

Semiotic Analysis of Cultural Da'wah: Decoding Religious Symbols and Public Reception in the Pepe'pepeka ri Makka Dance of Makassar

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Abstract

This research investigates the construction of religious messages and the efficacy of cultural preaching (*da'wah*) within the *Pepe'pepeka ri Makka* (Fire in Mecca) dance tradition in Paropo Village, Makassar. While traditionally viewed as a cultural spectacle, this dance functions as a sophisticated medium for Islamic proselytization. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, this study utilizes Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework—comprising signs, objects, and interpretants—to analyze the ritual's poetry and choreography. Data were collected through participatory observation, documentation, and in-depth interviews with key informants, including traditional maestros and religious figures. The findings reveal that the dance is a complex symbolic system representing core Islamic tenets, specifically *Tawhid* (monotheism), angelic hierarchies, and *Thaharah* (ritual purification). The fire serves as a potent index of divine light (*Nur*) and a symbol of spiritual resilience, echoing the miracle of Prophet Abraham. However, the analysis through the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model indicates a significant gap in public reception. While the performance elicits strong affective responses, such as awe and emotional engagement, the cognitive and behavioral impacts remain limited. This disconnect is attributed to linguistic barriers in the classical Makassarese poetry and the lack of explicit narrative interpretation. The study concludes that for cultural *da'wah* to achieve its transformative potential, "intersemiotic translation" is required to bridge the gap between traditional symbolism and contemporary public understanding.

Keywords: Cultural Da'wah, Semiotics, Pepe'pepeka ri Makka, Public Reception, Islamic Communication.

Introduction

The cultural diversity of Indonesia, particularly in South Sulawesi, reflects rich and diverse traditions in ritual and artistic forms. One prominent tradition is the dance *Fires in Mecca*, which has not only been a cultural performance, but also a means of religious expression for the Makassar people since the 17th century. According to (Muh. Ali Aziz, 2004, p. 319) traditions can be part of da'wah as long as they do not conflict with the Qur'an and Hadith. In this context, dance *Fires in Mecca* contains strong Islamic values in its poetry and movements, making it a legitimate and educational form of cultural preaching.

Office *Fires in Mecca* It is intended to convey spiritual messages such as monotheism and self-purification. The fire used in the dance is a symbol of divine light that burns away falsehood and illuminates life with Islamic guidance (Yahya Syamsuddin, *Interview*, April 30, 2024).

(Alex Sobur, 2016, p. 15) states that semiotics is used to read signs in culture. Dance *Fires in Mecca* is a system of signs rich in meaning, ranging from fire, poetry, to movement, all of which can be interpreted as symbolic messages rooted in local and Islamic values. (Benny Hoed, 2011, p. 4) in Charles Sanders Peirce, views signs as representations of something else, and the process of semiosis connects signs, objects, and interpretations. In this dance, fire is not just a visual element, but becomes a symbol of spiritual preaching that opens up space for deep interpretation for the community.

Meanwhile, according to (John Fiske, 2012, p. 66) in Charles Sanders Peirce, the fundamental principle of the nature of signs is representative and interpretative properties. The representative nature of a sign means that the sign is something else, while the interpretative nature is that the sign provides opportunities for interpretation depending on the user and recipient.

According to (Kamaluddin Tajibu, 2014, p. 23) and the Muhammadiyah PP Team (quoted by Andi Syahraeni, 2020, p. 34), cultural preaching is very important to reach a wider community. Traditions such as dance *Fires in Mecca* shows that local arts and culture can be used as an effective means of non-structural preaching, as exemplified by the Wali Songo in the past.

This research provides a lesson that local traditions such as dance *Fires in Mecca* It's not just a performing art, but also contains meaningful da'wah values, such as messages of monotheism, piety, and symbols of self-purification, displayed through movement, poetry, and the medium of fire. This topic is important to investigate because it demonstrates that da'wah doesn't always have to be delivered through formal channels like pulpits or religious studies, but can also be delivered through cultural channels that are closer to the local community, making it more easily accepted and understood.

Before this research was conducted, the community's understanding of dance *Fires in Mecca* Generally, these methods are limited to entertainment, ignoring the depth of the da'wah's meaning. Through a semiotic approach, this study demonstrates that da'wah media can be expanded beyond sermons to include cultural symbols, thus opening up new perspectives for understanding Islamic da'wah contextually. Thus, the lessons from this study encourage the use of local culture as a creative, strategic, and community-based means of da'wah, enriching Islamic da'wah methods in the modern era.

Literature Review

Etymologically, da'wah comes from the Arabic word *preaching* which means an invitation or call. In Islamic terminology, da'wah is defined as a conscious and planned effort to invite others to understand and practice Islamic teachings through speech, writing, and deeds. The essence of da'wah is to convey goodness and prevent evil in a wise and non-coercive manner (Mattulada, 1997).

Culture is the result of human creativity, feeling, and will, passed down from generation to generation. Experts such as E. B. Tylor (Koentjaraningrat, 1985) emphasize that culture encompasses patterns of behavior, values, and symbols that are part of society. Culture not only reflects identity but also serves as a means of conveying moral and spiritual values.

Cultural da'wah is a da'wah approach that utilizes local cultural elements to convey the message of Islam (Muhammad Hasan Tholhah, 2005). This approach has been practiced by figures such as Hasan al-Basri, the Wali Songo, and Abdurrahman Wahid. Cultural da'wah aims to spread Islamic values in a manner appropriate to the social and cultural context of society, without losing the essence of Islamic teachings. Principles such as wisdom, good speech, rationality, and respect for local culture are the main foundations of this approach.

Semiotic theory discusses how signs and symbols are used to convey meaning in communication (A. Sobur, 2006). (Charles Sanders Peirce, 1931–1958) call this process *semiosis*, namely the relationship between the sign (*representative*), the object referred to, and the meaning captured by the recipient (*they interpret*). This means that meaning does not come simply from signs, but is formed through an interpretive process that involves context and experience.

Peirce divided signs into three categories: icons, indices, and symbols. Icons resemble their objects (like photographs), indices have a direct connection (like smoke indicates fire), and symbols rely on social conventions (like language). He also distinguished signs based on their form, object, and how we interpret them. This shows that signs can be understood differently by different people depending on their culture and background.

In communication research, semiotic theory is very useful for exploring the hidden meanings of cultural symbols. Signs do not stand alone, but function within interconnected systems. Therefore, understanding communication messages requires an understanding of the social and cultural context in which they are used. Semiotics helps us see that meaning is always being constructed, negotiated, and subject to change.

This research not only reveals the signs and meanings of *the fire dance in Mecca*, but in this research we also try to provide understanding to the public by using theory S-O-R (*Stimulus Organism Response*) (Jalaluddin Rahmad, 2004, p. 219). Response is a basic and very simple model of communication that shows communication as a process of action and reaction. This theory is influenced by the discipline of behaviorist psychology (Winarni, 2003, p. 58).

The community's response to cultural da'wah in the Pepe'-pepeka ri Makka Dance tradition can be seen from three aspects, namely cognitive, affective, and conative (Jalaluddin Rahmad, 2004, p. 219). From the cognitive side, the community shows a new

understanding of the da'wah message that was previously poorly understood; affectively, they feel an emotional closeness that strengthens a positive attitude towards the tradition; while conatively, changes in community behavior are seen in active participation and habits that support the da'wah values conveyed through this dance (Zakiyuddin Baidawi dan Mutaharrun Jinan, 2002, p. 61).

Methods and Data

This study uses a descriptive qualitative research method (J. Lexy Moleong, 2017) located in Paropo Village, Makassar City. The approaches used are communication and da'wah approaches. The primary data sources for this study are informants. The key informants are Yahya Syamsuddin, a religious figure and dancer, and Sahir Dg. Sitaba, a traditional figure and dancer. Additional informants are members of the community who have witnessed traditional dance performances. *Fires in Mecca*, Surya Azmara, Abdillah, Muh. Afriyadi Thamrin, Sahrul Ramadhan, Burhan, Amil Raihan Abdillah, Muh. Ibnu, and Alwi. Secondary data sources are books, the internet, *ebook*, journals, and other data sources that can be used as complements (S. Nasution, 2006). The data collection method involves several stages, namely: observation, interviews, and documentation. Data analysis is carried out through three stages, namely: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions.

Results

1. Construction of Islamic Messages in Dance Traditions *Fires In Meccain* Paropo Village, Makassar City, Charles Sanders Peirce's Semiotic Perspective

The Pepe'-pepeka ri Makka dance tradition in Paropo Village, Makassar City, contains a richly symbolic message of da'wah, particularly through the verses of poetry used in the performance. Based on Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach, each verse of poetry is analyzed through three main components: sign, object, and interpretant. For example, in the first verse, phrases such as "Lailaha illallah, Pepe'-pepeka ri Makka, Lanteraya ri Madina" represent monotheism as the foundation of Islam, with Makka and Madina as historical symbols of the spread of Islam. Within a semiotic framework, these phrases are not merely literal but become a deep and complex system of spiritual representation.

The meaning of these poems contains theological representations that refer to the history of the spread of Islam. For example, the symbol "pepe" or fire is not merely a theatrical element, but rather represents the light of Islam, in accordance with the concept of "minazh zhulum" (light of the universe). and then o'clockfly" (from darkness to light). This indicates that the fire in the poem is not a material fire, but rather a symbol of divine enlightenment and guidance. From Peirce's perspective, this falls into the category of symbols, because its meaning is conventionally agreed upon in Makassar culture. The historical context of the Prophet Abraham and the Messenger of Allah implied in the poem also becomes the object of symbolic interpretation, linking historical experience to the framework of cultural da'wah.

Further analysis of verses such as "Balla Lompoa ri Makka, Sapanayya ri Madina, Nirinring kitta, Nibelo-belo satinja" depicts Islam as a sacred house (Kaaba) guarded by a book (the Qur'an) and sacred values. In semiotic construction, the large house of Mecca

represents the Kaaba, which has a symbolic dimension as a spiritual center and orientation of Muslim life. The stairs of Medina symbolize the path of da'wah and the struggle of the Prophet Muhammad, which began from that city. This meaning forms an interpretant that suggests the integration of cultural symbols (stilt houses, stairs) and religious symbols (Kaaba, the Qur'an) in conveying the message of da'wah.

Other verses of the poem also reflect a complex spiritual process. As in the phrase "Inai balla irate, sangtinggi Bawakaraeng, balla awalli, passiringan malaika," this verse not only describes the house of the saint of God but also illustrates how moral and spiritual values are part of the community's life. The tall house, likened to Mount Bawakaraeng, depicts the saint's position as a holy figure whose mouth conveys divine truth. The concept of "bawakaraeng," meaning "mouth of God," reflects a local understanding of honest and meaningful spiritual communication. Here, symbolic signs are constructed from local wisdom to represent Islamic spiritual concepts.

The final verse, which speaks of "angels as merchants, saints as rowers, and the Prophet Muhammad as helmsman," illustrates how the process of spreading Islam was not a spontaneous act but rather through a structured system. In Peirce's semiotic model, these three elements represent a theological communication system: angels as conveyors of revelation (representamen), saints as agents of da'wah (object), and the Prophet Muhammad as the center of orientation (interpretant). This poem emphasizes that da'wah is a complex spiritual activity, in which the delivery of God's message involves a harmonious hierarchical structure between heaven and earth. This overall analysis shows that the Pepe'-pepeka ri Makka dance tradition is not only a cultural heritage, but also a symbolic da'wah space that lives within the semiotic framework of Makassar society.

2. Fire Fire Dance Movement in Mecca

Figure 1



Source: Youtube ArmedTV

From the picture above, you can see the dancers taking movement positions. *ammen* (sitting) praying while holding a lit torch in his hand. Based on the relationship between the signs and objects above, it can be understood that before starting the dance *Fires in Mecca* The players first approach the creator and ask for help from Allah SWT.

Figure 2



Source: Youtube ArmedTV

All the dancers are seen in moving positions. *breastfeeding*(standing) holding a lit torch, held up while preparing to perform a dance movement. Based on the relationship between the signs and objects above, it can be understood that before starting the dance, the dancers first line up on the stage while holding up the torch as a signal to the audience that they are ready to perform.

Figure 3



Source: Youtube ArmedTV

The a'bukku' (bowing) movement in the Pepe'pepeka ri Makka dance is a form of respect, while the a'tabe' (excuse me) movement reflects the local wisdom of the Makassar tribe which shows an attitude of respect for others. This is seen from the position of the dancers who bow before the audience as a symbol of politeness. In Charles Sanders Peirce's perspective, a'tabe' is categorized as a symbol because its meaning is born from the cultural agreement of the community, especially the Bugis-Makassar, and does not have a direct physical or logical relationship with the object it signifies, but is understood through social convention.

Figure 4



Source: Youtube ArmedTV

Based on observations of the movement positions of the dancers who perform the *kale juice* (self-immolation) on the arm, it can be interpreted that this movement represents a symbol of courage and individual resilience in facing life's challenges. Within the framework of the relationship between signs and objects according to the semiotic approach, this movement *kale juice* is not just a physical performance, but rather a representation of a moral message that emphasizes the importance of an undaunted attitude in facing life's trials, and reflects the value of courage instilled through bodily expression in the tradition of cultural preaching.

Figure 5



Source: Youtube ArmedTV

Movement '*ammutara*' counterclockwise in dance *Fires in Meccais* is a spiritual symbol representing the *tawaf* (circumambulation). According to Ust. Yahya Syamsuddin, a key informant, this movement reflects the rotation of the universe and the cycle of human life, ultimately returning to God. Therefore, the rotation is not merely an aesthetic element of dance, but also conveys a spiritual message that life on earth is temporary and that every human will return to the Creator.

3. The Message of Da'wah in the Pepe'-Pepeka ri Makka Dance Tradition in Paropo Village, Makassar City

The following is an explanation of each point of the message of da'wah in the dance tradition. *Fires in Mecca* with an academic approach and analytical style like researchers from abroad:

a. Message of Creed Preaching

The tradition of poetry in *Fires in Mecca* demonstrates strong theological representation. Poems such as "La ilaha illallah" affirm the core teaching of tawhid in Islam—the oneness of God, which is the foundation of Muslim belief. The poem serves not only as a historical spiritual narrative but also as a performative da'wah function—building awareness of the foundations of the community's faith through an aesthetic approach. Furthermore, phrases such as "Nirinring kitta" symbolize the value of the holy book as a structure of belief, emphasizing the importance of the Quran in fortifying the community's spiritual home. This reflects the epistemology of faith, as codified in the principles of Islamic faith, including in Surah Al-Ikhlās and Surah Al-Baqarah. This symbolism goes beyond poetic expression; it reshapes the relationship between faith, revelation, and local cultural representation.

b. Sharia Preaching Message

Sharia elements are present in narratives that internalize the concepts of purification and worship in a symbolic setting. Poems such as "Nibelo-belo satinja" and the verse about istinja metaphorically depict purity as the foundation of Islamic law. Practices such as purification are interpreted not only as physical cleanliness but also as spiritual discipline. These texts represent the practice of Islamic law as part of a culture that regulates both vertical (humanity with God) and horizontal (humanity with others) relationships. Moreover, the poem about the weakening of religion that can be cured by congregational prayer represents a collective message about revitalizing religious practices within the community, demonstrating the interdependence between Islamic legal values and the maintenance of social ethics.

c. Moral Preaching Message

Islamic ethics or morality in poetry *Fires in Mecca* conveyed through the symbolism of noble character and epistemic prudence. For example, the third stanza reflects caution in accepting sources of religious teachings, emphasizing the importance of the credibility of the sanad or authority of knowledge. This reflects sensitivity to authentic epistemology in Islam. Lines such as "Padongko rikuntu tojeng" emphasize the ethical urge to uphold the truth, placing justice as the primary principle in social interactions. The fifth stanza depicts the figure of the saint as an exemplary figure whose speech and behavior are in sync, demonstrating the performativity of ideal morals. Even bodily expressions in the form of movements such as *asa'bukku* (bowing) reflects social etiquette based on manners, a cultural moral symbol of the Bugis-Makassar which reflects respect in the public religious space.

d. Integration of Poetry and Movement as a Media for Da'wah

The correlation between poetry and movement in *Fires in Mecca* not merely ornamental, but rather conveys the structure of the message of da'wah holistically. The

movement *'ammutara'* For example, depicting counterclockwise rotation as a spiritual symbol of tawaf, which positions movement as a form of existential contemplation. This dance conveys messages not only in verbal form, but also in bodily representations that serve a didactic function. This visual and verbal combination serves as a culturally based instrument of da'wah communication, bridging local communities' understanding with universal Islamic values.

e. Contextualization of Da'wah in Local Culture

Tradition *Fires in Mecca* demonstrates that da'wah is not always textual and normative, but can be articulated through cultural symbolism. The presence of local language elements, historical narratives of the Prophet's da'wah, and representations of figures such as angels, saints, and the Prophet Muhammad as part of the da'wah system demonstrates that religious messages are wrapped within a local cultural framework. Thus, da'wah becomes inclusive, down-to-earth, and communicative without losing the substance of its teachings. This approach addresses the challenges of contemporary da'wah in the context of multiculturalism and religious globalization.

4. Community Response to Cultural Preaching (Pepe'Pepeka Ri Makka Dance Tradition) in Paropo Village, Makassar City

a. Cognitive Response (Knowledge)

Cognitive response refers to the perception, understanding and knowledge structure of society regarding the messages of da'wah conveyed through... *Fires in Mecca* Theoretically, this response relates to an individual's ability to absorb new information and form meaningful cognitive constructs. Interview results indicate a dualism of understanding: *First* Dancers like Yahya Syamsuddin are able to articulate the deep meaning of poetry and movements that are full of Islamic values such as tauhid and thaharah. *Kedua* The general public exhibits limited understanding of symbolic meaning due to linguistic barriers (the use of classical Makassarese) and symbolic forms of delivery. From a cultural communication perspective, there is a mismatch between the symbolic code of the sender (dai) and the receptive code of the recipient (mad'u), which ultimately narrows the space for transmitting the meaning of da'wah.

b. Affective Response (Feelings and Emotions)

Affective responses reflect the public's emotional involvement with the performance. Emotions such as awe, wonder, goosebumps, and even fear emerged as reflections of extreme actions like self-immolation. However, these reactions were more directed at the performative and visual aspects, rather than the spirituality of the message. This suggests that *emotional disconnect* between form and substance. In Islamic aesthetic studies, form (visual, artistic) should be a bridge to deeper meaning (*ma'na al-batini*). When emotional responses revolve solely around entertainment and sensation, the spiritual message as a medium for preaching becomes subordinated. In other words, the affective power of this tradition has not fully succeeded in leading the audience into a contemplative space about faith, sharia, or morals.

c. Behavioral Response

Behavioral responses highlight the extent to which the message of da'wah conveyed through dance can influence people's attitudes and actions. Based on field findings, there is a gap between the intentions of the message deliverer (dai) and the outcome for the audience. People enjoy the performance as an art form without feeling the need to internalize or implement the Islamic values it contains. This directly correlates with weaknesses in the cognitive and affective domains. In the context of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model, the da'wah message as a stimulus fails to penetrate the interpretation mechanism (organism), thus not eliciting significant behavioral change (response). Dancers like Yahya Syamsuddin, who deeply understand the content of the poetry and the philosophy of movement, actually demonstrate more tangible changes in religious behavior, demonstrating the importance of deep understanding in shaping *religious behavioral outcomes*.

Through this analysis it is shown that the cultural approach to preaching through *Fires in Mecca* has great potential as a locally based instrument of spiritual communication. However, its effectiveness depends heavily on the appropriateness of the form of expression, cultural codes, and the audience's receptiveness. To bridge the gap in perception and understanding, educational interventions and more communicative reinterpretations of symbols are needed. *intersemiotic translation* namely translating symbolic meaning into verbal forms that are easy for the public to understand can be a solution to expand the reach of the message of da'wah in this tradition.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this study shows that the dance tradition *Fires in Mecca* in Paropo Village, Makassar City, there is a strong construction of the meaning of preaching, if viewed from Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics through the elements *sign, object, And interpreting*, which reflects religious values such as belief in Allah, angels, apostles, the Quran, purification, prayer, and mutual respect. The dominant message of da'wah in this tradition is faith, as seen in the recitation of the tauhid sentence in each verse of the poetry recited. However, public understanding of this cultural da'wah message remains low. This is evident in cognitive responses that indicate a lack of understanding of the meaning of the messages conveyed, while affective responses only appear in the form of admiration for the spectacle, not the substance of the da'wah. As a result, behavioral responses or changes in behavior towards a more religious direction are not significant. Thus, a more communicative and educational approach is needed so that the da'wah message in this tradition can be better understood, accepted, and internalized by the community as a whole in everyday life.

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