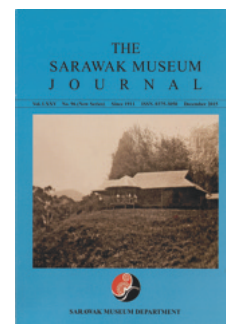




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## LOCAL WISDOM AND EDUCATIONAL VALUES IN THE KAYAN ORAL EPIC TAKNA' LAWE'

Albert Rufinus, Zahir bin Ahmad and Yaacob Harun

### ABSTRACT

The Takna Lawe is a set of long epic poems (7057 verses as published, over 45,000 lines) about love and heroism, part of the mythology of the Kayan community. The Takna Lawe embodies local values whose meaning and function can be absorbed through educational practices. The poems could provide advantageous learning materials for school-based or local curricula. In the epic, there are rich signs or symbols, verbal and non-verbal, that are worth exploring for such purposes. For example, the main character, Lawe', is a hero who often fights for love of his community, showing his loyalty by protecting his people, and his strength by his success in destroying his enemies. This paper discusses the relationship between representative signs or symbols in the poem and the forms of wisdom worth practising in the community, in school settings and in family life. I analyse this relationship through description and analysis based on Peirce's triadic modes in semiotics, the triad being sign-object-meaning: ideas in words, sentences, and verses of the poem are viewed as signs [representamen], which stand for their referents {object}, as referents stand for meanings {interpretamen}. I conclude that such meanings are local community (ethnic) wisdom which can be interpreted as useful values: educational values.

**Keywords:** Takna Lawe', Lawe', oral literature, epic poetry, Peirce's triadic modes, local educational wisdom, values, school-based curriculum.

## LOCAL WISDOM AND EDUCATIONAL VALUES IN THE KAYAN ORAL EPIC *TAKNA' LAWE'*

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The *Takna' Lawe'* is a set of long epic poems (7057 verses as published, over 45,000 lines) about love and heroism, part of the mythology of the *Kayan* community. The *Takna' Lawe'* embodies local values whose meaning and function can be absorbed through educational practices. The poems could provide advantageous learning materials for school-based or local curricula. In the epic, there are rich signs or symbols, verbal and non-verbal, that are worth exploring for such purposes. For example, the main character, Lawe', is a hero who often fights for love of his community, showing his loyalty by protecting his people, and his strength by his success in destroying his enemies. This paper discusses the relationship between representative signs or symbols in the poem and the forms of wisdom worth practising in the community, in school settings and in family life. I analyse this relationship through description and analysis based on Peirce's triadic modes in semiotics, the triad being sign-object-meaning: ideas in words, sentences, and verses of the poem are viewed as signs (*representamen*), which stand for their referents (*object*), as referents stand for meanings (*interpretant*). I conclude that such meanings are local community (ethnic) wisdom which can be interpreted as useful values: educational values.

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### INTRODUCTION

Heroism represents the ideal of citizens transforming civic virtue into the highest form of civic action, accepting either physical peril or social sacrifice (Franco, Blau and Zimbardo, 2011). Campbell (1968) states that a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won; the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

Lawe' is the hero of the *Takna' Lawe'* in Kayan oral literature. The published text in five volumes, edited and translated into Indonesian as *Syair Lawe'* by Pastor A.J. Ding Ngo, SMM, comes from the Kayan community in the Mendalam in the Kapuas Hulu of West Kalimantan, Indonesia, but the same stories exist

among other Kayan communities, including those in Sarawak, where these epic tales are called Belawan (Balawaan, another name for their hero Lawe'). In this long epic poem, Lawe' symbolises heroism in at least three ways: he is a strong and handsome man, a brave warrior, and at the same time a spirit. Lawe' means human, warrior, and spirit. Through his heroic figure and character Lawe' embodies rich and valuable traditional meanings, in that the poem provides so many symbols of local wisdom concerning Kayan ethnic identity, as shown in ethno-astronomy or ecology, traditional art, architecture, healing, and agriculture. In their beliefs about the origins of the world (cosmos) and their way of life, people of this community live in a system of customary law (*adat*) that directs them in their customs or beliefs system of life and work: through birth, growing age, and death; in land use and land management (the farming cycle from land choosing, clearing, harvesting, to the harvest festival), always in a close relationship with their environment.

For the purpose of utilisation, empowerment, and development, there must be activities within the community to help young people acquire and appreciate these local wisdoms and cultural identities. In the modern world, educational programmes and curricular design in local Kayan schools can help the community, school-age young Kayans especially, learn knowledge and skills.

This paper discusses some meaningful signs in the *Takna' Lawe'* and the ethnic symbols of the epic poem specifically in regard to educational wisdoms and values representing Kayan local identities with reference to their particular customs and characteristics. The symbols should contain educational messages, and for sustainable purposes they should also be appropriate parts of educational settings at school. In approaching such signs, semiotic concepts developed by Charles Sanders Peirce are useful and will be first discussed.

### Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics and the *Takna' Lawe'*

#### a. Peirce's Theory of Signs

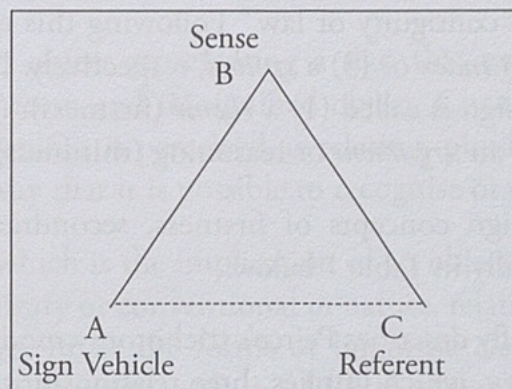
From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), an American philosopher, developed the analysis of sign theory which is known as semiotics theory. Semiotics means general signs dealing with systems of symbols in human life, relating signs to human psychology. Sanders Peirce's ideas have been the centre of interest, further developed by his fellow scholars in semiotics, among which are Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes, Jonathan Culler, Charles Morris, Micheal Rifatarre, Jurij Lotman, and Jacques Derrida.

In one of his many definitions of a sign, Peirce writes: "I define a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so

determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former.”

The description of signs basically refers to the objects they represent, on which the experiences the objects undergo are based. This situation is in relation to the model of sign Charles Sanders Peirce has proposed, as quoted by Daniel Chandler (2002: 32). Peirce offers a triadic model, in three parts: (1) the *representamen*, or form taken from the sign itself (not necessarily the material form); (2) the *interpretant*, which is not the interpreter but the sense made by the sign itself; and (3) the *object*: something referred to by the sign itself.

Peirce's Theory of Signs (2006, 2010) states that signs consist of three interrelated parts: a *sign*, an *object*, and an *interpretant*. For the sake of simplicity, we can think of the *sign* as the signifier, for example, a written word, an utterance, smoke as a sign for fire etc. The *object*, on the other hand, is best thought of as whatever is signified, for example, the object to which the written or uttered word attaches, or the fire signified by the smoke. The *interpretant*, the most innovative and distinctive feature of Peirce's account, is best thought of as the understanding that we have of the *sign-object* relation. The importance of the *interpretant* for Peirce is that signification is not a simple dyadic relationship between *sign* and *object*: a sign signifies only in being interpreted. This makes the *interpretant* central to the content of the sign; the meaning of a sign is manifested in the interpretation that it generates in sign users. More technically, Peirce affirms that the means of communication can be described by a triangle which frames the three relations as in the following Fig. 1 (Daniel Chandler, 2002: 34).



**Fig. 1:** A Semiotic Triangle.

Fig. 1 above is one version of the process of sign interaction dimension between three components of relationship of A (*sign vehicle*), B (*sense*), and C (*referent*). According to Chandler (2002: 241), *sign vehicle* is a term sometimes used