

Wayang Orang Betawi as a Medium for Cross-Cultural Communication through Local Expression in the Play Udel Jadi Raja

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Abstract

In the increasingly multicultural landscape of Indonesia, traditional performing arts are not merely forms of entertainment but serve as vital conduits for intercultural communication. Specifically, Wayang Orang Betawi is a traditional performing art that functions not only as entertainment but also as a medium of cultural communication within Jakarta's multicultural society. The play Udel Jadi Raja represents local cultural expression embedded with moral values, humour and social symbolism. This study examines how Wayang Orang Betawi serves as a medium for cross-cultural meaning exchange through local expression in the play. While previous scholarship has largely focused on the aesthetic preservation or linguistic vitality of Betawi arts, this study establishes novelty by positioning Wayang Orang Betawi as a medium of cross-cultural meaning exchange. Existing literature often overlooks the communicative function of these performances in mediating social conflict within heterogeneous urban settings. Consequently, the role of traditional humour and symbolism as mechanisms for social cohesion remains underexplored. Specifically, this study analyses how contextual humour functions as intercultural competence and how leadership symbolism conveys egalitarian values to diverse audiences. This study employed a qualitative approach using performance observation, documentation studies and descriptive analysis. Data were analysed by interpreting narrative elements, dialogues, cultural symbols and communication styles presented in Wayang Orang Betawi through the play Udel Jadi Raja. The findings indicate that Udel Jadi Raja facilitates cross-cultural meaning exchange by using Betawi language, distinctive humour and local cultural symbols. The transformation of the character Udel reflects universal values such as honesty, justice, equality and ethical leadership that are easy to understand from audiences in diverse cultural backgrounds. Wayang Orang Betawi in Udel Jadi Raja functions as an educational and reflective medium that bridges cultural differences. This performance contributes to strengthening local cultural identity while conveying universal values within a multicultural social context.

KEYWORDS

wayang orang betawi; cross-cultural communication; local cultural expression; meaning exchange.

Introduction

Indonesia, as an archipelagic nation with more than 1,300 ethnic groups (BPS Provinsi DKI Jakarta, 2023), faces a persistent challenge in maintaining social cohesion amid its dynamic cultural diversity. Within this pluralistic societal context, traditional performing arts play a role far more complex than that of mere entertainment; they function as a public sphere in which cultural values are

negotiated, identities are exchanged, and social conflicts are symbolically mediated and alleviated (Soedarsono, 2002). Traditional performing arts thus operate as a form of high-context communication, in which meaning is conveyed not only through verbal language but also through symbols, gestures, intonation, and socio-cultural context (Hall, 1976).

"In the contemporary era marked by rapid digitalization, traditional arts face dual pressures: preserving ancestral authenticity while maintaining relevance for modern audiences. Recent studies emphasize that for traditional performing arts to survive, they must undergo a process of adaptation or 'aesthetic transformation' (Supriyanto, 2025). This cultural representation is essential not only for sustainability but also to ensure that local wisdom remains communicative amidst the global cultural influx (Handayani & Setiawan, 2024; Mulyaningrum & Ryolita, 2024).

This phenomenon of cultural adaptation is particularly evident in Jakarta, a cultural melting pot where intercultural interactions occur intensively on a daily basis. According to data from the Jakarta Provincial Statistics Office, the city's population originates from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, making Jakarta one of the most socially heterogeneous regions in Indonesia (BPS DKI Jakarta, 2023). In this urban context, Betawi culture functioning as both the host culture and a product of long-standing acculturation offers a distinctive model of communication (Al Fahmi et al., 2024; Shahab, 2004). Unlike hierarchical traditions, this model is characterized by egalitarian speech patterns, direct humour, and a fluid 'social corrective' function. These communicative features are vividly embodied in its performing arts, particularly in Wayang Orang Betawi, which serves as a democratic space for intercultural dialogue.

Unlike the Javanese Wayang Wong tradition, which is often characterized by courtly ethics and hierarchical linguistic structures, Betawi performing arts are distinctively egalitarian, open, and democratic. Contemporary research confirms that Betawi arts, such as Lenong and Ondel-ondel, inherently reflect a fluid social identity that prioritizes communal intimacy over rigid stratification (Abdullah, 2018; Kurniawan, 2024). This egalitarian nature allows for greater flexibility in narrative improvisation, making it more adaptable to urban societal changes (Adiprasetyo & Wibowo, 2024; Hartono & Firmansyah, 2019; Pradini et al., 2024).

From a communication perspective, the utilization of humour in Betawi culture functions as a critical rhetorical strategy rather than a mere supplementary element. Recent scholarship on Betawi folk theater highlights that humour operates as a mechanism for social resilience and a 'social corrective' tool (Ibrahim, 2022). Through this medium, social tensions are mediated, allowing the aspirations of the common people to be articulated subtly without necessitating direct confrontation with power structures, a pattern consistent with broader findings on humour as social criticism in Indonesian discourse (Risty, 2024; Wijaya & Sari, 2020).

This gap in the literature is significant, as Wayang Orang Betawi presents a distinctive communicative phenomenon: the transformation of epic narratives that are typically regarded as sacred and elitist into profane and populist forms in order to render them accessible to audiences across-cultural boundaries. This hybrid genre combines the narrative structure of epic storytelling with the grounded, vernacular style of Betawi oral expression,

thereby creating a space for intercultural dialogue that has rarely been examined in academic studies.

This research focuses on a specific performance entitled "Udel Jadi Raja", staged at the Wayang Museum on 26 October 2025. The selection of this play is particularly critical because its narrative serves as a direct deconstruction of the feudal stratification inherent in classical Javanese Wayang Purwa. In these traditional canons, as articulated by Anderson (1990), power is typically conceptualized as a concrete entity reserved for those of noble lineage (trah), reinforcing a doctrine of blood-based privilege where a king must possess innate spiritual radiance (teja). By contrast, 'Udel Jadi Raja' offers a radical antithesis to this established convention. In this play, Udel a punakawan figure representing the common people ascends to the highest throne not through hereditary right, but after enduring suffering as a sacrificial figure, thereby introducing a meritocratic dimension rarely seen in classical epics.

This narrative phenomenon raises fundamental questions within intercultural communication studies: How can a local performance effectively communicate modern ideas of meritocracy, social justice, and transformational leadership to an audience with diverse cultural backgrounds? Does the use of local dialect and slapstick humour function as communicative noise, or does it instead serve as a bridge that reduces psychological distance between performers and audiences? These questions become increasingly relevant given that the audience at the Wayang Museum does not consist solely of Betawi communities, but also includes members of the general public and tourists who possess different cultural codes.

The novelty of this study lies in two main aspects that have not been widely explored by previous scholars. First, in terms of the material object, academic studies on Wayang Orang Betawi remain extremely limited compared to research on Wayang Kulit Betawi or Wayang Golek (Nurgijantoro, 2021). While significant research exists on the aesthetic and linguistic aspects of Betawi arts, the specific philosophical dimensions of Wayang Orang Betawi have received comparatively limited scholarly attention. Rather than viewing it through the lens of Javanese court philosophy, this study proposes that the art form possesses distinct mechanisms of meaning-making that merit independent analysis. This study challenges that assumption by demonstrating that Wayang Orang Betawi possesses its own distinctive mechanisms of philosophical communication, which are more adaptive to modern democratic values.

Second, from a theoretical perspective, this research shifts the analytical focus from purely aesthetic descriptions (such as costume and music) toward an examination of communicative functions. While earlier studies have largely emphasized linguistic vitality and the threat of cultural extinction, this study instead foregrounds the vitality of meaning. We argue that performances such as "Udel Jadi Raja" illustrate that tradition is not static; rather, it is a living entity that continuously negotiates meaning with modernity. The character of Udel is not merely a comic figure, but a symbol of cultural resistance against rigid social stratification, strategically packaged in humour to ensure acceptance without provoking overt resistance.

This study is theoretically based on the concept of Intercultural Communication, which considers culture a crucial variable in message encoding and decoding processes. The framework employs a Symbolic Interactionism perspective, highlighting the process by

which cultural symbols gain new meanings through social interactions in performance contexts. In this framework, Betawi humour is analyzed not as a disturbance, but as a form of communication competence that facilitates ice-breaking and builds rapport with multicultural audiences (Gudykunst, 2003; Samovar et al., 2009).

The primary objectives of this article are: (1) to analyze how the play "Udel Jadi Raja" represents the transformation of leadership values from feudalistic to egalitarian; and (2) to evaluate the effectiveness of local expressions (language, humour, and symbols) as media for cross-cultural meaning exchange. By addressing these objectives, this article is expected to contribute to the literature on cultural communication, particularly by enriching understanding of how local wisdom can serve as a solution for communication challenges in fragmented urban societies.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative-interpretative approach, specifically utilizing thematic analysis through three operational lenses: Ethnography of Communication to decode linguistic patterns, Symbolic Interactionism to analyze performance symbols, and Hall's High-Context Communication theory to evaluate non-verbal audience engagement. The selection of this approach is grounded in the research objective to understand a complex social phenomenon namely, intercultural meaning exchange within performing arts which cannot be adequately measured through numerical indicators alone. As articulated by Creswell, (2014), qualitative research is the most appropriate method for exploring and understanding the meanings individuals or groups assign to social or human problems. More specifically, this study adopts elements of the Ethnography of Communication to examine communication patterns, cultural codes, and symbols that emerge in the interactions between Wayang Orang Betawi performers and their audiences. The primary focus is placed on symbolic meaning-making (symbolic interactionism), wherein the researcher seeks to interpret how the play "Udel Jadi Raja" functions as a cultural text that conveys egalitarian moral messages within a heterogeneous society.

This study focuses on a communicative event, examined through the entire performance of the play Udel Jadi Raja. The primary units of analysis are:

1. Performance Text
This includes verbal dialogue (the play script), narrative structure, and paralinguistic elements such as intonation and the Betawi dialect.
2. Performance Context
This includes performers' non-verbal interactions, such as gestures and facial expressions, the utilization of costumes, and the arrangement of the stage.
3. Audience Responses
These refer to observable collective reactions during the performance, specifically laughter, applause, and verbal interjections. Data on these responses were recorded using structured field notes, which documented the timing of the reaction relative to the narrative progression (e.g., specific scenes or jokes) rather than quantifying individual responses. This approach treats audience reaction as an illustrative indicator of engagement rather than a statistical measure of comprehension.

The observational data sources were selected using a purposive sampling technique (Sugiyono, 2017). In this study, the focus was specifically directed toward key scenes involving the characters 'Udel' and 'Semar,' as these two figures were identified as the primary carriers of the play's main messages. In addition, the diverse composition of the audience at the research site representing various ethnic backgrounds also became an object of observation in order to examine cross-cultural message reception.

Furthermore, this study was conducted at the Wayang Museum, located in the Kota Tua area of West Jakarta. This location was selected for its strategic relevance for two main reasons. First, the Wayang Museum functions not merely as a repository of artifacts but as a living space for the preservation and performance of traditional arts in Jakarta. Second, as a major tourist destination, the museum serves as a meeting point for highly heterogeneous audiences, ranging from local Jakarta residents and domestic tourists from other regions to international visitors.

This multicultural setting provides an ideal context for examining the effectiveness of intercultural communication, as it allows the researcher to observe how local Betawi cultural content is "consumed" and interpreted by audiences with diverse cultural backgrounds. Data collection was conducted specifically on 26 October 2025, during the performance of the play Udel Jadi Raja. Instrumentation or Tools. In qualitative research, the primary instrument is the researcher themselves (human instrument).

The researcher as the planner, executor of data collection, analyst, interpreter of the data, and ultimately as the reporter of the research findings (Moleong, 2017). However, to support data validity, the researcher employs supporting instruments in the form of:

1. Observation Guide: Developed based on Hall's intercultural communication theory (High/Low Context), encompassing indicators such as the use of language codes (code-mixing/code-switching), non-verbal symbols (kinesics/proxemics), and the emotional responses of the audience.
2. Documentation Tools: A digital camera and audio recorder are used to capture details of the performance that may be overlooked by direct visual observation, as well as to validate the transcribed dialogues analysed. Ethical clearance for documentation was obtained from the event organizers, and recordings were strictly focused on the stage performance to respect audience privacy.
3. Field Notes: Utilized to record unique occurrences, the atmosphere of the performance, and the researcher's real-time reflections during the observation process.

Meanwhile, the data collection procedures were conducted through three systematic stages:

1. Pre-Field Stage (Documentation Study): The researcher conducted a literature review on the history of Betawi Wayang Orang, traditional performance conventions (pakem lakon), and the profile of the performing art group. The aim was to build an initial reference framework (pre-understanding) before entering the field.
2. Passive Participant Observation Stage: On October 26, 2025, the researcher was present at the site and blended in with the audience without being directly involved in the performance. The focus of observation was divided into two aspects: (a) Focused Observation, examining the storyline and dialogues of key characters; and (b) Selective Observation, examining specific moments when humour was delivered and how the audience responded to that humour.
3. Documentation Stage: The researcher collected supporting materials such as the event synopsis, scene

photographs, and audiovisual recordings to strengthen empirical evidence. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing visual observation findings with content analysis of the dialogue scripts to ensure consistency of interpretation.

Furthermore, the data analysis techniques refer to the interactive model of Miles et al., (2014), which consists of three concurrent streams of activities:

1. Data Condensation: The researcher selects raw data from the field notes. Irrelevant information is discarded, while key data related to symbols of leadership and Betawi humour are sharpened. This process involved an inductive coding strategy, where thematic labels were derived directly from the empirical data rather than pre-existing categories. The researcher conducted iterative readings of the transcripts to ensure consistency, assigning codes such as 'Egalitarian Humour,' 'Feudal Symbols,' and 'Universal Moral Messages' only when specific linguistic patterns appeared repeatedly across the dataset.
2. Data Display: The reduced data are organized into systematic descriptive narratives. The researcher maps the relationships between elements of Betawi culture (such as dialect and speaking style) and audience responses to identify emerging communication patterns. Important dialogue excerpts are presented to provide a “thick description” of the phenomena under study.
3. Conclusion Drawing/Verification: The researcher draws final conclusions regarding how “Udel Jadi Raja” represents shifts in social values. These conclusions are re-verified by revisiting the field data to ensure their validity. The analysis is conducted inductively, meaning that theory is built based on empirical field findings rather than forcing the data to fit pre-existing theories.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Social Structure: Classical Wayang vs. the Play “Udel Jadi Raja”

Comparative Aspect	Traditional Wayang Conventions (Feudal Paradigm)	Representation in “Udel Jadi Raja” (Egalitarian Paradigm)
Source of Authority	Hereditary lineage (noble or divine descent)	Merit-based legitimacy (personal struggle and spiritual mandate)
Initial Social Status of the Protagonist	Ksatria / aristocratic class	Punakawan / common people (marginalized figure)
Communication Style	High-register, formal, hierarchical language	Betawi dialect; direct, expressive, and egalitarian speech
Mode of Conflict Resolution	Supernatural combat and violence	Pragmatic intelligence (street wisdom) and humour

Table 2. Categories of Humour and Audience Responses in the Performance

Humour Category	Form / Scene Example	Communicative Function	Audience Response (Observation)
Verbal (Linguistic) Humour	<i>Udel's pantun: “Buah kedondong buah atep...”</i> delivered amid a tense situation	Ice breaker; reduces narrative tension	Collective laughter; non-Betawi audience members also laughed due to the humorous intonation.
Physical (Slapstick) Humour	<i>Udel's</i> comical martial arts movements when confronting a serious opponent	Universal language; understandable without linguistic competence	Enthusiastic applause; visual cheers and supportive gestures.
Interactive Humour (Breaking the Fourth Wall)	Performers directly addressing the audience (e.g., “ <i>Eh, Neng baju merah...</i> ”) or commenting on current issues	Social inclusion; positions the audience as part of the performance	Audience members felt acknowledged; reciprocal interaction occurred (call-and-response).
Satirical Humour (Social Corrective)	Semar's reprimands of royal elites delivered in a “ <i>Babeh</i> ” style	Social critique; articulates the aspirations of the common people	Nods of agreement; bittersweet laughter indicating contextual understanding of injustice.

Source: Observation Data Analysis (2025).

Result and Discussion

Based on in-depth participant observation of the Betawi Wayang Orang performance of “Udel Jadi Raja” at the Wayang Museum on October 26, 2025, this study identified distinctive patterns of cultural communication. The empirical findings are classified into three interrelated main themes: (1) the deconstruction of social hierarchy through character transformation; (2) the hybridity of cultural symbols in the characterization of Semar; and (3) humour as a mechanism of cross-cultural communication.

Deconstruction of Social Hierarchy: The Narrative of “Udel”

The main finding of this study is the presence of a significant structural deviation between the play “Udel Jadi Raja” and traditional Wayang conventions in general. Based on field observations, this contrast is clearly evident in how social structure is represented on stage. While court-style classical Wayang (particularly Javanese Wayang Purwa) tends to preserve a hierarchical status quo, where kings are conceptually expected to originate from the lineage of warriors (ksatria) or deities (Anderson, 1990). This traditional framework reinforces a static social order where the distinction between the elite and the commoners is perceived as divinely ordained. However, the play 'Udel Jadi Raja' deliberately deviates from this canon, offering a narrative of vertical mobility that is rarely permitted in the strict conventions of court-based performances. The central character, Udel, is introduced not through symbols of grandeur, but through a simple costume that represents the punakawan class or common people.

As detailed in Table 1, the performance constructs a distinct dialectic between the established feudal norms and the proposed egalitarian alternative. The shift in the source

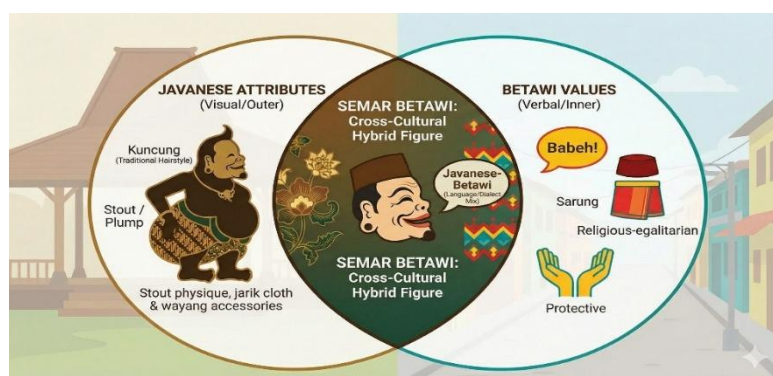


Figure 1. Model of Cultural Hybridity in the Character of Semar

Source: Developed by Researchers (2025)

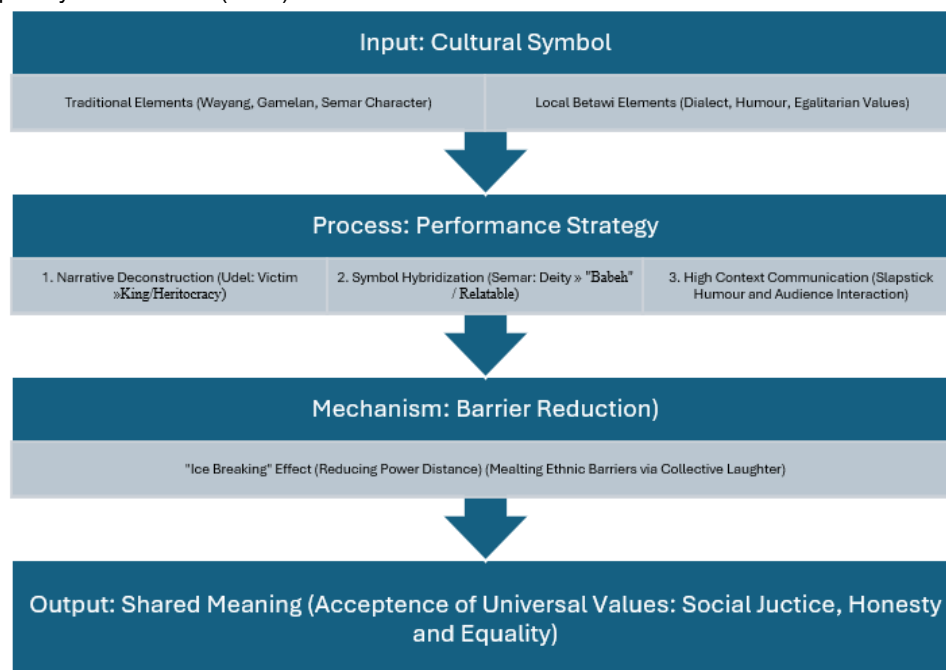


Figure 2. The Process of Intercultural Meaning Negotiation in "Udel Jadi Raja" Performance

Source: Developed by Researchers (2025)

of authority from hereditary lineage to merit-based legitimacy suggests a reinterpretation of leadership. In this play, leadership is no longer portrayed as an inherent privilege of the elite, but rather as a moral responsibility (*amanah*) that is accessible to any individual who demonstrates integrity, regardless of their social origin.

Table 1 serves as an analytical framework that summarizes the fundamental differences between the social structure of classical Wayang and the social representations offered in the play "Udel Jadi Raja." By comparing aspects such as the source of authority, characters' social status, communication style, and modes of conflict resolution, the table highlights a paradigm shift from feudalism toward egalitarian values that constitute the core findings of this study. This comparative framework then provides the basis for a more in-depth reading of the early scenes of the performance, particularly in identifying how power hegemony and social inequality are initially constructed dramaturgically before being deconstructed throughout the narrative, as illustrated in the two opening scenes set in the Kingdom of Goaselamaya.

Scene 1: The Hegemony of Power in Goaselamaya.

The performance opens with a crisis situation in the Kingdom of Goaselamaya, which is depicted as being

struck by disaster. In this scene, the royal elites are portrayed as engaging in deliberation through a highly formal and hierarchical mode of interaction. A crucial decision is made unilaterally by those in power: the necessity of a human sacrifice to halt the calamity. Social irony is made explicit when the chosen sacrifice does not come from the royal court, but instead falls upon Udel, the son of Ki Semar. Semiotically, this scene affirms the inequality of the social structure, wherein the safety of the elite (the rulers) is secured through the sacrifice of *wong cilik* (common people).

Scene 2: The Visualization of Powerlessness.

The scene then shifts its focus to Udel as he becomes aware of his fate. The researcher observes the deliberate construction of a dramatic atmosphere through dim lighting and melancholic instrumental accompaniment. Udel is positioned as a marginal figure, lamenting his destiny as a victim of structural injustice. The absence of significant physical resistance in this early stage symbolically represents the powerlessness of the lower social classes in the face of an oppressive feudal destiny.

Through the scenes described above, Udel is portrayed as an object of suffering, forcibly selected as a sacrificial offering to save the Kingdom of Goaselamaya from disaster.

Semiotically, this depiction represents the powerlessness of lower-class communities within traditional power structures. The researcher notes a tense atmosphere constructed through dim lighting and melancholic background music as Udel laments his fate. However, a narrative turning point occurs when the act of sacrifice instead becomes a catalyst for his awakening. Udel does not die; rather, he receives a revelation of leadership (wahyu kepemimpinan).

Udel's transformation from a "sacrificial victim" to a "king" constitutes a crucial finding, particularly because it is not accompanied by a shift toward feudal character traits. Upon ascending the throne, Udel does not adopt high-register language typically associated with Wayang kingship. Instead, he consistently maintains a strong Betawi dialect, a direct and candid speaking style, and relaxed, non-rigid bodily gestures. This phenomenon represents the egalitarian values of Betawi culture, in which personal dignity is not determined by "blue blood" lineage or elaborate linguistic hierarchy, but by integrity and courage (nyali). Audience responses during Udel's coronation scene were highly enthusiastic, marked by prolonged applause, indicating that the narrative of a commoner becoming a leader resonates strongly on an emotional level with modern audiences who aspire to meritocratic ideals.

The [figure 1](#) above represents a visual depiction of the cultural hybridity embodied by the character of Ki Semar. Visually (outer appearance), Semar retains Javanese attributes, such as the kuncung hairstyle, jarik cloth, and a stout body, adhering to the established iconography of Javanese Wayang (Soedarsono, 2002). However, verbally and in terms of character (inner dimension), Semar adopts Betawi values, including the distinctive "Babeh" accent, a protective demeanor, and a religious-egalitarian orientation. This intersection produces the figure of "Betawi Semar," which is readily accepted by cross-cultural audiences.

Cultural Hybridity: The Localization of Semar

The second finding highlights a process of cultural adaptation, or the localization of symbols, as embodied by the character of Ki Semar. In Javanese mythology, Semar is a highly sacred (divine) figure, symbolizing a deity who descends to the human realm (Ismaya) and is typically portrayed with profound mystical authority. However, in the play "Udel Jadi Raja," observations indicate that Semar undergoes a pronounced process of "Betawi-ization" without losing his underlying philosophical essence.

Visually, Semar continues to display his standard iconography, including a stout body, pale white face, and the kuncung hairstyle. Verbally and behaviorally, however, Semar in this play is presented as a representation of the "Babeh" figure within Betawi family structures: protective, religious, yet highly fluid and humorous. The researcher notes a specific moment in which Semar protests the decision of the royal elites to sacrifice his son. This protest is not conveyed through vague, poetic tembang (sung verses), but rather through logical and straightforward verbal expressions characteristic of Betawi parental discourse.

Semar's Dialogue: "Enak aje lu mau matiin anak gue! Emang lu kate nyetak anak gampang?" "How dare you try to kill my child! Do you think having a child is that easy?" (Field Observation, Scene 3).

The use of this direct and slightly coarse expression indicates a shift from the indirect communication culture characteristic of the Javanese court to the direct communication style associated with Betawi coastal culture.

This finding reinforces the argument that Betawi Wayang Orang is a fluid product of cultural hybridity. It borrows the "outer shell" from Javanese tradition (costumes and gamelan), while infusing its "inner soul" with Betawi values (democratic and open). This hybridity enables audiences who may be unfamiliar with Javanese Wayang philosophy to remain engaged with the narrative, as the character of Semar appears more humanized and relatable to their everyday experiences (Fadia & Damayanti, 2024; Melinda & Paramita, 2019).

Humour as Intercultural Communication Strategy

The third finding, and perhaps the most vital within the context of intercultural communication, is the use of humour as a strategy of social inclusion. Given that the research was conducted at the Wayang Museum, a heterogeneous public space, cultural gaps between the performers (Betawi) and the audience (multi-ethnic/foreign) constituted a tangible challenge (Attardo, 1994). (See [Table 2](#)).

Observational data indicate that the play addresses these challenges through the use of situational and slapstick humour that transcends linguistic boundaries. Unlike verbal humour that relies on complex wordplay (puns) and may only be fully understood by native speakers, the performers in "Udel Jadi Raja" predominantly employ visual humour and expressive intonation. For instance, battle scenes that are typically tense in classical Wayang are deconstructed into comedic sequences in which Udel confronts his opponents not with supernatural weapons, but through comical martial arts movements and seemingly incongruous pantun.

Udel's pantun: "Buah kedondong buah atep, dulu benjol sekarang ganteng."

Although the pantun is relatively simple, the audience's laughter was collective and simultaneous. The researcher observed that the laughter was collective, shared by the general audience. Given the museum's status as a major tourist destination attracting diverse visitors, this suggests that the humour resonated beyond specific cultural groups, although exact ethnic backgrounds were not individually verified. This suggests that humour functions as an effective ice breaker, dismantling the "fourth wall" between the stage and the audience. The performers frequently engaged in improvisation (ad libitum), directly addressing audience members, inviting interaction, or commenting on relevant contemporary issues. (See [Figure 2](#)).

This communicative strategy can facilitate what Casmir, (1997) describes as 'third culture building,' wherein performers and audiences converge within a shared emotional frequency namely, joy. Humour diminishes the power disparity between the actors (as message sources) and the audience (as message recipients), therefore making the moral themes about justice and leadership expressed through the figure of Udel more accessible and comprehensible. Post-performance observations indicate that audiences left the theater with joyful smiles and participated in casual discussions about the comedic characters, suggesting that the cultural messages were conveyed without resistance or a didactic tone.

These empirical data indicate that "Udel Jadi Raja" has a purpose beyond just visual delight. It constitutes a complex communication system that employs symbols of egalitarianism, character hybridity, and inclusive humour to convey universal moral messages within a culturally diverse society (Putri & Sudrajat, 2019).

This section discusses the implications of the research findings regarding the play "Udel Jadi Raja" within the context of intercultural communication and the sociology of performing arts. The discussion focuses on three primary aspects: (1) The reinterpretation of power within Betawi

culture, (2) The effectiveness of humour as a bridge for cross-cultural communication, and (3) The adaptation model of traditional arts in the modern era.

Interpretation of Key Findings: Egalitarianism as a Counter-Narrative The findings of this study demonstrate that the play 'Udel Jadi Raja' functions as a counter-narrative to the feudal cultural hegemony often associated with Wayang. While classical scholars like Benedict Anderson (1990) posited that the traditional Javanese concept of power is static, concrete, and hierarchically centered on noble lineage, this performance presents a stark antithesis. This theoretical contradiction is empirically demonstrated in the coronation scene (Scene 4). When offered the supreme title 'Gusti' (Lord) and addressed in the high-register *krama inggil*, Udel explicitly rejects these linguistic markers of stratification. Instead, he chooses to address his subjects using the egalitarian Betawi dialect and physically descends from the throne to sit at the same level as the people. This act deconstructs the notion of power as a divine privilege, redefining it instead as a functional mandate accessible to anyone based on merit rather than bloodline. The transformation of Udel from a sacrificial victim into a king articulates a dynamic narrative of power based on meritocracy. This shift mirrors recent findings in Indonesian performance studies, which suggest that traditional arts are increasingly being utilized to voice 'cultural resilience' and challenge established social hierarchies (Haryanto, 2024; Setyawan & Saddhono, 2025).

From the perspective of cultural identity theory, this phenomenon confirms that the Betawi community employs a unique 'identity negotiation strategy'. They do not reject the Wayang culture "imported" from Java; rather, they engage in a negotiation of meaning. The figure of Udel, who retains his thick accent and outspoken demeanor (*ceplas-ceplos*) even after becoming king, serves as a symbol of resistance against social stratification. This confirms Saidi, (1997) view that the fundamental character of Betawi culture is egalitarian and open. The implication of this finding is significant: Wayang Orang Betawi is not merely mimicry of the Javanese Wayang Wong, but an independent entity voicing the aspirations of the grassroots regarding social justice aspirations that may be difficult to articulate in formal forums.

Comparison with Previous Studies The findings regarding the use of humour in this play exhibit both parallels and distinctions when compared to previous studies.

1. Consistency: These findings align with James Danandjaja, (1997) theory regarding humour as "disguised social protest." In "Udel Jadi Raja," humour is not merely an intermezzo, but a tool for criticism. When the character Semar complains using a Betawi dialect, he is performing a social control function, referred to in modern theater as a social corrective.
2. Distinction/Innovation: Unlike Mu'jizah's (2015) study, which regarded the decline of Betawi oral traditions in the context of modernization with a pessimistic lens, this research reveals a newfound optimism. The incorporation of code-mixing, which combines Indonesian, Betawi, and elements of Old Javanese in this drama, has demonstrated efficacy in engaging millennial and multi-ethnic audiences (Yulfianti et al., 2024).

"Drawing on the concept of high-context communication (Hall, 1976), this study finds that meaning in Wayang Orang Betawi is transmitted primarily through non-verbal cues rather than linguistic precision. This aligns with recent observations in multicultural education settings, where symbolic interaction and shared emotional

experiences serve as more effective bridges than verbal language (Sadiyah & Karman, 2024). Consequently, non-Betawi audiences can comprehend the narrative through 'visual symbolism' such as slapstick gestures and intonation creating an inclusive space for cross-cultural interpretation (Angelina et al., 2022).

In this case, comedy serves as a tool for diminishing uncertainty. For audiences not familiar with Betawi culture, discomfort can be relieved by communal laughter. Laughter establishes a "third space" in which differences between races diminish. This demonstrates that local arts, when combined with universal storylines (such as the plight of the ordinary people or *wong cilik*), hold considerable potential as tools of domestic cultural diplomacy in a pluralistic Indonesia (Gudykunst, 2005).

This research offers innovative insights; nonetheless, it possesses some limitations that require acknowledgment. First, this is a case study that just looks at one play. Therefore, generalizing our findings to the complete repertoire of Wayang Orang Betawi should be approached with caution, as other plays may feature more traditional story structures. Second, the observation concentrated significantly on the qualitative dimensions of interaction; thus, data pertaining to audience demographics (age, specific ethnicity) were derived from the researcher's visual assessments rather than exact quantitative surveys. Consequently, the findings regarding cross-cultural reception should be interpreted as preliminary indicators rather than conclusive generalizations. While the observed engagement suggests effective communication, it does not statistically confirm the depth of message comprehension across all demographic groups without further quantitative validation.

Conclusion

This study investigated the role of Wayang Orang Betawi, specifically through the play "Udel Jadi Raja," as a medium of intercultural communication in a heterogeneous urban society. The analysis yields two primary conclusions regarding the adaptation of traditional art. First, the narrative functions as a counter-discourse to the feudal values traditionally embedded in Wayang arts. By transforming the character Udel from a sacrificial victim (*tumbal*) into a King, the play symbolizes the egalitarian ethos of Betawi culture. This shift emphasizes meritocracy and openness, explicitly challenging rigid social hierarchies. Second, in terms of communication strategy, the performance utilizes situational humor and high-context communication styles. Our observations suggest that humor serves as a vital ice-breaker mechanism, reducing the psychological distance between performers and the multi-ethnic audience, thereby helping universal moral messages to bridge potential linguistic barriers.

These findings offer specific insights into the preservation of traditional arts, illustrating one viable adaptation pathway where cultural heritage negotiates meaning with modernity. This case study demonstrates that by embracing meritocratic narratives and high-context humor, local performances can remain relevant without losing their fundamental uniqueness. This research has been limited to a singular case study at the Wayang Museum. Therefore, one should exercise caution before drawing generalizations about the broader genre of Betawi arts. To enrich the literature on cultural communication in Indonesia, future research should expand the scope of analysis through comparative studies of different plays or

by employing quantitative survey methods to measure audience reception more comprehensively.

Author contributions

The first author acted as the primary researcher, responsible for the conceptualization of the study, data collection through participant observation at the Wayang Museum, and the initial drafting of the manuscript. The second author contributed to the theoretical framework of Intercultural Communication and Symbolic Interactionism, conducted the qualitative data analysis using the interactive model, and performed the final critical revision of the article for intellectual content. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article. There are no financial or personal relationships with people or organizations that could inappropriately influence or bias the findings presented in this study.

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