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Deconstructing Ethical Values and Social Meanings in Traditional Cupak Gerantang Theater: Implications for Cultural Education

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Abstract

This study examines how ethical values and social meanings are constructed in the traditional Cupak Gerantang theater of Sasak culture and how the conventional opposition between Cupak as bad and Gerantang as good can be critically reinterpreted. A qualitative descriptive-interpretive approach within a critical paradigm was employed. The study was conducted at Taman Budaya Nusa Tenggara Barat, Mataram, during May-July 2026. Data were obtained through observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews with two purposively selected cultural informants, and documentation consisting of performance materials, photographs, and dialogue-related records. Data credibility was strengthened through source and technique triangulation. Analysis combined Spradley-oriented cultural analysis with close reading and close viewing informed by Jacques Derrida's deconstruction and Stuart Hall's representation theory. The findings show that the performance constructs honesty, responsibility, justice, social concern, solidarity, cooperation, respect, patience, and wisdom through character behavior, conflict, relationships, and narrative consequences. The deconstructive reading further demonstrates that Cupak and Gerantang acquire meaning relationally: Cupak is not exhausted by the category of evil but also signifies ambition, jealousy, self-interest, insecurity, and the desire for recognition, while Gerantang represents ethical ideals that require patience, sacrifice, responsibility, and perseverance. The study argues that this reinterpretation does not erase the traditional moral lesson; rather, it expands the performance into a culturally grounded resource for ethical reasoning, cultural literacy, and critical learning. The educational implications are conceptual and contextual, not claims of experimentally tested learning effects.

Keywords: Cupak Gerantang, Deconstruction, Ethical Values, Social Meaning, Cultural Education

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional Traditional performing arts are cultural practices through which communities preserve collective memory, communicate social values, and negotiate identity. In the Sasak context, traditional theater is not simply entertainment; it is also a social space where ethical expectations, relationships, and ideas about appropriate conduct are represented and transmitted. Cupak Gerantang occupies a distinctive position in this cultural field because its narrative places two brothers with contrasting characteristics at the center of a conflict that is familiar in Sasak oral and performance traditions.

The conventional reading of the story is strongly binary. Cupak is associated with greed, deceit, selfishness, arrogance, and the pursuit of personal advantage, whereas Gerantang is associated with honesty, courage, patience, responsibility, and concern for others. In the thesis from which this article is developed, the performance is described as carrying values of honesty, responsibility, justice, social care, solidarity, cooperation, self-control, family responsibility, cultural identity, and

educational function. These values are represented through character behavior, dialogue, conflict, symbols, and the resolution of events rather than through explicit moral instruction alone. This supports the view of traditional performance as a medium of cultural learning (Schechner, 2013; Koentjaraningrat, 2009).

Research on Cupak Gerantang has already established its significance for character formation, local wisdom, social meaning, and cultural preservation (Mawardi et al., 2021; Puspawati & Suastika, 2021; Mawardi et al., 2025). Recent work also demonstrates that the text remains open to interpretation through social-semiotic analysis and that traditional arts can serve as culturally grounded educational resources (Suardana & Semadi, 2026; Fajri et al., 2024). Thus, the contribution of the present study is not to claim that Cupak Gerantang has previously been ignored, but to move from identifying moral values toward interrogating the structure through which those values are made meaningful.

This shift is important because the moral opposition Cupak/bad and Gerantang/good can easily become a fixed hierarchy. Such a hierarchy is pedagogically useful when the purpose is to transmit an explicit moral lesson, but it can also reduce the complexity of human behavior to stable categories. The thesis data indicate that both characters are understood by informants as representations of human traits that coexist in social life, and that the meaning of one character depends on the presence of the other. Muhammad Junaidi Rawan explained that the two figures depict different human qualities and that each provides lessons about behavior and its consequences. Muhammad Baihaki similarly emphasized that the characters should be understood through the social and cultural meanings generated by the performance.

Jacques Derrida's deconstruction is useful here because it does not simply replace one meaning with another. It examines how binary oppositions establish hierarchy, how each term depends on its opposite, and how internal tensions make a seemingly stable meaning difficult to maintain (Derrida, 1976; Sarup, 1993). In Cupak Gerantang, the relevant question is therefore not only whether Cupak is bad and Gerantang is good, but how those meanings are produced, what they exclude, and what becomes visible when their opposition is read critically.

Stuart Hall's representation theory complements this approach by treating meaning as culturally produced through language, symbols, and practices rather than as a fixed property of an object (Hall, 2016). The performance can consequently be read as a dynamic cultural text whose meanings are reproduced and renegotiated as social contexts change. The present study therefore asks three related questions: how ethical values and social meanings are represented in Cupak Gerantang, how the binary representation of Cupak and Gerantang is destabilized through deconstructive reading, and what this reinterpretation means for cultural education and contemporary social life.

The study contributes to scholarship in two ways. First, it reframes the ethical opposition between the two characters as relational rather than absolute. Second, it connects this deconstructive interpretation to cultural education without claiming a tested classroom effect. In this way, Cupak Gerantang is approached not as a moral formula that students must memorize, but as a culturally authentic text through which ethical reasoning, cultural literacy, and critical reflection can be developed.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive-interpretive approach within a critical paradigm. The approach was selected because the study focused on cultural meanings, ethical values, representation, and the relations among characters and social practices. Rather than reducing these meanings to numerical indicators, the research interpreted how they were constructed and represented within the performance context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Moleong, 2021).

The research was conducted at Taman Budaya Nusa Tenggara Barat, Jalan Airlangga, Kelurahan Kekalik Jaya, Kecamatan Sekarbela, Mataram, West Nusa Tenggara. The fieldwork was planned for May-July 2026, with the documented interviews conducted on 7 June 2026. The site was selected because it functions as a cultural space for the performance, preservation, and interaction of artists, cultural figures, and communities around traditional arts. The study involved two purposively selected informants: Muhammad Junaidi Rawan, a Sasak cultural figure and literary writer, and Muhammad Baihaki, a cultural figure and academic with experience performing Cupak Gerantang. The selection was based on cultural competence, experience, and direct knowledge of the tradition.

The thesis also records that informant participation included willingness to support publication of the research findings.

Data were collected through observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation focused on the performance context, character interactions, dialogue, expressive actions, cultural symbols, and the social meanings constructed through the performance. Interviews explored the ethical values represented in the story, the meanings of the two central characters, social relationships, cultural identity, preservation, and contemporary relevance. Documentation included photographs, performance materials, and available dialogue-related records. The thesis notes that the documentary materials were used for close reading and close viewing to identify contradictions, gaps, and possible alternative meanings.

Data credibility was strengthened through source and technique triangulation. Statements from the two informants were compared with observational notes and documentary evidence. The analysis proceeded through reduction and organization of relevant data, identification of cultural domains and categories, mapping of the principal binary opposition, close reading and close viewing, identification of contradictions or aporias, and interpretive synthesis. The qualitative cultural analysis drew on domain, taxonomic, componential, and cultural-theme procedures associated with Spradley (1997), while the critical interpretation was guided by Derrida's deconstructive reading and Hall's representation theory. Educational implications were derived from the meanings supported by the collected data; they were not treated as evidence of an experimentally tested intervention.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Ethical Values as a Cultural System

The findings indicate that Cupak Gerantang represents ethical values as an interconnected cultural system rather than as isolated moral lessons. The most consistently supported values are honesty, responsibility, justice, social concern, solidarity, cooperation, respect, patience, and wisdom. The performance communicates these values through character behavior, the development of conflict, relationships among characters, and the consequences attached to particular actions. The pattern is consistent with the informants' descriptions of the performance as a medium for transmitting moral and cultural knowledge.

Junaidi Rawan explained that the characters are not merely actors in the story but symbols of human qualities in everyday life. In his account, honesty, responsibility, and social harmony become understandable through the actions of the characters and the consequences of their choices. He emphasized that the performance teaches that honesty creates trust and harmony, while conduct that violates these expectations produces social problems. Baihaki similarly explained that ethical values are communicated through characters, dialogue, plot, and conflict, allowing audiences to connect events in the story with lessons about everyday social relations.

The ethical structure can therefore be read through a chain of representation: behavior is displayed in performance, behavior is interpreted as a value, the value is connected to social expectations, and those expectations become part of cultural memory. This is close to Hall's argument that meaning is produced through representational practices (Hall, 2016). The significance of the finding is that the moral lesson is not located in a single sentence or character label; it is distributed across the whole performance system.

2. Social Meanings and Cultural Representation

The performance also represents social meanings that extend beyond individual morality. The findings identify family and brotherhood, social responsibility, solidarity, leadership, cultural identity, and cultural preservation as important dimensions of meaning. The relationship between Cupak and Gerantang shows that family ties can contain affection, tension, conflict, and obligation at the same time. In this sense, the performance presents social harmony not as the absence of conflict but as an ethical problem that must be negotiated.

The story of the brothers also provides a social vocabulary for discussing individual and collective interests. Gerantang's willingness to face difficulty and fulfill the task of rescuing the princess is contrasted with Cupak's avoidance of hardship and later attempt to claim the achievement for himself. The narrative consequence is important: deception and appropriation temporarily create recognition for Cupak, but the truth is subsequently revealed and the social

order is re-evaluated. This sequence allows the performance to represent justice, responsibility, and the consequences of self-interested action as interconnected meanings.

Baihaki's account similarly places the performance within a broader social environment of kinship, cooperation, and mutual assistance. Junaidi Rawan emphasizes that Cupak Gerantang remains relevant because contemporary communities still require honesty, responsibility, social care, and togetherness. These findings position the theater as cultural memory: its language, interactional patterns, symbols, and values provide a recognizable framework through which cultural identity can be reproduced and reconsidered. Such a function is consistent with scholarship that understands traditional performance as a living cultural practice rather than a static artifact (Schechner, 2013; Turner, 1982).

3. Deconstructing the Cupak-Gerantang Binary

The most significant finding concerns the instability of the binary Cupak/bad and Gerantang/good. In the conventional representation, Gerantang occupies the superior position of virtue, while Cupak is placed in the inferior position of vice. The deconstructive reading does not deny this conventional moral distinction; instead, it examines the dependence between the two terms. Gerantang is recognizable as good partly because Cupak is represented as his opposite, while Cupak becomes legible as bad within the same relational structure. The binary therefore depends on coexistence rather than on independent meanings.

The field data reinforce this point. Junaidi Rawan described the two figures as embodiments of different human qualities that exist together in social life and argued that they provide lessons about both desirable and undesirable behavior. The thesis records that he did not view the performance as a simple mechanism for assigning absolute moral judgments to the characters. Baihaki likewise emphasized that the symbolic meaning of the characters is not singular and can be connected to changing social conditions. These observations are significant for deconstruction because they expose a tension between the fixed moral label and the more complex social function of the characters.

Cupak becomes especially productive for deconstructive analysis because his negative conduct can be read beyond the label of evil. His greed, jealousy, manipulation, insecurity, and desire for recognition can be interpreted as recognizable forms of human vulnerability. This interpretation does not excuse his behavior. Rather, it shifts the analytical question from moral classification to the conditions through which the behavior becomes meaningful. The thesis explicitly identifies ambition, jealousy, self-interest, and the desire for recognition as alternative meanings that emerge when the character is read critically. Such meanings complicate the assumption that Cupak is simply an externalized evil figure.

Gerantang is also destabilized by the same operation. He is not presented as a perfect essence of goodness that exists prior to the narrative. His ethical position is produced through patience, responsibility, courage, sacrifice, and perseverance. Goodness therefore appears as a practice that must be repeatedly enacted. In deconstructive terms, the positive term is not self-sufficient; it contains the traces of the conflict through which it becomes visible. This is why the relation between the brothers is analytically more important than either character taken in isolation.

The following synthesis summarizes the relationship between the empirical material and the deconstructive interpretation.

Analytical focus	Empirical basis	Conventional meaning	Deconstructive reading
Ethical values	Interview accounts; observation of behavior, dialogue, conflict and consequences	Values are moral lessons attached to particular characters	Values are relational, contextual, and produced through the whole performance
Social relationships	Brotherhood, family conflict, cooperation and responsibility	Harmony is expected when duties are fulfilled	Harmony emerges through negotiation, tension and

			competing interests
Cupak and Gerantang	Character contrast and narrative dependence	Cupak = bad; Gerantang = good	Each character acquires meaning through the other; the binary is unstable
Cupak as a human figure	Cupak seeks advantage and recognition after the rescue	A purely negative or villainous character	Ambition, jealousy, insecurity and recognition reveal ordinary human vulnerabilities

This relational reading aligns the deconstructive analysis with Hall's theory of representation. Meaning is produced through representational difference: the characters, actions, symbols, and conflicts become intelligible because they are positioned within a cultural system of difference. The contribution of the present study is therefore not a new moral taxonomy, but an explanation of why the taxonomy remains persuasive and how the performance itself also contains resources for questioning it.

4. Contemporary Relevance and Cultural Education

The findings indicate that the social meanings represented in Cupak Gerantang remain recognizable in contemporary life. Competition, personal interest, dishonesty, family tension, social recognition, responsibility, and the need for solidarity are not confined to the traditional narrative. Informants described the values of honesty, responsibility, cooperation, social care, and togetherness as still necessary in present-day community life. The continued relevance of the performance thus lies not simply in preserving the storyline but in maintaining the possibility of connecting the storyline with changing social realities.

From a cultural-education perspective, this has an important pedagogical implication. A conventional teaching approach may ask learners to identify which character is good and which is bad. A deconstructive approach can retain the moral lesson while adding questions about why characters act as they do, how social relationships shape behavior, what consequences follow, and whether a moral category can be understood outside the relationship that produced it. This turns the performance into a dialogic learning resource for cultural literacy and ethical reasoning rather than an object of memorization.

The educational potential identified here remains conceptual. The study did not measure changes in students' character, cultural literacy, or critical-thinking skills, and it did not implement a classroom intervention. Its contribution is instead to identify a culturally authentic text and an interpretive pathway that teachers or cultural educators could adapt through discussion, role-play, reflective writing, or comparative analysis. This distinction is important for maintaining a clear boundary between what the present qualitative data demonstrate and what future educational research should test.

The study also suggests that cultural preservation should not be reduced to repeating an unchanged performance form. The thesis findings indicate that Cupak Gerantang survives partly because its presentation can adapt while retaining recognizable cultural values. Deconstructive reinterpretation can support such continuity by allowing the tradition to remain meaningful when social contexts change. In this sense, reinterpretation is not necessarily a threat to authenticity; it can be one mechanism through which cultural heritage remains a living resource.

5. Scope and Contribution

The study has a clear contextual scope. It is based on one traditional performance context and two key cultural informants, supplemented by observation and documentation. The findings should therefore not be generalized to all Sasak communities or to all versions of Cupak Gerantang. The value of the study lies in analytic depth and contextual interpretation rather than statistical generalization.

Within that scope, the principal contribution is a shift from moral identification to relational interpretation. The study shows that Cupak Gerantang can simultaneously preserve conventional moral values and invite critical reflection on how those values are constructed. The performance

can therefore be understood as a dynamic cultural text in which cultural identity, ethical judgment, social relations, and educational possibility intersect.

DISCUSSION

This study offers a unique contribution in shifting the analysis beyond conventional identifications of moral and social values in Cupak Gerantang to a deconstructive interpretation of how these values are produced through inter-character relationships, narrative oppositions, and cultural representations. Previous research has generally emphasized the moral content, potential for character education, cultural preservation, or social significance of Cupak Gerantang (Mawardi et al., 2021; Puspawati & Suastika, 2021; Mawardi et al., 2025). Instead, this study questions how the opposition between Cupak and Gerantang itself generates meaning and whether the categories of good and bad remain stable when the two characters are interpreted relationally. This is the main novelty of this study. Using Derrida's deconstruction and Hall's theory of representation, the analysis shows that Cupak and Gerantang are not self-contained vessels containing fixed moral meanings. Instead, each character can be understood through the presence of the other. This relational reading extends previous studies of Cupak Gerantang from mere value identification to a critical examination of the cultural processes that shape and maintain moral hierarchies.

The main findings indicate that Cupak Gerantang represents an interconnected ethical system consisting of honesty, responsibility, justice, social care, solidarity, cooperation, respect, patience, and wisdom. These values are not only conveyed through explicit moral statements, but emerge through character behavior, dialogue, conflict, interpersonal relationships, and the consequences of certain actions. Furthermore, the findings also indicate that the social meaning of the performance extends to family relationships, brotherhood, responsibility, leadership, solidarity, cultural identity, and cultural preservation. This study shows that the conventional dichotomy of Cupak as evil and Gerantang as good is unstable. Cupak can also be interpreted through ambition, jealousy, self-interest, insecurity, and the desire for recognition, while the goodness of Gerantang is represented as a practice that requires patience, sacrifice, courage, responsibility, and perseverance. These findings are in line with previous research that shows that traditional performing arts can function as a repository of moral knowledge and cultural identity. Mawardi et al. (2021), for example, identified moral teachings, independence, religiosity, mutual cooperation, patriotism, and personal integrity in the Cupak Gerantang narrative, while Puspawati and Suastika (2021) showed that the story contains educational, moral, and ethical values in Balinese and Sasak society. More recent research by Mawardi et al. (2025) emphasized that Cupak Gerantang remains relevant as a cultural performance while facing challenges in balancing preservation with contemporary cultural and tourism demands. These findings are essentially in line with this study, as they all affirm that Cupak Gerantang is more than mere entertainment and contains socially meaningful ethical knowledge. However, this study differs analytically because it goes beyond identifying the values contained within. Instead, it examines how these value systems are organized through binary structures and how these structures can be critically interpreted. Thus, the difference lies primarily in the analytical lens used to interpret the same object.

This research interpretation aligns with international studies on intangible cultural heritage, which increasingly view heritage as a living, negotiated process, rather than as a fixed cultural artifact. Su (2018) argues that authenticity in intangible cultural heritage is subjective and context-dependent, while Istvandity (2021) suggests that heritage from the performing arts can be connected through creative and interdisciplinary practices. Similarly, Tan et al. (2018) found that attachment to place, awareness, justice, and a sense of mission contribute to the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage. Chen et al. (2020) further argue that intangible cultural heritage is shaped through interactions between artists, communities, institutions, and visitors, rather than as standalone cultural objects. These studies help explain why Cupak Gerantang needs to be understood as a living cultural text, its meaning both preserved and renegotiated. This research, therefore, adds a deconstructive dimension by demonstrating that even the moral hierarchies embedded in narratives can be renegotiated without abandoning the cultural tradition itself.

A relational reading of Cupak and Gerantang becomes crucial when compared to Hall's conception of representation. Meaning is not solely inherent in the characters as intrinsic traits, but rather is generated through systems of difference, cultural codes, language, and social practices (Hall, 2013). The findings of this study support this principle because Gerantang appears virtuous

partly because Cupak is constructed as his opposite, while Cupak is identified as a morally problematic figure through comparison with Gerantang. This insight also resonates with the research of Lu et al. (2022), which shows that cultural representations in educational texts are not neutral, but reflect specific cultural choices and configurations. Similarly, Aminuddin et al. (2022), using Hall's cultural identity framework to examine Mamanda theater, show that traditional theater identity is continuously shaped through adaptation, community expectations, and changing performance practices. Thus, traditional theater can be understood not simply as a repository of inherited meanings, but as a cultural space where meaning is continuously produced, negotiated, and reconstructed.

This research also differs from studies that primarily view traditional arts from the perspective of transmission and preservation. Lau (2019) and Luo and Lau (2020) emphasize the importance of community-based arts education, experiential learning, and engagement with local cultural knowledge. Good et al. (2021) found that community-based and school-based traditional music programs foster cultural development, social development, engagement, and the transmission of cultural knowledge among Indigenous youth. Similarly, Garcia-Lazo (2024) demonstrated that visual arts education can support cultural identity and culturally inclusive pedagogical practices. These studies emphasize participation, cultural continuity, and identity formation. This research complements these findings by introducing an additional critical layer: cultural transmission should not only reproduce inherited meanings but also encourage learners to question how cultural categories are constructed. In this regard, the research contribution is pedagogically relevant because it suggests that cultural preservation and critical interpretation do not have to be mutually exclusive goals.

Research has shown that arts and performance can support social, emotional, and ethical development. Goldstein et al. (2020), based on responses from 173 performing arts teachers, found that collaboration, communication, creativity, self-confidence, and empathy were the most strongly associated outcomes with theater education. Juntunen and Partti (2022) also demonstrated that interdisciplinary arts education can create opportunities for renegotiating cultural identity, experiencing empathy, engaging with otherness, and developing critical and reflective thinking. Wonowidjoyo (2022) argued that arts education connected to sites of memory can foster critical inquiry and the development of cultural identity. More recent research reinforces this position. Harnett et al. (2026) found that artistic learning becomes more socially and emotionally meaningful when collaboration, reflection, peer interaction, and the artistic process are intentionally integrated. These findings help explain the educational potential of Cupak Gerantang identified in this study. However, an important distinction must be maintained: those studies involved educational or developmental contexts involving learners, whereas this study did not implement or experimentally test an educational intervention. Therefore, the educational implications of Cupak Gerantang in this study should be understood as theoretically and contextually grounded possibilities, not as proven learning outcomes.

Another important point of comparison relates to cultural sustainability. Power (2021), through an analysis of 564 annual reports from the subsidized performing arts sector in Australia, demonstrated that sustainability in the performing arts relates not only to the survival of the art form, but also to the organizational viability, relevance, and sustainability of artistic practice. Chung (2022), who studied 56 Cantonese opera performers, also emphasized that disruptions in cultural transmission can threaten the sustainability of traditional theater. Kim et al. (2019) further demonstrated that digital technologies can contribute to the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage by supporting access, dissemination, and transmission. More recent ScienceDirect research extends this argument by demonstrating that immersive technologies can support learning and engagement with intangible cultural heritage. Li and Zheng (2025), for example, found that interactive virtual reality environments increased knowledge acquisition, learning motivation, engagement, and awareness among young people about preserving China's intangible cultural heritage. These studies demonstrate that sustainability depends on the ability of traditional culture to remain meaningful in changing social and technological contexts. This research contributes by proposing that interpretive flexibility itself can be a mechanism for sustainability. A tradition can remain culturally recognizable while its meaning can be reviewed critically.

The social dimension of the research is supported by international studies on cultural participation. Lan et al. (2021) demonstrated that emotional solidarity and perceptions of tourism

development influence the creation of shared value between residents and tourists in the context of intangible cultural heritage tourism, while Yan and Chiou (2021) highlighted civic participation and informal education as mechanisms for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. A scoping review by Honda et al. (2026), which identified 42 studies from various countries, also demonstrated that traditional arts and events can foster social participation, social connectedness, and community well-being. These findings are consistent with the observation in this study that Cupak Gerantang represents solidarity, cooperation, family responsibility, and social care. This consistency is understandable because traditional performances are inherently relational, where they are created, performed, interpreted, and passed down through social interaction. The difference lies in the focus of the research; these international studies often examine participation, well-being, governance, or community impact, while this study specifically focuses on the symbolic and ethical structure of a performance's narrative.

The educational implications of these findings therefore extend beyond the conventional use of folktales to teach predetermined moral lessons. Conventional pedagogical approaches might ask students to identify which characters are virtuous and which are immoral. The proposed deconstructive approach encourages students to ask why a character is represented in a certain way, what social conditions shape their actions, how one character becomes meaningful through another, and what happens when apparent categories remain questionable. This pedagogical orientation aligns with community-based arts education, culturally responsive education, and critical arts learning (Lau, 2019; Luo & Lau, 2020; Garcia-Lazo, 2024). Salam (2020) also argues that arts education rooted in local culture can strengthen cultural identity, while the findings of this study expand on this idea by proposing that local cultural materials can also be sources of critical interpretation. Thus, Cupak Gerantang can support cultural literacy not only through the preservation of content, but through critical engagement with the meanings conveyed by that content.

The contributions of this study can be summarized in three dimensions. Theoretically, this study introduces a deconstructive reading model for traditional theater that understands ethical meaning as relational, unstable, and culturally produced, rather than fixed. Empirically, this study enriches the limited scholarship on Cupak Gerantang by connecting data from local Sasak performances to broader debates on representation, intangible cultural heritage, and cultural education. Pedagogically, this study offers a pathway for traditional theater to connect cultural identity, ethical reasoning, and critical reflection. This represents an important extension of previous research on Cupak Gerantang, as existing literature has focused more on moral values, cultural preservation, character education, or tourism, while this study examines the tension between moral classification and interpretive complexity (Mawardi et al., 2021; Puspawati & Suastika, 2021; Mawardi et al., 2025). In this sense, the study shifts the analytical question from "What values are contained in the performance?" becomes “How are these values formed, maintained, and questioned through representation?”

These findings also have practical and policy implications. For teachers and cultural educators, Cupak Gerantang can be integrated into culturally responsive learning through guided discussions, role-playing, reflective writing, comparative character analysis, and interpretation of dialogue and performance symbols. Such activities should maintain the cultural context of the performance while encouraging students to challenge assumptions about morality, social relations, responsibility, and identity. For cultural institutions, these findings suggest that protecting traditional theater does not have to mean confining its meaning to a single, canonical interpretation. Instead, maintaining the relevance of a living cultural heritage may require creating spaces that enable younger generations to experience traditional performances while connecting them to contemporary social issues. This direction aligns with recent international research emphasizing participatory, community-based, and adaptive approaches to cultural heritage transmission (Chen et al., 2020; Istvandity, 2021; Chung, 2022; Yan & Chiou, 2021). Recent evidence also suggests that the integration of intangible cultural heritage into education is gaining increasing attention, including in higher education and traditional music education.

The findings of this study need to be interpreted within its methodological boundaries. The analysis is based on one performance context and two key cultural informants, supplemented by observation and documentation. Therefore, this study does not claim statistical generalizability to the entire Sasak community or all versions of Cupak Gerantang. Therefore, future research should

broaden the empirical base by examining different performance groups, different regions of Lombok, audiences from different generations, and educational contexts. Longitudinal or intervention-based research could also test whether deconstructive engagement with traditional theater actually enhances students' cultural literacy, ethical reasoning, empathy, or critical thinking skills. Comparative studies involving other traditional Indonesian theaters could also determine whether relational deconstruction is specific to Cupak Gerantang or whether it can serve as a broader analytical model for understanding traditional performances as dynamic spaces for cultural meaning-making.

CONCLUSION

The traditional Cupak Gerantang theater is a dynamic cultural text that represents ethical values, social meanings, and Sasak cultural identity. The performance communicates honesty, responsibility, justice, solidarity, social concern, cooperation, respect, patience, and wisdom through characters, relationships, conflicts, and narrative consequences. These values make the performance relevant not only as cultural heritage but also as a potential resource for culturally grounded education. The deconstructive analysis shows that the conventional opposition between Cupak as evil and Gerantang as good is not absolute. Their meanings are mutually constructed, and both characters represent complex dimensions of human experience. Cupak can be read as a representation of ambition, jealousy, self-interest, and the desire for recognition, while Gerantang represents ethical ideals that require responsibility, sacrifice, perseverance, and ethical choice. This reinterpretation does not remove the traditional moral lesson; it broadens it by encouraging critical reflection on how ethical meanings are constructed. The study therefore concludes that Cupak Gerantang remains relevant to contemporary Sasak society and has potential as a cultural education resource. Its educational value lies particularly in the possibility of combining cultural identity and character learning with critical interpretation. However, the educational implications identified here are conceptual rather than experimentally tested. Future studies should examine how deconstructive and culturally responsive use of traditional theater affects learners' cultural literacy, ethical reasoning, and critical-thinking abilities in formal and non-formal educational settings.

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