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## The Eroding Spiritual Significance of Tarawangsa Art Among Teenagers

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**Abstract:** Culture is a way of life that develops and is shared by a group of people, which is passed down from generation to generation. Tarawangsa is one of these cultures and is a medium of cultural expression that contains traditional values that must be continuously preserved so that they are not lost to the times. However, with the development of the digital era and modern popular culture, the authenticity of the meaning and spiritual function of Tarawangsa has begun to erode, because the younger generation has easier access to global digital entertainment and less respect for traditional values. This study aims to understand the symbolic meaning of Tarawangsa art, analyze the younger generation's understanding of the symbolic meaning of Tarawangsa, and analyze the spiritual meaning in Tarawangsa that has been eroded in the younger generation. In this study, the method used is a descriptive qualitative method by conducting in-depth interviews with artists, namely Abah Abun and field observations to gather information about the younger generation's understanding of Tarawangsa art. Based on the analysis using Semiotic theory, Tarawangsa art has a deep meaning in the lives of Sundanese people. The results of the study indicate that the younger generation's understanding of the symbolic meaning of Tarawangsa is still limited and tends to be superficial.

**Keyword:** Tarawangsa, Spiritual, Symbolic Meaning, Young Generation, Culture.

### INTRODUCTION

Culture is a way of life that develops dynamically over time and is collectively owned by a community and passed down from one generation to the next. It encompasses various elements such as beliefs, traditions, language, art, and norms that govern social interaction. Furthermore, culture also reflects human creativity, emotions, and will, while also representing the identity and values upheld by a society (Khumairani et al., 2023). Culture is not static, but rather continually changes and adapts in response to changing times and external influences. Thus, culture has a very important role in shaping lifestyle patterns, regulating social order, and strengthening cohesion and unity within a community. Culture is

defined as a comprehensive collection of human ideas, actions, and works that form the core of a society, acquired through a learning process. It encompasses all aspects of human life that are transmitted across generations and evolve in accordance with social dynamics and modern conditions (Kistanto, 2025).

According to (Hamid et al., 2023) Culture plays a central role in shaping human behavior, facilitating adaptation to the environment, and maintaining social order. Furthermore, culture serves as a means for communities to express their emotions and identities through various forms of expression, such as art, customs, and social norms. Furthermore, culture is vital for preserving the traditional and moral values that underpin communal life, while also serving as a means of transmitting and passing down knowledge from one generation to the next.

Cultural values are becoming less significant due to significant changes in the way individuals interact with and understand culture. The advancement of digitalization has facilitated access to and the dissemination of cultural information; however, it has also led to the commercialization of culture and the erosion of local identities. Social media and digital platforms create new cultural dynamics that often obscure traditional values, even giving rise to new norms that sometimes undermine the depth of social relationships and traditional standards of ethical communication (Sari et al., 2024). This change poses challenges in maintaining the sustainability of indigenous cultural values and norms that have been passed down from generation to generation. Therefore, strengthening digital literacy is crucial so that people can use technology wisely without neglecting the fundamental elements of culture that play a crucial role in shaping identity and strengthening social cohesion (Sumiyanti et al., 2025).

The cultural significance of traditional arts is beginning to erode in the digital era, as seen in the challenges faced by Tarawangsa. According to (Haqqi, 2024), Tarawangsa is a traditional Sundanese art form that uses musical instruments such as bamboo and jenteng, and has a spiritual and ritual function in various traditional ceremonies. This art form plays a crucial role in preserving local cultural heritage while also serving as a medium of expression representing traditional values that must be preserved amidst the tide of modernization. Typically, Tarawangsa is performed in traditional ceremonies and celebrations such as Ngalaksa as a form of expression of gratitude and an effort to maintain the spiritual balance of the community. Nonetheless, during the formation of the digital age and the prevalence of pop culture, the real essence and spirituality of Tarawangsa is starting to fade away. The youth today have become more preoccupied with international technological entertainment than their own cultural roots. However, there are still some who believe in the value of Tarawangsa as an attempt to preserve their ancestors' legacy.

Today's younger generation, especially teenagers, tends to view traditional art solely as entertainment without delving into its underlying spiritual meaning. This tendency is related to their cognitive and psychological development, where adolescents aged around 11 to 20 are in a phase moving towards a more rational mindset, prioritizing logic over symbolic or spiritual meanings in understanding cultural phenomena (Diorarta, 2020). On the other hand, the strong influence of popular culture and the allure of digital technology have contributed to the neglect of the profound values and ritual functions of traditional art. In arts like Tarawangsa, which are steeped in spiritual meaning and closely tied to religious ritual practices, the younger generation tends to interpret them merely as entertainment without understanding their role in maintaining social and spiritual balance in society. This perspective ultimately contributes to a decline in interest in preserving important cultural values inherited from previous generations. Therefore, educational and mentoring efforts are needed so that the younger generation not only recognizes art as entertainment but also is

able to understand and appreciate the philosophical and spiritual values contained within it (Desiyana, 2024).

As found out from previous research, Tarawangsa is considered to be spiritual transcendental performance art, which acts as a channel for the transmission of meanings of agrarian society as well as spirituality and cultural value transmission. Additionally, previous researches have described the rituals performed in Tarawangsa including different aspects such as offerings, musical instruments, dancing and even other tools used in Tarawangsa as means of communication. Nevertheless, previous research did not address how young generation perceives the meanings in Tarawangsa.

This phenomenon requires further investigation because it indicates the potential erosion of cultural values and spiritual meanings that underlie the identity and sustainability of a community. This research aims to uncover the symbolic meanings of Tarawangsa art, examine the younger generation's understanding of these meanings, and analyze the shift or erosion of Tarawangsa spiritual values among them. In addition, the study will also provide inputs towards the creation of strategies that will help preserve the cultural heritage in such a manner that it stays pertinent for future generations. Moreover, the study will open up avenues for understanding the relationship between technology and popular culture that can help preserve traditional art without losing its essence.

## **METHOD**

This study is a qualitative oriented research that seeks to investigate and understand the social and humanitarian issues through the meanings individuals or groups assign to them. That this involves a developmental research cycle, collecting data from the field directly, inductive analysis (moving from specifics to general themes), and interpretation of meaning on behalf of the researcher. Qualitative methods are further defined by a flexible design, an emphasis on subjective experiences and results that are presented in narrative form (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The main procedures in qualitative methods include data collection through interviews, observation, and review of journals or books; data analysis through the development of themes; and validation through researcher reflection. Qualitative designs such as narrative, phenomenology, ethnography, and case studies emphasize the researcher's role as the primary instrument and the importance of reflexivity to minimize bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The data analysis method used in this qualitative study, particularly in the context of the Tarawangsa ritual, follows an in-depth descriptive approach by conducting interviews with the artist, Abah Abun, to explore the spiritual significance of Tarawangsa art and the understanding that teenage youth have of this spiritual significance. According to research from (Sumartias et al., 2019), The analysis was conducted by grouping data, eliminating irrelevant data, and presenting the data systematically to holistically understand the symbolic and rational meanings of the ritual. This approach allowed the researcher to interact directly with and delve into the sociocultural context surrounding the Tarawangsa ritual, thereby obtaining a comprehensive and richly meaningful picture. Roland Barthes's theory of semiotics can be applied in this analysis to understand the symbols that emerge in the ritual, such as attributes, movements, and music, which carry implicit meanings that are culturally and symbolically interpreted (Sumartias et al., 2019).

In Roland Barthes' semiotics model, the information is decoded based on the identification of symbols and their denotative and connotative meanings, as well as the process involved in interpreting the ritual itself. Barthes suggests that symbols have more than one meaning in the sense that they carry an underlying message regarding the culture and ideology of a particular society. In the context of the Tarawangsa ritual, all elements

involved such as offerings, dances, and musical performances can be interpreted as symbols that are full of deep meaning. Thus, semiotic analysis can enrich our understanding of the symbolic meanings embedded in the ritual, as well as how those meanings are constructed and perceived by the community (Sumartias et al., 2019).

The informant research technique used is purposive sampling, which focuses on key informants and can be adapted from purposive sampling based on the principle of proportionality—that is, selecting an individual who substantially represents a proportion of the overall population or phenomenon. This approach is often applied in single-case study-based qualitative research, where the primary informant or key informant provides in-depth data through intensive interviews until information saturation is reached, thus eliminating the need for additional samples.

In this study, the data validation technique used was triangulation. Through triangulation, the researcher was able to verify the consistency of information from various different perspectives, resulting in more accurate and comprehensive findings (Nurfajriani et al., 2024). By using triangulation, researchers can cross-verify their findings, thereby enhancing the credibility of qualitative research. This technique can help identify data inconsistencies and deepen understanding of the phenomena under study. Overall, triangulation is an important method for ensuring that the findings of qualitative research are scientifically sound and accepted by the scientific community (Hoed, 2014).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Tarawangsa is a traditional art form that is still preserved today and embodies strong values and symbolic meanings. This art form holds symbolic significance that is deeply intertwined with the way of life of the Sundanese agrarian community, particularly in the Rancakalong region. Tarawangsa is not viewed merely as a form of entertainment or a traditional musical performance.

In this era of digitalization and modernization, the Tarawangsa art form is losing its significance among the younger generation. Findings indicate that the symbolic and spiritual meanings of Tarawangsa art are not well understood by the younger generation; they tend to merely appreciate this art form visually. The younger generation has been taught about its meaning by the artists, something that has been helped considerably by educational programs in schools, enabling this teaching to take place quite easily even with other hurdles in keeping this art alive.

Younger generation is important for the continuation of the Tarawangsa dance tradition, although their knowledge of the significance behind this traditional art form is still limited. Adolescents can easily identify Tarawangsa dance as a religious and cultural tradition practiced during harvesting or other traditions, yet they are still unable to explain the symbols of Tarawangsa dance.

The younger generation is more likely to interpret this art in terms of its visual representation, such as offerings, musical instruments, and costumes, which can simply be regarded as symbols of sanctity. However, it is also evident that the younger generation has the potential to comprehend the symbolic meaning of Tarawangsa if educated properly.

There are numerous factors that contribute to the degradation of the spiritual significance of the Tarawangsa art form. According to the artists who created the Tarawangsa art form, young people are not capable of comprehending the spiritual meaning of this particular art form. The spiritual meaning in various art forms is increasingly being eroded in the contemporary era, especially in Tarawangsa art.

In the myths told in Tarawangsa, there has been a change in meaning; the older generation perceives them as metaphorical teaching stories that protect religious teachings, whereas the youth perceives them literally, even as being irrational. Hence, the role of the

myths in imparting religious teachings is becoming obsolete. On the contrary, the utilization of digital media by artists is indicative of adaptation to contemporary times. Nonetheless, the real challenge still lies in ensuring that full spirituality is imparted through this mode of communication.

The task of cultural conservation does not belong to artists alone but is also a task for the younger generation, which should start realizing the significance embedded in each art form. The spiritual aspect of culture cannot be grasped just by observing; there needs to be an adequate learning process, along with active participation from the young generation itself.

## DISCUSSION

### The Symbolic Meaning of Tarawangsa Art

Semiotics involves the study of symbols and how they generate meaning in social and cultural contexts. As mentioned by Barthes, the meaning of symbols can be grouped into three categories; one being the literal meaning of signs (denotation), another is the emotional meaning or the meaning related to value and culture (connotation), and finally, the mythological meaning (Ambarini & Nazla Maharani Umay, 2012). This semiotic approach is helpful in interpreting how elements like music, movements, rituals, and offerings have not only literal meanings but deeper meanings in Tarawangsa.

According to Roland Barthes, denotation is the first order of signification, meaning that is direct, objective, and in accordance with general conventions. Denotation refers to the basic relationship between signifier and signified without any emotional, ideological, or additional value content. In other words, denotation is the literal or "as is" meaning of a sign. In Tarawangsa art, denotation can be seen in the stringed instruments tarawangsa and jenteng as traditional instruments, the sounds they produce, and the activity of playing music in traditional ceremonies. Denotatively, this performance is a traditional musical activity that accompanies certain rituals.

Symbolic meaning in traditional arts is a fundamental aspect in understanding how art functions within the social, spiritual, and cosmological structures of society. In the context of Tarawangsa, symbolic meaning lies not only in the form of musical performance, but also permeates the entire accompanying traditional ritual practice and the value system of Sundanese agrarian society. Interview results indicate that Tarawangsa is interpreted as an integral part of traditional ritual stages such as ngalungsurkeun, pohaci, and nginebkeun, each of which represents the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature through the symbol of rice as a source of life, prosperity, and the continuity of community life.

Traditional music is often a symbolic medium for conveying the social, cosmological and spiritual values of a community, not just a means of entertainment (Najamudin et al., 2026). In this study, the traditional music of Tarawangsa in the Rancakalong community, Sumedang is understood as a system of meaning that reflects the way of life of an agrarian society, where music becomes a symbol of the integration between work, prayer, and human relations with nature. This is in accordance with Roland Barthes' theory which states that cultural signs contain not only denotative meanings, but also connotative and mythical meanings that represent the values, ideology, and perspectives of a society. Thus, the sounds, rhythms, and musical atmosphere in Tarawangsa not only function as artistic expressions, but also as cultural signs that contain messages of collective values and beliefs.

Connotation is the second level in the second-order signifying system according to Barthes. At this stage, signs are not only interpreted literally, but also contain values, emotions, ideologies, and certain cultural backgrounds. Connotation develops through social experience, history, and society's perspective on a sign. Barthes stated that connotation is the result of the development of how humans interpret signs. In Tarawangsa art, the sounds produced not only have meaning as music, but also connote a sacred atmosphere, inner peace,

respect for ancestors, and human closeness to nature. The performers' attire and the atmosphere of the performance also contain meanings of simplicity, spirituality, and local wisdom.



**Figure 1.** The Tarawangsa Musical Instrument

This musical instrument not only functions as a sound instrument, but also as a cosmological symbol that represents harmony between humans, nature, and ancestors (Aria, 2025). Music in this ritual is understood as a medium of spiritual communication and a means of strengthening the cultural identity of the indigenous community. Through ritual repetition, these musical symbols form a system of socially accepted meaning and are understood as part of the community's lived reality.

The symbolic meaning of Tarawangsa is also reflected in the use of ritual props such as offerings, rice, and colorful scarves. Offerings in Tarawangsa are not interpreted as a form of worship other than to God, but rather as a symbol of respect for nature and ancestors as guardians of the balance of life. Musical instruments and ritual paraphernalia serve as symbols of spiritual summoning, purification of sacred space, and a medium of communication with transcendent powers. Thus, the symbols in the ritual are not merely decorative, but rather have functional and transcendental meaning in the life of the indigenous community (Yunxia & Abdullah, 2025).

Furthermore, symbolism in Tarawangsa also serves as a means of cultural communication between generations. Symbolic meanings are not conveyed solely verbally, but are transmitted through ritual practices involving the collective participation of the community. Music and ritual serve as symbolic languages that enable the community to read and understand its value system through direct experience (Yunxia & Abdullah, 2025). In this regard, the cultural symbols serve as a living medium through which meanings can be transmitted.

Hence, the symbolic meaning of the Tarawangsa must not be looked at merely as a form of aesthetics in music, but as a symbolic system that embodies the existential, sociological, and cosmological values of the agrarian society of the Sundanese people. The symbolic meaning is embedded through the practice of rituals that help develop social coherence, cultural identity, and humanity's connection to nature and God.

Within semiotic theory, myth is considered a complex form of the sign system which incorporates the use of connotation, and is used for the purpose of legitimizing certain cultural values or ideologies by creating an impression that such values or ideologies are a result of nature and are hence right. Myth functions on the principle of making the cultural

values appear “normal,” “natural,” and acceptable within the lives of people. Within Tarawangsa, myth is reflected in the belief that Tarawangsa music can create a connection between humans and their ancestors’ souls, balance nature, and bring about salvation. What was once seen as merely an artistic expression is now seen as a sacred cultural heritage that needs to be protected and preserved for future generations.



**Figure 2.** The Shawl Worn by the Dancers

Also, rice, as the main theme in the story of Tarawangsa, bears significant symbolism, being a reflection of life, reproduction, and prosperity of agricultural societies. The rice is not just seen as a commodity item but as a cosmic symbol of the union between humans, nature, and God (Aria, 2025; Najamudin et al., 2026). Based on Roland Barthes' mythic perspective, cultural items may act as secondary symbols that form the ideological and cosmic meanings within the social consciousness. Therefore, the rice in the story is not only a literal item but also a symbol of life and the spiritual relation between humans, nature, and God.

### **Young People’s Understanding of Tarawangsa Art**

The younger generation has a very important strategic position in the sustainable transfer of traditional arts, such as the Tarawangsa dance. However, findings from interviews reveal that the younger generation’s knowledge about the symbolism in Tarawangsa is rather poor and superficial. While teenagers acknowledge Tarawangsa as sacred traditional arts performed during harvest rituals or practices, they still cannot interpret the symbolism involved in its movement, music, and rituals. The younger generation generally views traditional culture superficially, focusing solely on the physical aspects without understanding and appreciating the symbolic meaning contained within.

The opinions held by teenagers regarding Tarawangsa music as being too slow, repetitive, and boring show how the aesthetic perspective of the youth has changed. The youth are now more familiar with modern forms of music that are faster and offer immediate gratification. Such an occurrence shows just how much impact pop culture and technology have had on musical tastes such that traditional forms of art are no longer considered relevant in modern times. Hence, the arts like the Tarawangsa are viewed as part of our past rather than a living value system in modern times.

This notwithstanding, the adolescents still have some emotional experiences as they watch Tarawangsa, which could be calmness, emotion, and happiness among others; however, at this point, they are not yet able to define where these emotions arise from. This is crucial since it acts as an entry point into culture. Emotional engagement in cultural activities can be a foundation for increased awareness and understanding, especially when supported by a reflective and participatory learning process (Palany et al., 2025).

Symbolic understanding of Tarawangsa by the younger generation usually comes through the visual perception of rituals, like giving out gifts, playing music, and wearing traditional attire. They understand these only as symbols of sanctity or uniqueness of the culture without being aware of their symbolic importance. In this case, one can see that cultural transmission has not yet focused on the symbolic importance of the signs than the forms. Herein lies the fact that the cultural signs are not at the second stage of symbolic importance yet.

In addition, the young generation prefers to view the mythological aspects in Tarawangsa in a more logical way and as such, they tend to be skeptical about them. There is always an inclination towards seeing different traditions as obsolete tales which are not applicable in the present time. The development in attitude towards myths has led to people becoming more rational. It means that there has been less emphasis on beliefs regarding myths and custom-made images in art (Mantri, 2022).

There is a significant opportunity for the younger generation to understand the symbolic meaning of Tarawangsa if supported by the right educational environment. The emotional experiences they experience while watching Tarawangsa can serve as a foundation for developing a deeper symbolic understanding through a dialogic, participatory, and contextual approach to cultural education. The active involvement of the younger generation in local cultural practices also has the potential to raise awareness and strengthen their cultural identity (Hidayat et al., 2025). Through this process, a reconstruction of meaning is possible, namely a shift from denotative to connotative meanings, even to the level of myth, so that Tarawangsa once again functions as a living and relevant sign system in the lives of the younger generation.

### **The Eroding Spiritual Values Among the Younger Generation**

Tarawangsa is basically an art that carries within it a high level of spirituality, which is seen by the followers of this art as something that bridges between humans and God. With the help of joint prayers, spiritual ambiance, and expressions of thanks, Tarawangsa establishes a spiritual environment in which man's life is intertwined with nature and spirituality. However, the younger generation tends to view this aspect of Tarawangsa in a limited and less in-depth way.

This transformation in meaning may be analyzed using Roland Barthes's theory of semiotics, which involves ideas of denotation and connotation. While the previous generation sees symbolic meanings in ritual objects or actions, interpreting them as signs that symbolize spiritual ties to God and nature (connotative and mythological interpretations), the next generation understands their meaning superficially by perceiving them as traditions or rituals handed down by the ancestors and not necessarily connected to spirituality (Pratama & Huri, 2024). Such an illustration shows the rationalistic approach to interpreting symbols and myths used by the next generation.

The process of modernization and the dominance of popular culture has also been a significant factor in contributing to the phenomenon. The present-day youth enjoys forms of entertainment which are fast-paced and instantaneous such as social media, pop music, and computer games. From this point of view, Tarawangsa is not enjoyable because it requires one to be patient, peaceful, and sensitive. It demonstrates how popular culture holds a great impact on the preferences of the youth in terms of art (Amalia et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the changing of the social structure, which was generally very individualized, has further reduced the importance of Tarawangsa on a spiritual level. The communal rituals that were part and parcel of the daily lives of farmers have occurred rarely, thus reducing the occasions where spirituality could create value within society.

The other change is in the interpretation of the mythological elements in Tarawangsa. To the older generation, the myths were used as a way of symbolic instruction and were the protectors of the sacredness of the traditions. But to the younger generation, myths have become old and irrational tales that do not have any bearing on modern times. Myths, according to Roland Barthes, are the secondary order of signs that create ideology and culture (Ambarini & Umayana, 2012). When this mythological structure loses its relevance, the messages within the Tarawangsa become meaningless. Therefore, it can be seen that there is less and less interest shown by the younger generation in the myths represented in traditional art (Mantri, 2022).

Adaptive steps taken by artists, such as utilizing digital media to document and disseminate Tarawangsa, reflect a response to the dynamics of modern developments. However, the main challenge lies not only in maintaining the sustainability of the performance, but also in conveying its comprehensive spiritual meaning. Therefore, sustainable cultural preservation needs to encompass the transmission of values, symbolic meaning, and spiritual dimensions, rather than simply focusing on the performative aspect (Meylani & Hernawan, 2024).

From Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics, the decline in spirituality within the context of the art of Tarawangsa among young people could be viewed as a disconnect between signifiers and their connotations/myths. Younger people usually interpret the concept of Tarawangsa in a rational manner, thereby failing to comprehend its spiritual aspect. Thus, revival efforts for the rejuvenation of Tarawangsa should focus on instilling spirituality.

Within the semiotics of Roland Barthes, the Tarawangsa art is regarded as a system of signs composed of two different meanings, which include the denotation and connotation. As a denotation, the Tarawangsa is an artistic performance consisting of musical sounds produced using stringed and plucked instruments accompanied by rituals, offerings, and codes of conduct during the agricultural rites of the Sundanese community. On the other hand, as a connotation, the various components hold spiritual significance in their representation of the interconnection between humanity, nature, and the divine being.

From Roland Barthes' mythological perspective, Tarawangsa can be understood as a second-order sign system that plays a role in constructing and strengthening the ideology of Sundanese agrarian society. Elements such as rituals, customary taboos, and spiritual symbols are not merely viewed as customs but as natural truths. Through this mythologization process, Tarawangsa reinforces the belief that prosperity, harvests, and balance in life depend heavily on collectively maintained spiritual relationships. Thus, the spiritual meaning of Tarawangsa becomes part of the construction of social consciousness that shapes the values and orientations of the community.

## CONCLUSION

This research shows that Tarawangsa is a signifier with great symbolism that signifies the connection of humans with nature and God in the context of the Sundanese culture specifically in Rancakalong. Music, dance, ritual, and symbols like rice and offering give Tarawangsa more significance than just being a performing art; it also becomes an instrument for communicating values and identities of the society. Therefore, Tarawangsa can be said to carry the meaning at the denotative, connotative, and mythic level of meaning according to Roland Barthes' semiotic theory.

This research also shows that the younger generation's understanding of the symbolism in Tarawangsa is still limited and tends to be superficial. They generally only recognize Tarawangsa as a traditional art form that is sacred and related to ritual, without being able to interpret the symbolic meanings contained in the movements, music, or stages of the ceremony. The greater emphasis on visual and aesthetic aspects reflects a shift in cultural

orientation among the younger generation. Nevertheless, the emotional experiences they experience when watching Tarawangsa provide opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of the symbols, particularly through appropriate educational approaches.

Furthermore, this research also reveals the diminishing relevance of the spiritual significance of Tarawangsa to younger generations. The former spiritual signs or means of transcending communications are now regarded as traditions or myths without their inherent significance. This can be explained through a number of factors such as modernity, influence of popular culture, change of lifestyle, and disappearance of myths in everyday life, among other considerations. In practical terms, the research recommends that further measures should be taken regarding the improvement of community cultural education, involvement of the youth in traditional rituals, and utilization of electronic media as an educational tool rather than a documentary tool alone. On the other hand, from a theoretical perspective, this study stresses the necessity of advancing the use of Roland Barthes's semiotics in traditional art studies, at the same time providing new opportunities for research related to methods of communicating the symbolic and spiritual aspects of local culture amid modernity and digitalization.

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