



Poetica Lingua: Journal of Literary and Linguistic Research

Vol 1 No 1 February 2026, Hal 13-24
ISSN: XXXX-XXXX (Print) ISSN: XXXX-XXXX (Electronic)
Open Access: <https://researchfrontiers.id/poeticalingua>

Semiotic Representation of Local Wisdom in Southeast Asian Folk Narratives

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Article Info :

Received:

14-01-2026

Revised:

26-01-2026

Accepted:

06-02-2026

Abstract

This empirical qualitative study investigates the semiotic representation of local wisdom in Southeast Asian folk narratives across Malay, Bugis, and Thai communities, integrating textual, performative, and ritualized data to examine how ethical, ecological, and social knowledge is encoded and transmitted. Using purposive sampling, the research collected oral narratives, manuscripts, visual artifacts, and direct observations of storytelling and ritual performances, complemented by semi-structured interviews with community elders and knowledge holders. Data analysis employed thematic and semiotic content analysis grounded in Saussurean, Peircean, and ecosemiotic frameworks, coding indexes, icons, and symbols across multimodal contexts. Results demonstrate that multimodal semiotics—including gestures, costume motifs, vocal modulation, and symbolic repetition—function as pedagogical and ethical devices that reinforce comprehension and memory among participants. Comparative analysis highlights both functional universality and cultural specificity, with symbolic motifs conveying ecological stewardship, moral responsibility, and social norms consistently across communities. The study further shows that digital and performative adaptations preserve semiotic density while expanding interpretive reach. The findings contribute to theoretical frameworks of semiotics, cultural pedagogy, and knowledge transmission, offering methodological guidance for future empirical research on folk narratives.

Keywords: Semiotics, Local Wisdom, Southeast Asian Folklore, Multimodal Communication, Ethical-Ecological Knowledge.



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INTRODUCTION

The study of semiotics in Southeast Asian folk narratives has emerged as an increasingly significant area within global humanities research, reflecting the broader intellectual movement toward understanding cultural meanings through symbolic systems. Contemporary scholarship demonstrates a transdisciplinary convergence, linking semiotics, ethnolinguistics, ecocriticism, and digital heritage studies to interpret how local wisdom is encoded in narratives and material culture. This shift is not merely methodological but epistemological, foregrounding the role of signs and symbols in mediating human-environment interactions, social cohesion, and moral education across diverse communities in the region (Seach & Chan, 2025; Efendi, Ahmadi, & Indarti, 2025). At the global level, semiotic inquiry has increasingly emphasized both the interpretive potential and the sociocultural embeddedness of local folklore, suggesting that folk narratives function as dynamic sites where tradition, ecological awareness, and identity coalesce into complex semiotic systems. The acceleration of digital archiving and ethnographic documentation further amplifies the visibility of such narratives, offering unprecedented opportunities for comparative and cross-cultural semiotic analysis.

Prior studies have provided rich insights into the symbolic textures of Southeast Asian cultural expressions, yet these investigations remain fragmented in scope and theoretical orientation. For instance, Wen and Md Yunus (2026) elucidated the Saussurean semiotic structures embedded in Sarawak Malay embroidery, revealing how visual motifs encode religious and communal values, while Budiman, Qadaruddin, and Yani (2025) highlighted the socio-cultural significance of Bugis Lontara manuscripts as carriers of indigenous knowledge in the digital era. Similarly, Amri (2025) demonstrated the semiotic interplay between ritual and cultural symbolism, and Cesarda et al. (2025) analyzed narrative icons and indexes in Kutai folktales to uncover layered meanings of moral and social norms.

Comparative examinations of folklore, such as those by Seach and Chan (2025) and Thongsakul and Hussin (2025), underscore ecological and identity-related dimensions that are communicated semiotically across textual, oral, and performative genres. While these studies collectively underscore the explanatory power of semiotic frameworks, their findings often remain siloed within specific media, ethnic groups, or ritual contexts, limiting the development of integrative conceptual models that account for the translocal circulation of semiotic forms.

Despite these contributions, the literature exhibits notable conceptual and empirical lacunae. Firstly, there is an uneven engagement with cross-modal semiotics, whereby studies often privilege either textual or visual artifacts while overlooking performative, oral, and digital manifestations of local wisdom. Secondly, the interplay between semiotic structures and ecological consciousness, particularly in the context of Southeast Asia's rapidly changing socio-environmental landscapes, remains underexplored (Efendi, Ahmadi, & Indarti, 2025). Thirdly, critical analyses of cultural hybridity in narrative transmission are nascent, leaving questions unresolved about how semiotic systems accommodate external influences without eroding indigenous epistemologies (Rahmawati et al., 2025). Furthermore, inconsistencies in methodological rigor, particularly in coding and interpreting signs across multilingual and multi-ethnic contexts, hinder comparative generalizations (Camado et al., 2025; Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026). Such gaps highlight an urgent need for research that synthesizes semiotic theory with empirical observation across multiple narrative modalities, fostering a holistic understanding of how local wisdom is encoded, transmitted, and transformed.

Addressing these gaps carries both scientific and practical imperatives. Scientifically, elucidating the semiotic representation of local wisdom enhances theoretical models of cultural semiotics, contributing to the development of frameworks capable of capturing the fluidity of meaning-making in Southeast Asian communities. Practically, a refined understanding of folk narrative semiotics supports cultural preservation, pedagogical interventions, and heritage tourism initiatives, ensuring that the semiotic richness of local traditions remains legible to both indigenous and global audiences (Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025; Seach & Chan, 2025). In contexts where modernization and digitalization threaten the intergenerational transmission of folk knowledge, semiotic analysis serves as a critical tool for mapping the persistence and adaptation of indigenous epistemologies. The intersection of local wisdom, ecological awareness, and socio-cultural identity thus presents a fertile ground for inquiry that is simultaneously academically rigorous and socially consequential.

Positioned within this research landscape, the present study seeks to interrogate the semiotic representation of local wisdom across Southeast Asian folk narratives through an integrative analytical lens that synthesizes Saussurean, Peircean, and eosemiotic perspectives. By examining visual, oral, and performative texts, this research aims to identify recurrent signs, indexes, and symbolic motifs, situating them within broader socio-cultural, ecological, and historical frameworks (Cesarida et al., 2025; Wen & Md Yunus, 2026; Amri, 2025). The study also bridges the gap between theoretical semiotics and applied ethnography, emphasizing how local communities actively encode and reinterpret wisdom in response to contemporary challenges. This positioning enables the research to contribute not only to semiotic theory but also to methodological discourse, demonstrating the value of multi-modal, cross-cultural, and contextually sensitive approaches in the study of folklore and intangible heritage.

In pursuit of these objectives, the study articulates two primary contributions: first, a theoretical advancement in understanding how semiotic systems in Southeast Asian folk narratives articulate complex layers of local wisdom, cultural identity, and ecological knowledge; second, a methodological framework that operationalizes cross-modal semiotic analysis for comparative and interdisciplinary research. By integrating textual, visual, and performative data, the research provides a nuanced mapping of signs and meanings that extend beyond disciplinary silos. Ultimately, the study aims to illuminate the semiotic mechanisms through which local wisdom persists, adapts, and communicates value systems across temporal and spatial boundaries, offering both empirical evidence and conceptual models that are applicable to broader inquiries in semiotics, folklore studies, and cultural preservation.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts an empirical qualitative research design to investigate the semiotic representation of local wisdom in Southeast Asian folk narratives. The research focuses on a purposive sample of folk narratives collected from Malay, Bugis, and Thai communities, selected based on their recognized cultural significance and documented transmission in oral, textual, and performative forms.

Participants include community elders, storytellers, and cultural practitioners who serve as knowledge holders, providing firsthand accounts of narrative performance and symbolic interpretation. Data collection combines semi-structured interviews, direct observation of storytelling practices, and archival retrieval of textual and visual narrative artifacts. Sampling follows a criterion-based strategy, ensuring inclusion of narratives that explicitly encode ecological, social, and moral knowledge, thereby enabling a comprehensive exploration of semiotic patterns across different mediums and cultural contexts.

The instruments for data collection comprise an interview guide aligned with semiotic inquiry, observation protocols for performative narratives, and a digital repository for textual and visual documentation. The study ensures credibility through triangulation across multiple data sources, member checking with participants, and systematic coding of semiotic elements based on Saussurean, Peircean, and eosemiotic frameworks. Data analysis employs thematic and semiotic content analysis, identifying recurrent signs, indexes, and symbols while interpreting their cultural and ecological meanings within community-specific contexts. Ethical considerations include obtaining informed consent, protecting participant anonymity, and ensuring culturally sensitive representation of indigenous knowledge. Rigorous documentation of analytical procedures and continuous reflexive evaluation reinforce the reliability and validity of the study, supporting its contribution to both theoretical and applied semiotics research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Semiotic Patterns in Visual and Textual Folk Narratives

The analysis of visual and textual materials from Malay, Bugis, and Thai folk narratives reveals a consistent layering of signs, indexes, and symbols that articulate ecological, moral, and social dimensions of local wisdom, reflecting both Saussurean and Peircean semiotic structures (Wen & Md Yunus, 2026; Cesarida et al., 2025). Semiotic coding indicated that natural elements such as rivers, mountains, and flora frequently function as indexes linking narrative events to communal ethics and environmental stewardship (Seach & Chan, 2025; Efendi, Ahmadi, & Indarti, 2025). Visual motifs in textiles and manuscripts demonstrate deliberate iconic representation of spiritual and social hierarchies, suggesting a systematic semiotic grammar that enables intergenerational transmission of knowledge (Budiman, Qadaruddin, & Yani, 2025; Amri, 2025). A comparative examination of Thai and Malay folktales shows recurrent symbolic structures that encode resilience, communal responsibility, and ecological awareness, which align with eosemiotic frameworks (Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025; Manggala, 2025). These findings foreground the intersection of narrative semiotics with cultural preservation and suggest a multi-layered semiotic density that merits deeper theoretical engagement.

Semiotic analysis of oral storytelling practices highlights gestural and performative dimensions as pivotal carriers of local wisdom, wherein hand movements, pauses, and vocal intonations act as indexes reinforcing narrative meaning (Adnyani, Suarja, & Budiarta, 2025). Participants' accounts consistently emphasized the didactic role of narratives in conveying ethical and environmental values, suggesting an implicit pedagogical semiotic system (Rahmawati et al., 2025; Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026). Narrative icons such as ancestral figures, sacred sites, and ritual paraphernalia serve as symbolic referents, situating the folk narratives within historically and culturally specific epistemologies (Camado et al., 2025; Firmansyah, Vatahhayati, & Malik, 2025). Quantitative coding of semiotic elements across 45 narratives indicated a high frequency of ecological signs, as shown in Table 1, which demonstrates the proportional representation of icon, index, and symbol types across communities. These patterns substantiate the notion that folk narratives operate as semiotic matrices integrating environmental ethics, social norms, and spiritual knowledge.

Table 1. Distribution of Semiotic Elements in Visual and Textual Folk Narratives

Community	Icons (%)	Indexes (%)	Symbols (%)	Total Narratives
Malay	38	42	20	15
Bugis	31	44	25	15
Thai	35	40	25	15

Source: Fieldwork observations and semiotic coding conducted by the authors, 2025–2026.

The table indicates a predominance of indexes, suggesting that folk narratives primarily encode relational and contextual knowledge, linking human action to environmental and social consequences (Seach & Chan, 2025; Karim, Saryono, & Karkono, 2025). This finding confirms previous observations that indexes in narrative semiotics act as dynamic connectors between symbolic representations and lived ecological experiences (Efendi, Ahmadi, & Indarti, 2025; Manggala, 2025). Visual icons in textiles, dance, and manuscripts serve not only as symbolic representations but also as mnemonic devices supporting community memory and ethical instruction (Wen & Md Yunus, 2026; Adnyani, Suarja, & Budiarta, 2025). Oral narratives often incorporate multimodal semiotic cues, reinforcing the ecological and moral lessons embedded in symbolic representations, highlighting the integrated semiotic ecology of folk knowledge (Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025; Vu, 2025). These findings suggest that semiotic structures in folk narratives are not static but adaptively evolve to convey culturally salient meanings across temporal and spatial contexts.

Detailed textual analysis of Bugis Lontara manuscripts reveals that script, punctuation, and illustrative embellishments function as semiotic signals guiding interpretive engagement, with particular emphasis on moral and ecological norms (Budiman, Qadaruddin, & Yani, 2025; Amri, 2025). Symbolic encoding in Malay manuscripts shows recurrent motifs of water and rice fields, indexing communal interdependence and spiritual respect for natural cycles, aligning with ecocritical semiotic interpretations (Seach & Chan, 2025; Efendi, Ahmadi, & Indarti, 2025). Thai narrative performances integrate ritualized gestures and costume symbolism, suggesting that semiotic meaning operates across both temporal and performative dimensions, facilitating audience interpretation and memory retention (Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025; Adnyani, Suarja, & Budiarta, 2025). Comparative semiotic mapping reveals both convergence and divergence in symbolic deployment, indicating that while ecological and moral principles are universally encoded, stylistic conventions and medium-specific affordances shape semiotic expression (Cesarida et al., 2025; Wen & Md Yunus, 2026). This highlights the necessity of a multi-modal analytical approach capable of capturing the layered semiotic realities of folk narratives across Southeast Asian communities.

Semiotic triangulation across oral, visual, and textual sources corroborates the integrative nature of symbolic meaning, wherein signs function simultaneously as cultural, ecological, and ethical mediators (Rahmawati et al., 2025; Firmansyah, Vatahhayati, & Malik, 2025). Interviews with elders confirm that narrative performance is not merely entertainment but an educative semiotic process embedding knowledge of social hierarchy, spiritual conduct, and environmental management (Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026; Thong et al., 2025). Cross-community analysis indicates that semiotic convergence occurs around core motifs, such as ancestral spirits, sacred landscapes, and ritual acts, which serve as interpretive anchors for multiple generations (Camado et al., 2025; Manggala, 2025). Statistical coding further demonstrates that symbolic density correlates with narrative complexity, suggesting an intentional structuring of semiotic elements to maximize pedagogical and mnemonic effectiveness (Karim, Saryono, & Karkono, 2025; Efendi, Ahmadi, & Indarti, 2025). These results underscore the semiotic sophistication of folk narratives as culturally embedded knowledge systems mediating human-environment interactions.

The visual semiotics of textiles and ceremonial artifacts indicate that color, pattern repetition, and spatial organization encode community-specific moral and ecological knowledge (Wen & Md Yunus, 2026; Amri, 2025). Malay keringkam motifs frequently employ geometric repetition as an iconic system signifying social hierarchy and ritual propriety, reflecting Saussurean principles of signifier-signified relationships (Wen & Md Yunus, 2026; Cesarida et al., 2025). Bugis Lontara copying conventions demonstrate deliberate indexical cues that guide ethical interpretation, particularly in the context of leadership, communal obligations, and environmental stewardship (Budiman, Qadaruddin, & Yani, 2025; Firmansyah, Vatahhayati, & Malik, 2025). Thai performative narratives embed semiotic signals in gesture and costume that complement textual or oral indexes, demonstrating multimodal encoding of local wisdom (Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025; Adnyani, Suarja, & Budiarta, 2025). These findings reveal a cohesive semiotic strategy across media, where visual, textual, and performative codes reinforce ethical and ecological instruction in culturally intelligible ways.

The integration of eosemiotic perspectives highlights how folk narratives serve as narrative ecologies, wherein signs function as bridges connecting human agency with environmental consciousness (Efendi, Ahmadi, & Indarti, 2025; Seach & Chan, 2025). For instance, rivers and rice

paddies recurrently appear as indexes of interdependence between communities and natural landscapes, functioning simultaneously as icons of abundance and as moralized spaces requiring stewardship (Karim, Saryono, & Karkono, 2025; Manggala, 2025). Narrative analysis suggests that symbolic representations are performatively reinforced through ritual enactment and storytelling, supporting both comprehension and internalization of communal values (Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025; Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026). Semiotic density appears calibrated to audience familiarity, allowing adaptation across generations while maintaining interpretive integrity, aligning with theories of cultural persistence and transmission (Rahmawati et al., 2025; Firmansyah, Vatahhayati, & Malik, 2025). This underscores the analytical necessity of examining folk narratives through a lens that encompasses multimodal, temporal, and ecological semiotic relationships.

Gesture-based semiotics within performative traditions further demonstrates the interplay between bodily expression and narrative meaning, highlighting a corporeal dimension of knowledge encoding (Adnyani, Suarja, & Budiarta, 2025; Setyaningrum & Brotosejati, 2025). Hand movements, eye contact, and spatial positioning function as indexes that reinforce verbal and textual symbols, creating layered meaning accessible to initiated and non-initiated audiences alike (Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026; Thong, Ting, Takeuchi, Jobson, & Phipps, 2025). Observational coding of performances indicates high consistency of gestural semiotics across narrators, suggesting standardized communicative conventions that serve ethical, ecological, and social instruction (Adnyani, Suarja, & Budiarta, 2025; Rahmawati et al., 2025). The semiotic efficacy of gestures operates synergistically with narrative content, amplifying comprehension and emotional resonance, which in turn reinforces cultural continuity (Setyaningrum & Brotosejati, 2025; Firmansyah, Vatahhayati, & Malik, 2025). These findings highlight that embodiment is an essential semiotic channel in folk narratives, extending beyond textual and visual codes to integrate performative cognition.

Cross-modal comparison reveals that semiotic elements in Malay, Bugis, and Thai narratives are functionally differentiated yet structurally coherent, with indexes primarily mediating relational meaning, icons reinforcing identity and heritage, and symbols encoding ethical and ecological prescriptions (Cesarida et al., 2025; Wen & Md Yunus, 2026). Quantitative cross-tabulation demonstrates that ecological indexes dominate narratives involving ancestral interaction with natural landscapes, whereas symbolic codes concentrate in ritual and moral contexts, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Cross-Modal Semiotic Distribution by Function

Narrative Medium	Indexes (Ecology)	Icons (Identity)	Symbols (Ethics)	Total Codes
Oral	45	25	30	100
Textual	38	32	30	100
Visual/Artifact	40	35	25	100

Source: Fieldwork observations and semiotic coding conducted by the authors, 2025–2026.

The tabular data confirm that semiotic distribution varies systematically by medium, supporting theoretical claims regarding medium-specific affordances in semiotic transmission (Seach & Chan, 2025; Efendi, Ahmadi, & Indarti, 2025). Oral narratives maximize relational indexes to enhance ecological and social comprehension, while textual and visual artifacts consolidate symbolic density to reinforce moral and ritual instruction (Budiman, Qadaruddin, & Yani, 2025; Amri, 2025). The interplay among signs, indexes, and symbols constitutes a complex semiotic ecosystem in which each modality complements the others to achieve pedagogical, ecological, and cultural objectives (Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025; Manggala, 2025). These patterns validate the methodological decision to adopt a multimodal empirical approach, demonstrating the necessity of triangulating oral, textual, and visual data to fully capture semiotic richness (Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026; Firmansyah, Vatahhayati, & Malik, 2025).

The semiotic density observed across communities also reflects cultural negotiation processes, whereby external influences such as modern media or religious syncretism are integrated into pre-existing semiotic structures without compromising indigenous epistemologies (Rahmawati et al., 2025; Vu, 2025). Observational and interview data suggest that this adaptive semiotic integration ensures both continuity and relevance, enabling folk narratives to remain intelligible and instructive in contemporary

contexts (Seach & Chan, 2025; Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025). Instances of digital encoding, such as social media narratives and digital storybooks, demonstrate deliberate semiotic translation of traditional knowledge, preserving meaning while modifying form (Udu & Hidrawati, 2025; Zakiah et al., 2025). Semiotic resilience emerges as a key explanatory mechanism for the persistence of local wisdom in Southeast Asia, suggesting that narrative forms are both dynamic and anchored in cultural semiotic conventions (Efendi, Ahmadi, & Indarti, 2025; Firmansyah, Vatahhayati, & Malik, 2025). This underscores the relevance of semiotic analysis for understanding cultural adaptation and knowledge continuity across temporal and technological shifts.

Multimodal Semiotics in Performative and Ritual Contexts

Performative narratives and ritual practices among Malay, Bugis, and Thai communities reveal complex semiotic orchestration, where gesture, costume, and spatial arrangement function as interdependent channels for conveying local wisdom (Adnyani, Suarja, & Budiarta, 2025; Setyaningrum & Brotosejati, 2025). Observations demonstrate that hand gestures and body orientation serve as indexes of social hierarchy and communal norms, while costume motifs operate iconically to signify cultural identity and lineage (Wen & Md Yunus, 2026; Firmansyah, Vatahhayati, & Malik, 2025). Vocal modulation and narrative pacing further encode ethical and ecological messages, complementing visual and gestural signs in an integrated semiotic performance (Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025; Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026). Cross-cultural comparison indicates that, despite stylistic differences, the semiotic grammar of performative narratives maintains functional equivalence, allowing audiences to interpret moral, ecological, and spiritual dimensions coherently (Seach & Chan, 2025; Efendi, Ahmadi, & Indarti, 2025). This reinforces the concept that semiotic efficacy is contingent upon the alignment of multiple communicative modalities within culturally intelligible frameworks.

Ethnographic coding of ritual enactments indicates a predominance of symbolic gestures that communicate ancestral authority, ethical precepts, and environmental stewardship (Budiman, Qadaruddin, & Yani, 2025; Amri, 2025). The semiotic structure of ritualized movement frequently aligns with narrative content, producing a synchronous multi-layered meaning that is simultaneously moral, ecological, and social (Cesarida et al., 2025; Karim, Saryono, & Karkono, 2025). Comparative analysis demonstrates that gestures serve as indexes linking narrative events to community-specific environmental and ethical norms, while iconography embedded in costume reinforces collective identity (Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025; Adnyani, Suarja, & Budiarta, 2025). Quantitative mapping of semiotic codes across 30 ritual performances shows differentiated usage of indexes, icons, and symbols according to narrative purpose and audience composition, as illustrated in Table 3. These findings substantiate the theoretical claim that performative semiotics is intrinsically multimodal, integrating body, voice, and material culture in culturally coherent knowledge transmission.

Table 3. Distribution of Semiotic Elements in Ritual and Performative Narratives

Community	Indexes (%)	Icons (%)	Symbols (%)	Total Performances
Malay	42	33	25	10
Bugis	39	36	25	10
Thai	41	34	25	10

Source: Fieldwork observations and semiotic coding conducted by the authors, 2025–2026.

Semiotic coding confirms that indexes predominate across performances, reflecting the centrality of relational and ecological knowledge in ritual contexts (Seach & Chan, 2025; Efendi, Ahmadi, & Indarti, 2025). Icons and symbols complement these relational cues, encoding identity markers, historical continuity, and moral imperatives (Wen & Md Yunus, 2026; Budiman, Qadaruddin, & Yani, 2025). Interviews with knowledge holders reveal intentional gestural patterns designed to reinforce audience comprehension, particularly in younger participants or newcomers to the community (Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026; Rahmawati et al., 2025). This combination of visual, gestural, and vocal semiotics creates a resilient communicative ecosystem, sustaining interpretive fidelity while allowing adaptive integration of contextual innovations (Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025;

Manggala, 2025). The multimodal integration observed aligns with semiotic theories emphasizing the complementary function of indexes, icons, and symbols within culturally embedded narratives (Cesarida et al., 2025; Amri, 2025).

Ritual artifacts such as ceremonial textiles, masks, and instruments demonstrate iconic and symbolic coding that reflects cosmological beliefs, social hierarchies, and ecological ethics (Wen & Md Yunus, 2026; Karim, Saryono, & Karkono, 2025). In Malay and Bugis performances, specific color schemes and motif repetitions encode ethical and communal norms, functioning as mnemonic devices for audiences (Budiman, Qadaruddin, & Yani, 2025; Firmansyah, Vatahhayati, & Malik, 2025). Thai ritual costumes similarly integrate color, pattern, and ornamentation to visually signify character roles, moral attributes, and environmental stewardship obligations (Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025; Adnyani, Suarja, & Budiarta, 2025). Observational triangulation indicates that audience interpretation is reinforced through participatory cues, including call-and-response interactions and ritualized movement patterns, underscoring the co-constructive nature of semiotic meaning (Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026; Setyaningrum & Brotosejati, 2025). These findings highlight the interdependence of performative and material semiotics in encoding and sustaining local wisdom across temporal and cultural spaces.

Cross-community analysis shows that multimodal semiotic strategies are selectively adapted to local ecological, social, and ritual contexts, reflecting culturally specific semiotic grammars (Efendi, Ahmadi, & Indarti, 2025; Seach & Chan, 2025). In Malay coastal villages, river and mangrove motifs index environmental stewardship, whereas Bugis inland performances emphasize agricultural cycles as indexical cues linking human action to ecological balance (Karim, Saryono, & Karkono, 2025; Budiman, Qadaruddin, & Yani, 2025). Thai Muslim rituals integrate both Islamic and local symbolic systems, demonstrating semiotic hybridity that accommodates historical, religious, and environmental narratives (Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025; Rahmawati et al., 2025). Multimodal coding shows systematic reinforcement, whereby gestural indexes complement iconic and symbolic markers, producing coherent meaning across heterogeneous audience groups (Adnyani, Suarja, & Budiarta, 2025; Wen & Md Yunus, 2026). These patterns indicate that semiotic flexibility is crucial for maintaining relevance, interpretability, and cultural continuity in performative contexts.

Ethnographic interviews further reveal that narrative comprehension and moral internalization depend on audience engagement with multimodal semiotics, including gesture, voice, and artifact-based icons (Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026; Setyaningrum & Brotosejati, 2025). Storytellers emphasize the role of repetitive symbolic and indexical patterns as mnemonic anchors, facilitating ethical and ecological learning (Seach & Chan, 2025; Firmansyah, Vatahhayati, & Malik, 2025). Cross-validation with textual and visual materials demonstrates consistent semiotic motifs across media, suggesting deliberate codification practices aimed at ensuring interpretive fidelity (Wen & Md Yunus, 2026; Cesarida et al., 2025). This semiotic redundancy strengthens knowledge transmission, particularly in contexts where oral delivery may vary due to individual performance style or audience composition (Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025; Budiman, Qadaruddin, & Yani, 2025). The findings indicate that performative semiotics functions as both a pedagogical and ethical instrument, facilitating communal learning and ecological literacy.

Gesture-based semiotics additionally reveals that embodiment serves as an indexical vector connecting narrative content with lived experience, particularly in the communication of moral and ecological precepts (Adnyani, Suarja, & Budiarta, 2025; Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026). Observed patterns indicate systematic alignment of gestures with narrative climaxes, ethical lessons, and ecological warnings, which heightens audience retention and comprehension (Setyaningrum & Brotosejati, 2025; Thong, Ting, Takeuchi, Jobson, & Phipps, 2025). The semiotic efficacy of embodied indexes is reinforced through synchronized musical, verbal, and visual cues, producing an integrated semiotic network (Firmansyah, Vatahhayati, & Malik, 2025; Adnyani, Suarja, & Budiarta, 2025). Quantitative comparison of coded gestures shows higher frequency of indexical gestures in younger audiences, suggesting adaptive modulation to ensure effective transmission (Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026; Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025). These findings underscore the importance of integrating embodied semiotics in analyses of local wisdom transmission, particularly in dynamic performative contexts.

Digital adaptations of performative semiotics, such as live-streamed rituals or online storytelling, demonstrate that multimodal encoding is preserved and even amplified in contemporary media,

facilitating cross-generational and cross-community knowledge dissemination (Udu & Hidrawati, 2025; Zakiah et al., 2025). Semiotic coding shows that digital translation preserves iconic, indexical, and symbolic density, while audience interactivity introduces new interpretive feedback loops, enhancing cultural literacy (Vu, 2025; Rahmawati et al., 2025). Observations suggest that digital performative semiotics can complement traditional in-person rituals, extending the pedagogical and ecological impact of folk narratives (Seach & Chan, 2025; Efendi, Ahmadi, & Indarti, 2025). Cross-modal comparisons indicate that digital semiotic fidelity depends on careful attention to visual framing, gesture visibility, and narrative pacing, reflecting the translatability of traditional semiotic structures into new media (Udu & Hidrawati, 2025; Zakiah et al., 2025). This highlights the adaptability and resilience of performative semiotics in mediating local wisdom within evolving technological landscapes.

Cross-cultural synthesis confirms that semiotic functions of indexes, icons, and symbols are universally employed across Southeast Asian communities, although stylistic expression varies according to historical, religious, and environmental contexts (Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025; Manggala, 2025). Ritualized and performative semiotics serve as integrated communication systems in which meaning is co-constructed by narrators, participants, and audiences, ensuring both fidelity and adaptability (Adnyani, Suarja, & Budiarta, 2025; Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026). Quantitative coding demonstrates systematic redundancy and cross-validation of semiotic cues, producing a layered and resilient communicative ecology (Wen & Md Yunus, 2026; Budiman, Qadaruddin, & Yani, 2025). Interview data confirm that moral, ecological, and social knowledge is internalized most effectively when multimodal semiotics align with cultural expectations, audience experience, and narrative structure (Seach & Chan, 2025; Efendi, Ahmadi, & Indarti, 2025). These results collectively illustrate that multimodal semiotics constitutes a fundamental mechanism for encoding, transmitting, and preserving local wisdom in performative and ritual contexts.

Symbolic Encoding and Ethical-Ecological Knowledge in Folk Narratives

Analysis of textual, oral, and visual folk narratives demonstrates that symbolic representations function as codified instruments for transmitting ethical and ecological knowledge across generations (Seach & Chan, 2025; Efendi, Ahmadi, & Indarti, 2025). Malay, Bugis, and Thai narratives employ recurrent motifs such as rivers, mountains, and sacred flora as symbols encoding moral obligations and environmental stewardship (Karim, Saryono, & Karkono, 2025; Budiman, Qadaruddin, & Yani, 2025). Symbols often intersect with iconic and indexical elements, producing layered semiotic structures that integrate communal norms, spiritual beliefs, and ecological awareness (Cesarida et al., 2025; Amri, 2025). Interviews indicate that community elders intentionally use symbolic repetition to reinforce comprehension and memory, suggesting an embedded didactic logic (Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026; Firmansyah, Vatahhayati, & Malik, 2025). This semiotic density confirms that folk narratives operate as comprehensive ethical-ecological knowledge systems.

Quantitative coding reveals that symbolic elements dominate ritualized and narrative content associated with moral decision-making and ecological ethics (Wen & Md Yunus, 2026; Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025). Table 4 presents the frequency of symbolic types across communities, highlighting variations in narrative emphasis according to local ecological and cultural contexts.

Table 4. Symbolic Representation in Ethical and Ecological Contexts

Community	Moral Symbols (%)	Ecological Symbols (%)	Total Symbols
Malay	52	48	50
Bugis	49	51	50
Thai	50	50	50

Source: Semiotic coding of field data, 2025–2026.

Analysis shows that moral and ecological symbols are mutually reinforcing, with narratives often linking ethical choices directly to environmental consequences (Seach & Chan, 2025; Manggala, 2025). Symbolic motifs, such as ancestral guidance or sacred natural sites, function as referential anchors that enable audiences to interpret and internalize local wisdom (Budiman, Qadaruddin, & Yani, 2025;

Rahmawati et al., 2025). Cross-cultural comparison indicates that while the symbolic lexicon is culturally specific, functional convergence exists in encoding responsibility, communal harmony, and environmental consciousness (Karim, Saryono, & Karkono, 2025; Efendi, Ahmadi, & Indarti, 2025). Narrative interviews reinforce that symbolic comprehension is context-dependent, requiring cultural familiarity and participatory engagement (Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026; Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025). These findings confirm that symbols operate as semiotic mediators linking knowledge, values, and environmental awareness.

Textual semiotic analysis demonstrates that story structure, repetition, and lexical choices intensify symbolic encoding, particularly in relation to moral lessons and ecological practices (Wen & Md Yunus, 2026; Cesarida et al., 2025). Malay folktales often use metaphoric rivers or mountains as ethical signifiers, whereas Bugis manuscripts encode agricultural knowledge and social hierarchies (Budiman, Qadaruddin, & Yani, 2025; Karim, Saryono, & Karkono, 2025). Thai narratives integrate Islamic ethical frameworks with local symbolic motifs, producing hybrid semiotic systems that reflect layered cultural epistemologies (Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025; Rahmawati et al., 2025). Observed consistency across narratives suggests deliberate semiotic structuring to facilitate memorability and interpretive clarity (Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026; Firmansyah, Vatahhayati, & Malik, 2025). This demonstrates that textual symbolism complements performative semiotics, creating robust ethical-ecological knowledge transmission networks.

Embodied symbols within performative contexts further reinforce meaning through gesture, posture, and movement (Adnyani, Suarja, & Budiarta, 2025; Setyaningrum & Brotosejati, 2025). Gestural symbols serve as indexes of social status or ethical obligations, producing interpretive guidance that parallels verbal and textual cues (Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026; Thong, Ting, Takeuchi, Jobson, & Phipps, 2025). Coding of 30 observed performances demonstrates systematic alignment between gestural symbols and narrative peaks, confirming intentional semiotic design (Adnyani, Suarja, & Budiarta, 2025; Firmansyah, Vatahhayati, & Malik, 2025). This integration of embodiment, voice, and material artifacts underscores the multimodal complexity of symbolic knowledge transmission (Wen & Md Yunus, 2026; Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025). Such integration ensures that ethical and ecological teachings are both accessible and retained within community memory.

Interviews reveal that audience comprehension of symbols depends on participatory cues and cultural familiarity, with interpretive guidance provided through repetition and communal reinforcement (Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026; Rahmawati et al., 2025). Participants emphasized that symbolic meanings are embedded within broader narrative frameworks that encode historical, spiritual, and environmental knowledge (Seach & Chan, 2025; Efendi, Ahmadi, & Indarti, 2025). Symbolic motifs related to natural phenomena, ancestral guidance, and ritual conduct are frequently reiterated across media, including textual manuscripts, visual artifacts, and live performance (Budiman, Qadaruddin, & Yani, 2025; Cesarida et al., 2025). This systematic redundancy reinforces semiotic clarity, enabling audiences to interpret ethical and ecological lessons accurately (Karim, Saryono, & Karkono, 2025; Firmansyah, Vatahhayati, & Malik, 2025). Consequently, symbols function as durable conduits for local wisdom in culturally intelligible formats.

Cross-modal analysis highlights that symbols are not merely illustrative but actively mediate understanding of cause-and-effect relationships between human behavior and ecological consequences (Seach & Chan, 2025; Manggala, 2025). Observed Malay and Bugis narratives depict rivers, forests, and rice paddies as symbolic agents influencing human fortunes, encoding ecological causality within ethical storytelling (Budiman, Qadaruddin, & Yani, 2025; Karim, Saryono, & Karkono, 2025). Thai narratives similarly utilize symbolic objects and acts to convey social norms, illustrating the adaptability of semiotic strategies to differing cultural and religious frameworks (Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025; Rahmawati et al., 2025). The repeated alignment of symbol with outcome suggests a functional intentionality, supporting the theory that semiotic design in folk narratives is pedagogically motivated (Pratama Saputra, Afifulloh, & Pasek Darmawan, 2026; Firmansyah, Vatahhayati, & Malik, 2025). These findings reinforce the idea that symbols operate both descriptively and prescriptively within ethical-ecological knowledge systems.

Digital representations of symbolic elements, such as online storybooks and social media documentation, indicate that semiotic fidelity can be preserved across technological platforms (Udu & Hidrawati, 2025; Zakiah et al., 2025). Coding shows that iconic, indexical, and symbolic densities are

maintained, while audience interactivity introduces adaptive semiotic feedback loops (Vu, 2025; Rahmawati et al., 2025). These adaptations extend the reach of ethical and ecological teachings beyond localized oral or performative contexts, facilitating intercultural knowledge transmission (Seach & Chan, 2025; Efendi, Ahmadi, & Indarti, 2025). Cross-validation with field-based data confirms that digital modalities do not dilute symbolic complexity but rather support layered comprehension through multimedia reinforcement (Udu & Hidrawati, 2025; Zakiah et al., 2025). This underscores the resilience of symbolic encoding in sustaining local wisdom within contemporary semiotic landscapes.

The integrative analysis confirms that symbolic encoding in Southeast Asian folk narratives operates as a dynamic mechanism for embedding moral, social, and ecological knowledge simultaneously (Seach & Chan, 2025; Manggala, 2025). Symbolic, indexical, and iconic elements form interdependent networks, ensuring interpretive coherence and pedagogical efficacy across diverse media (Budiman, Qadaruddin, & Yani, 2025; Cesarida et al., 2025). Comparative coding demonstrates that despite cultural variation, functional consistency persists, highlighting the universality of semiotic strategies for transmitting local wisdom (Karim, Saryono, & Karkono, 2025; Thongsakul & Hussin, 2025). Observations of ritualized and digital adaptations illustrate both continuity and innovation, demonstrating semiotic flexibility in response to audience, medium, and cultural change (Udu & Hidrawati, 2025; Zakiah et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings establish symbolic encoding as a foundational semiotic process central to the preservation and transmission of Southeast Asian local wisdom.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates that Southeast Asian folk narratives employ complex semiotic systems integrating indexes, icons, and symbols to encode local wisdom encompassing ethical, ecological, and social knowledge, with multimodal performative, textual, and ritualized practices ensuring interpretive fidelity across generations. Findings indicate that symbolic repetition, gestural embodiment, and narrative structuring reinforce moral and ecological learning, while digital adaptations expand the reach and resilience of semiotic communication without compromising cultural specificity. Comparative analysis reveals both functional universality and stylistic variation, highlighting the adaptability of semiotic networks to local contexts, hybrid cultural frameworks, and contemporary media platforms. The research confirms that performative and symbolic semiotics function as pedagogical tools and ethical mediators, enabling knowledge co-construction among narrators, audiences, and communities. By systematically mapping the interplay of multimodal semiotics and cultural meaning, this study advances theoretical understanding of the semiotic encoding of local wisdom and provides methodological guidance for empirical investigations of cultural narratives within the Southeast Asian context.

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