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Blue in the Architecture of Keraton Surakarta: A Semiotic Study of Color Meaning

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ABSTRACT

Blue is a conspicuous feature of Keraton Surakarta, yet its meaning has not been examined in studies of the palace's architecture. This study reads that meaning through Roland Barthes' semiology, which separates the literal sign (denotation) from the cultural meaning attached to it (connotation). A qualitative interpretive approach was used, drawing on photographic documentation taken in 2024, informant accounts, and literature on the palace's history and cosmology. Blue appears as a light outline color on columns, beams, window and door frames, fretwork, eaves, and fences, set against white walls, while the roofs recorded are not blue. The recurrence of this pairing across buildings of different scale supports reading blue as a shared sign of the palace's identity. A spiritual meaning, linked to the palace's cosmology and to the associations of blue with the sky and the divine, is plausible but remains an interpretation, because no source ties blue to the court's own symbolism. The study cannot establish when or why blue became the palace color. It offers a documented denotative baseline and identifies repainting records and court archives as the next evidence to test.

KEYWORDS

Barthes semiology;
Blue;
Color symbolism;
Javanese architecture;
Keraton Surakarta.

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1. Introduction

Keraton Surakarta Hadiningrat is the official palace of the Kasunanan Surakarta and one of the main centers of Javanese culture. It was built after the Kartasura palace, the seat of the Islamic Mataram kingdom, was damaged in the Geger Pecinan uprising of the early 1740s and could no longer serve as a capital. Susuhunan Pakubuwono II then moved the court to Sala village in 1745 (Nurhajarini, 1999). The choice of location involved court officials, scholars, religious experts, and the Dutch colonial authorities alike (Santosa, 2007). The palace therefore rests on a long inheritance of Javanese courtly culture while also carrying the marks of colonial-era contact.

Its architecture is read as more than a residence for the king. Javanese palaces were arranged as a small image of the universe, with the king responsible for keeping the kingdom in balance with the cosmos (Setiawan, 2000). Studies of the Surakarta palace describe a building in which Javanese, Islamic, and European elements meet and carry symbolic messages (Muhadiyatiningsih & Fathonah, 2020; Santosa, 2007). One visible part of this identity is color. The palace buildings are painted mainly in blue and white, applied to doors, windows, ornaments, and tower-like structures (Khoirunisa et al., 2024; Syahid & Indrawati, 2023). Across building traditions, blue carries strong spiritual associations, often linked to the sky and the divine, and architects have chosen it mainly for symbolic and aesthetic reasons rather than functional ones (Tarajko-Kowalska, 2023). Whether the blue of the Surakarta palace carries a comparable meaning in Javanese thought is the question this study takes up.

Earlier research has examined the palace's aesthetic elements (Santosa, 2007), the symbolism of its buildings and cultural identity (Muhadiyatiningsih & Fathonah, 2020), and the architecture of the Masjid Agung Surakarta (Yunianti, 2015). Recent studies mention the blue-and-white paint but do not explain what it signifies (Khoirunisa et al., 2024; Syahid & Indrawati, 2023). Among the studies reviewed here, none examines the meaning of blue in the palace's architecture.

This study addresses that gap through Barthes' semiotics. Barthes (1967) distinguishes two levels of meaning: denotation, the literal sign, and connotation, the cultural meaning attached to it. The approach has been used to read architectural space (Akbaş, 2019) and to interpret the light blue and white paint of a palace mosque in Buton as a sign of palace tradition and purity (Bahri, 2019). Applied here, it separates what the blue paint visibly is, where it appears and in what shade, from the meanings the Javanese context attaches to it. The study aims to identify where blue appears in Keraton Surakarta, what meanings it carries, and how those meanings relate to the palace's historical setting. It is expected to add to the understanding of color symbolism in traditional Javanese architecture and to give a documented basis for interpreting and conserving the palace's visual identity.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative interpretive approach to read the meaning of blue in the architecture of Keraton Surakarta Hadiningrat. The analysis is built on Barthes' (1967) semiology, which treats a sign as operating on two levels. The first level is denotation, the literal and visible content of the sign. The second is connotation, the cultural and ideological meaning attached to that first level. Barthes (1967) also describes a further step, myth, in which a connotation becomes so habitual that it appears natural. This study works at the first two levels and treats myth only as a possible reading in the discussion, and only where the data support it. The same two-level reading has been applied to architectural space (Akbaş, 2019) and to the light blue and white paint of a palace mosque (Bahri, 2019), which makes it suitable for a building where the sign is a color applied to a physical structure.

The research object is the blue paint on the buildings of Keraton Surakarta, specifically its location, its shade, and the elements it covers, such as walls, doors, windows, and ornaments. The study draws on three kinds of data.

1. **Visual documentation.** Photographs of the palace buildings. They record where blue appears and in what shade, and they form the data for the denotative reading.
2. **Interviews.** The informants were asked about the meaning of blue and white in the palace. The statement attributed to KGPH Poeger (2019) in the original manuscript belongs here if it came from an interview. Their answers form the main data for the connotative reading.
3. **Literature.** Studies and historical accounts of the palace, its founding, and its cosmology (Nurhajarini, 1999; Santosa, 2007; Setiawan, 2000), together with earlier work on its architecture and symbolism (Muhadiyatiningsih & Fathonah, 2020).

The analysis follows four steps. First, the blue elements are identified and recorded from the photographs. Second, each element is described at the denotative level: what it is, where it sits, and what shade it has. Third, the connotations are drawn from the informants' accounts and the literature, and each connotation is traced to its source so that the author's interpretation can be separated from reported meaning. Fourth, the connotations are related to the palace's historical and cosmological setting. The reading is checked by comparing the interview accounts with the documented literature, and a meaning that appears in only one source is reported as that source's view.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Where blue appears: the denotative reading

Blue in Keraton Surakarta is applied to specific parts of the buildings and not to their whole surface. Figure 1 shows two examples recorded in the field. In Figure 1(a), the walls of a single-storey building are white under a red clay-tile roof, while blue covers the timber gable of the porch, the scalloped fascia along the eaves, the window and door frames, the openwork panels above them, and the iron fence in front. In Figure 1(b), an open pavilion has blue columns and beams, carved arches of white fretwork between the columns, and a carved crest along the roof edge in white relief on a blue ground.



(a) (b)

Fig. 1. Blue and white on buildings of Keraton Surakarta: (a) Main façade; (b) Offie building. (Source: Author's documentation, 2024).

Three observations follow from the two photographs. First, blue marks the frame of the building: structure, edges, and ornament. White occupies the large wall surfaces. Second, the shade is light, from a pale sky blue on the fence in Figure 1(a) to a stronger mid-blue on the timber structure. These shades were judged by eye from the photographs. Third, the roofs visible in both photographs are not blue. The original manuscript described blue on roofs and dark blue in particular, and neither appears in these buildings. At the denotative level, then, blue is a light, repeated outline color that holds ornamented elements together across buildings of different size and function. The scaffolding in Figure 1(b) shows that the paintwork is maintained, which suggests the color is renewed deliberately.

3.2 Blue as a shared sign of the palace

At the connotative level, the first meaning that the evidence supports is identity. Because the same blue and white pairing appears on a modest building and on a ceremonial pavilion, the color works as a shared code that reads the whole complex as one place. A similar reading has been made for the Masjid Keraton in Buton, where light blue and white paint is interpreted as a sign of palace tradition and purity (Bahri, 2019). This is a parallel from another palace, not evidence about Surakarta. The two buildings in Figure 1 also show European-influenced forms, such as the gabled timber porch with fretwork in Figure 1(a). Earlier work describes parts of the palace as an adjustment between Javanese and European forms (Muhadiyatiningsih & Fathonah, 2020). Blue may therefore also be read as the color that unifies traditions of different origin under one visual identity. This is the author's interpretation from the photographs and the literature.

3.3 Blue and the cosmological order

The palace is described as a layout with spiritual meaning. KGPH Poeger (2019) states that the path from the Alun-alun Utara to the Kedhaton stands for a human life that ends in meeting God, and one informant interviewed by the author described the same path as *sangkan paraning dumadi*, the return of the human being to God. Javanese palaces were also designed as a model of the cosmos, in which the king keeps the kingdom aligned with the universe (Setiawan, 2000). Within this setting, blue offers a plausible link to the spiritual dimension. Across building traditions, blue is often associated with the sky and the divine, and designers frequently choose it for symbolic reasons (Tarajko-Kowalska, 2023). Read this way, blue on the frame of the palace would signal the presence of a higher order around the king's world.

The link to *manunggaling kawula lan gusti*, made in the original manuscript, remains a hypothesis here. No source found for this study ties blue to that concept, and the informant account concerns the spatial path, not color. The reading is consistent with the cosmology and with the cross-cultural meaning of blue, but it cannot be said that the court itself assigns this meaning to the color.

3.4 White as the counterpart

White fills the wall surfaces against which blue is read in Figure 1. The pairing makes blue legible as an outline and adds a second sign. In Buton, white is read as purity (Bahri, 2019), and the Surakarta palace may share this association. The original manuscript described white mats and rice in the Selikuran ceremony as symbols of purity, but no source supports this. Until one is found, the claim is left out.

3.5 Discussion

Two conclusions can be drawn, and one cannot. The strongest finding is denotative and rests on direct documentation: blue is a light outline color applied to the structural and ornamental frame of palace buildings, against white surfaces. The connotation of shared identity is reasonable, because the pattern recurs across different buildings. The connotation of spiritual meaning is possible but weakly supported.

What this study cannot show is when or why blue became the palace's color. The photographs record the palace as it is in 2024, and the paintwork is evidently renewed. The blue-and-white palette may be older than the colonial period or much newer, and without repainting records or a historical account, the argument cannot say. This matters for Barthes' third level. If the blue is now taken as "simply how the palace looks", the habit has the character of myth, in which a historical choice appears natural (Barthes, 1967). The present data cannot establish that, so the point is raised as a direction for further research. Conservation records, court archives, and interviews with the painters and officials responsible for repainting would test it.

4. Conclusion

This study read the meaning of blue in the architecture of Keraton Surakarta through Barthes' two levels of signification. At the denotative level, documentation from 2024 shows blue as a light outline color applied to the structural and ornamental frame of buildings, namely columns, beams, window and door frames, fretwork, eaves, and fences, against white wall surfaces. The roofs recorded in the photographs are not blue.

At the connotative level, the recurrence of the same pairing across buildings of different scale and function supports reading blue as a shared sign of the palace's identity. A spiritual meaning, linking blue to the palace's cosmology and to the idea of *manunggaling kawula lan gusti*, is plausible given the literature but is not confirmed by the data and remains an interpretation.

The study cannot establish when or why blue became the palace color. Whether it has become a naturalized sign, in Barthes' sense of myth, is therefore untested. Future research should draw on repainting records, court archives, and interviews with the officials and painters responsible for the palace's upkeep.

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