

Beyond the page: Unearthing local wisdom in the Sundanese classic manuscript *Wawacan Bermana Sakti*

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ABSTRACT

Although the Sundanese manuscripts have been thoroughly studied, critical examination remains limited, and unearthing their underlying messages or wisdom could yield new insights. To fill the gap, this article examines the layered meanings of a traditional Sundanese folktale, *Wawacan Bermana Sakti*, by exploring how narrative motifs and symbolic codes articulate nature as an ecological, ethical, and spiritual concern within Sundanese society. Written in Pegon script between the 18th and 19th centuries, in verse form for performance as songs, *Wawacan Bermana Sakti* narrates the journey of Prince Bermana Sakti, an exiled prince who becomes a true king. Guided by Dundes' folkloristics (2007) and Eco's semiotics (1976), the analysis positions nature, in relation to the characters in the text, as a partner, the sacred, and power. This positioning is constructed through the recurring narrative structures examined in Dundes' categories, while Eco's semiotic lens reveals multilayered signs embedded in the various forms of nature as a partner, the sacred, and as power. The analysis indicates that the constructed nature has reflected an ethic of interdependence in which humans must learn from and live with nature. It can be assumed that nature has an enabling agentive quality that transforms *Bermana Sakti* into an accomplished leader. *Wawacan Bermana Sakti* anticipates ecological crises by perpetuating the notion that human survival and legitimacy depend on recognizing nature's agency rather than subordinating it. Reflecting on the current ecological disaster, revisiting old manuscripts from various parts of Indonesia might shed light on local wisdom, which should be sustained as it may offer alternative solutions to contemporary issues at both the national and global levels.

Keywords: Agentive quality; *Bermana Sakti*; nature; Sundanese manuscript; *wawacan*

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INTRODUCTION

The Sundanese are an ethnic group in Indonesia who inhabit western Java, specifically the West Java province. The Sundanese are rich in cultural artifacts, such as ancient temples and musical instruments, as well as traditions in music, culinary arts, and literature. With their distinct culture, the Sundanese are popular among Indonesia's multicultural communities. Nevertheless, compared with academic Javanese studies, which have enjoyed

greater exposure at the national and global levels, academic studies on Sundanese are relatively few and little known (Watson & Moriyama, 2025). As a matter of fact, Sundanese traditions, most specifically the literary tradition, are worth investigating for their extensive historical evidence. According to Suherman (2019), the Sundanese literary tradition dates back to the 16th century with the discovery of an old manuscript *Sanghyang Siksakandang Karesian*, compiled in 1518.

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Furthermore, the colonial education policy in the latter years of the 19th century created space for printed Sundanese stories for the educated, thereby raising Bandung's literacy rate to the highest in the Indies (Moriyama, 2005).

The Sundanese people have a long tradition of poetic storytelling that is deeply woven into their cultural identity. Even today, some communities perform poetic storytelling at communal gatherings, such as harvest festivals, and at art festivals. At the heart of this tradition is the *wawacan*, a long narrative poem written in metrical verses called *pupuh*. These texts really took off after the Mataram Kingdom of Central Java expanded into Sundanese lands in the 17th century, and they were adopted by both the nobility and Islamic scholars (Mukherjee, 2009; Rosidi, 1966). While the form has Javanese roots, it blends indigenous beliefs with Islamic teachings and local folklore in a distinctly Sundanese way.

Wawacan manuscripts show just how diverse and flexible the Sundanese writing culture has been. Ruhaliah (2018) points out that they were written in different scripts, Old Sundanese, Javanese-Sundanese, Pegon (an Arabic script adapted for local languages), and Latin, each reflecting different religious, political, and educational influences over time. Even older Pallava scripts appear on stone inscriptions, hinting at just how far back Sundanese literacy goes. Ruhaliah also notes that these manuscripts were handwritten on paper or palm leaves, bound as scrolls or stitched booklets, and kept in sacred sites (*kabuyutan*), libraries, and private collections. These are not just containers for words; they are cultural artifacts that carry the aesthetics, technologies, and spiritual practices of their era.

To appreciate *wawacan* fully, however, one must attend not only to its material existence but also to its formal literary architecture. Every *wawacan* is organized around the *pupuh* system, a set of metrical patterns borrowed from the Javanese *tembang* (traditional songs) tradition but shaped by Sundanese sensibilities. Each *pupuh* has its own rules: how many syllables per line, how many lines per stanza, and what vowel sound ends each line, collectively called *guru wilangan* and *guru lagu* (Soepandi, 1985). These are not just random decorative rules. They carry meaning. Different meters carry different emotional tones and narrative functions (Ruhaliah, 2018; Sumarsono et al., 1990). *Dangdanggula*, for example, tends to appear during elevated, majestic, or contemplative moments, often at key turning points or when royalty speaks. *Kinanti* has a more intimate, longing feel and often appears in scenes of separation or yearning. *Asmarandana*, etymologically tied to *Kamajaya*, the god of love, is typically used for romance or tender devotion. So the choice of a *pupuh* meter is itself a layer of meaning-making that shapes the content

before a single word is even read. Reading a *wawacan* without paying attention to these metrical choices may lead to a loss of meaning. Strangely enough, this formal side of *wawacan* has not gotten nearly as much scholarly attention as its historical and ethnographic dimensions, which is a quite significant gap in the research.

To understand why *wawacan* emerged and thrived the way it did, an examination into the historical conditions that produced it is necessary. The Mataram expansion into Sundanese territory in the 17th century was not just a political takeover, it reshuffled the whole cultural landscape of West Java (Hermansoemantri, 1979). When Mataram's court culture and literary conventions were imposed on Sundanese communities, it created a situation of both accommodation and pushback. In this light, *wawacan* can be seen as a negotiated cultural form, one that adopted Javanese structural templates while retaining distinctly Sundanese oral, spiritual, and cosmological content. At the same time, Islam was spreading deeper across the archipelago, adding another layer. Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) became key places where *wawacan* were copied and circulated in *Pegon* script, embedding the genre within an Islamic moral framework (Mukherjee, 2009; Rosidi, 1966). But many *wawacan* narratives still carried pre-Islamic cosmological elements, animism, spirit intermediaries, and divine animals (Rosidi, 1995a), revealing a blend that neither the Mataram court nor the Islamic establishment could fully stamp out. This messy history means we should not treat *wawacan* as a simple expression of cultural consensus. It is more like a contested text, produced at the crossroads of competing ideological and spiritual traditions.

Studying Sundanese oral traditions matters because it can help shape and reshape people's identities and offer reflective insights into their roots and beliefs about life. Studies in this area often intersect with manuscript studies, such as *wawacan* research. However, much of the existing work, especially the early foundational studies, is mostly descriptive and historical. The earliest efforts, and much of what is still being done, involve transcription, transliteration, translation, and summary, as can be seen from Rigg's seminal work (1862/1998) right up through the Indonesian National Library's 2025 compilations. Major Sundanese philologists, such as Ekadjati (1988), Iskandarwassid et al. (1989), Kartomi (1973), Rosidi (1995b), and Ruhaliah (2018), have described the forms, features, and functions of *wawacan* across different Sundanese communities. Many *wawacan* tell hero's journey stories, showing how princes rely on resilience and resourcefulness to overcome their enemies before emerging as true rulers. Along the way, the heroes, usually princes, get supernatural help to defeat their rivals. While *wawacan* is not as popular as it used to be, it remains part of Sundanese

social life, appearing at gatherings, such as harvest festivals and religious celebrations. The texts often describe or explain the philosophy and practice of farming, marriage, and Islamic religious observance (Hernawan et al., 2021; Yunidawati, 2019). They also carry values such as *silih asih, silih asuh, silih asah* (mutual love, care, and education), as well as living in harmony with nature, which are seen as core Sundanese local wisdom (Koswara et al., 2019; Maulana et al., 2024). Ilfiandra and Saripudin (2023) describe Sundanese people as embodying “total harmony” across three dimensions: harmony with God and nature, harmony with others, and harmony with self. Therefore, the *wawacan* documents and conveys the Sundanese resilience in adapting to socio-cultural changes, enabling human capacity building as mandated by the Sustainable Development Goals for quality education.

Consequently, *wawacan* has become a popular resource for teaching in secondary schools. Even though Indonesian is the official language, the government encourages the teaching of local languages in schools by granting provincial governments autonomy to decide whether to teach their local languages, helping preserve local cultures. Although provincial governments’ decisions on this matter vary, West Java has decided to teach the local language, Sundanese. Therefore, Sundanese is taught in primary and secondary schools across West Java, where most people are Sundanese. Using an ethno-pedagogical approach, teachers bring *wawacan* into the classroom both to preserve the language and literary tradition. Like other Sundanese literary forms (see Rostiyati et al., 2024; Yanti et al., 2024), *wawacan* reinforces Sundanese spiritual values, especially Islamic ones, as a way of educating people.

Another popular current thread in *wawacan* studies is how Sundanese women are portrayed. Mukherjee (2025) and Ruhailiah (2015) examine portrayals of Sundanese women in two texts. Both *wawacan* describe the ideal Sundanese woman as fair-skinned, outspoken, and fairly independent in making decisions. This aligns with findings from Tanusy et al. (2024) that women in Sundanese folktales have agency, even if it is often limited to domestic settings or tied to male characters. These studies have highlighted some interesting differences between Sundanese women and the more submissive, demure image often associated with, for example, Javanese women.

While there is a lot of scholarship on *wawacan*, often overlapping with general research on Sundanese oral traditions, most of it is descriptive and historical, focusing on transcription, transliteration, translation, and summary. What is noticeably absent is sustained critical and interpretive engagement with these texts as complex literary and semiotic artifacts. Descriptive work, however essential to philology, cannot fully account

for the ideological work these narratives do, the symbolic systems they draw on, or the cultural anxieties they work through. The field has not yet systematically applied interpretive frameworks from folkloristics, semiotics, postcolonial theory, or ecocriticism to *wawacan* in ways that go beyond describing content to actually interrogating how meaning gets made. This theoretical gap is not just an academic problem; it has real consequences for how *wawacan* is taught, how its values are passed on, and how its relevance for today’s ecological and ethical concerns gets articulated.

The same limitation holds true for *Wawacan Bermata Sakti*, a tale probably composed sometime between the 18th and 19th centuries. Transcribed from *Pegon* into Roman script in 1986, it tells the story of a young prince who has everything, loses it, is thrown into hardship, and eventually regains what is his. The story explores human-animal relationships through layered narratives and poetic forms. Like most *wawacan* texts, *Wawacan Bermata Sakti* is structured through *pupuh* meters, each one, whether *dangdanggula*, *kinanti*, or *asmarandana*, carrying its own emotional tone and narrative rhythm. The metrical system shapes storytelling in ways that are, as argued above, analytically significant. Sumarsono et al. (1990) conducted a study on the narrative structure of this *wawacan*, but did not engage in a critical analysis of the text. Consequently, this article seeks to move beyond descriptive work and attempts to re-read the manuscript through a multidisciplinary lens, guided by Dundes’ folkloristics (2007) and Eco’s semiotics (1976). Dundes argues that variations in folktales are proof of their living, dynamic nature, but he insists that a folklorist’s goal is to interpret the texts based on their layers: text, texture, and context. Meanwhile, Eco contends that any interpretation of a sign points to other signs, yet is bound by the text’s boundaries. In other words, while Dundes helps us understand the cultural roots of a text, Eco offers the tool for decoding how the text communicates meaning to its reader. More specifically, this study aims to explore how narrative motifs and symbolic codes articulate nature as an ecological, ethical, and spiritual concern within the Sundanese society. In doing so, this study reveals how exploring indigenous narratives might serve not only as a form of cultural preservation but also as a crucial step in rediscovering sustainable syncretic wisdom for our contemporary world.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design rooted in the interpretivist paradigm and uses Umberto Eco’s semiotic framework to analyze the transliterated manuscript. This approach is fundamentally qualitative, as it explores and

interprets the meanings ascribed to individuals or groups of people (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Within a semiotic framework, a text is not merely a form of communication, but a multi-layered signification. In other words, beyond its literal meaning, a text may have symbolic or cultural meanings that depend on the audience and context. For example, a wolf is seen as a threat to European culture, but it could mean something different in a region where wolves are not present. By positioning the researchers as the 'Model Reader' (Eco, 1979), the design acknowledges that the manuscript is an 'open work' requiring active, context-bound interpretation to reconstruct its internal 'encyclopedia' – the total of everything a specific culture, in this case, the Sundanese, knows or believes about the world. Therefore, the analysis aims to achieve a deep, qualitative understanding of the ideological and semiotic codes that governed the manuscript production.

Wawacan Bermana Sakti was one of the popular *wawacan* that represent the hero's journey trope with an interesting element of masquerade, yet it remains under-researched for its multidisciplinary approach. The text centers on Radén Bermana Sakti's adventures. Radén Bermana Sakti, the smart and handsome prince of Keling, is exiled after secretly freeing a mythical lion that his father had captured. The lion is actually King Sindujaya of Singasari. Disguised in a skin darkened by a Pua fruit, Bermana Sakti becomes a servant named Si Puwa in Majapahit, an expansive kingdom, and befriends Princess Puspitawati.

Through a series of contests orchestrated by Sindujaya to repay his debt, Si Puwa wins the right to marry Puspitawati, but must repeatedly prove his worth. He eventually reveals his true form as the radiant prince Radén Bermana Sakti and marries both Puspitawati and another princess he saved, Andrawati. He becomes the mighty King of Majapahit, defeats invading armies, and expands his empire. His reign is further secured when his young son defeats three warrior princesses, who then marry his three eldest sons. The story concludes with Bermana Sakti, now Sultan Mangkurat Alam, reconciling with his father and ruling a vast, peaceful domain.

Data were collected from the transliteration of *Wawacan Bermana Sakti* by Sutadimaja (1986). This version was selected for its comprehensiveness, particularly in transliteration and the use of diverse *pupuh*. It consists of 1,544 verses of a long poem, divided into twelve Sundanese *pupuh* (meters): *Asmarandana*, *Dangdanggula*, *Durma*, *Gambuh*, *Kinanti*, *Magatru*, *Maskumambang*, *Mijil*, *Pangkur*, *Pucung*, *Sinom*, and *Wirangrong*. Each *pupuh* carries a distinct tone, highlighting the narrative's drama. Nevertheless, the data focused on the meanings of actions, thoughts, and symbolism present in the text.

Dundes' morphological approach to folklore, which builds on but critically extends Propp's structural analysis of folktales, gives a rigorous framework for identifying the basic building blocks, or *motifemes*, that organize narrative logic across cultures. Applied to *Wawacan Bermana Sakti*, this framework enables a systematic analysis of how the text produces and reproduces culturally specific narrative schemas: the fallen prince, the liminal wilderness, the animal ally, and the restoration of rightful order. Rather than treating these elements as incidental plot features, Dundes's approach insists on their structural necessity and cultural significance. Eco's semiotics, meanwhile, provides the tools to analyze how the text produces meaning beyond its explicit narrative content, how signs, symbols, and codes operate within and across the text to communicate values, hierarchies, and cosmological assumptions to its intended interpretive community. Together, these frameworks allow for an analysis that is neither reducible to plot summary nor to ethnographic inventory but engages the text as a dynamic site of cultural signification. In doing so, this study shows how exploring indigenous narratives can be not just an act of cultural preservation but a crucial step in rediscovering sustainable, syncretic wisdom for our contemporary world.

FINDINGS

Upon analyzing the text, it is found that Bermana Sakti's exile into the jungle has shaped him into a strong, responsible king through his interactions with nature. Nature is not merely a setting where he tests his physical and moral capabilities, but more importantly, as his partner, as the sacred, and the source of power.

Nature as partner

Taking Dundes' perspective, Bermana Sakti's narrative indicates recurring events of substitutions and moral testing. The two recurring events constitute a journey that ultimately leads to Bermana Sakti becoming the country's ultimate ruler. The journey always includes interactions with nature; for example, Verse 1067, which, in Dundes' perspective, is part of the narrative's motifs. Recurring motifs include mountains and forests, trees, and animals.

Referring to Dundes' main argument that folklore is a "mirror of culture," folklore reflects a society's deeply held values, beliefs, anxieties, and worldview, often beyond the conscious awareness of the people who share the lore. In this case, mountains, forests, trees, and animals can be alluded to in the encyclopedia of culture put forth in Eco's semiotics. The verse indicates mountains and forests

Verse 1067

Line

1 *Kasigeugkeun Kangjeng Sultan,*
2 *sinareng ponggawa mantri¹.*
3 *Kebatkeun Radén nu angkat,*
4 *anu keur sangsara diri.*
5 *Ra[ha]dén² Bermana Sakti,*
6 *turun gunung unggah gunung,*
7 *nyorang lebak jeung bubulak,*
8 *di leuweung loba dedemit.*
9 *Radén Putra enggeus ngambah leuweung sangar.*

as part of Bermana Sakti's journey. Mountains and forests are dwelling places of spirits, "*di leuweung loba dedemit*" (line 8). *Dedemit*, an evil spirit in Indonesian, serves to test Bermana Sakti. *Dedemit* is the supernatural being that gives mountains and forests their presence in nature. With the presence of *dedemit*, the function of nature as a test for Bermana Sakti has rendered nature a site of ascetic practice, one requiring spaces for Bermana Sakti to meditate and reflect.

Nature, encompassing mountains, forests, animals, and evil spirits, tests and challenges Bermana Sakti's strength, empathy, discipline, wisdom, and other qualities pivotal to his becoming a king. Therefore, the line "*Radén Putra enggeus ngambah leuweung sangar*" (line 9) is evidence that being in ominous jungles is an achievement for Bermana Sakti. These motifs mirror the beliefs of the Sundanese people, which, taking Eco's encyclopedic notion of culture, indicate that nature in Sundanese texts is not an entry for a physical realm. In the Sundanese encyclopedia, nature also carries cultural meaning tied to Sundanese ways of

That is for now about the king
and his guards.
Let's continue with the prince who went away
and suffered on his own.
Prince Bermana Sakti
going up and down mountains,
going through waters and rivers,
going into jungles full with evil spirits,
Bermana Sakti has gone through the most ominous jungle

life. By narrating nature as something to count on in life, the Sundanese see nature as a partner. The elements of nature, such as mountains, trees, forests, and animals, should be regarded as entities that help humans live better.

Nature is giving, providing, teaching, and even testing human beings so that they become fully human. Rather than treating nature as an object to indulge human interests or greed, the text indicates that nature is a rich source of knowledge and wisdom that accompanies human beings on their journeys. This is what happens to Bermana Sakti, who encounters nature as the site of trials and tribulations. Facing trials and tribulations is a necessary step to becoming a leader. Nature is the site where Bermana Sakti faces trials and tribulations as a prerequisite to his transformation into a leader. This means that nature contains collective values and memories to reflect on and learn from as he becomes the ultimate king. This is also why nature is a semiotic code that needs to be included in the Sundanese cultural encyclopedia in Verse 0577.

Verse 0577

Line

1 *Harita téh enggeus jauh ti nagara,*
2 *geus nepi ka leuweung kai,*
3 *karamatna Pua,*
4 *hanteu jalan leuweung alas,*
5 *jalan besar meunang ngeusik, sapanjang jalan*

As a specific form of nature, the forest is introduced as part of Pua's sacred memory, "*karamatna Pua*" (line 3). Pua is Bermana Sakti in disguise. Specifically, Pua is Bermana Sakti wearing a wood bark and painting his face and body accordingly. In Pua's memory, the forest is instrumental because it leads Bermana Sakti to a tree whose bark gives him a new identity as Pua or Pua-Pua. The new identity guides him in his journey

At that time, he was far away from his country
He has arrived at the forest,
Pua's sacred memory,
Not through the jungle,
But through graveled big roads

to become the king. Again, nature serves a role in assisting Bermana Sakti in his journey to become a leader. Thus, this verse exemplifies how nature is constituted by experience and values that, in turn, become collective meaning. The collective meaning is another entry to the Sundanese cultural encyclopedia. Verse 0171 describes the initial encounter between the Bermana Sakti and the tree, which later helped him disguise himself as Pua.

Verse 0171

Line

1 *Harita Radén mendakan,*
2 *di dinya téh tangkal kai.*
3 *Kayu téh dahan midua,*
4 *anu sabeulah ka cai,*
5 *ari nu sadahan deui,*
6 *ka darat dahanna kayu.*
7 *Di handapeun kayu lénang,*
8 *Radén Putra alak-ilik,*
9 *bari eureun akar kayu dicalikan*

At that time, the Prince found
that there was a tree in the area
There were two branches of the tree
One grew in the direction of the water
And the other one
grew towards the main branch
Under the tree,
Bermana Sakti looks around
and sit on the big tree root

Verse 0171 depicts the initial encounter between Bermiana Sakti (the Prince) and the tree, which later plays a significant role in his future identity formation. In the initial verses, the tree becomes part of the Bermiana Sakti's memory as the place where he takes refuge from an approaching storm. This particular encounter, detailed in verses 0170-0172, emphasizes how the tree becomes a helpful tool for Bermiana Sakti to disguise himself as Pua and to serve as a hiding place and refuge from the lion.

The tree, then, is constitutive of Dundes' narrative motif because it is used repeatedly and establishes the value of nature as inseparable from Bermiana Sakti's journey. The tree is instrumental in disguising Bermiana Sakti as Pua. Later, Bermiana Sakti's memory of trees evolves in later verses into forests. As part of Eco's encyclopedic notion, trees and forests are cultural wealth with symbolic meanings that represent continuity factors in life. They are present as memories constructed as spaces for reflection or grievance.

The presentation and functioning of nature have indicated that the narrative of Bermiana Sakti

perceives nature not merely as a static background to the story. It reveals that it is present as a being that is inseparable from Bermiana Sakti's transformation. Narratively, it serves as background to Bermiana Sakti's journey. Later, the background becomes instrumental because its presence has shaped Bermiana Sakti's path to becoming the true leader of his people. The narrative has utilized nature as one of the means that contribute to Bermiana Sakti's ultimate identity formation.

Nature as the sacred

Although nature has often served as both background and company to human beings in the text, it is presented as a symbol of worship. Therefore, the text also indicates motifs in which nature is considered sacred and capable of sanctifying people. The sanctification of nature comes in the form of prayers, purification, or a test. These forms strengthen Dundes' notion of narrative motifs as the reflection of culture, as exemplified in Verse 1074.

Verse 1074

Line

1 *Ayeuna caturkeun deui,*
2 *nu aya di jero guha,*
3 *opat bulan lawasna téh,*
4 *mubus//dina jero guha,*
5 *langkung husu ka Pangéran,*
6 *harita aya pituduh,*
7 *soara tan katingalan*

Now, it is said that
the one purifying self in the cave
for four months
hiding//inside the cave,
has become more devoted to God
at that time, there is a revelation
which comes in silent

This verse is about Joharsah, the king of the Islamic Jinns, whom another king, Pawaka, defeats in a battle to defend his sister's honor. It underscores the importance of purifying oneself and reflecting on past events to seek God's help and guidance. The event needs to be held in nature, in this case, a cave. And after four months of meditating in a cave, revelation comes in the form of a voice. This particular incident indicates a syncretic tendency in the text, where Islamic beliefs merge with cultural values that highly position the place as a site of sanctity.

Taking Dundes' folkloristic principle, this means nature in the text is regarded as another motif that reflects the Sundanese's way of valuing nature. Nature is sacred. It can purify oneself and open up

more opportunities to receive God's grace. These motifs also evidence the influence of Islam, while upholding ancestral beliefs. This contradiction stems from the fact that Islamic beliefs are upheld by appealing to ancestral beliefs about nature. Attaching one's belief to a cultural code strengthens nature as one of Dundes' narrative motifs in the text, reinforcing the assumption of nature as sacred and as another entry in the Sundanese cultural encyclopedia.

A different version of this entry is the following analysis. In the following verse, it is explained that disguising himself as a Pua-pua (nature) is actually Bermiana Sakti's way of testing himself.

Verse 0343

Line

1 *Bilih héran Bapa Paksi,*
2 *abdi nyamar Pua-pua,*
3 *eukeur ngadoja diri téh,*
4 *disuhunkeun du'a Bapa,*
5 *sim abdi ngadoja awak"*
6 *Sang Galudra imut matur,*
7 *"Deudeuh Radén teu kapalang.*

In case you are wondering, Bapa Paksi
I am disguising as Pua-pua
To test myself
I ask for your blessings
As I test myself
The Galudra smile,
"You are so sincere."

This verse also shows nature as part of the sanctifying process of a human being. In this verse, nature is represented by Pua-pua and Sang Galudra (a mythic bird). By blending with nature as Pua-pua, Bermata Sakti proves himself worthy of becoming a leader. However, this is achieved only through the blessings of another representation of nature, Sang Galudra: “*disuhunkeun du’a Bapa, sim abdi ngadoja awak*” (line 4-5). The role of nature as a purifying force for human beings is again indicative of nature as sacred, as an entry in the Sundanese cultural encyclopedia.

Belief in the sacredness of nature is an important aspect of Sundanese culture. The analysis shows that nature is equal to god and is also the last

resort in the attempt to transform into what is perceived as an idealized identity, a mighty king.

Nature as Power

Nature, as a partner and a sacred entity, implies the presence of power, as can be seen in verses 1067, 0340, 0341, 0342, and 0343, which construct nature with an agentive characteristic. Nature becomes an agent of power that determines Bermata Sakti’s future endeavors and their subsequent consequences.

As a partner, nature is chosen for its capacity to either support or obstruct human endeavor in life. Once again, verse 0167 exemplifies nature’s capacity to become either a support or an obstruction for Bermata Sakti.

Verse 0167

Line

1 *Kasigeugkeun Kangjeng Sultan,*
2 *sinareng ponggawa mantri¹.*
3 *Kebatkeun Radén nu angkat,*
4 *anu keur sangsara diri.*
5 *Ra[ha]dén² Bermata Sakti,*
6 *turun gunung unggah gunung,*
7 *nyorang lebak jeung bubulak,*
8 *di leuweung loba dedemit.*
9 *Radén Putra enggeus ngambah leuweung sangar.*

That is for now about the king
and his guards.
Let’s continue with the prince who went away
and suffered on his own.
Prince Bermata Sakti
going up and down mountains,
going through waters and rivers,
going into jungles full with evil spirits,
Bermata Sakti has gone through the most ominous jungle

Verse 0340

Line

1 *seug nangkep tuur di lawing,*
2 *sidakep barina ngaos,*
3 *nu dicipta Sang Galudra,*
4 *reup baé pereum sakedap.*
5 *Barang beunta geus ngajentul,*
6 *payuneunana Galudra.*

After praying, he left and hugged his knees at the door,
and closed his arms while praying,
which Sang Galudra created,
and then he was silent for a moment.
When he opened his eyes, he appeared,
Sang Galudra was in front of him.

Verse 0341

Line

1 *Sang Galudra nyaur manis,*
2 *“Deudeuh Radén anak Bapak,*
3 *na ngersakeun naon Asép?”*
4 *Dén Putra énggal walonan,*
5 *“Bapa nu langkung waspada,*
6 *putra jeneng mandor wedus,*
7 *sareng meri hayam soang.*

Sang Galudra said sweetly,
“Raden, my son,
what do you want, Dear?
The son replied,
“Father, you know better,
That I now am the foreman to take care of the sheep,
the ducks, the chicken, the goose.

Verse 0342

Line

1 *Bapa nu mawi diangkir,*
2 *wiréh éta sato héwan,*
3 *ayeuna ngan kantun paro*
4 *ku dadali sareng gagak.*
5 *Kuring Bapa neda tulung,*
6 *dumeh Bapa téh rajana.*

Father, I call you
that those animals
now only half of its number
eaten by the hawks and the crows.
So I ask your favor
Since you are their king.

Verse 0343

Line

1 *Bilih héran Bapa Paksi,*
2 *abdi nyamar Pua-pua*
3 *euker ngadoja diri téh,*

In case you are wondering, Bapa Paksi
I am disguising as Pua-pua
To test myself.

The narrative emphasizes Bermana Sakti's hardship in facing nature, "*Kebatkeun Radén nu angkat, anu keur sangsara diri sangsara diri*" (Verse 1067, line 3-4), which means that Bermana Sakti is prepared to suffer on his own by leaving the palace and going into the wild (nature). Expressions highlight the suffering from encountering nature "*turun gunung unggah gunung; nyorang lebak jeung bubulak*" (Verse 0167, line 6-7).

From Dundes' perspective on folklore, verse 0167 is evidence of nature's force, a reminder of human vulnerability. It shows the possibility of various forms of nature obstructing human beings, in this case, Bermana Sakti, and adding to their suffering, but the human traits such as perseverance, intelligence, and creativity may turn the obstruction into support. It is evidenced that Bermana Sakti's traits have enabled him to gain power from "*turun gunung unggah gunung; nyorang lebak jeung bubulak*". The fact that he survives the ordeal of facing nature earns him his father's respect: "*Kasigeungkeung Kangjeng Sultan sinareng ponggawa mantri*" (Verse 1067, line 1-2).

The text develops nature as semiotic codes which interpret the forces as signs of authority, thus, power, with possible plurality of meanings. According to Eco (1976), this could mean that nature is conceived as an entity with the power to generate obstruction, domination, correction, and, eventually, awe. This is again evidence of nature as an agent, which validates Bermana Sakti's trials to become the ultimate king.

A different narrative pattern is evidenced in verse 0340. The verse is presented differently. Nature in this verse is presented in the form of a mythic animal, Sang Galudra. Different from verse 0343, in verse 0340 Bermana Sakti is portrayed as intentionally meditating, *seug nangkep tuur di lawang* and praying *sidakep barina ngaos, nu dicipta Sang Galudra* (Verse 0340, line 1-3), who later appears *Barang beunta geus ngajentul, payuneunana Galudra* (Verse 0340, line 5-6) at Bermana Sakti's request. In his relation to the mythical animal, the narrative infers a father-son relation, which again positions nature as an authoritative being. This is evidenced by the use of expressions such as *anak Bapa* and endearment terms, such as *manis, deudeuh, or Asep*, all in Verse 0341.

The following verse (0342) shows a different form of authority for Sang Galudra. Here, it is implied that he has authority over different types of animals, both farm and wild. This is another piece of evidence of nature as an authoritative being. Even Bermana Sakti has to negotiate his position with Sang Galudra as a representation of nature. In verses 0341-0343, the narrative indicates Bermana Sakti's subordinate position to nature, Sang Galudra. He has to explain his disguise as Pua-pua, "*Bilih héran Bapa Paksi, abdi nyamar Pua-pua, eukeur ngadoja*

diri téh" (Verse 0343, line 1-3). This explanation has earned him Sang Galudra's respect, "*Deudeuh Radén teu kapalang*" (Verse 0343, line 7).

Nature as power in Wawacan Bermana Sakti is a motif highlighting nature's agentive role in shaping his destiny as a leader. In the text, nature emerges as a force that both obstructs and legitimizes Bermana Sakti's journey. Nature is situated as a site where human vulnerability is exposed. Human vulnerability is the locus of power play. Therefore, vulnerability is transformative. It becomes the proof that Bermana Sakti is entitled to rule.

From Eco's semiotic perspective, nature's potential to control human vulnerability indicates its power to destabilize human certainty, as in nature's role as the backdrop to the narrative. This backdrop transforms into a relational dynamic, such as father and son, that has developed into transformational processes essential to Bermana Sakti's identity formation.

Thus, nature as power is not a one-way interaction, such as nature dominating humans or humans dominating nature; it is a dialectical interaction. Bermana Sakti's survival depends on his ability to negotiate with power, which he then uses to transform obstruction into empowerment. Therefore, it can be assumed that nature has an enabling agentive quality that transforms Bermana Sakti into an accomplished leader. This quality also positioned nature as an entity with authoritative power within the Sundanese cultural encyclopedia.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the narrative motifs and symbolic codes articulate nature as an ecological, ethical, and spiritual concern within the Sundanese society in three layers: the partner, the sacred, and power. The three-layer elements reflect an ethic of interdependence, in which humans must learn from and live with nature. While nature is sometimes utilized for human benefit, it is never reduced to mere utility. Nature is always part of Bermana Sakti's trials and his achievements. The ethics of interdependence have elevated nature to sanctifying spaces, where Bermana Sakti's trials cannot escape divine intervention. This is the part where the text indicates the development of syncretic tendencies, in which ancestral beliefs fuse with Islamic tradition. The fusion shows how nature mediates human vulnerability and divine intervention. The overlapping and relational position of nature in the text has underscored nature's agency and authority. Nature is situated as an enabler. It has the capacity to obstruct, to test, and to validate Bermana Sakti's transformation.

Therefore, it is safe to say that nature in *Wawacan Bermana Sakti* is not merely a passive backdrop to his endeavors, but it functions as a text

with many meanings, or a multivalent text that can be interpreted as an instrumental means in the shaping of *Bermana Sakti*'s identity. In addition, the three elements (partner, the sacred, and power) highlight Sundanese ethics, which reflect the text's worldview of the ecological realm. The Sundanese text implies resistance to the modern exploitative tendency towards nature. By situating nature as a partner, the text reveals an ecological reciprocity that constructs nature as an inseparable agent in human destiny while simultaneously endowing it with aspects of divinity. This consequently discloses a spiritual ecology reflecting the Sundanese worldview, which is dependent on divinity. The text, however, indicates a hybrid worldview that juxtaposes Islamic teachings and beliefs with ancestral beliefs and rituals. By embedding nature within a spiritual ecology, the text has endowed nature with power, establishing it as essentially sovereign.

In other words, the findings suggest that nature represents a holistic Sundanese worldview. This confirms and reconfirms Sundanese belief in harmony with nature, as revealed in other manuscripts (Koswara et al., 2019) or practices (Ilfiandra & Saripudin, 2023; Rostiyati et al., 2024). Nevertheless, rather than seeking or promoting Islamic values represented in *wawacan*, as Hernawan et al. (2021), Maulana et al. (2024), and Yunidawati (2019) did, this study underscores a syncretic tendency in interactions with nature. Consequently, examining oral traditions, practices, and old manuscripts offers a more comprehensive view of how Sundanese people in the past structured and cultivated harmony with nature.

Furthermore, the findings align with research on the representation of nature in classic narratives worldwide, more specifically in the hero's journey trope. The inclusion and description of people, land, plants, and animals are common in most surviving ancient and medieval texts, suggesting a holistic worldview that connected humankind with his physical environment (Kennedy & Jones-Lewis, 2016) and cultural values (Canli & Aghasiyev, 2026). Similar to many hero's journeys in ancient texts, in which the forest serves as the initiation phase for the hero's training, *Bermana Sakti* is akin to Eastern epics that acknowledge the coexistence of nature. In the Eastern epics, such as the Indian *Mahabharata* and the Chinese *Xīyóuji* (*Journey to the West*), nature is a partner that strengthens the hero's ethical and religious/spiritual values (Shahid et al., 2024). Likewise, the journey in which *Bermana Sakti* leaves his community to enter a place of natural abundance, where he learns to depend on and respect nature, reflects 'the botanical hero' coined by McCoppin (2016). Nature is inseparable and crucial in the making of a botanical hero. However, the three layers of nature, imbued in Islamic values, in this *wawacan* offer a distinct

Sundanese perspective. Thus, this study contributes to the legacy of the holistic worldview in classic manuscripts, as observed globally.

From a contemporary perspective, *Wawacan Bermana Sakti* anticipates ecological crises by perpetuating the notion that human survival and legitimacy depend on recognizing nature's agency and not subordinating it. It is unfortunate that, with the advent of modernism, this worldview has evolved into a mindset in which nature is treated as an object to be exploited. Such a mindset might contribute to ecological disasters, as exemplified by the 2025 Sumatra disaster. A catastrophe that results from a mindset that situates nature as a mere object. *Wawacan Bermana Sakti* offers an archive of ecological wisdom, encouraging modern readers to reimagine nature not as a resource but as a partner, sacred present, and sovereign power.

Reconsidering classic texts such as *Wawacan Bermana Sakti* remains relevant, especially in the realm of sustainable development. In the digital era and amid rapid change, easier access to classic texts offers a reconnection to our historical roots and cultural identity, helping us interpret contemporary challenges. As concerns about environmental issues rise, an eco-critical perspective on the representation of nature in literary works, including classic texts, could raise awareness on the dynamics of the human-nature relationship (Agofure & Nureni, 2026; Alias, 2011; Fourqurean, 2024). Thus, investigating local wisdom in Indonesian classic texts could, for example, disclose alternative solutions and policies to mitigate ecological disasters such as tsunamis (Suciani et al., 2018; Syafwina, 2014) or volcanic eruptions (Fakhriati et al., 2023; Rahayu et al., 2026). Ultimately, it is necessary "to build a new attitude on the part of human beings based on sustainability and respect" (Alias, 2011, p.7) to critique anthropocentrism and advocate for ecological balance. This notion has promoted an ecocritical pedagogy, in which students study literature in more relevant media and methodology for today's society, in the hope of preserving and respecting nature rather than exploiting it (de Smalen & Ritson, 2023; Guanio-Uluru, 2019; Guarcello et al., 2026; Kuchta, 2022). By positioning nature as a partner, this educational approach could nurture an equal and ethical relationship between human beings and nature, thereby advocating sustainable practices at both the national and global levels.

Despite this study's central examination of semiotics, at least two limitations should be mentioned. First, the analysis was restricted to the signs and signification of natural elements in the text. While the tones characterizing *wawacan* may signify something, they were not part of the analysis. Second, the data were collected from a single version of the text. There are other versions of the same text that may offer more specific

regional meanings; yet the study's findings may not cover them. As a result, the limitations of this study could serve as the basis for future research.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the narrative motifs and symbolic codes that articulate nature in *Wawacan Bermata Sakti* from the perspective of Eco's semiotics. The findings reveal that nature is an essential part of Sundanese society, functioning as a partner, a sacred force, and a sovereign power. The analysis suggests that the built environment embodies a principle of interdependence, highlighting the necessity for humans to learn from and coexist with nature. Overall, the study reconfirms the Sundanese worldview of harmony with nature. In addition, the study aligns with current research on nature's representation in the hero's journey in classic literature, where nature is an inseparable aspect of a future leader's development. Revisiting classic manuscripts, therefore, may shed light on ecological contemporary issues. By examining classic manuscripts and disseminating them through modern approaches, younger generations may learn to embrace and nurture nature for sustainable development and, in turn, prevent ecological disasters. In addition, this study implies that Sundanese manuscripts offer a wealth of insights into the Sundanese worldview, which is open to further research. Themes such as leadership, gender, and technology presented in the texts could be examined through various theoretical frameworks, highlighting the Sundanese contribution to local and global issues.

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