

# **A STUDY ON THE *RENGKUH* GESTURE WITHIN SUNDA ETHNIC GROUP AS AN ALLEGORIC CULTURE IN VISUAL COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE**

**Supriatna**

Institut Seni Budaya Indonesia (ISBI) Bandung

## **Abstrak**

Cara masyarakat berperilaku terhadap tamu merupakan bagian dari sistem budaya yang dibentuk oleh seperangkat norma budaya yang diturunkan dari satu generasi ke generasi berikutnya. Di banyak budaya, orang menggunakan isyarat dalam interaksi sosial mereka. Orang Sunda, misalnya, melakukan gerak tangan ketika berinteraksi dengan tamu atau orang yang mereka hormati dengan cara merendahkan badan dan kepala (dalam istilah Sunda disebut 'rengkuh'). Sikap pribadi ini tidak hanya mencerminkan kepribadian mereka saat berhadapan dengan tamu, tetapi juga mencerminkan budaya komunitasnya. Rengkuh adalah aturan komunal tak tertulis, seni bahasa tubuh seseorang mulai dari postur berdiri yang alami hingga membungkuk. Secara visual, ada perbedaan posisi tubuh sebelum dan sesudah dilakukan. Perbedaan ini tentu memiliki arti tersendiri. Mengenai makna bentuk, penelitian ini dilakukan dalam lingkup komunikasi visual dengan menggunakan metode observasi langsung dan tidak langsung, serta pendekatan semiotik.

Kata Kunci: Rengkuh, Algoritma, Komunikasi Visual

## **Abstract**

The way people in society behave towards guests is part of a cultural system formed by a set of cultural norms passed on from one generation to the next generation. In many cultures, people use gestures in their social interactions. Sundanese people, for instance, gesticulate when they interact with guests or people whom they respect by lowering their torso and head (known as 'rengkuh' in Sundanese terms). This personal attitude not only reflects their personality when dealing with guests but also reflects the culture of their community. Rengkuh is an unwritten communal rule, an art of a person's body language from a natural standing posture to a bowing position. In terms of visual, there are differences in body position before and after it is done. These differences certainly have their meanings. Concerning the form-meaning, this research was conducted within the scope of visual communication by using direct and indirect observation methods, as well as a semiotic approach.

Keywords: Rengkuh, Allegorical, Visual Communication

## INTRODUCTION

In a communication event, language is used by the communicator to convey, capture, and provide feedback messages. Language, as a medium of communication, is divided into verbal and non-verbal language. Mulyana [7] (2008: 261 and 334) said that verbal language is a medium for expressing thoughts and feelings by using words, and non-verbal language is all signs that are not with words. Even though they are different in nature, the use of verbal and non-verbal language is usually inseparable. For example, when someone delivers a verbal message, then the body parts, both the face and the hands, express themselves with mimics and gestures to support the content of the message.

Non-verbal communication with body language takes place when a communicator gesticulates to get across messages to a communicant. Gesticulation, according to online Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI), means hand gesture. Cambridge dictionary<sup>2</sup> defines gesture as a movement of the hands, arms, or head, etc. to express an idea or feeling. Referring to these definitions, gestures can be interpreted as body language depicted in symbolic behavior [10] (Burke in Susanto, 2018:13).

Gestures as body language are expressed through partial or whole-body movements to form a symbol, as an emphasis for non-verbal messages, or as a companion to verbal communication. In the context of interpersonal communication, gestures are considered as personal expressions which reflect personal characteristics. Therefore, the message recipient can perceive the communicator's gestures into various personality traits, such as friendly, egalitarian, humble, or rude (unethical).

In the socio-cultural context, the symbols of gesture are not only related to individual charac-

ters, but also reflect their culture. Body language is a person's means of communication related to the communication style of his or her society. Different ethnicities have different ways of expressing their body language. Desmond Morris (1994) in David B. Givens [3] (2002; p. 2-3) claimed that:

*Accompanying hundreds of human-wide, universal gestures, such as the shoulder-shrug and smile (which, themselves, may be shaped by culture) are hundreds of additional gestures which must be learned to be understood. Many of the latter, culturally coded gestures—such as the hand ring (Italy), hand ring-jerk (Great Britain), hand ring-kiss (France), and hand ring pull-side (Holland).*

In some ethnic societies in Asia, the way people show their respect to guests, esteemed people, foreigners or incomers is different between ethnic groups. For example, the Tibetan people stick out their tongues, Thailand people press both palms before their chess with slightly-bowed head, and the Japanese bend at their waist when facing their communicants<sup>3</sup>. In Sundanese society, gesticulation when interacting with other people is worthy of attention. It is related to the ethics of cultural norms, either preferable or undesirable attitudes.

Body language manners in society certainly do not exist by themselves. It is a product of a habitual process from generation to generation that forms a cycle of etiquette in the society. The most significant and fundamental contribution comes from the family since parents set an example and teach their children to apply the culture of body communication. Likewise, parents are influenced by the environment in which they interact with neighbors, as well as in the wider setting, such as what and how to use appropriate body language to

survive in society.

This manner continues to be taught to the next generations. Thus, it becomes customary norms in terms of politeness, law, and religious norms that are mutually agreed upon as guidelines for people to act and behave in their society:

Rengkuh in the Indonesian-Sundanese Dictionary means a gesture of respect by bowing slightly [4] (Koesman Epa Sjafei Adisastra, 1985). For Sundanese people, the culture of respecting guests is highly important and has become life philosophy held in daily social interactions. It says ‘*someah hade kasemah*’, which means friendly and well behaved towards guests. This philosophy is then visually depicted in the *rengkuh* gesture.

Visually, when a human standing upright is depicted with normal muscle strength, this marks the depiction of normal posture. However, when a human body is bent, it is depicted with relaxed muscle and marks the gesture visualization that the body structure is not in its normal strength and the body shape is relaxed. From a visual arts perspective, the change in gesture from normal upright to bent is generally visualized for other human activities. Yet, in this case, the visual of bending is during social interaction. Therefore, it is interesting to be studied further why Sundanese people have to bend when they interact with other people. The meaning and cultural values of *rengkuh* can be analyzed within the visual arts communication perspective.

The formulations of the questions are as follows.

- 1) What is the form of Sundanese *rengkuh* gesture interpreted as a sign of respect towards guests?
- 2) What is the symbol behind the form of Sundanese *rengkuh* as a communication system of visual art towards guests?
- 3) What is the meaning of the form of Sundanese *rengkuh* viewed from the visual arts communication perspective?

## METHODS

This study used a qualitative method with descriptive-analytic approach, that is, the conclusion will be largely determined by the researcher based on reality supported by authentic data. Data was collected through direct and indirect observation, as well as key informant interviews. The selected data were analyzed through a comprehensive study. Conclusions were drawn by using Erwin Panofsky’s iconography-iconology semiotic theory approach in the perspective of visual communication.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Rengkuh Gestures

The life system adopted by the Sundanese people shows a pattern of attitudes that prioritize peace, togetherness and harmony in their action or speech during their interaction with either fellow ethnic groups or people from different ethnicities, beliefs, and gender. Cultural attitudes cannot be separated from the characteristics of cultural norms in the community, for example, the appropriateness of word selection and body gestures.

According to Ardiwinata in Nina [5] (1998; 173-179), the ethics of Sundanese culture include behavior, language, and clothing aspects. The “behavior” or manner is shown by gesture and body movements that covers:

- a) *Sembah*
- b) *Sila atau emok, cingogo dan mando*
- c) *Dongko, sampoyong* (mamandapan, according to Satjadibrata), *tapak deku, ngorondang, gengsor, dan midek*
- d) *Ngampil*.



Fig. 1.

(Source: <https://www.wajibbaca.com/2016/07/mlaku-mbungkuk-akhlaq-orang-jawa-yang.html>. Download 24 September 2020)

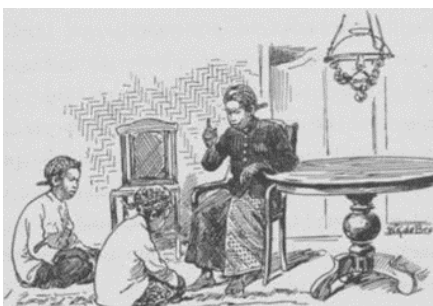


Fig. 2.

(Source: Roesdi djeung Misnem: Boekoe Batjaan pikeun Moerid di Sakola Soenda, downloaded from Facebook; Ade Daryana, Sept. 25, 2020.)



Fig. 3.

(Source: Djaja Diredja, Adiwidjaja, 194, Boekoe Batjaan di Sakola Soenda, Djilid 1, Soember Aroem)



Fig. 4.

(Source: Supriatna,2020)

In another statement, [5] Nina (1998; 172-173) said that in 1908 there was a special book about etiquette entitled *Tatakrama Oerang Soenda*, compiled by an OSVIA teacher, DK. Ardiwinata. It stated that the first person to be honored was a nobleman, and a higher-ranking nobleman was given more honor than a lower-ranking nobleman. One of the Sundanese etiquettes was when someone demonstrated respect or *sembah* towards a Regent, it had to be done several times more than when he performed *sembah* to a lower-ranking nobleman. *Sembah* was always accompanied by *rengkuh* gesture.

*Rengkuh* is a person’s attitude expressed by his body gesture, which is bending or bowing when interacting with another respected person or a group of invited people as guests who must be honored. *Rengkuh* in the online dictionary means respect. It is a verb related to body gestures performed by a person, as body language when communicating.

According to R.A. Dana Dibrata (2006) in the Sundanese Dictionary, *rengkuh* means:

“Adat kabiasaan ngahormat ka saluhureun ku jalan bandan saeutik rada dibongkokeun, sok disebut oge renggu: ting rengkak; orang sunda lamun ngomong kasaluhureun lain hungkul bahasana lemes tapi oge dibarengan ku rengkuh,”

(English Translation: “The custom of respecting older people, with the body slightly bent, often called *Renggu*: see *Rengkak*; Sundanese people, when talking to older people, do not only use the refined speech level but also complement it with a *rengkuh* attitude.”)

*Rengkuh* gesture has different forms that depend on where, when, and in front of whom it occurs. The followings are the occasions when the Sundanese custom of *rengkuh* takes place.

1. When someone passes in front of another person who happens to be on the street.
2. When someone is being advised or reprimanded by a respected person.
3. When someone is dealing with guests or respected people.
4. At the beginning and at the end of an artist's performance on stage, the artist demonstrates respect by *rengkuh*.

### Visual Communication of *Rengkuh*

Research on the social gesture of *rengkuh* as a Sundanese allegorical culture towards guests is a study related to individual character, yet has an impact on the stigma of an ethnicity. The *rengkuh* attitude toward guests is the attitude of communication carried out with body language. This non-verbal language is not interpreted directly with a single meaning. Instead, it is allegorical, a figurative that has plural meanings.

Erwin Panofsky [9] (1972: 3,4), an iconology semiotician, shared his experience that while he was having coffee in a café, he became acquainted with someone whilst lifting his hat. From a formalistic point of view (visual science), there were changes in certain details, namely the facial expressions and a hat that was lifted from the head accompanied by a bowing gesture for a moment.

The factual changes are a typical form of expression nature. However, the gesture created a psychological nuance to raise empathy, which instinctively evokes certain reactions to the communicant. The visible form can be classified as a primary meaning or something natural. However, the relationship between lifting the hat and the custom



Fig. 5.  
(Source: Supriatna,2020)

of a brief greeting might be interpreted as different connotations, and need to be seen from elements of culture and history.

The *rengkuh* gesture is a form of body communication that becomes art related to cultural customs. Comprehending the gesticulation of body art as visual arts communication can enrich the meaning repertoire of the visual arts, in particular, comprehending the meaning of traditional culture in the context of the art communication, especially visual art communication. West and Turner [11] (2008: 5) West and Turner (2010: 5) proposed that “*Communication is a social process in which individuals employ symbols to establish and interpret meaning in their environment.*” Kenney (2009 :1) considered visual communication “*as a social process in which people exchange messages that include visuals*”.

Based on the explanation above, visual communication is related to visual arts. Besides, there is also a grammar of visual language, as stated by Bradley:

*The reason for writing a grammar of visual language is the same as for any language: to define its basic elements, describe its patterns and processes, and to understand the relationship between the individual elements in the system. Visual language has no formal syntax*

*or semantics, but the visual objects themselves can be classified.*

The *rengkuh* gesture is a form of visual communication, which is based on the Sundanese culture. Its interpretation implies denotative-connotative meaning <sup>6</sup>, namely, how is the relation between the *rengkuh* gesture with hospitality, respect, and openness.

Denotation is direct, namely the special meaning contained in a sign, and in essence, it can be called a picture of a sign. Meanwhile, connotations will be associated with the culture that wraps it [6] (Maryanto and Sunarto: 2005: 55).

Based on his experience, the semiotician Erwin Panofsky [8] (1955: 26) formulated three stages of analysis, namely pre-iconography, iconography, and iconology. The first-level analysis, pre-iconography is also called the primary or Subject Matter. This analysis is an effort to understand the most basic (natural) without involving cultural knowledge. It is solely based on the individual experience of an object of research (visual), namely the perception of basic elements in visual work, such as configurations, lines, colors, textures, special shapes, or certain objects that represent everyday life. The secondary level of analysis, iconography is also called the conventional subject matter. This stratum goes a step further and brings to the equation cultural and iconographic knowledge. The tertiary level analysis, iconology is also called Intrinsic Meaning or Content. This level takes into account personal, technical, and cultural history into the understanding of a work.

The following is an analysis of *rengkuh* gestures when a person is interacting with other people, such as guests or respected people.

#### a. Pre-iconography

Primary data: a person stands upright and bows. His chest is deflated, both of his palms are placed together in front of his chest. He gives a slight nod and a smile while looking at the other person.

#### b. Iconography

The secondary data: there are changes in gesture configuration from standing upright to bending. In terms of gesture, the movement changes the form on the body surface from contracted muscles in the chest and head to uncontracted muscles (relaxation gesture occurs). A relaxed body gesture indicates that the muscles are relaxed, not tense.

#### c. Iconology

This section takes into account history and culture in understanding visuals. In this section, *Rengkuh* as an art movement is not an independent event, but it is connected to the conceptual norms that shape it. Based on primary data and secondary data, the researcher analyzed the body language of looking down, deflating, and also facial expressions in relation to their culture.

The gesture changes from standing upright to bending when interacting with another person is an implementation of the *rengkuh* attitude, namely the Sundanese custom of respecting an older person, a guest, and an honorable ruler by bending the body slightly. The implementation of the bending gesture shows allegorical visual communication, which is a diplomatic language that is not understood immediately by the interlocutor [1] (Anshori, 2017;63)

However, logically it can be understood as a symbol of lowering one's pride by acknowledging that his or her position or rank does not exceed

those of his or her interlocutor.

In line with the expression ‘*handap asor*’ that R.A. Danadibrata, [2] (2006; 37), defined as *handap*: something that counts between distances or under, *asor*: loses; *handap asor*: *Sagala hormat tara tinggal ti bari diuk atawa nagog, oge bisa dihartikeun rendah, teu ngaluhurkeun diri kanu sejen*. It is a life philosophy of how we treat others so that we will not feel arrogant.

The gesture of contracting the chest is a visual symbolization of an allegorical character, which is feeling small or making himself smaller as an ordinary person who acts powerless in front of others. The gesture of deflating the chest can also be interpreted as being submissive, having no power to argue against the other person. Another meaning that this visual communication gives is ready to serve and assist the interlocutor.

A smiling face and friendly expressions are also a way of visual communication through facial expressions. This *marahmay* expression (pleasant expression) indicates that the person is happy to be dealing with the person he is interacting with. The welcoming aura on the face gives the impression of peace, sincerity, openness, friendly, and reflects his positive thoughts about his interlocutor. This expression is an implementation of the life philosophy. Pleasing both guests and foreigners in Sundanese society is a highly recommended principle.

## CONCLUSION

The Sundanese people have a noble culture in receiving guests or respected people through speech and body language integrated into the form of *rengkuh* gesture. Thus, this manner is the society’s operational system of visual communication in carrying out the culture of respecting other people.

*Rengkuh* gesture is the art of movement that visualizes allegorical symbols (imagery). Its interpretation needs a comprehension of the local culture. However, in general, it contains positive signs with universal meanings. It can be interpreted as the Sundanese people’s openness and hospitality in honoring guests. Regarding that, *rengkuh* gesture shows the individual pleasant characteristic (brand personality) and also reflects the manner of its society.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Anshori, Dadang S, 2017, Etnografi Komunikasi Perspektif Bahasa, Jakarta, Rajawali Pers
- [2] Dibrata, R.A. Dana, 2006, Kamus Basa Sunda, Bandung, Bandung, Kiblat Buku Utama, Universitas Padjadjaran.
- [3] Givens, David B. 2002 The NonVerbal Dictionary of Gestures, Signs & Body Language Cues From Adam’s-Apple-Jump to Zygomatic Smile, Washington, Center for Non-verbal Studies Press.
- [4] Koesman Epa Sjafei Adisastra, 1985, Kamus Sunda, Jakarta –Indonesia, Pusat Pembinaan dan Pengembangan Bahasa Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Keith Kenney, 2009, Visual Comunication Research Designs, New York, Routledge.
- [5] Lubis, Nina 1998, Kehidupan Menak Priangan Tahun 1800-1942, Bandung, Pusat Informasi Bahasa Sunda.
- [6] Maryanto, M. Dwi dan Sunarto: 2005, Tanda-Tanda Dalam Kebudayaan Kontemporer Suatu Pengantar Semiotika (terjemahan dari Arhur Asa Berger), Yogyakarta, Triana Wacana Yogya.
- [7] Mulyana, Deddy, 2008, Komunikasi Massa Kontroversi, Teori dan Aplikasi, Band-

---

ung, Widya Padjadjaran

- [8] Panofsky, Erwin, 1955, Meaning In The Visual Art, Garden City New York, Double day Anchor Books Doubleday&Company,Inc.
- [9] \_\_\_\_\_, 1972, Studies In Iconology, Oxford University, Westview Press.
- [10] Susanto Harry,Eko, 2018, Komunikasi Manusia Teori dan Praktek Dalam Menyampaikan Gagasan, Jakarta Mitra Wacana Medita.
- [11] West, Richard, Turner,Lynn H, 2008, Pengantar Teori Komunikasi Analisis dan Aplikasi, penerjemah Maria Natalia Damayanti Maer. Jakarta, Salemba Humanika.

#### Web

- [12] <https://kbbi.co.id/arti-kata/gestikulasi>
- [13] <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/gesture>
- [14] <https://www.diction.id/t/bagaimana-cara-orang-menyapa-berdasarkan-asal-negara/6679>
- [15] [http://www.id.wikipedia:visual grammar](http://www.id.wikipedia:visual_grammar)  
downloaded 28 /7/ 2019
- [16] <https://woocara.blogspot.com/2016/04/pengertian-norma-macam-macam-norma-fungsi-norma.html>
-