

REPRESENTATION OF ATMA KERTHI IN THE PKB XLVIII POSTER: A VISUAL COMMUNICATION SEMIOTICS ANALYSIS

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Received: 15 April 2026, Revision: 11 May 2026, Publishing: 2 June 2026

Abstract

The poster for the Bali Arts Festival (Pesta Kesenian Bali/PKB) XLVIII 2026 adopts the theme “Atma Kerthi: Jiwa Sidha Parisudha,” posing a significant challenge for translating abstract theological concepts into contemporary visual media. This study examines the semiotic relationship between the narrative fragment of Sutasoma and the philosophical essence of Atma Kerthi through visual communication elements. A descriptive qualitative method is employed, using Roland Barthes’ semiotic framework—denotation, connotation, and myth—and supported by visual artifact analysis to deconstruct its formal elements. The findings reveal that at the denotative level, the poster establishes a binary opposition between the serene figure of Sutasoma and the dynamic mythological dragon. Connotatively, Sutasoma’s gesture of surrender signifies the subjugation of the ego (panyucian atma), while the dominant red background functions as a theological metaphor for Agni (sacred fire) as an instrument of spiritual purification rather than mere aesthetic courage. At the mythological level, the composition constructs a narrative of a liminal journey toward cosmic unity, repositioning classical literature as a relevant moral compass in modernity. This research concludes that the poster serves as a space for visual dialectics, successfully performing a transliteration of sacred values into a contemporary design framework. This study contributes a new paradigm in understanding visual hybridity, where traditional iconography and modern aesthetics negotiate to maintain cultural identity within global communication contexts.

Keywords: Semiotics, Visual Communication, Atma Kerthi, Sutasoma, Balinese iconography.

INTRODUCTION

The Bali Arts Festival (Pesta Kesenian Bali, hereafter PKB) serves as a stage for cultural diplomacy and the largest annual visual communication artifact in Bali, recording the dynamics of local values amidst the currents of globalization. In its 48th iteration in 2026, PKB carries the theme “Atma Kerthi: Jiwa Sidha Parisudha,” a philosophical concept concerning the glorification and purification of the human soul toward ultimate inner quality. Within the perspective of Visual Communication Design (VCD), translating abstract metaphysical concepts into a visual medium, such as a poster, presents a complex creative challenge. As stated by Sumbo Tinarbuko (2020: 15), visual communication design is a marker of the times that functions to record cultural values while delivering them in a communicative visual form. Similarly, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) emphasize that visual communication possesses its own grammar that governs how meaning is constructed through visual elements such as color, composition, and symbols.

The PKB XLVIII 2026 poster responds to this challenge through a specific narrative visualization: a fragment of Sutasoma in a position of surrender as he is about to be devoured by a dragon. This representation refers to the epic Kakawin Sutasoma, which is philosophically interpreted as a symbol of steadfast faith and the conquest of the ego. In the context of representation, Stuart Hall (1997) states that meaning is produced through sign systems operating within a culture. Thus, the PKB poster's visuals do not merely function as promotional media but also as a representational practice that shapes the interpretation of the Atma Kerthi concept through cultural symbols. This phenomenon indicates a transformation of traditional signs into contemporary visual forms relevant to modern audiences.

A number of previous studies indicate that posters, as a visual medium, have the capability to build symbolic meaning through sign systems. Research by Ningtyas et al. (2024) and Thamrin (2024) shows that Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis of poster media can reveal denotative, connotative, and even mythological meanings contained within visual elements. Meanwhile, Sulistyaningrum and Sabri (2022) assert that posters featuring cultural elements function not only as information media but also as representations of cultural values constructed through visual symbols. However, research specifically examining the representation of Atma Kerthi in the context of the PKB poster through the Sutasoma visual narrative remains relatively limited. The novelty of this research lies in its analytical focus that bridges classical epic literature with contemporary visual design, where the abstract philosophical value of Atma Kerthi is transformed into functional visual signs. Unlike previous research which tends to be general, this article explores how the poster medium within the PKB ecosystem recontextualizes the Sutasoma narrative as an effort to form cultural identity in the digital era.

To understand the complexity of such meaning, a semiotic approach is essential, given that visual works are not only aesthetic but also sign systems operating within a socio-cultural context. Fiske (1990) states that semiotics is the study of signs and how they work in society. Furthermore, Roland Barthes (1972) posits that myth is a second-order sign system that functions to convey ideological messages through visual representation. Therefore, the analysis of the PKB poster does not stop at literal meaning but must also uncover the connotative and mythological meanings constructed through its visual elements.

In a cultural context, Geertz (1973) views culture as a system of meanings inherited through symbols. This reinforces that every visual element in the PKB poster contains cultural values inseparable from the Balinese societal context. Sutasoma's gesture of surrender, for instance, cannot be understood in isolation from other visual elements such as the dominance of the color red and the overall visual composition. In the study of Indonesian visual culture, Agus Sachari (2019) explains that color has a symbolic function carrying certain spiritual values. In the context of Atma Kerthi, the color red can be interpreted as a representation of agni energy or the fire of purification, symbolizing the process of spiritual transformation toward purity (parisudha).

The visual appeal of this poster is further strengthened by the presence of circular ornaments forming a focal point and the use of gold-colored typography that emphasizes a sacred and majestic impression. The combination of these elements builds a visual structure that is not only aesthetic but also communicative and symbolic. Therefore, this research focuses on the visual communication semiotic analysis of the interaction between Sutasoma and the dragon, as well as the dominance of the color red, to reveal how cultural identity and the spiritual message of Atma Kerthi are constructed in contemporary design media. Through this study, it is expected that it can be understood how traditional Balinese values remain relevant as markers of the times amidst the dynamics of modernity.

Based on the background described, the research problems in this study are as follows:

1. How is the representation of the *Atma Kerthi* concept in the PKB XLVIII 2026 poster through visual communication elements?
2. How is the meaning of signs in the PKB XLVIII poster analyzed through the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth according to Roland Barthes' semiotic approach?
3. How do the visual interaction between the figures of Sutasoma and the dragon, and the dominance of the color red, build the philosophical meaning of soul purification in the context of *Atma Kerthi*?

Based on the research problems described, the objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To identify the representation of the *Atma Kerthi* concept in the PKB XLVIII poster through visual communication elements.
2. To analyze the meaning of signs in the PKB XLVIII poster based on the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach.
3. To uncover the philosophical meaning built through the visual interaction between the figures of Sutasoma, the dragon, and the dominance of the color red in the context of *Atma Kerthi*.

Semiotics is the approach used to understand meaning through sign systems present in various forms of visual representation. According to John Fiske (1990), semiotics is the study of signs and how they work in social life. In the context of visual communication, every element such as images, color, and typography does not only function aesthetically but also contains meanings formed by cultural systems.

The semiotic approach used in this research refers to the thoughts of Roland Barthes. Barthes (1972) divides the system of signification into two levels: denotation and connotation, which then develops into myth as a second-order sign system. Denotation refers to the literal meaning or what appears directly, while connotation relates to additional meanings influenced by cultural context. Myth, in this case, is an ideological construction of meaning that functions to convey certain values through visual representation.

The concept of representation is also an important foundation in this research. Stuart Hall (1997) states that representation is the process of producing meaning through sign systems operating within a culture. Thus, the visuals in a poster do not merely reflect reality but also shape the audience's perspective on a concept—in this case, *Atma Kerthi* as a philosophical value.

From a Visual Communication Design perspective, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that visual communication has a structure or grammar that governs how meaning is organized through visual elements such as composition, color, and symbols. This shows that every element in design has a role in building a complete and structured message.

Furthermore, color as a part of visual elements plays a vital role in conveying symbolic meaning. Agus Sachari (2019) explains that in Indonesian visual culture, color does not only function as an aesthetic element but also as a medium containing spiritual and philosophical values. Therefore, the use of color in a visual work can be interpreted as a representation of certain values living within a community's culture.

Based on this theoretical framework, this research uses a semiotic approach to examine the meanings contained in the visual elements of the PKB XLVIII poster, specifically in representing the *Atma Kerthi* concept through symbols, color, and visual composition.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-interpretative research type. This approach was selected to examine the symbolic meanings contained within visual objects in depth. The study focuses on visual communication semiotics analysis using Roland Barthes' theoretical framework, which encompasses three levels of signification: denotation,

connotation, and myth. Through this approach, the research is directed toward uncovering how the Atma Kerthi concept is represented in the PKB XLVIII 2026 poster.

In qualitative research, the term "population" is not used statistically but refers to the context of the object of study. Therefore, the target of this research is the official poster of the 48th Bali Arts Festival (PKB XLVIII) in 2026 as the primary object of analysis. The sampling in this study is purposive, meaning it was intentionally selected based on relevance to the research objectives. The analytical focus is directed toward the main visual elements of the poster, including the figure of Sutasoma, the representation of the dragon, the dominance of the color red, the background ornaments, and the typography that forms the overall visual composition.

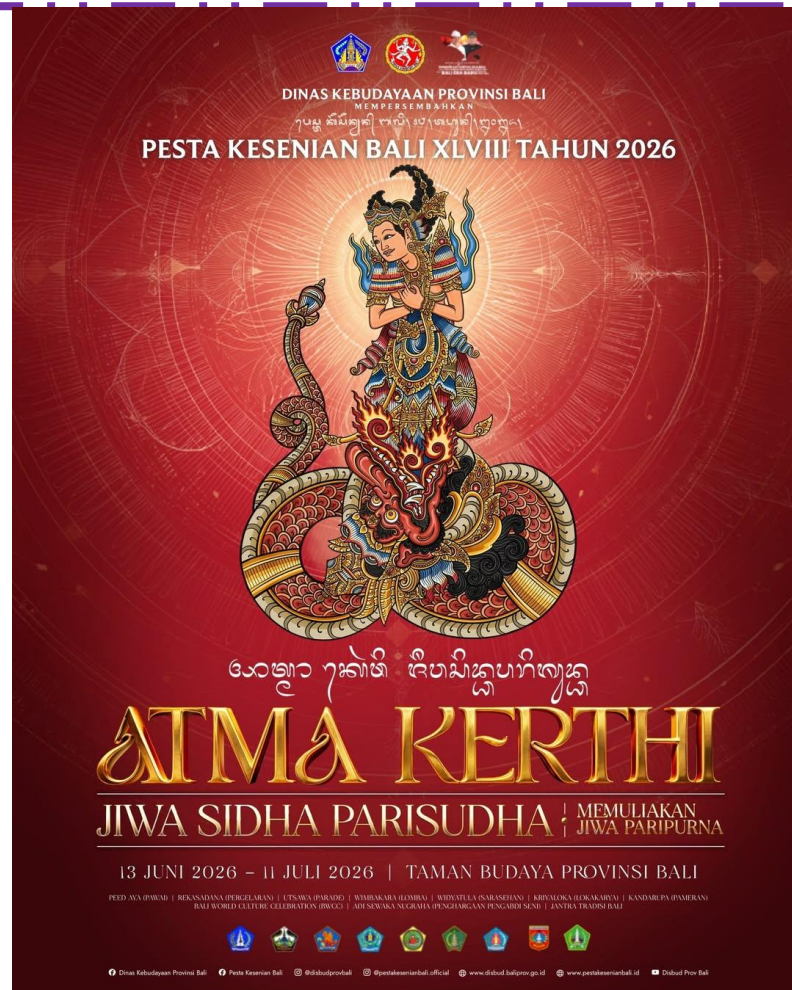
The key instrument in this research is the researcher themselves (human instrument), acting as an interpretive analyst supported by a Barthesian Semiotic Analysis Matrix. The researcher's position as the primary instrument is reinforced by a contextual understanding of Balinese visual culture, which serves to ensure the sharpness of the interpretation of the object. Data were collected through the integration of two primary techniques: Structured Visual Observation (Visual Artifact Analysis) and Heuristic Documentation Study. Visual observation was conducted through a systematic process of deconstructing formal elements across units of analysis, such as colorimetry, typography, iconography (the figures of Sutasoma and the dragon), and the compositional structure of the PKB XLVIII poster artifact. This technique was then synergized with a heuristic documentation study to trace the philosophical roots of Atma Kerthi and the Sutasoma narrative from both primary and secondary literature. The integration of these two techniques through the matrix instrument aims to achieve data triangulation, where visual findings are dialectically confronted with Balinese-Hindu theological texts and previous research to ensure the validity and depth of the resulting semiotic interpretation.

Data analysis was performed using a qualitative-interpretative technique within Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The analysis was conducted through three stages: (1) denotation analysis to identify the literal meaning of visible visual elements; (2) connotation analysis to interpret symbolic meanings based on cultural and aesthetic contexts; and (3) myth analysis to uncover the ideological meanings or philosophical values constructed through the overall visual representation.

The analysis process was carried out holistically by examining the interconnections between visual elements in forming a unified meaning. Data interpretation was supported by semiotic theory and visual culture studies to ensure that the resulting meanings are relevant to the Balinese cultural context, particularly in representing the concept of Atma Kerthi.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The PKB XLVIII 2026 poster, as shown in Figure 1, presents a visual composition centered on the figure of Sutasoma interacting with a dragon as the narrative focal point. This composition is reinforced by the dominance of the color red, circular ornaments in the background, and the use of decorative gold-colored typography. This visual structure forms a complex sign system that can be analyzed through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to uncover meanings at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth.



Picture 1. Poster Pesta Kesenian Bali (PKB) XLVIII Tahun 2026

Source: Instagram Official Pesta Kesenian Bali.

1. Denotation Analysis

At the denotative level, the poster displays a primary figure, Sutasoma, depicted in a position of surrender (*pasrah*), with a calm body gesture showing no resistance while facing a dragon about to devour him. The dragon is visualized as a mythological creature with a dynamic form and a powerful expression, occupying a dominant position in the visual composition. This represents a narrative of massive worldly challenges, intentionally contrasted with the figure of Sutasoma to demonstrate that the core essence of *Atma Kerthi* lies in inner tranquility amidst the cacophony of external threats.

The background is dominated by a deep red color, accompanied by circular ornaments resembling a mandala centered on the main figure. Additionally, there are decorative typographic elements in gold that provide a monumental and sacred impression. Overall, the visual composition exhibits a clear focal point on the interaction between Sutasoma and the dragon.

2. Connotation Analysis

At the connotative level, these visual elements contain deeper symbolic meanings. Sutasoma's gesture of surrender is not interpreted as weakness, but rather as a symbol of ego-conquest and acceptance of the spiritual process. In the context of Balinese Hindu teachings, this attitude reflects the awareness of the importance of self-control as a path toward soul purification.

The dragon, which denotatively appears as a threat, represents the power of transformation at the connotative level. Its presence can be interpreted as a symbol of an intense purification process that must be undergone in man's spiritual journey. This aligns with the concept of *Atma Kerthi* as an effort to purify the soul from negative elements.

The dominance of red in the background is a visual articulation of the southern axis in the *Nawa Sanga* cosmology, representing the power of *Agni* (fire) as an instrument of purification. Semiotically, the use of this color creates a liminal space—a field of transformation where the ego and worldly impurities are dissolved through the fire of consciousness. Thus, the red background functions not only aesthetically but serves as a theological metaphor for the *Atma Kerthi* process, where soul purification is achieved through the courage to face existential turmoil.

The circular ornaments resembling a mandala signify the balance and wholeness of the cosmos, directing visual attention toward the narrative center. Meanwhile, the use of gold typography conveys a sacred, majestic, and prestigious impression, strengthening the identity of PKB as a high-value cultural event.

3. Myth Analysis

At the level of myth, the collective visual elements in the poster construct an ideological narrative regarding the human spiritual journey. The interaction between Sutasoma and the dragon is no longer understood merely as a dramatic scene, but as a symbolic representation of the process of soul purification through sacrifice and self-control. The poster constructs the meaning that soul purity (*Atma Kerthi*) can only be achieved through the courage to confront and dissolve the ego within the process of spiritual transformation. This narrative aligns with the philosophical values of Balinese Hindu tradition, which emphasize the balance between physical and spiritual aspects.

Furthermore, the use of a contemporary visual style to elevate the classical Kakawin Sutasoma narrative indicates an effort toward cultural recontextualization. The poster does not only represent tradition but also adapts it into a modern visual language so that it remains relevant to contemporary society. In this context, the PKB XLVIII poster functions as a cultural communication medium that not only conveys information but also builds a collective awareness regarding the importance of soul glorification amidst the dynamics of modernity.

The results of this study indicate that the visual meaning structure in the PKB XLVIII poster is closely linked to Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, particularly in the relationship between denotation, connotation, and myth as a layered signification system. These findings, on one hand, confirm Stuart Hall's theory of representation—that meaning is produced through cultural sign systems. However, critically, the PKB XLVIII poster also demonstrates a complex dialectic between the flexibility of contemporary visual construction and the rigidity of the *Atma Kerthi* theological values. In contrast to Hall's view, which tends to see representation as an entirely fluid process, this poster becomes a field of identity negotiation; where visual modernity is used not to change the original meaning, but to package "old truths" so they are acceptable within global aesthetics without losing their religious authority.

From a visual communication perspective, the results confirm the view that visual elements possess a structure or grammar that shapes meaning. The dominance of red, the centered composition, and the use of traditional symbols indicate that visual meaning is constructed systematically, rather than for mere aesthetics. Furthermore, this study opens the possibility of developing visual semiotic concepts within the context of local culture. If within the Barthesian framework myth is understood as an ideological construction, in this context, myth also functions as a medium for preserving spiritual values. Consequently, it can be proposed that visual semiotics in the context of Balinese culture functions not only as a tool

for meaning analysis but also as a cultural mechanism for maintaining the continuity of traditional philosophical values amidst the dynamics of modernity.

CONCLUSION

Based on the semiotic analysis of the PKB XLVIII 2026 poster, the representation of Atma Kerthi is realized through a sophisticated integration of visual communication elements, where Sutasoma's interaction with the dragon denotatively illustrates a spiritual encounter that connotatively symbolizes ego-conquest and transformative purification. This visual structure, further amplified by the symbolic use of Agni (red) energy and circular mandalas, constructs a modern myth regarding the soul's journey toward purity, effectively serving as a cultural medium that bridges traditional philosophy with contemporary aesthetics. Ultimately, this research offers a new paradigm for viewing Balinese visual hybridity, proving that contemporary design can function as a dialectical space between conservation and innovation, while challenging modern designers to go beyond technical visualization toward the meaningful transliteration of profound philosophical values into a relevant visual language.

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