Aesthetic Wisdom in Sundanese Traditional Proverbs: Exploring Heritage Value and Cultural Depth through Oral Artefacts

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Abstract: This research examines Sundanese traditional proverbs as culturally embedded oral artefacts that embody aesthetic values, local wisdom and intangible cultural heritage within West Java's Sundanese communities. Departing from conventional folkloristic and literary approaches that often treat proverbs as static texts, this study adopts a Barthesian semiotic framework, drawing on Roland Barthes's theory of myth to analyze proverbs as dynamic signifying systems that naturalize cultural ideologies and encode inherited worldview. Through participatory ethnography over eighteen proverbs were collected through community interviews, oral storytelling and archival triangulation. Each proverb was examined not only in its linguistic form but as a mythic structure in Barthes' sense, a second-order semiological system that transform cultural values into self-evident truths. Findings highlight that Sundanese traditional proverbs function as aesthetic-cultural systems, conveying harmony with nature, intergenerational respect, communal balance and resistance to cultural homogenization. By examining how these proverbs operate both semantically and ideologically, the study shows how they act as mythic speech that reinforces local identity and moral consciousness, while simultaneously adapting to contemporary cultural contexts. This re-framing challenges the treatment of proverbs as inert folklore and instead presents them as living, semiotic practices that play an active role in the negotiation of meaning, memory and cultural continuity. Ultimately, this study offers a novel methodological contribution by integrating aesthetic analysis with Barthesian semiotics to interrogate oral traditions within endangered linguistic communities. It argues for the urgent preservation and revalorization of such oral artefacts as part of broader efforts in cultural sustainability and intangible heritage protection. In doing so, the findings contribute not only to Sundanese cultural studies but also to wider interdisciplinary dialogue on language preservation, the aesthetics of local wisdom and the politics of representation in intangible heritage discourses.

Key words: Aesthetic wisdom, Sundanese proverbs, Heritage value, Oral artefacts.

Introduction

Often marginalized within mainstream folklore studies, Sundanese traditional proverbs (*Paribasa Sunda*) are in fact rich semiotic systems that function as living myths in the Barthesian sense, texts that transform complex historical and cultural realities into naturalized truths, myth is a system of communication or type of speech that it is a message (Roland Barthes: 1972, 107) and myth takes a purely cultural and historical object, a sign of universal value (Graham Allen: 2004, 36). This study reconceptualizes these proverbs not as static aphorisms but as dynamic linguistic signs that encode indigenous ecological wisdom, ethical norms and cosmological worldview specific to West Java's Sundanese communities, useful in trying to understand folk ideas (Alan Dundes:1972, 95). Drawing on Barthes' theory of myth as a second-order semiological system, where language is used to disguise ideology as common sense, this study examines how proverbs such as *Gunung teu menang dilebur, sagara teu meunang diruksak* (Mountains must not be destroyed, seas must not be damaged) mythologize environmental ethics. Through metaphor and narrative condensation, these expressions don not merely reflect ecological awareness, presenting indigenous environmental law (*Pikukuh*) as timeless, universal truth, when in fact it is culturally and historically constructed.

This Barthesian framework allows for a re-reading of oral traditions not as static linguistic artefacts of the past, but as ideologically active and performative practice that continuously construct and reinforce cultural identity, cultural phenomena (Simon J, Bronner and Alan Dundes, 2007, 183). By employing participatory field methods and close textual analysis, this study interprets proverbs as sites of ideological production that conceal their constructedness beneath a surface of aesthetic beauty and moral clarity. The performative nature of these sayings, shared in ritual, daily conversation and storytelling, further strengthens their mythic function by embedding their messages in rhythm, repetition and symbolism, the proverbs gain legitimacy and emotional force, presenting inherited cultural values as natural ways of seeing and being. In this sense, Sundanese proverbs operate as what Barthes calls *mythical speech,* myth is a type of speech (Roland Barthes: 1972, 113), it transforms historically contingent social codes into depoliticized expressions of truth, shaping collective attitude toward nature, community and morality.

Empirical fieldwork conducted eighteen proverbs rich in aesthetic devices, metaphorical condensation, rhythmic orality and symbolic coding, that reveal deep ontological insights and a distinct cosmological worldview rooted in West Java's indigenous epistemologies. These proverbs act not as neutral descriptions of cultural values, but as powerful semiotic machines that construct

a cosmology in which ecological balance, ancestral connection and communal ethics are treated as inevitable and eternal. This aligns with Barthes' notion of myth's ideological work, the ability to render cultural narratives invisible by presenting them as natural facts, universal facts (Roland Barthes: 1972, 101). Proverbs like *Cikaracak ninggang batu, laun-laun jadi legok* (Dripping water hollows the stone) do not simply advocate perseverance, embedding within the metaphor a broader moral that privileges patience and harmony with slow, natural processes. Such sayings create a narrative architecture through which local identity is preserved and cultural memory continuously reactivated, even amidst the destabilizing forces of modernity and globalization, cultural memory is identity constructing and identity maintaining (Agnes Heller: 2001, 139).

By revalorizing Sundanese proverbs as ideologically charged myths rather than inert folklore, this study intervenes in contemporary debates on intangible heritage, ecological consciousness and cultural sustainability. Through the lens of Barthes, proverbs are revealed as semiotic forms that conceal their ideological labor by aestheticizing it, masking power relations behind metaphor and rhythm. In a context where the Sundanese language faces erosion due to national linguistic standardization and digital homogenization, these myths become sites of resistance, encoding alternate ways of knowing and being that challenge dominant narratives. This study ultimately positions Sundanese proverbs as living, mythic expressions of indigenous epistemology, locally rooted but globally relevant, and argues that their continued circulation is vital not only for linguistic and cultural survival, but for broader conversations about the politics of meaning, environmental ethics and the symbolic labor of tradition in a rapidly changing world.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in critical Roland Barthes' theory of myth as a second-order semiological system (Roland Barthes: 1972, 113). Barthes conceptualizes myth not as falsehood, but as a form of speech that transforms historically situated meanings into naturalized, universal truths. Following this theoretical premise, the methodology focuses on identifying how Sundanese proverbs function not only as linguistic expressions but as ideological mechanism, myth lends in two ways by its form and by its concept (Roland Barthes: 1972, 137) that disguise constructed cultural values as common sense. Rather than describing proverbs as static traditions, the study treats each as a dynamic sign within a broader mythological structure, where language, symbolism and aesthetics converge to communicate dominant worldview, particularly in relation to ecological ethics, communal identity and cosmological order.

Fieldwork was conducted across Sundanese-speaking regions in West Java, Bogor and Kuningan, using participatory ethnographic methods. Local storytellers were engaged through contextual observation during everyday interactions. Proverbs were documented within the natural flow of conversation, ceremonial performance and local storytelling, ensuring that each expression remained embedded in a living social and cultural context. Each proverb was treated as a situated utterance, a culturally coded sign composed of a literal message (*first-order meaning*) and an ideological function (*second-order myth*), as conceptualized by Barthes.

The analysis phase applied Barthes' two-level semiotic reading to each proverb. *First,* the signifier and signified were identified to understand the surface-level meaning. *Second,* the connotative function was examined to reveal the underlying ideology that the proverb communicates as a myth (Roland Barthes: 1972, 113). For example, *Gunung teu meunang dilebur, sagara teu meunang diruksak* presents an environmental imperative, but also mythologizes ecological preservation as a timeless moral truth, concealing its cultural construction within Sundanese cosmology. This dual-level analysis exposes how aesthetic form, rhythm, metaphor, symbolic layering, serves to reinforce ideological content. Through this Barthesian lens, the study interrogates proverbs as cultural myths: signifying practices that embed ethics, identity and ecological consciousness into the fabric of everyday speech while presenting those meanings as inevitable and university valid.

Result/Findings and Discussion

Mythical Narrative of Ecological Responsibility in Sundanese Wisdom

The first proverb, *Ari diarah supana, kudu dipiara catangna* (If you plant a tree, you must take care of its roots) operates on two semiotic level, at the first-order semiotic level, the signifier is the literal phrase of the proverb, while the signified is its pragmatic instruction, genuine care and growth require attention not only to visible outcomes but also to foundational, unseen efforts. The resulting sign thus communicates a culturally embedded ethic of responsibility, particularly with regard to sustainability and long-term commitment. On the surface, the message promotes an intuitive logic of care, one that aligns well with ecological thinking rooted in reciprocal maintenance and deep attention to the conditions of growth. However, the sign does not remain neutral.

At the second-order, or mythological level, the proverb becomes a vehicle for ideological naturalization. It transforms a culturally specific ethic of environmental responsibility into a seemingly universal, eternal truth or universal facts (Roland Barthes: 1972, 101). By privileging

the roots, the invisible but essential dimension, the proverb encodes a moral discourse that appears apolitical but in fact masks the cultural and historical contingencies shaping such values. It mythifies sustainability as a self-evident duty, thereby obscuring the social structure, historical tensions and labor divisions that inform who is expected to care. The myth depoliticizes environmental ethics by presenting them as innate, thereby reinforcing dominant narrative about morality and responsibility without interrogating their origins or socio-political implications.

The second proverb, *Gunung teu meunang dilebur, sagara teu meunang diruksak* (Mountains must not be destroyed, seas must not be damaged), presents itself as a directive on environmental ethics but operates, under Barthes' semiotic theory of myth, as a cultural narrative that constructs nature as sacred and inviolable. At the first-order level of signification, the signifier consists of the literal expression, while the signified refers to the straightforward environmental advice. The natural would, particularly its most monumental elements, *mountains and seas*, should be preserved and protected from harm. The resulting sign is an imperative toward ecological preservation, seemingly grounded in traditional wisdom and respect for nature's inherent values.

This proverb does more than offer environmental instruction, it constructs an ideological myth that naturalizes environmental protection as a timeless, absolute moral order. Once the initial sign is elevated into myth, it becomes a mythic signifier, wherein *mountain* and *sea* are no longer just physical entities but are imbued with symbolic meaning, representing permanence, sacredness and balance. The categorical prohibition against harming them transforms environmental ethics into an unquestionable law of nature rather than a socially constructed response to ecological crisis. In this mythic framework, or marine exploitation are obscured. The myth depoliticized ecological responsibility, framing it not as a site of struggle or negotiation, but as a cultural constant. The proverb conceals the historical and socio-political dynamics that underlie environmental degradation and resistance, thus reinforcing an ideology where nature's sanctity is eternal, yet silent about the forces that threaten it.

The third proverb, *Tatangkalan di leuweung the kudu dipupusti* (Trees in the forest must be maintained) presents itself as a practical ecological directive but functions as a deeply encoded ideological message. At the first-order level of signification, the signifier is the literal utterance of the proverb, while the signified is its surface meaning, the necessity of preserving forest trees. This results in a sign that communicates a normative call for environmental care, rooted in traditional ecological knowledge. It appears as a simple expression of sustainable practice, maintaining trees for the health and continuity of the forest.

Once this sign is lifted into the realm of myth, it is transformed into a mythic signifier, a

symbol for a broader ideological construct. In this case, the act of maintaining the forest is no longer a contextual practice but is reimagined as an inherent moral duty, detached from socio-political conditions. The proverb constructs an image of sustainable reciprocity as a natural law, where humans and nature are positioned in a perpetual, balanced relationship. This mythic framing masks the historical that determine how forests are actually used, protected or exploited. Logging, land commodification or indigenous displacement are absent from this narrative. Instead, the myth reinforces a collective ethical identity based on ecological harmony, while silently excluding exploitative or alternative environmental worldview. In effect, the proverb reifies traditional stewardship not just as wisdom, but as unquestionable truth, thereby naturalizing one ideological version of environmental ethics and suppressing its political complexity.

These proverbs collectively construct a powerful myth of ecological stewardship that Barthes would say functions to naturalize environmental ethics within Sundanese culture. They do so by transforming culturally specific ecological practices into universal, timeless truths that escape critique and debate. This mythic process makes sustainability an unquestioned moral imperative, binding the community through shared cultural memory and linguistic ritual. The ideological effects are to maintain ecological balance not through visible enforcement but through the subtle internalization of environmental respect as an innate, almost sacred duty, thus securing long-term social cohesion and natural resource preservation under the guise of timeless wisdom.

The Humility and Self-Restraint in Sundanese Proverbs

The proverb *Luhur budi handap asor, someah hade ka semah* (Noble character is humility, be kind and hospitable to guests) constructs humility and kindness as intrinsic virtues that define moral excellence. From a Barthesian perspective, this saying functions as a myth by transforming socially constructed behaviors into universal, timeless values. The repetition of such maxims in oral tradition naturalizes humility, making it seem an inherent human quality rather than a cultural expectation. By presenting modesty and hospitality as unquestionable moral truths, this myth obscures the role these traits play in reinforcing social cohesion and managing interpersonal dynamics within the community.

The second proverb *Ulah agul ku payung butut* (Don't boast with a torn umbrella) vividly critiques arrogance and pretension through metaphor. Barthes would argue this myth operates by equating pride with futility or shame, thereby embedding self-restraint as an ideal norm. the proverb masks the power dynamics at play by suggesting that arrogance is inherently negative, rather than a behavior influenced by social status or circumstance. By naturalizing humility and

discouraging overt pride, the myth perpetuates social order by promoting self-limitation, thus preventing challenges to existing hierarchies.

Th the third proverb *Hirup mah tong asa aing uyah* (Don't act like you're the salt) there is a powerful symbolic reference to salt as an essential yet humble element. Barthes's theory reveals how this myth uses the metaphor of salt to present humility as both vital and self-effacing, a naturalized ideal for living. This mythic construction discourages arrogance by framing it as a moral failing against a backdrop of communal interdependence. The proverb masks the cultural mechanisms that maintain social balance by portraying humility not as a strategic behavior but as an eternal, self-evident truth.

These proverbs form a cohesive myth that naturalizes humility and self-restraint as eternal in Sundanese culture. Barthes would highlight how this myth conceals the social functions of these values, primarily maintaining harmony and reinforcing social hierarchies by presenting them as universal moral imperatives. Through constant repetition and oral transmission, these expressions ensure that humility is internalized as a natural part of human character, discouraging deviation by framing arrogance or pride as moral transgressions rather than socially contingent behaviors.

The Quiet Violence of Wisdom: When Cultural Sayings Justify Injustice

Roland Barthes' theory of myth reveals how cultural messages, disguised as common sense, serve to naturalize ideologies. In this framework, myths are not falsehoods but second-order semiotic systems, where language is stripped of its historical roots and repackaged as universal truth. Sundanese proverbs like *Peurih jadi peurah* (Pain becomes beauty) participate in this process. On the surface, this saying offers hope that suffering eventually leads to grace. But under Barthes' lens, it functions mythically by masking systemic causes of pain and romanticizing hardship. It detaches suffering from its material roots, poverty, injustice, labor exploitation, and turns it into a moral virtue, demanding internal transformation instead of external critique.

Cai karacak ninggang batu, laun-laun jadi legok (Constant dripping hollows the stone), this Sundanese traditional proverb suggesting that slow, repeated effort will overcome even the hardest obstacles. However, the mythic structure Barthes identifies shows that such sayings serve to individualize struggle. The proverb does not ask *why* the stone must be worn down or whether the process is just, it simply asserts that enduring effort is inherently good. This shifts the burden of change entirely onto the individual, ignoring social immobility and entrenched inequality. The *stone,* which may represent systemic barriers, is left uninterrogated, while the *drip* (the individual) is praised for slowly self-eroding in its presence. This is a pacifying myth, it encourages

compliance, not transformation.

This proverb reinforces the earlier myth and carries an unspoken cost. The proverb implies that transformation is possible, but only through long-term self-sacrifice. Under Barthes' framework, this represents a bourgeois mythologization of patience. It disguises the real violence of structural inequality by presenting slow degradation (of self, of energy) as a quiet triumph. The myth erases agency and turns resignation into resistance. It tells the oppressed not to rise up but to endure, to trust that, one day, even stone will yield, never questioning why the stone exists at all.

These Sundanese proverbs construct a moral in which suffering is the currency of eventual redemption. Yet, as Barthes would argue, they do not describe reality, they prescribe how we ought to interpret it. These sayings are not merely motivational, they are ideological traps, coding injustice as natural and endurance as heroic. They silence systemic critique by embedding virtue in submission. This is the danger of myth it does not need to lie to be harmful. By celebrating the aesthetics of moral labor, these proverbs uphold the status quo. The real question is not whether effort leads to reward, but why effort must always passthrough suffering in the first place.

Cultural Proverbs as Tools for Normalizing Harmony and Suppressing Dissent

Using Barthes' concept of myth as a second-order signifier, we see how proverbs encode ideology by presenting historical or cultural values as natural truths. The Sundanese saying *Herang caina, beunang laukna* (Let the water be clear, and the fish be caught) seems to advocate for peaceful resolution, clean methods leading to just outcomes. But in Barthes's terms, this is not simply advice, it is mythologized as moral truth. It erases the social tensions and negotiations inherent in real-life conflict by suggesting a win-win outcome is always possible, if only people behave ethically. In doing so, the proverbs mask the power dynamics in play and turns complex conflicts into individual moral responsibilities.

The proverb *Ngeduk cikur kedah mitutur, nyokel jahe kedah micarek* (When taking galangal, one must ask; When picking ginger, one must speak up) mythologizes ethical behavior as mandatory. At first glance, this saying promotes respect, consent and transparency, values that sustain communal trust. However, by making these behaviors seem absolute, it subtly disciplines individuals into compliance. Barthes's theory reveals how myths depoliticize, this proverb removes context, hierarchy, necessity, resistance, and casts polite, non-confrontational conduct as the only legitimate path. It ignores situations whereas speaking out or acting unilaterally may be necessary in systems marked by inequality, thus preserving social order over justice.

What appears as a cultural commitment to balance is, in Barthesian terms, a myth that

conceals conflict. These proverbs naturalize harmony not as a social tactic but as ethical law, creating a moral structure where the absence of open conflict is synonymous with success. But this framing delegitimizes dissent. In real-world systems, especially within uneven power relations, conflict is not always harmful, it can be necessary for justice and change. The myth of balance trains individuals to internalize guilt for disrupting harmony, even when doing so exposes wrongdoing. Thus, proverbs become tools of soft control.

These proverbs illustrate what Barthes warned of ideology clothed in the language of nature. They transform communal strategies into moral absolute, punishing deviation bot through force but through cultural shame. In elevating harmony and ethical behavior to the level of myth, these sayings foreclose the possibility of strategic confrontation. They silence those who challenge authority by equating discomfort with failure. The ultimate effect is pacification, preserving existing hierarchies while appearing benign. What seems like wisdom is, under the surface, a powerful mechanism of social regulation. The myth is not that harmony is good, but that it is always good, for everyone, in every context.

The Myth of Inherited Custom: How Tradition is Framed as Destiny

Roland Barthes, in his seminal work *Mythologies,* asserts that myth operates as a second-order semiological systems, transforming cultural constructions into what appears as natural and inevitable. According to Barthes, myth functions ideologically by depoliticizing speech and rendering history invisible, presenting contingent social values as eternal truths. Within this framework, the Sundanese proverb *Adat kakurung ku iga* (Custom is caged within the ribs) functions not merely as folk wisdom but as a mythologized assertion of the essentialism of cultural identity. What is, in fact, a historically contingent behavior becomes reified into something innate, inherited, and therefore beyond question. This naturalization of custom masks the socio-political forces that shaped it, transforming the mutable into the immutable and thereby resisting the very possibility of reform.

That proverb exemplifies the kind of myth Barthes critiques, speech that goes without saying. It offers an image of culture and habit not as learned or practiced, but as physically embodied, enclosed within the human form. In doing so, it re signifies cultural behavior as biological fate. Such a construction performs a powerful ideological function, it silences debate over the validity, relevance or justice of certain traditions. By embedding customs into the very body, the proverb denies the agency of the individual and the possibility of alternative cultural pathways. In Barthesian terms, this is myth operating at full force, where sign becomes essence

and where history is replaced by nature. The subject is no longer a participant in culture but merely a vessel of inherited, unchangeable values.

Viewed through Barthes' lens, that proverb reveals its true role not as a neutral observation of cultural consistency, but as a form of ideological resistance. It acts as a rhetorical barrier against external critique and internal transformation. Any attempt to reform or reinterpret traditional practices can be delegitimized by invoking this myth of immutability. In this way, the proverb functions both defensively and aggressively, it safeguards existing power structures within the culture while also rejecting perceived threats from outside. As myth, it provides an alibi for cultural stagnation by dressing power in the garments of nature. By insisting that habit is unchangeable, it forecloses the possibility of progress or ethical reevaluation, precisely the kind of critical consciousness that Barthes saw myth as suppressing.

To challenge the hegemonic function of this proverb is not to reject Sundanese tradition, but to reveal its constructed-ness and open it to critical reflection. Barthes urges readers to demythologize cultural texts by re-inserting history into what myth tries to make natural. That proverb must be read not as literal truth but as a cultural strategy, one that reflects specific historical anxieties about change, identity and authority. By exposing its mythological structure, we can begin to see how habits are learned, how customs are codified and how both are always subject to reinterpretation. Demythologizing that proverb allows for a more dynamic engagement with culture, one that honors tradition without being bound by it, and one that insists on the human capacity to question, adapt and transform.

Myth of Unexpected Joy and Fate

Barthes exposes how myths work to transform historical or contingent phenomena into naturalized, eternal truths. By rendering social narratives into what seems like universal meaning, myth suppresses the uncertainty of existence and replaces it with symbolic coherence. The Sundanese proverb *Asa ditonjok congcot* (Like being punched in the mouth, by joy) appears as a vivid depiction of life's pleasant surprises. However, through Barthes' lens, this expression is more that metaphor, it becomes a mythic narrative (Roland Barthes: 1972, 113) that naturalizes unpredictability by encoding it as moral or cosmic justice. In this way, chance is stripped of its chaos and re-signified as meaningful, comforting, deserved, even fated.

That saying mythologizes the phenomenon of unexpected joy by positioning it as a concealed reward, an unseen hand delivering goodness when least anticipated. Barthes would identify this as a secondary semiological system, the literal sign of an unexpected emotional impact

is elevated into a cultural reassurance that fate or cosmic forces align behind human virtue. This transformation is ideological. It rewrites randomness into spiritual order, allowing individuals to believe that their moral behavior will be acknowledge, even if the timing and form are unknown. The myth erases the brute contingency of life and replace it with a coded promise of eventual justice, an emotional analgesic in the face of existential insecurity.

Under Barthes' framework, this proverb becomes a mechanism of cultural reassurance. It suppresses anxiety by embedding existential risk within a narrative of delayed gratification. In Sundanese culture, where ancestral wisdom and communal harmony hold deep value, the proverb reflects a collective need to believe in ethical causality, that good deeds, patience or suffering are eventually recognized. Yet this belief is not neutral. As myth, it serves an ideological function, it discourages direct confrontation with randomness, suffering or systemic injustice by implying that virtue will, somehow, be rewarded. It deflects critique and encourages resignation, recasting powerlessness as a prelude to grace.

To demythologize that proverb is not to rob joy of its mystery, but to unmask the cultural mechanism that turns chance into doctrine. Barthes invites us to read such expressions critically, to restore the historicity and unpredictability of events that myth makes invisible. When this proverb is viewed as a cultural construct rather than a cosmic truth, we can begin to engage more honestly with the complexities of joy, fate and suffering. We can acknowledge that not all goodness is rewarded, and not all fortune is meaningful. In doing so, we reclaim the human experience from the mythic script and open space for more grounded forms of hope, resilience and ethical reflection, ones that do not rely on fate, but on conscious action and mutual responsibility.

Myth of Futility and Moral Instruction

Barthes reveals how everyday language and cultural expressions often conceal ideological operations beneath a veneer of natural truth. Myths are not lie but distortions, mechanisms that transform historically contingent and socially constructed meanings into taken for granted norms. The Sundanese proverb *Caang bulan dadamaran* (Lighting a lamp under the full moon) functions as a cultural shorthand for futile or redundant effort. While seemingly practical, Barthes' theory encourages a deeper interrogation of such expressions. What appears as harmless wisdom is a mythologized discouragement of behaviors that fall outside culturally sanctioned norms. It becomes not just a comment on inefficiency, but a social judgement that converts deviation into absurdity.

That proverb operates as a myth by encoding a specific moral lesson into symbolic form,

that certain actions, though perhaps well-intentioned, are pointless if they deviate from the correct time, place or social recognition. In Barthesian terms, this is a classic example of myth naturalizing a value judgement. The proverb appears to critique poor timing or misaligned efforts, but at a deeper level, it legitimizes conformity and punishes innovation or alternative pathways. It shifts the conversation from a practical critique of utility into a broader ideological stance, that deviation from normative frameworks is not just ineffective, it is laughable. Through this semiotic transformation, the proverb becomes an instrument of cultural discipline that silences experimentation and reasserts established paths as the only credible ones.

Barthes insists that myth carries an ideological burden, it is never innocent. The proverb's didactic function is not simply to warn against inefficiency but to preemptively control behavior by framing non-conformity as futile. In this way, that proverb polices the boundaries of social legitimacy, if one's actions are not in alignment with prevailing norms, they are presumed meaningless. The mythic structure (Roland Barthes: 1972, 113) thus performs a dual function, it reassures the community of the wisdom in maintaining the status quo, and it disciplines the individual by equating deviation with absurdity. This kind of mythological thinking reinforces a moral in which usefulness is determined not by personal intent or ethical worth, but by collective validation. Under the guise of wisdom, the proverb enforces a narrow vision of what counts as meaningful labor or virtue.

To demythologize that proverb is to expose the ideological work it performs in delegitimizing certain forms of action. Rather than accepting the futility it prescribes, a critical reading reveals the proverb's function in maintaining cultural orthodoxy and suppressing creative or non-sanctioned expressions of effort. When read against the grain, the proverb becomes a sit of struggle, between conformist expectations and alternative moral imaginaries. Demythologization does not call for the rejection of all traditional wisdom, but for its recontextualization, reclaiming the possibility that what is dismissed as futile may in fact be meaningful in ways the dominant discourse refuses to see. In this sense, Barthes offers not just a theory of myth, but a method for rethinking agency, cultural legitimacy and moral plurality within inherited systems of meaning.

Myth of Integrity and Ethical Precision

Barthes demonstrates that myth is not simply a collection of ancient stories but a contemporary language system that turns culturally specific, historical value into naturalized truths. When applied to moral instruction, myth functions to obscure the socio-historical construction of ethical norms by presenting them as eternal, self-evident and universally binding.

In the context of Sundanese traditional culture, a cluster of proverbs. *Kudu sebeuh memeh dahar. Kudu nepi memeh indit* (Be full before you eat, arrive before you depart), *Ngaragap hate batur ari nyarita teh ulah ngeunah ehe teu ngeunah eon* (Mind others' feelings when speaking, don't just enjoy the pleasant but also consider the unpleasant) and *Kudu ngukur ka kujur, nimbang ka awak* (Measure by your height, weigh by your body) constitutes a moral framework. Through Barthes' lens, these proverbs function as myths that naturalize a culturally specific model of ethical self-discipline and interpersonal sensitivity, presenting them as universal moral imperatives.

Each of these proverbs initially reads as practical guidance for social harmony and personal accountability. Yet, in Barthesian terms, they go further, they translate socially constructed ethics into what appears to be common sense or natural law. For instance, *Kudu seubeuh memeh dahar, kudu nepi memeh indit* uses metaphor to encode values of preparedness, punctuality and responsibility. However, this proverb does not merely advise, it mythologize a behavioral ideal. It masks the cultural conditioning behind the value of precision and frames it as inherently virtous. Thus, the proverb operates not only as wisdom but as mythic language (Roland Barthes: 1972, 113), rendering ethical behavior as something pre-existing and self-evident, rather than as a negotiated product of Sundanese socio-cultural life.

The proverb *Ngaragap hate batur ari nyarita the ulah ngeunah ehe teu ngeunah eon* emphasizes emotional intelligence and empathy in speech. On the surface, it champions sensitivity and mutual respect, deeply cherished values in Sundanese social life. But Barthes would argue that once such culturally informed moral codes are transformed into proverbs, they become depoliticized and de-historicized. The expression subtly enforces a myth of moral clarity, that one always knows the impact of their words, and that ethical speech is a matter of internal discipline alone. The ideological work of this myth is to suppress the complexity of communication, power relation and emotional nuance, offering instead a tidy moral binary, what is considerate and what is not, presented as a natural law.

Kudu ngukur ka kujur, nimbang ka awak utilizes the body as a metaphor for ethical boundaries, counseling individuals to act in proportion to their capabilities. In Barthes' view, this functions as a myth that conflates physical measurement with moral proportion. The proverb suggests that proper action is a matter of knowing one's place and limitations, mythologizing humility and self-regulation as innate virtues. The body, here, becomes a symbol of social containment, it naturalizes the idea that social aspiration or deviation beyond one's assigned measure is inherently unethical. This is not a neutral observation, it enforces hierarchical stability and frames conformity as moral truth.

Across these proverbs, ethical values including precision, empathy and proportion are presented not as products of cultural evolution, but as natural laws, Barthes reminds us that this is the central function of myth, it removes the history from meaning. What remains is an illusion of self-evidence. These Sundanese proverbs, revered for cultural resonance, do not merely instruct, they discipline. They are ideological tools that define moral correctness while discouraging alternative expression of morality that may arise from different personal, situational or class-based experiences. In this way, the proverbs become a form of soft power, encouraging self-regulation under the guise of universal wisdom.

By presenting a singular vision of virtue, these proverbial myths marginalize the possibility of moral plurality. For example, the pressure to always speak considerately *ulah ngeunah ehe teu ngeunah eon* might suppress necessary expressions of dissent, criticism or emotional honesty. Similarly, the call to measure by the body *nimbang ka awak* can stifle ambition or difference under the weight of communal conformity. In mythic terms, these proverbs do not merely instruct. The Sundanese erase the legitimacy of moral action that falls outside their narrowly coded frame, substituting complexity with pre-packaged, culturally approved behavior. Through Barthes' lens, a powerful mechanism for maintaining social order.

Barthes' project is not an attack on tradition but a call to reveal the ideological operations hidden within it. To demythologize these proverbs is to reinsert Sundanese historical and cultural contexts, to recognize that what is called integrity or ethical precision is a construct rooted in specific socio-cultural conditions. This opens space for rethinking morality not as a fixed code but as a living, evolving negotiation between individuals and communities. Ethical practice not as obedience to inherited codes, but as a conscious, critical engagement with the realities of power, intention and consequence.

The Sundanese proverbs analyzed here function as myths that conceal their ideological labor. Through Barthes' theory, Sundanese proverb transform historically situated ethics into depoliticized truths, reinforcing social conformity and suppressing moral complexity. Yet this recognition is not a call to discard tradition but to critically engage with it. By demythologizing these proverbs, this study reclaims their potential as tools for ethical reflection rather than rigid scripts for behavior. In doing so, the agency of individuals to shape moral life not through inherited codes alone, but through critical awareness, empathy and cultural self-examination.

Myth of Speech and Substance

Barthes identifies myth as a system of communication that naturalizes culturally contingent

meanings, transforming ideology into common sense. Through myth, signs that are historically and socially constructed are misrecognized as universal truths. This theoretical lens allows us to examine traditional expressions, such as the Sundanese prover *Lodong kosong ngelentrung* (An empty bamboo tube echoes loudly) not merely as folk wisdom but as ideological instruments. What appears as a simple moral critique of hollow verbosity is, in Barthesian terms, a myth that reconfigures cultural assumptions about communication, power and legitimacy into an essential moral judgement. It naturalizes silence as wisdom and renders expressive or dissenting speech suspect, if not entirely invalid.

At face vales, that proverb offers a metaphor that equates verbal excess with intellectual or moral emptiness. The proverb condemns those who speak often but lack substance. Favoring minimal or reserved speech as a sign of true understanding. It ceases to function as a context-dependent observation and becomes a myth that justifies social norms of restraint and conformity, suppressing alternative forms of discourse that may be more assertive, performative or emotionally expressive.

Barthes' semiology helps illuminate how *Lodong kosong ngelentrung* delegitimizes not just excessive speech but expressive speech in general. By equating loudness or eloquence with emptiness, the proverb functions as a myth that prioritizes substance over form, but only according to narrowly defined cultural criteria. Performative expression, rhetorical flourish or passionate speech become associated with ego, ignorance or insincerity. This mythic structure casts suspicion on speech (Roland Barthes: 1972, 113) that does not conform to the dominant ideal of subdued wisdom, thereby marginalizing styles of communication that may be vital for critique, resistance or emotional articulation. In short, it is a myth that regulates speech by defining what kinds of voices are empty and which are full.

In Barthes' theory, myth always serves an ideological purpose by depoliticizing and moralizing cultural constructs. The proverb in question moralizes silence and penalizes visibility in speech. It is not simply about communication quality, it is a mechanism of moral judgement. The figure who speaks too much or too loudly is rendered not just annoying, but ethically inferior. This transformation turns rhetorical style into a character flaw, and silence into virtue. By presenting these values as timeless truths rather than products of cultural context, the proverb operates as a myth that subtly disciplines social behavior.

Like many cultural myths, *Lodong kosong ngelentrung* does not operate in a vacuum, it often intersects with existing social hierarchies. Within Sundanese and broader Indonesian contexts, speech is historically entangled with gender, age and status-based norms. Talkativeness

in women or lower-status individuals, for example, may be judged more harshly, while verbosity from the elite might be interpreted as rhetorical skill or charisma. The myth naturalized by this proverb thus contributes to a broader ideological framework that regulates power through speech, disguising social policing as moral clarity. Barthes would identify this as a quintessential example of mythic logic, historical power relations masquerading as ethical wisdom.

Critically, this myth also has political dimensions. By framing loud or expressive speech as inherently empty, the proverb can be mobilized to discredit dissent, protest, or passionate critique. In contexts where harmony and quiet compliance are culturally and politically valorized, that proverb serves as a silencing mechanism, delegitimizing voices that challenge dominant narratives. Barthes teaches us to be wary of such moments, when speech is dismissed not on the basis of its content but on its style or tone. The myth becomes a tool of rhetorical control, reinforcing an ideal of civility that often privileges the status quo and marginalizes oppositional discourse. To demythologize *Lodong kosong ngelentrung,* following Barthes' approach, is to strip it of its false naturalness and reinstate its historical and cultural specificity. This proverb reflects particular values of Sundanese etiquette, such as restraint, humility and indirectness, that have been elevated to universal moral standards. Recognizing this allows us to see the proverb not as a timeless truth but as a coded instruction for navigating social dynamics in a specific cultural setting.

That proverb functions as a Barthesian myth that naturalizes a specific ideology of communication, conflating form with meaning and silence with virtue. Through this myth, alternative or disruptive modes of speech are rendered illegitimate, not through argument, but through symbolic association. Barthes encourages us not to accept such association uncritically, but to ask who benefits from them and who is excluded. A plural ethics of speech would recognize the value in many forms of communication, measured or expressive, restrained or passionate, without reducing style to a moral verdict.

Myth of Communal Commitment and Integrity

Barthes unveils how myths operate as depoliticized speech, transforming contingent cultural values into eternal, self-evident truths. Myths function ideologically by stripping away historical context and presenting specific ways of being as natural or inevitable. Within this theoretical frame, the Sundanese proverb *Sacangred pageuh sagolek pangkek* loosely translated as grasp firmly, hold tight does not merely advocate for perseverance or loyalty, it mythologizes collective integrity and unwavering commitment as inherent moral imperatives. What begins as a

communal ideal is transformed into an unquestionable cultural law, naturalizing a specific form of social cohesion and responsibility.

On its surface, this proverb appears to emphasize positive traits, loyalty, perseverance and reliability, virtue often essential in sustaining social harmony. However, under Barthes' scrutiny, such traits are shown to be culturally encoded values that myth seeks to universalize. *Sacangred pageuh sagolek pangkek* presents commitment not as a choice or context-specific response, but as a moral absolute. This ideological move transforms socially useful behavior into a sacred norm, silencing dissent or alternative models of social engagement that prioritize individual autonomy or situational nuance. Thus, the myth enshrines communal commitment as a self-evident good while erasing its constructed nature.

The proverb operates as a form of soft regulation, subtly prescribing the boundaries of acceptable behavior in group settings, especially within familial, organizational or communal life. Through its mystical function, it disciplines individuals by fusing morality with obligation. To break from a commitment is not simply to change one's mind but to commit a moral failure. This myth depoliticizes the complexity of relational dynamics, differences in power, emotional labor or personal constraint, and reduces them to a binary of loyal and disloyal. In this way, it operates ideologically preserving the stability of collective structures by masking moral complexity with the simplicity of cultural absolutes.

In the mythic framework of that proverb, the collective is always prioritized over the individual. Barthes would argue that such myths conceal their violence by appearing benign or virtuous. While promoting unity, the proverb may suppress individual desires, dissent or ethical autonomy. The language of firmness and consistency becomes a tool not only for community cohesion but also for social control. Once this ideal is naturalized, to question one's role in the group, or to withdraw, is interpreted as weakness or betrayal rather than a legitimate moral choice. The myth thus legitimizes any challenge to the collective ethos.

Barthes insists that to demythologize is to return speech to its contingent origins. This means reading that proverb not as a timeless truth but as a reflection of specific socio-cultural needs, kindship-based communities where survival depended on tightly bound cooperation. Recontextualizing the proverb allows us to see that commitment and consistency, while valuable, are not universally applicable or morally superior in all situations. This opens a space for dialogue about when communal loyalty becomes coercive, and when withdrawal or refusal is ethically justified. It restores complexity and choice to a discourse that myth had rendered absolute.

That proverb functions as a Barthesian myth that elevates communal loyalty into an

unquestioned moral ideal, concealing its ideological underpinnings through the appearance of timeless wisdom. While the proverb reflects cultural values rooted in mutual trust and stability, its mythic form serves to regulate individual behavior and suppress deviation from collective norms (Roland Barthes: 1972, 113). Demythologizing this expression allows for a more critical engagement with the ethics of commitment, one that respects the value of community while recognizing the moral legitimacy of refusal, difference and personal agency.

Conclusion

This study has examined the aesthetic and ideological functions of Sundanese traditional proverbs through the lens of Roland Barthes' theory of myth, revealing the complex interplay between cultural heritage, moral instruction and social regulation. The Sundanese traditional proverbs at first glance appear as simple expressions of local wisdom. However, close reading exposes their deeper function as carriers of cultural myth, transforming historically and socially specific values into naturalized truths. These proverbs do not merely communicate ethical ideals, it shapes the moral imagination of the community, dictating acceptable behavior, communication styles and interpersonal norms under the appearance of timeless guidance. Barthes' framework helps unmask how these oral artefacts simultaneously preserve heritage and perpetuate dominant ideologies through aesthetic forms.

The finding of this study lies in its methodological convergence, it bridges structural semiotics with indigenous. Cultural analysis to uncover the depth of Sundanese oral tradition as both art and ideology. Rather than treating proverbs as static or folkloric remnants, this study positions them as dynamic mythic structures that actively participate in shaping collective identity, ethical boundaries and social consciousness. It demonstrates that Sundanese proverbs are not merely repositories of ancient wisdom but also tools of cultural negotiation, resistance and control. By demythologizing these proverbs.

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