reflects localized interpretations of East Javanese tradition, with certain dishes symbolizing spiritual offerings. In contrast, others fulfill the pragmatic functions of hospitality and social bonding. These dynamics underscore the relationship between continuity and adaptation in local traditions, wherein food becomes a living text of cultural expression and negotiation, especially in East Java.

REFERENCES

Acosta-Alzuru, C. (2003). "I'm Not a Feminist...I Only Defend Women as Human Beings": The Production, Representation, and Consumption of Feminism in a Telenovela. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 20 (3): 269–294.

Brandon, J. R. (1970). *On Thrones of Gold: Three Javanese Shadow Plays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Champ, J. G., & Brooks, J. J. (2010). The Circuit of Culture: A Strategy for Understanding the Evolving Human Dimensions of Wildland Fire. *Society & Natural Resources: An International Journal* 23: 573–582.

Cohen, M. (2007). Contemporary Wayang in Global Contexts. *Asian Theatre Journal* 24 (2): 338–369.

Curtin, P. A., & Gaither, T. K. (2006). Contested Notions of Issue Identity in International Public Relations: A Case Study. *Journal of Public Relations Research* 18: 67–89.

Ding, Y., & Thompson, L. (2013). Re-evaluating the Beijing Olympic Fuwa mascots in the circuit of culture. *Asia Pacific Journal of Sport and Social Science* 2 (2): 87–103.

du Gay, P., Hall, S., Janes, L., Mackay, H., & Negus, K. (1997). *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman.* Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Dwijonagoro, S. (2014). Philosophical, Ethical, and Aesthetic: Values in Shadow Puppet Theatre (Wayang) Performance. *Jurnal Budaya Nusantara* 1 (1): 11–30.

Garcia, C. (2020). Real Madrid and public relations: applying the circuit of culture to organizational values. *Soccer & Society.*

Geertz, C. (1980). Negara Teater: Politik Kebudayaan di Indonesia. Yogyakarta: Bentang Budaya.

Halimah, L., Arifin, R. R. M., Yuliariatiningsih, M. S., Abdillah, F., & Sutini, A. (2020). Storytelling through "Wayang Golek" puppet show: Practical ways in incorporating character education in early childhood. *Cogent Education* 7 (1).

Hartono, Nuryani, W., & Kusumastuti, E. (2022). Javanese art conservation in Indonesia inheriting potentials of local wisdom through Wayang Wong Bocah. *Research in Dance Education.*

Ras, J. J. (2007). The social function and cultural significance of the Javanese Wayang Purwa theatre. *School of Oriental and African Studies* 29: 19–32.

Reumont, E. v. (2022). Detecting Ethnocentricity in Conservation Practice: Javanese Wayang Kulit Collections in Museum Storage. *Studies in Conservation* 67 (1): 301–308.

Scherer, J., & Jackson, S. J. (2008). Cultural Studies and the Circuit of Culture: Advertising, Promotional Culture and the New Zealand All Blacks. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 8 (4): 507–526.

Sedyawati, E. (2002). Pertunjukan Rakyat: Refleksi Budaya dan Media Komunikasi Tradisional. Jakarta: Balai Pustaka.

Soar, M. (2000). Encoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising Production. *Mass Communication and Society* 3 (4): 415-437.

Supendi, E. (2007). Wayang Orang sebagai Pertunjukkan Teater Tradisional dalam Tinjauan Semiotika. *Jurnal Ilmu dan Seni* 5 (1): 54–72.

Thiruchelvam, C. C., & Abdullah, S. (2019). The Essence of Wayang in Modern Indonesian Artworks: Examining the Works of Nasirun and Heri Dono. *Malaysian Journal of Performing and Visual Arts* 5: 57–79.

Wirzba, N. (2011). *Food & Faith: A Theology of Eating*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wita, A., & Apip. (2020). Theatre Excursion: Circuit of Culture of Production and Consumption of Traditional Theatre. *Jurnal Panggung* 30 (3): 325–334.