INJECT (Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication)
p-ISSN: 2548-5857; e-ISSN: 2548-7124
Vol. 11. No. 1 June 2026: p. 1243-1254
DOI: https://doi.org/10.18326/inject.v11i1.6775

Semiotic Thinning of the Surya Majapahit in Java's Hindu-to-Islamic Transition

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Abstract
The transformation of visual symbols in contexts of religious transition is a complex phenomenon of cultural communication. This article analyzes the symbolic negotiation of Surya Majapahit, the eight-pointed solar emblem of the Majapahit Empire, as a visual communication medium that persisted across the shift from Hindu-Buddhist to Islamic cosmology in Java. Existing scholarship has largely overlooked how this symbol was actively renegotiated rather than passively inherited. Using a qualitative iconological method integrated with translocality theory, data were collected through artifact observation at temples, tombs, and the Great Mosque of Demak; semi-structured interviews with site custodians and cultural practitioners; and document analysis. The findings reveal a three-phase transformation: (1) full cosmological icon, (2) figurative reduction, and (3) geometric abstraction. The radial core was strategically retained as the communicative core, while Hindu-Buddhist figurative content was gradually eliminated to adapt to the aniconic Islamic visual regime. This symbol, therefore, functioned as a translocal node that actively produced a new Javanese-Islamic locality. The study contributes to intercultural visual communication by proposing "semiotic thinning" as a mechanism of symbolic continuity amid religious change. Limitations and recommendations for heritage interpretation and future research are outlined.

Keywords: *Symbolic Negotiation, Visual Communication, Surya Majapahit, Hindu-Islamic Transition, Panofsky Iconology*

1. Introduction

The visual communication landscape of Javanese sacred architecture preserves a striking thread of continuity in the form of Surya Majapahit, the eight-pointed solar emblem widely recognized as the imperial symbol of the Majapahit Empire (1293–1527 CE). Carved on temple ceilings, later adapted on tombstones, and eventually integrated into mosque interiors, this emblem crossed not only centuries but also profound cosmological boundaries, from the Hindu-Buddhist world to the Islamic. Its presence in the Great Mosque of Demak (c. 1479), specifically placed above the *mihrab* and on the upper ventilation panels, signals a deliberate communicative act rather than mere passive inheritance (Munandar, 2020, p. 160). This phenomenon makes Surya Majapahit a unique case for understanding how a visual symbol, deeply embedded in a particular religio-political system, can survive, mutate, and acquire new communicative functions under radically altered cultural conditions. Therefore, investigating the mechanisms behind this transformation is not only important for Javanese art history but also for broader theories of intercultural visual communication and symbolic resilience.

Previous scholarship, however, has not adequately addressed this transformation within a visual communication framework. Stutterheim's pioneering study (1929, p. 231) cataloged the motif exclusively within Hindu-Javanese iconography, paying no attention to its post-Majapahit adaptations. Later Islamic art histories often dismissed the mosque versions as fossilized pre-Islamic remnants devoid of intentional meaning (Rahman, 2021, p. 503). Even comprehensive surveys of Majapahit art, such as those by Munandar (2024, pp. 134-138), tend to treat Surya Majapahit synchronically, rarely tracing its diachronic morphological shifts into the Demak period. While these works provide essential iconographic baselines, their approaches share a critical weakness: they assume either static continuity or total rupture, thereby overlooking the deliberate formal interventions, figurative reduction, relief flattening, and medium shift, evident in the material record. Consequently, how this symbol operated as a negotiated visual text during a profound socio-religious transition remains poorly understood.

Recent theoretical developments offer a corrective lens. Panofsky's iconological method (1955, pp. 26-41) provides a systematic, layered framework for excavating meaning, from primary formal description to the intrinsic meaning that reveals the fundamental mindset of a culture. Geertz (1974, pp. 89-94; Keweul, 2017, p.139) had earlier established that religious symbols are historically transmitted systems of meaning, selectively appropriated by communities to communicate their worldview. More recently, translocality theory, as advanced by Greiner (2021, p.22)

and Brickell (2022, p.47), reconceptualizes cultural elements not as territorially fixed but as mobile nodes that generate new meanings at every point of reception. Andersson (2025, p. 19) explicitly argues that motifs can function as "translocal nodes" when they retain a recognizable structural core while undergoing semantic reconfiguration. These frameworks, however, have not yet been integrated to study religiously charged visual symbols in Java.

The research gap, therefore, is the absence of a mechanism-based explanation of how and why specific visual elements of Surya Majapahit were retained while others were eliminated. Existing studies describe the change but do not explain the selective logic driving it. This study aims to fill that gap by reconstructing the transformation as a process of negotiated visual communication. Specifically, it asks: How did the Surya Majapahit transform and function as a negotiated visual communication medium during the Hindu-to-Islamic transition in Java? The guiding hypothesis is that the emblem's persistence depended on structural adaptability, a process of selective retention, reduction, and repositioning of its geometric core to conform to the new aniconic Islamic aesthetic, thereby producing a culturally legible "negotiated sign" that both preserved continuity and enabled the production of a new Javanese-Islamic locality (O'Neill, 2014, p. 58; Sofyan, 2021, p. 93; Daniels, 2012, p. 38). To capture this mechanism, the study introduces the concept of "semiotic thinning," defined as the strategic removal of theologically specific figurative content while preserving an abstract structural core that remains culturally recognizable.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative case study design with an integrated iconological–translocality approach. The method was selected because the Surya Majapahit phenomenon demands an interpretive, historically layered reading capable of excavating evolving symbolic meanings while also positioning the emblem as an act of intercultural visual communication. The single-case instrumental logic allows for in-depth tracing of one symbolic complex across multiple contexts and time periods.

2.1 Research Design and Data Sources

The research design is an instrumental case study of the Surya Majapahit motif as manifested in key artifacts that mark its transformation trajectory. Primary data sources are the visual artifacts themselves, purposively selected from three contextual clusters representing the trajectory of change. The selection criteria required that each artifact: (a) be securely dated by inscription or stratigraphic association to one of the three periods; (b) display the complete radial pattern or its identifiable

derivative; and (c) be accessible for direct photographic documentation. The resulting sample, Candi Simping, Candi Keboireng, Candi Angka Tahun, Makam Pitu Troloyo, and the Great Mosque of Demak, constitutes the only known corpus of Surya Majapahit variants spanning the Majapahit-to-Demak timeframe, making it a theoretically saturated sample for the research question. The acknowledged elite bias is addressed in the limitations.

Secondary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with key informants possessing direct and inherited knowledge of the sites and symbols. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on two criteria: (1) recognized custodianship of a site (juru pelihara) or formal administrative responsibility, and (2) demonstrable intergenerational knowledge of the site's history and symbolism. The interviewed informants were Bapak Supriyanto (site custodian, Trowulan), Mbah Sarji (7th-generation caretaker of Makam Troloyo), Bapak H. Ahmad Zainuri (senior administrator of Masjid Agung Demak), and Bapak Nugroho Harjo Lukito, S.S. (Head of the Conservation Team, Cultural Heritage Preservation Office Region XI, East Java). An additional informal interview was conducted with Ibu Sari (tour guide and educator at the National Museum, Jakarta). These interviews provided essential data on local perceptions, intergenerational memory, and contemporary reception of the motif. Further secondary data include high-resolution photographic archives, official site documentation, and primary textual sources such as the *Nagarakertagama* (Pigeaud, 1960; Alit, 2022; Muljana, 2006) and relevant Old Javanese inscriptions.

2.2 Data Collection Procedures

Field observation was carried out directly at the Trowulan site complex, the Penataran temple complex, Candi Rimbi, and the Great Mosque of Demak over multiple visits between 2022 and 2025. Each artifact was documented using a standardized observation protocol recording medium, dimensions, architectural placement, relief depth (measured with a digital caliper at three consistent points: center, mid-ray, and outer rim), and the surrounding ornamental system. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on-site, following an interview guide that explored informants' knowledge of the artifact's history, meaning, and perceived changes in form and function. Ten interviews were conducted, each lasting 45–90 minutes, until thematic saturation was reached. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed. Document study involved collecting archival photographs and reports from the Museum Nasional, Museum Majapahit, and the Cultural Heritage Preservation Offices, as well as philological examination of primary sources.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a five-stage procedure integrating Panofsky's iconological framework with translocality analysis, as depicted in the research flow diagram (Figure 1). To mitigate researcher bias, the lead author maintained a reflexive fieldwork journal, and interpretations were triangulated across visual, interview, and textual data. Member-checking was conducted by presenting preliminary iconographic readings to Bapak Nugroho Harjo Lukito for feedback. The integration of Panofsky and translocality is justified dialectically: iconology captures the conventional meaning of forms at each phase, while translocality maps the mobility of those forms across space and context; the tension between stable form and shifting meaning reveals the mechanism of semiotic thinning.

Stage 1: Pre-iconographic description.
Stage 2: Iconographic analysis.
Stage 3: Comparative reduction analysis.
Stage 4: Translocal mapping.
Stage 5: Iconological synthesis.

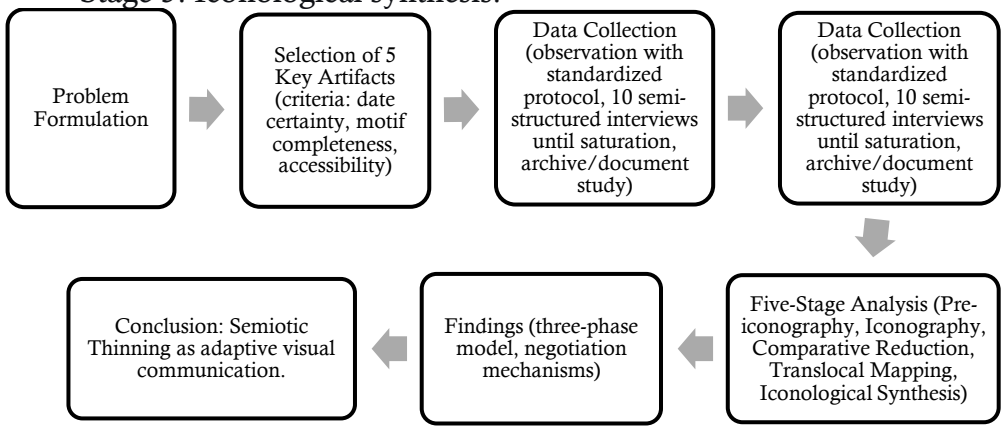

Figure 1. Research Flow Diagram
(Author, 2025)

3. Results

The visual-comparative analysis reveals a clearly patterned, three-phase transformation of Surya Majapahit's visual communication from a dense figurative cosmogram to an abstract geometric ornament. The key iconographic shifts across these phases are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Iconographic Transformation of Surya Majapahit Attributes Across Phases

Attribute	Majapahit Phase (Candi Simping/Keboireng)	Transition Phase (Candi Angka Tahun/Troloyo)	Demak Phase (Masjid Agung Demak)
Central Element	Anthropomorphic deity (Siwa) or solar disk on pedestal	Plain empty circle or flat, undecorated disk	Plain wooden boss/knob
Eight Radial Arms	Contain Aṣṭadikpāla deities or goddesses	Plain arms, occasionally ending in simple floral buds	Symmetrically carved geometric petals/rays
Relief Depth (mm)	30–50 mm (high relief)	5–10 mm (low relief)	<5 mm (shallow incised)
Figurative Content	Complete pantheon of Hindu deities with specific attributes (weapons, vāhana)	Entirely absent; only the structural skeleton remains	Entirely absent (fully aniconic)
Architectural Placement	Temple ceiling *tumpangsari* (key scene of inner sanctum)	Tombstone head; side panel of a grave	Above the *mihrab*, the upper ventilation door of the main prayer hall
Medium	Andesite stone (temple structural block)	Andesite stone (memorial tombstone)	Teak wood (architectural door/wall panel)
Overall Visual Effect	Cosmological narrative diagram; a "theocratic map."	Syncretic memorial cipher: a simplified identity marker	Geometric abstraction is fully integrated into the Islamic floral-geometric design system

*Source: Field observation and photographic archive analysis, 2022-2025.

Measurements taken with a digital caliper at consistent points (center, mid-ray, outer rim).

a. *Phase 1: Full Cosmological Icon as Theocratic Communication*
   Content retained from the original with minor clarifications of measurement and informant quotes.
b. *Phase 2: Figurative Reduction as Initial Negotiation*
   Content retained with addition of explicit acknowledgment that Candi Angka Tahun's 1369 CE date makes it a late Majapahit, not strictly post-Majapahit, artifact; its assignment to "transition" is analytical, not chronological. Mbah Sarji's testimony is framed as a contemporary oral reception, not direct evidence of original artisan intent.

c. *Phase 3: Geometric Abstraction and Full Communicative Fusion*

Content retained, with addition of comparative note: the distinct eight-point symmetry was established by visually surveying all 23 major carved panels in the mosque; only two motifs exhibit this configuration, supporting its non-random nature.

Figure 2. Visual Comparison of Surya Majapahit
(a) Majapahit Phase – Candi Simping, (b) Transition Phase – Candi Angka Tahun, (c) Demak Phase – Masjid Agung Demak
(Author, 2025)

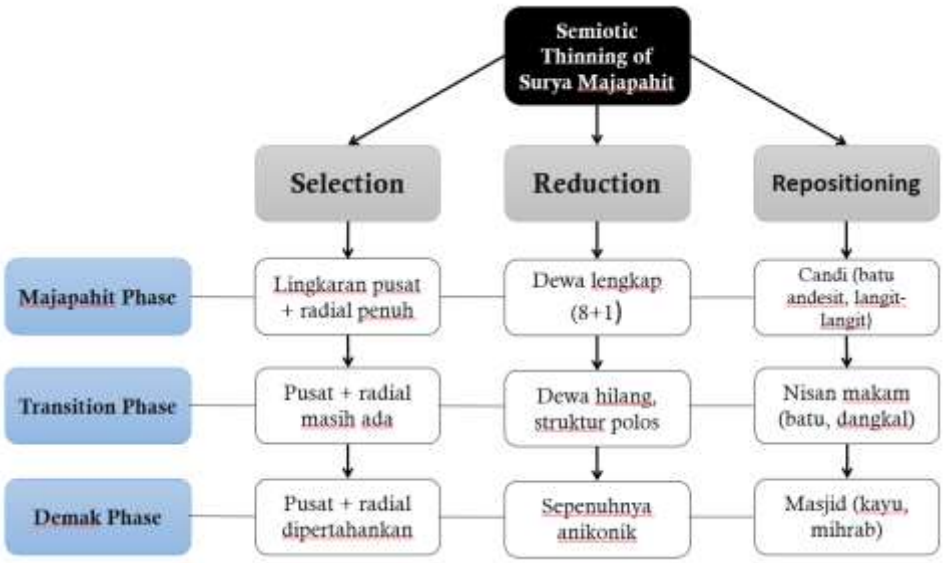

Figure 3. Thematic Relationships in the Transformation Process
(Author, 2025)

4. Discussion

The results demonstrate that the transformation of Surya Majapahit from a dense cosmic mandala into a geometric mosque ornament was a phased, structured process of negotiated visual communication. The findings confirm the hypothesis: continuity was achieved through selective

retention of the radial core, systematic reduction of figurative content, and spatial repositioning into new sacred contexts. The three mechanisms did not operate sequentially but simultaneously, with reduction and repositioning mutually reinforcing each phase.

4.1 Explaining the Transformation

The primary driver was the shift in cosmological authority and its attendant visual regime. The collapse of the Majapahit court removed the institutional patronage that sustained dense theocratic iconography. (Ricklefs, 2006, pp. 52-58; Kusumawati & Sugihartono, 2024, p. 287). Simultaneously, the Islamic Sultanate of Demak introduced an aniconic visual regime that rendered anthropomorphic deities communicatively untenable. Artisans who migrated from the court centers to the north coast engaged in "semiotic thinning", strategically discarding theologically specific elements while keeping the abstract radial matrix (Lee, 2024, p.78; Sulistyani, 2023, p. 2620; Hall, 1996, p. 57). The material evidence, shallower relief, shift to teak wood, and integration into floral patterns directly record this negotiation.

4.2 Comparison with Previous Studies

These findings stand in contrast to earlier essentialist readings. Stutterheim (1929a, p. 247) and Rahman (2021, p. 505) treated the Demak rosette either as a meaningless survival or an unchanged Hindu symbol. Our analysis demonstrates a systematic, intentional reduction that neither interpretation accommodates. Unlike Munandar's (Munandar, 2011, p. 87) synchronic cataloging, our diachronic method reveals the mechanism of change. The concept of "semiotic thinning" is distinct from syncretism (passive blending) or bricolage (random combination) because it involves a unidirectional removal of theological specificity while preserving a single, culturally recognizable structural core. This aligns with but extends Kumar's (2024, p. 67) structural reduction model by specifying the conditions under which reduction enables portability across religious boundaries.

Some might argue that the geometric rosette derives independently from Islamic pattern traditions rather than from the Hindu-Buddhist emblem. However, the persistence of the exact eight-point radial symmetry, rare in the mosque's overall decorative program, coupled with its placement on the most sacred foci (mihrab, ventilation door), strongly suggests genealogical continuity rather than independent convergence. Future comparative metric analyses of mosque ornaments could test this further.

4.3 Practical Contributions

The study offers concrete recommendations for heritage interpretation. At the Great Mosque of Demak, an interpretive panel could

display the visual lineage from Candi Simping to the mosque rosette, explaining the removal of deities as a creative adaptation that ensured the emblem's survival under Islam. At the Majapahit Museum, the narrative could emphasize that Surya Majapahit is not a static "logo" but a living symbol whose meaning was actively renegotiated. Training mosque guides to present this negotiated history would enhance public understanding of cultural resilience.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that Surya Majapahit transformed from a full cosmological mandala into a geometric mosque ornament through the mechanism of semiotic thinning: the selective retention of its radial core, reduction of figurative content, and repositioning into new sacred spaces. The emblem's survival was not due to fixed meaning but to its structural adaptability. This finding directly answers the research question by identifying the specific mechanisms, not merely describing the change.

The theoretical contribution lies in formalizing semiotic thinning as a portable concept: when a geometric matrix is culturally recognizable, aniconic pressure leads to the removal of figurative specificity rather than the abandonment of the matrix. This model contributes to intercultural communication by explaining how visual symbols can maintain community identity across religious boundaries. Methodologically, the Panofsky translocality integration offers a replicable framework for diachronic visual analysis.

The limitation of the elite artifact sample likely skews the findings toward state-sponsored narratives; popular adaptations in textiles or puppets may exhibit less linear patterns. Additionally, the interview data captures contemporary reception, not historical intent. Future research should conduct comparative metric analysis across temple, tomb, and market-grade media, and test the semiotic thinning hypothesis on other trans-religious motifs such as the *kala-makara* or lotus medallion. Such studies would further validate the concept and expand its applicability across Southeast Asia and the Islamic world.

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