

Performative Semiotics of Manca' Paddang: Body, Sword, And Humor in the Construction of Selayar Cultural Meaning

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Abstract

This study analyzes manca' paddang, a traditional Selayar martial performance using swords, as a performative semiotic practice in which the body, object, and humor operate as cultural signs. Although the performance remains visible in ritual and community stages, it is often reduced to entertainment, thereby obscuring its role in transmitting values of courage, siri', social intimacy, and cultural memory. Using an interpretive qualitative design, data were collected over approximately three months in Galung Bontosikuyu, Benteng Bontoharu, Kayuadi, and Pulau Madu through passive observation, in-depth interviews, and visual documentation of performances. Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of representamen, object, and interpretant was used as the main analytical framework, complemented by performance studies perspectives on embodied action and cultural transmission. The findings show that the performer's body functions as a representamen through patterned movement, gesture, posture, and facial expression. The paddang or sword operates as an object that indexes courage, self-control, and disciplined masculinity while structuring dramatic interaction. Humor emerges as a dynamic interpretant through playful improvisation, laughter, and audience participation, transforming potential violence into social intimacy. The study argues that manca' paddang is not merely a traditional martial attraction but a complex cultural sign system in which Selayar identity is enacted, negotiated, and reproduced. It contributes to scholarship on Indonesian performance by integrating Peircean semiotics with performative analysis of embodied local knowledge.

Keywords: *performative semiotics, manca' padding, Selayar culture, humor, Peircean semiotics*

INTRODUCTION

Traditional performing arts are not simply aesthetic displays or community entertainment. They are embodied systems through which societies transmit values, memories, moral orientations, and local knowledge across generations. Performance studies has long shown that cultural meaning is not only stored in written archives but is also enacted through bodies, gestures, spatial arrangements, repetition, and audience participation (Bauman, 1977; Schechner, 2013; Taylor, 2003; Turner, 1982). In this sense, a traditional performance is a living cultural text: it is learned, repeated, modified, and interpreted in concrete social encounters.

Within the cultural life of the Selayar Islands in South Sulawesi, manca' paddang occupies an important position as a performative expression that brings together martial movement, symbolic objects, playful improvisation, and social humor. Local practitioners distinguish between manca', a martial performance without a weapon, and manca' paddang, a performance involving the paddang or sword. The latter is the focus of this study because the presence of the sword intensifies the symbolic field of the performance. The sword does not merely function as a stage property; it becomes a sign through which courage, self-control, danger, social discipline, and cultural identity are dramatized.

Field observations in Galung Bontosikuyu, Benteng Bontoharu, Kayuadi, and Pulau Madu indicate that manca' paddang remains present in community events and traditional stages. Yet its meanings are often narrowed by audiences and observers who treat it mainly as a physical attraction or humorous spectacle. Such a reduction obscures the symbolic density of the performance. The bodily movements, the circular performance space, the opening gestures of respect, the stylized handling of the sword, and the comic exchanges between performers and spectators all participate in a process of meaning-making. What appears at first as entertainment is, in fact, a structured cultural event in which Selayar values are enacted and interpreted.

This problem is significant because the survival of traditional performance cannot be measured only by whether the performance continues to be staged. A tradition may remain visible while its interpretive depth gradually weakens. When manca' paddang is understood only as entertainment, the cultural knowledge embedded in its bodily techniques, symbolic objects, and social humor may become detached from the communities that sustain it. This condition is particularly important in contemporary cultural contexts where local performances increasingly encounter commodification, tourism, digital circulation, and aesthetic simplification.

The present study therefore proposes a performative semiotic reading of manca' paddang. Semiotics enables the analysis of signs, objects, and meanings, while performative analysis emphasizes the embodied and event-based production of meaning. Peirce's triadic framework of representamen, object, and interpretant is useful because it treats meaning as a relational process rather than as a fixed property of an object. A movement, a sword, a laugh, or a gesture becomes meaningful through its relation to cultural references and audience interpretation. In the context of manca' paddang, this model allows the researcher to examine how the body operates as a sign, how the sword refers to cultural values, and how humor produces interpretive effects within the social event.

Previous studies of traditional performance in Indonesia have often focused on descriptive aspects such as historical origin, form, function, and preservation. These studies are valuable, but they frequently stop at the level of documentation. Conversely, semiotic studies sometimes analyze symbols as static elements without fully examining how signs are produced through live action, bodily rhythm, improvisation, and audience response. This study addresses that gap by integrating Peircean semiotics and performance analysis to explain how cultural meaning is produced in the interaction among body, sword, humor, performer, and audience.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze manca' paddang as a performative semiotic practice in Selayar culture. More specifically, it seeks to identify the relationship between the performer's body, the paddang as a symbolic object, and humor as an interpretive effect in the construction of cultural meaning. The study also explains how the triadic process of semiosis helps clarify the role of manca' paddang as a complex cultural sign system rather than a mere martial or comic attraction.

Traditional Performance as Embodied Cultural Transmission

Performance is a central site of cultural transmission because it converts memory into action. Taylor (2003) distinguishes the archive from the repertoire, arguing that embodied practices such as gesture, movement, ritual, and performance transmit knowledge in ways that written records cannot fully capture. This perspective is relevant to manca' paddang because the performance is learned and reproduced through bodily practice, observation, imitation, and communal repetition rather than through formal textual instruction alone.

Bauman's (1977) concept of performance as an event also helps clarify how meaning emerges in manca' paddang. A performance is not merely a text to be decoded; it is a situated

encounter involving performers, audiences, expectations, genres, and social evaluation. The circular arena in manca' paddang places performers and spectators in close proximity, making audience laughter, shouting, and participation part of the performance itself. Meaning is therefore produced in the event, not only in the performer's movement.

Schechner (2013) further emphasizes that performances are restored behaviors: actions that are repeated, remembered, and rearranged in specific contexts. Manca' paddang can be read as a form of restored behavior because its movements, openings, closing gestures, and comic sequences are inherited patterns that are reactivated in each performance. Repetition does not make the performance static; instead, it allows performers to negotiate continuity and improvisation within an established cultural frame.

Peircean Semiotics and the Production of Cultural Meaning

Peirce's semiotic theory conceptualizes meaning as a triadic relation among the sign or representamen, the object to which the sign refers, and the interpretant or meaning-effect generated through interpretation (Peirce, 1931-1958). This model is particularly suitable for analyzing performance because it does not reduce signs to fixed meanings. Instead, semiosis is dynamic: signs become meaningful through their relation to cultural references, embodied action, and interpretive communities.

In manca' paddang, the performer's body can be understood as a representamen because it presents visible forms such as posture, gesture, movement, facial expression, and rhythm. The paddang functions as an object because it refers to values such as courage, discipline, threat, and cultural identity. Humor functions as an interpretant because it is the meaning-effect produced through interaction: laughter, emotional release, social bonding, and the reconfiguration of martial tension into communal enjoyment. This triadic process allows the performance to be understood as a cultural sign system rather than as a sequence of isolated movements.

Body, Object, and Humor in Performative Semiosis

The body is central to performative semiosis because it is both a biological presence and a cultural medium. In traditional martial performances, bodily movement may signify strength, agility, discipline, readiness, and social honor. In Selayar and the broader South Sulawesi cultural sphere, values related to honor and dignity are often discussed through the concept of siri', while courage and solidarity are expressed through culturally situated conduct (Pelras, 1996). In manca' paddang, the body does not merely display technique; it makes these values visible and socially legible.

The object used in performance also carries semiotic force. The paddang or sword is not neutral. It organizes movement, creates dramatic risk, and marks the performance as a stylized martial encounter. Yet the sword's potentially threatening meaning is repeatedly softened through comic timing and playful bodily action. This transformation is crucial because it shows that the performance does not glorify violence; it stages the management of force through control, aesthetic rhythm, and social humor.

Humor is a key communicative mechanism in this process. Meyer (2000) argues that humor can create identification, clarify social positions, enforce norms, and differentiate acceptable from unacceptable behavior. In manca' paddang, humor helps performers and spectators manage the tension created by weapon play. It makes danger socially acceptable by placing it within a controlled aesthetic frame. Laughter therefore becomes an interpretive response that confirms the success of the performance and reinforces social proximity between performers and audiences.

METHOD

This study used an interpretive qualitative approach with a performative semiotic design. The approach was selected because the object of the study is a cultural performance whose meanings are produced through embodied action, symbolic objects, social interaction, and audience response. Quantitative measurement would not be sufficient to capture the interpretive complexity of the performance. The study therefore focused on understanding how signs operate in the actual performance context and how cultural meaning is constructed through the relationship between body, sword, and humor.

The research was conducted in the Selayar Islands, South Sulawesi, specifically in Galung Bontosikuyu, Benteng Bontoharu, Kayuadi, and Pulau Madu. These locations were selected because they remain active sites where manca' paddang is known, practiced, or performed in community contexts. The study was conducted over approximately three months, covering observation, field documentation, interviews, and interpretive analysis.

Data were collected through passive observation, in-depth interviews, and visual documentation. Observation focused on performance structure, spatial arrangement, bodily movement, gestures of respect, the use of the paddang, performer interaction, audience response, and humorous episodes. Interviews were conducted with practitioners of manca' paddang, customary figures, cultural observers, and audience members selected through purposive sampling. Visual documentation in the form of photographs and videos was used to support detailed analysis of movement, object use, expression, and interaction.

The primary instrument was the researcher, who functioned as the key interpreter in the collection, organization, and analysis of qualitative data. Supporting instruments included observation guides, interview guides, field notes, and visual recording tools. The use of multiple data sources enabled methodological triangulation between what was observed in the performance, what was explained by performers and cultural actors, and what was visible in the documentation.

Data analysis followed Peirce's triadic semiotic framework. First, the researcher identified representamen, including bodily movements, gestures, posture, facial expressions, spatial formations, repeated action patterns, and comic acts. Second, the researcher examined objects or cultural references associated with these signs, such as courage, siri', respect, discipline, social intimacy, and communal harmony. Third, the researcher interpreted the interpretants or meaning-effects produced through audience laughter, emotional engagement, participation, and shared recognition. The analysis then integrated these semiotic findings with performative interpretation to explain how manca' paddang constructs Selayar cultural meaning through embodied action.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Performance Structure of Manca' Paddang

Observation shows that manca' paddang is performed as an arena-based event. The audience usually forms a circle around the performers, creating a spatial arrangement in which spectators are not distant observers but part of the performative environment. This circular arrangement produces openness, intimacy, and reciprocal attention. The performers can face different directions, respond to audience reactions, and transform the performance space into a collective cultural arena.

The performance generally begins with two actors entering the arena and offering a gesture of respect. They lower their bodies and bring their hands together as an embodied greeting to the audience. This opening gesture is not merely ceremonial; it establishes the ethical relation between performers and spectators. Before martial action begins, the performance marks itself as a socially controlled event governed by respect, recognition, and communal witnessing.

After the opening gesture, the performers introduce the paddang. The sword immediately changes the dramatic atmosphere of the performance because it creates the possibility of danger. However, this danger is stylized and controlled. The performers move the sword through curved, flowing, and circular motions while performing martial gestures. Common movement patterns include circling, moving forward to confront the opponent, retreating, and repeating sequences in rhythmic alternation. These repeated patterns build dramatic expectation and allow spectators to anticipate moments of tension and humor.

The performance does not rely solely on martial intensity. Comic action appears repeatedly through exaggerated facial expressions, playful gestures, teasing movements, simulated fear, bodily hesitation, and mock attacks. At certain moments, performers appear to threaten one another with the sword, but the movement shifts into comic play. They may pretend to strike, avoid, tickle, or display amusing expressions that invite laughter. These humorous episodes become the most eagerly awaited parts of the performance because they convert the tension of weapon play into shared pleasure.

The closing sequence returns to the logic of respect. Performers again acknowledge the audience, often turning toward several directions as if addressing the entire arena. This closure completes the symbolic movement from respect to tension, from tension to humor, and from humor back to harmony. The structure indicates that manca' paddang is not a random display of movement but a patterned performance with an ethical and dramatic order.



Figure 1. Manca' Paddang performers in an arena-style performance (Figure by authors)

The Body as Representamen

The actor's body functions as the primary medium of sign production. Movement, posture, facial expression, rhythm, and orientation all become visible signs through which cultural values are communicated. The performer's body does not simply execute technique; it signifies courage, agility, control, alertness, and social awareness. In Peircean terms, the body operates as a representamen because it is the visible sign-vehicle through which the performance becomes interpretable.

The repeated movement patterns create a grammar of performance. Circular motion suggests continuity and spatial balance. Advancing toward the opponent indexes confrontation and courage. Retreating does not signify weakness; rather, it demonstrates

control, timing, and strategic awareness. Sudden comic hesitation transforms martial seriousness into playful theatricality. Through these bodily signs, the performer communicates that bravery is inseparable from self-discipline and social sensitivity.

Facial expression is especially important in the production of humor. A performer may exaggerate fear, surprise, confidence, or confusion to invite laughter. The audience reads these expressions not as failure of martial ability but as deliberate comic stylization. The face therefore becomes part of the semiotic system of the performance. Together with hand gestures, footwork, and bodily rhythm, facial expression expands the meaning of manca' paddang beyond combat technique and into theatrical communication.

The Paddang as Object and Symbolic Mediator

The paddang is the most visible object in the performance and the strongest symbolic mediator between martial action and cultural meaning. It is not a secondary prop but a central element that organizes the movement, interaction, and dramatic tension of the performance. Its presence distinguishes manca' paddang from forms of manca' that do not involve weapons. Semiotically, the paddang refers to several layers of meaning. It indexes courage because the performer must handle a potentially dangerous object. It signifies control because the sword is moved in stylized, measured, and disciplined ways. It also refers to social honor because the use of the weapon occurs within a performance governed by respect, not aggression. The paddang therefore represents force that has been culturally regulated.

The symbolic role of the paddang becomes clearest when the performance shifts from apparent combat to humor. The sword may appear to threaten, but the comic turn prevents the encounter from becoming purely violent. This shift suggests that manca' paddang is not about defeating an opponent. It is about transforming danger into spectacle, discipline into beauty, and tension into social laughter. The sword thus mediates between the seriousness of martial identity and the playfulness of communal performance.

Humor as Interpretant and Social Communication

Humor emerges as one of the most important meaning-effects in manca' paddang. It appears through bodily play, improvised interaction, exaggerated expression, and audience laughter. In Peircean terms, humor can be understood as an interpretant because it is the meaning produced when spectators interpret the relation between the body's action and the symbolic object. The audience does not merely see a sword movement; it interprets a stylized transformation of threat into play.

Humor performs several social functions. First, it reduces the tension generated by the use of the sword. Second, it brings performers and audiences into a shared emotional rhythm. Third, it invites audience participation through laughter, shouting, and spontaneous response. Fourth, it confirms the performer's skill not only as a martial actor but also as a cultural communicator capable of controlling mood, timing, and social atmosphere.

This finding is important because humor is often treated as a secondary or decorative element in traditional performance. In manca' paddang, however, humor is structurally central. Without humor, the performance would appear mainly as a martial display. With humor, it becomes a community event in which danger, respect, discipline, and joy are negotiated together. Humor is therefore not an interruption of cultural meaning; it is one of the main mechanisms through which cultural meaning becomes socially recognizable.

Triadic Semiotic Mapping of Manca' Paddang

The relationship between body, object, and humor can be summarized through the following triadic semiotic mapping.

Table 1. Triadic semiotic mapping of Manca' Paddang

No.	Representamen	Object / Cultural Reference	Interpretant / Meaning-Effect
1	Circular arena of spectators	Open communal space	Performance as collective interaction
2	Opening gesture of respect	Courtesy and ethical relation	Legitimization of performer-audience interaction
3	Paddang or sword	Courage, force, and control	Cultural identity and disciplined self-mastery
4	Curved and advancing martial movements	Combat technique	Agility, balance, and readiness
5	Simulated sword attack	Symbolic conflict	Transformation of danger into spectacle
6	Comic facial expression	Processed tension	Humor as emotional release
7	Playful body movement	Social interaction	Intimacy between performers and audience
8	Repeated action patterns	Inherited dramatic structure	Expectation, rhythm, and cultural continuity
9	Audience laughter	Social response	Recognition of successful performance
10	Closing gesture toward multiple directions	Harmony and balance	Restoration of social order

The table shows that manca' paddang produces meaning through a dynamic relation among signs, cultural references, and interpretive effects. The body provides visible forms; the paddang supplies symbolic density; and humor produces the social interpretation that transforms the performance into a shared cultural event. Meaning does not reside in a single element. It emerges from the interaction among the performer, the object, the audience, and the cultural context.

This triadic relation confirms that manca' paddang is a complex sign system. The performance reproduces Selayar cultural values by staging respect, courage, control, humor, and communal harmony in embodied form. It also negotiates cultural continuity because each performance repeats inherited patterns while allowing improvisation and audience response.

Discussion

Reframing Manca' Paddang Beyond Entertainment

The findings challenge the common perception that manca' paddang is merely an entertaining martial attraction. While entertainment is certainly part of the performance, it does not exhaust its cultural meaning. The performance is a semiotic event in which bodies, objects, spatial arrangements, and laughter produce a shared interpretation of Selayar identity. In Geertz's (1973) terms, culture can be understood as a web of meanings; manca' paddang is one of the performative forms through which that web becomes visible, audible, and socially experienced.

This reframing is important for cultural preservation. If preservation efforts focus only on staging the external form of manca' paddang, they may maintain the performance while losing its interpretive depth (Mellēna, 2022; Gwerevende & Mthombeni, 2023). A more meaningful preservation strategy must attend to the symbolic logic of the performance: why performers begin with respect, why the sword must be controlled, why humor

accompanies martial action, and why audience laughter matters. Preservation should therefore include the transmission of interpretation, not only the reproduction of choreography (Ferrer, 2015; Yadegari, 2021).

Embodied Semiosis and Cultural Memory

The analysis confirms that cultural meaning in manca' paddang is embodied. The performer's body becomes a living archive of inherited movement, discipline, emotion, and social knowledge. This aligns with Taylor's (2003) argument that performance transmits memory through the repertoire of embodied practice. The bodily signs in manca' paddang do not simply represent culture from a distance; they enact it in front of the community.

The performance also demonstrates the relational nature of Peircean semiosis. A gesture, sword movement, or comic expression becomes meaningful only when connected to cultural objects and interpreted by an audience. The interpretant is not produced privately by the performer alone (Almeida, 2024). It is socially negotiated through audience laughter, attention, and response. This means that the audience is not passive. Spectators are co-producers of meaning whose emotional and verbal responses help complete the performance.

Humor, Controlled Danger, and Social Intimacy

One of the most significant findings is the role of humor in managing the tension between danger and intimacy. The sword introduces symbolic threat, but humor prevents the performance from becoming a display of aggression. Through comic timing, playful hesitation, and exaggerated expression, performers transform potential violence into a socially acceptable spectacle. This transformation is central to the ethical structure of the performance.

Meyer's (2000) view of humor as a communicative resource helps explain this process. Humor can create identification and clarify shared values. In manca' paddang, laughter indicates that the audience recognizes the performance as controlled, skilful, and socially meaningful. Humor also establishes closeness between performers and spectators, creating a temporary community of shared affect. Thus, the comic dimension of manca' paddang is not accidental; it is a key interpretive mechanism that organizes the audience's understanding of the performance.

Implications for Cultural Education and Future Research

The study has implications for cultural education in Selayar and beyond. Manca' paddang can be introduced not only as a traditional performance but also as a pedagogical resource for teaching local values, embodied discipline, symbolic interpretation, and cultural identity. Documentation programs should include explanations from performers and elders so that younger generations learn both the movement and the meaning of the performance.

The study also opens opportunities for future research. Subsequent studies may examine intergenerational transmission among performers, the role of gender in manca' paddang, the influence of tourism and digital media on performance style, or comparative relations between manca' paddang and other martial performances in South Sulawesi. Further research with a larger and more clearly documented informant base would strengthen empirical transparency and enable more detailed analysis of how different audiences interpret the performance.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that manca' paddang is a performative semiotic practice through which Selayar cultural meaning is enacted, negotiated, and reproduced. The performance cannot be adequately understood as entertainment alone. It is a structured cultural event

involving respect, martial discipline, symbolic object use, audience interaction, humor, and social harmony.

The analysis demonstrates a triadic relation among the body, the paddang, and humor. The performer's body functions as a representamen through movement, posture, gesture, and expression. The paddang operates as an object that refers to courage, control, honor, and culturally regulated force. Humor emerges as an interpretant that transforms tension into social intimacy and confirms the shared recognition of meaning between performers and spectators.

By integrating Peircean semiotics with performative analysis, this study contributes to the understanding of traditional Indonesian performance as a living sign system. It shows that meaning in manca' paddang is not static or purely symbolic in an abstract sense; it is produced through embodied action, repeated practice, improvisation, and audience response. Such an approach is useful for strengthening cultural preservation because it highlights not only what is performed, but how and why the performance continues to matter for Selayar cultural identity.

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