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Thick Description Analysis of Solo Keroncong Music as Indonesia's Cultural Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

This research examines keroncong music as a representation of Javanese culture. The aim of the research was to interpret the lyrics of keroncong in a cultural context using thick description, Clifford Geertz. Keroncong music is also seen from a cultural diplomacy perspective. Research data was obtained from interviews and direct observation and supported by relevant literature. This research explicitly analyzes canonical songs such as Bengawan Solo, Tirtonadi, Taman Jurug, and Kota Solo to understand how cultural symbols are produced and consumed. Research data were obtained through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (FGD) with a community of practitioners. Lyric analysis is integrated with High-Context Communication (HCC) theory to demonstrate how the indirect communication patterns of Javanese society are represented in keroncong musicality. The research found Javanese cultural symbols in the lyrics of keroncong songs. It highlights the city of Solo as the center of cultural civilization on the island of Java. Solo is known as "the spirit of Java." The keroncong lyrics, which tell stories about people's lives, are able to attract and inspire love for Indonesia. Indonesian cultural diplomacy is supported by a community of keroncong music lovers abroad who act as diplomatic agents. The beauty of keroncong's musicality and poetic lyrics becomes a cultural signpost that is considered a soft power in cultural diplomacy. The conclusion of this research confirms that the rich culture of the Indonesian nation can be developed as an important instrument of cultural diplomacy. The success of cultural diplomacy requires direct contact with communities of Indonesian arts and culture lovers, at home and abroad.

Keywords: Cultural diplomacy, keroncong, keroncong, soft power, thick description

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji musik keroncong sebagai representasi budaya Jawa. Tujuan penelitian dilakukan untuk menerjemahkan lagu-lagu keroncong dalam konteks budaya dengan menggunakan thick description, Clifford Geertz. Musik keroncong juga dilihat dari perspektif diplomasi budaya. Penelitian ini secara eksplisit menganalisis lagu-lagu kanonik seperti Bengawan Solo, Tirtonadi, Taman Jurug, dan Kota Solo untuk memahami bagaimana simbol-simbol budaya diproduksi dan dikonsumsi. Data penelitian diperoleh melalui observasi partisipan, wawancara mendalam, dan diskusi kelompok terfokus (FGD) dengan komunitas praktisi. Analisis lirik diintegrasikan dengan teori High-Context Communication (HCC) untuk menunjukkan bagaimana pola komunikasi tidak langsung masyarakat Jawa direpresentasikan dalam musikalitas keroncong. Data penelitian diperoleh dari hasil wawancara, observasi langsung, dan didukung

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pustaka yang relevan. Penelitian menemukan simbol-simbol budaya Jawa dalam lirik lagu keroncong. Hasil analisis terhadap lagu-lagu keroncong dalam penelitian ini menonjolkan kota Solo sebagai pusat peradaban budaya di pulau Jawa, dikenal dengan istilah "the spirit of Java." Lirik lagu keroncong yang bercerita tentang kehidupan masyarakat mampu menarik dan menimbulkan kecintaan terhadap Indonesia. Diplomasi budaya Indonesia didukung oleh adanya komunitas pecinta musik keroncong di luar negeri yang berperan sebagai agen diplomasi. Keindahan musikalitas keroncong dan lirik yang puitis menjadi soft power dalam diplomasi budaya. Kesimpulan penelitian ini menguatkan bahwa kekayaan budaya bangsa Indonesia dapat dikembangkan sebagai instrumen penting diplomasi budaya. Kesuksesan pelaksanaan diplomasi budaya memerlukan jalinan langsung dengan para komunitas pecinta seni dan budaya Indonesia, di dalam dan luar negeri.

Kata Kunci: Diplomasi budaya, keroncong, soft power, thick description

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is internationally acknowledged as a nation characterized by profound cultural diversity, particularly in the domain of traditional music. Within this rich cultural repertoire, keroncong occupies a singular position, as it encapsulates a dynamic interplay between indigenous aesthetic values and external cultural influences. Its resilience in withstanding the pressures of modernization and the dominance of the contemporary music industry underscores its enduring cultural significance. Specifically, the keroncong tradition of Solo demonstrates an Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), thereby fulfilling UNESCO's criteria for recognition and protection as an element of intangible cultural heritage. (Witarti et al., 2025)

Historically, keroncong music traces its deep-rooted origins to the cultural interactions between Portuguese settlers and the local communities in Kampung Tugu, Batavia, during the seventeenth century (Setiawan & Hidayatullah, 2022). Originally performed by Portuguese slaves and the *Mardijker* community, keroncong evolved through a highly complex process of cultural assimilation, emerging as a new musical form that combined Western harmonic structures with the localized expressions of the Indonesian archipelago. From its roots in Kampung Tugu, the music gradually disseminated across various regions, including Kalimantan, Sulawesi, West Nusa Tenggara, and the interior of Java. Among these, Surakarta (Solo) emerged as a significant cultural center for the development and consolidation of keroncong.

The development of keroncong in Solo accelerated significantly with the support of media institutions such as the Solosche Radio Vereniging (SRV), which later became the precursor of Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI). Within its programming, keroncong was broadcast as one of the primary musical genres alongside gamelan, a process that eventually gave rise to a

new subgenre known as *Langgam Jawa*. This hybrid form represented a synthesis of Western instruments, including the guitar, cello, *cak cuk*, and violin, with the distinctive gamelan tonal systems of *slendro* and *pelog*. Through this convergence, the unique identity of the Solo-style *keroncong* emerged, characterized by a slow, gentle, and profoundly expressive aesthetic. Beyond its role as a form of entertainment, this musical tradition functioned as a medium for fostering national consciousness, articulating local aesthetics, and sustaining the cultural practices of Javanese society.

Beyond its function as a musical performance, *keroncong* is imbued with profound cultural, social, symbolic, and educational values. The lyrical narratives of *keroncong* songs frequently articulate themes of everyday life, moral guidance, patriotism, and cultural wisdom, thereby reinforcing both local and national identity. Moreover, *keroncong* has played a significant role in various social events, ranging from weddings and thanksgiving ceremonies to traditional rituals. Through such functions, *keroncong* has evolved into a vital instrument of social cohesion, strengthening intergroup relations within Indonesian society (Mutsaers, 2014).

Keroncong has evolved not merely as a form of entertainment but as an expression of national identity and a symbol of diversity that resonates with the spirit of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). In this regard, *keroncong* possesses significant potential to be examined as an instrument of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy on the global stage, particularly through the distinctive Solo style. Solo *keroncong* can be understood as a medium of cultural communication that embodies the value systems, norms, and social symbols of Javanese society. It should therefore be regarded not only as an artistic product but also as a communicative code that enables the transmission of cultural messages across generations and facilitates the articulation of local traditions to global audiences. As such, Solo-style *keroncong* functions as both a vehicle for expressing the collective identity of the Solo community and a channel for fostering cross-cultural understanding among international audiences of diverse sociocultural backgrounds (Lustig et al., 2018).

This study situates Solo *keroncong* within the broader socio-cultural context of Javanese society. In the field of ethnomusicology, music is examined in relation to its cultural setting, emphasizing not only its aesthetic qualities but also its social dimensions. Accordingly, this study seeks to analyze the meanings, functions, and roles of music in everyday life. Music is thus approached as a social activity rather than merely as an aesthetic object constituted by sounds and melodies produced through instruments. It is understood as a complex form of cultural expression that reflects the values, norms, and social practices of a community (Setiawan, 2024).

In a review of recent literature (2020-2025), there is a crucial research gap. Most previous studies, such as those by Putri et al. (2023), tend to focus on historical acculturation traces between Indonesia and Portugal. Other research by Zilmi (2021) emphasizes vocal techniques like *luk*, *nggandul*, and *cengkok* in the context of popular music performance. However, there is still a lack of literature that systematically links cultural symbolism in *keroncong* lyrics with cultural diplomacy strategies through the lens of High-Context Communication (HCC) theory. This research positions itself to fill that gap by comparing empirical findings in contemporary *keroncong* communities with Edward T. Hall's theoretical framework to show how *keroncong* music functions as a broader communication code rather than just entertainment (Sheposh, 2025).

Through its lyrics, instrumentation, and modes of performance, *keroncong* generates a cultural discourse that can be interpreted and reinterpreted by its audiences. This process constitutes a form of symbolic communication, wherein each musical element conveys implicit meanings that are deeply embedded within the local cultural context. For instance, the use of *slendro* and *pelog* scales in *Langgam Jawa* not only highlights the distinctive aesthetic qualities of Solo's musical tradition but also embodies the Javanese philosophical worldview characterized by harmony, subtlety, and refined social etiquette. In this sense, *keroncong* functions as a narrative medium that mediates cultural meanings and values (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2022).

In the global context, *keroncong* has also served as a cultural ambassador of Indonesia in various countries. Solo-style *keroncong*, in particular, has been well received by international audiences. Enthusiast communities have emerged abroad, such as the *Orkes Keroncong Arif Lukisan* in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), *Keroncong Rumput* in Virginia (United States), and *Keroncong Suralaya* in London (United Kingdom).

The performances of *Keroncong Rumput* in the United States have successfully captivated audiences. Iconic *keroncong* pieces in both Indonesian and Javanese, such as *Bengawan Solo*, *Keroncong Moritsko*, *Jali-jali*, and *Walang Kekek*, have enthralled music enthusiasts and demonstrated the genre's enduring transnational appeal. (Elsa Emiria Leba, 2019). This demonstrates that *keroncong* possesses cross-cultural appeal that resonates not only with the Indonesian diaspora but also with international communities. Cultural diplomacy, in this sense, is not solely pursued to advance state interests; rather, it enables the strengthening of transnational networks of art and cultural enthusiasts who function as cultural agencies. (Ang et al., 2015).

When keroncong is performed on international stages, it facilitates an exchange of meanings between Indonesian culture and global audiences. The repertoire of keroncong conveys cultural messages that embody and project Indonesia's national identity. This cultural appeal exemplifies what Joseph Nye conceptualizes as soft power, a form of influence that derives from attraction rather than coercion. Such power can be further cultivated as an instrument of cultural diplomacy, given its inherently persuasive character (Cowan & Cull, 2008). The functions of cultural presentation and cultural exchange within cultural diplomacy constitute one of the key pillars of public diplomacy. (Cull, 2019). The success of cultural diplomacy is largely determined by intercultural competence and cross-contextual communication skills. (Chen & Starosta, 2018).

This study positions keroncong music as both a practice of cultural representation and an instrument of diplomacy. Nevertheless, scholarly research on keroncong music particularly the Solo style remains dominated by descriptive approaches and has yet to sufficiently uncover the deeper layers of cultural meaning. Therefore, the thick description approach introduced by Clifford Geertz becomes highly relevant for this study.

This approach gave rise to symbolic and interpretive anthropology, which emphasizes culture as webs of significance constructed by human beings. The researcher's task is to observe and interpret the meanings embedded in communicative acts. Thick description is not merely concerned with describing surface events, but rather with uncovering 'what the happening means' behind each action and cultural symbol. Within the scope of this study, the researcher seeks to unravel the meanings embedded in the symbols present in Solo keroncong songs within the broader Javanese cultural context. Solo keroncong music is thus understood not merely as an aesthetic object, but also as a living cultural representation. (Ponterotto, 2015)

In the realm of cultural diplomacy, such forms of representation are crucial, as music is not only a universal language but also a narrative of national identity.

Solo, as the site of this study, possesses distinctive cultural strengths: a city of heritage, the seat of the royal court, and an ecosystem of keroncong communities that remain active to this day. The existence of keroncong ensembles, festivals, and artist collectives in Solo provides a vital foundation for preserving and promoting keroncong on the international stage. However, in order to optimize the potential of Solo keroncong as a medium of cultural diplomacy, it is necessary to develop a deeper understanding of the cultural elements embedded in the music, including its musical structures, lyrical narratives, social relations within performer communities, and the cultural symbols it conveys.

This study seeks to contribute to the literature on Indonesian traditional music while also opening an academic space for discussing the potential of cultural diplomacy through music. By employing thick description analysis, this research aims to qualitatively uncover the cultural layers of the Solo keroncong style and to demonstrate how this music plays a vital role in shaping, representing, and disseminating Indonesian cultural identity on the global stage.

High-Context Communication (HCC) Theory in Javanese Society

A major contribution of this research is the integration of High-Context Communication (HCC) theory from Edward T. Hall to dissect communication styles in keroncong music. High-context cultures, found in many Asian countries including Indonesia, rely heavily on implicit, non-verbal communication and place emphasis on relationships and social bonds (Sheposh, 2025). In these cultures, most message meanings are not explicitly stated in verbal codes but are instead embedded in the physical context or internalized within the individual (Khasidah, et al., 2024).

Javanese society traditionally adheres to very strong HCC patterns. Communication tends to be indirect, ambiguous, yet prioritizes harmony (Fadhillah, et al., 2024). The use of metaphors, *sanepan*, and layered language in keroncong lyrics is a manifestation of this communication pattern. A review of the lyrics of “Taman Jurug,” for example, shows how moral advice is conveyed subtly, reflecting the Javanese value of *eling lan waspada* (mindful and cautious) without being overtly didactic. Understanding HCC dimensions is crucial in twenty-first-century diplomacy to avoid misunderstandings with Low-Context cultures, such as those of the United States or Northern Europe, which value directness (Sheposh, 2025).

Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy in this sense allows for the strengthening of transnational networks of art and culture enthusiasts who function as cultural agencies (Winandy, 2022). Performances of keroncong on international stages facilitate an exchange of meaning between Indonesian culture and global audiences. This cultural appeal is what Joseph Nye conceptualized as soft power, a form of influence derived from attraction rather than coercion (Winandy, 2022).

The functions of cultural presentation and exchange are main pillars of public diplomacy (Winandy, 2022). The success of cultural diplomacy is largely determined by intercultural competence and skills in cross-contextual communication (Damayanti et al., 2024). The

following table summarizes the strategic dimensions of keroncong music as a diplomatic instrument based on recent literature.

Table 1. Analysis The strategic Dimensions of Keroncong Music as a Diplomatic Instrument

Diplomacy Dimension	Mechanism Description	Impact on International Relations
Soft Power Projection	Use of aesthetic appeal to build a positive national image (Winandy, 2022).	Increased profile of Indonesian culture globally.
Psychological Disarmament	Music as a medium to break barriers of prejudice and mistrust (Winandy, 2022).	Creation of mutual understanding.
Cultural Agency	Overseas communities (Rumput, Suralaya) act as informal ambassadors.	Strengthening of non-governmental transnational networks.
Educational Medium	Use of lyrics to teach history and philosophical values.	International cultural literacy about the history of the archipelago.

Source: Various references, compiled by the researcher

RESEARCH METHOD

This article is developed as an ethnomusicological study that examines Solo keroncong music within the socio-cultural context of Javanese society. Ethnomusicology is defined as “the study of music in its cultural context.” In this perspective, music is understood not merely as an aesthetic object comprised of sounds and melodies produced by instruments, but as a form of social activity. Ethnomusicology thus analyzes the meanings, functions, and roles of music in community life. Music is regarded as a complex form of cultural expression that reflects the values, norms, and social practices of a particular group (Setiawan, 2024)

Data collection was conducted through participatory observation. The researcher also organized focus group discussions with members of the Indonesian Keroncong Music Artists Community (KAMKI), Surakarta chapter. This study specifically examines the existence of the keroncong ensemble “Suralaya” in London, United Kingdom, and the group “Rumput” in Virginia, United States. Primary data were obtained from the impressions and reflections of participants in keroncong workshops facilitated by the researcher in London, Oxford, and Cambridge (United Kingdom), as well as at Richmond University (United States). Secondary data were collected from a variety of relevant sources, including songbooks, digital recordings,

and academic literature. The research data sources were selected to represent canonical keroncong repertoires, namely Bengawan Solo, Tirtonadi, Taman Jurug, and Kota Solo.

The data were analyzed systematically and interpretatively using Clifford Geertz's thick description approach. Thick description seeks to characterize the intentional, communicative, and interpretive meanings embedded within a given behavior. Methodologically, the use of thick description allows for the generation of richer and more detailed insights derived from observation and the researcher's direct engagement in the field. (Luhmann, 2015)

The interpretative qualitative research design enables Solo keroncong music to be analyzed as a cultural text. The findings, which reveal the meanings, symbols, and values embedded within Solo keroncong songs, are further examined in relation to their function as instruments of cultural diplomacy.

Research Operationalization and Data Validity

To meet rigorous qualitative methodology standards, this research details the analysis stages and informant criteria clearly. This study uses an interpretive qualitative design that allows Solo keroncong music to be analyzed as a cultural text (Saputra et al., 2023).

1. Informant Criteria and Discovery

Informant discovery was conducted through purposive sampling and snowball techniques. Key informants were selected based on competence, deep knowledge of keroncong, and active involvement in the ecosystem. A total of 16 informants were involved in the research.

2. The informant criteria include:

- a. Artists and Practitioners: Members of the Indonesian Keroncong Music Artists Community (KAMKI) Surakarta chapter with at least 10 years of performance experience.
- b. Academics and Ethnomusicologists: Experts studying keroncong from scientific and historical perspectives.
- c. International Participants: Participants of keroncong workshops in London, Oxford, Cambridge, and Richmond University who provided impressions and reflections.
- d. Association Officers: Figures leading musician and enthusiast associations in Surakarta.

Data Analysis Stages

Data were systematically analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model consisting of three main stages (Saputra et al., 2023):

1. Data Reduction: The process of summarizing, selecting key points, and discarding irrelevant data from interviews and field observations.
2. Data Display: Categorizing findings based on emerging themes, such as lyric symbolism, HCC communication styles, and diplomatic challenges.
3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: Conducted iteratively to identify deeper patterns of meaning and ensure findings are supported by strong empirical evidence.

Table 2. Operationalization of HCC and Thick Description in Keroncong Lyrics Analysis

Dimension of HCC / Thick Description	Coding Indicators (Lyrics)	Analytical Function (Auditability)	Examples from Canonical Songs
Implicit & Metaphorical Communication	Nature metaphors, indirect expressions (sanepan).	To decode how Javanese society avoids directness to maintain social harmony.	"Air mengalir sampai jauh, akhirnya ke laut" (Bengawan Solo): Represents the life cycle (Sangkan Paraning Dumadi).
Cultural & Contextual Embeddedness	Historical landmarks, local history, and cultural identity markers.	To provide a "Thick Description" of Solo as a cultural and historical hub.	"Kota Solo... kota berbudaya" (Kota Solo): Reconstructs the identity of Solo as a center of civilization.
Relational Harmony	Expressions of politeness, social cohesion, and subtle advice.	To demonstrate the internalization of moral values through non-didactic narratives.	"Eling lan waspada" (Taman Jurug): Reflects Javanese self-awareness and social ethics.
Symbolic Soft Power	Aesthetic appeal and emotional resonance of the musicality.	To analyze the transformation of local symbols into global attraction.	The use of slendro and pelog scales: Creates a sense of "refinement" that appeals to international audiences.

Source: Various references, compiled by the researcher

Validation and Authenticity Techniques

To ensure the credibility and validity of findings, this research uses triangulation techniques (Saputra et al., 2023). Source Triangulation: Comparing interview data from various informant sources (artists, enthusiasts, academics) to find consistent truth (Nurfajriani et al., 2024). Technique Triangulation: Using a combination of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation (archives, photos, digital recordings) simultaneously on the same data source (Saputra et al., 2023). Time Triangulation: Checking data at different times or situations, such as comparing informant responses during routine practice versus major performances (Nurfajriani et al., 2024).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Development of Solo Keroncong Music

This section is based on discussions from the focus group conducted with keroncong practitioners in Surakarta. Historically, keroncong music has evolved through continuous adaptation to the socio-cultural contexts of society. Solo-style keroncong emerged as the result of acculturation between keroncong Tugu and traditional Javanese music. The genre *langgam gamelan* exemplifies the fusion of Western musical instruments with the Javanese gamelan. This adaptive capacity constitutes a distinctive characteristic that differentiates Solo keroncong from other regional musical traditions.

The development of keroncong music has also been inseparable from the role of media in its dissemination. Keroncong achieved nationwide recognition through Lokananta recordings and radio broadcasts. Both Solosche Radio Vereeniging (SRV) and Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI) featured keroncong as one of their flagship programs. Radio orchestras in Solo, Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung, and other cities shaped prevailing musical trends of the time (Setiawan, 2024). The media significantly influenced public listening preferences, positioning keroncong not merely as a form of local expression but as a representation of national music recognized across Indonesia. The media has played a crucial role in shaping public listening preferences. Keroncong has thus transcended its status as a local form of expression to become a representation of national music recognized throughout Indonesia.

Although deeply rooted in history, keroncong in Solo has not remained static. Throughout its development, the genre has undergone transformation through the adaptation and creativity of its practitioners. This demonstrates that innovation does not signify a departure from tradition but rather enriches the musical character of Solo keroncong, ensuring its continued relevance in changing times.

The existence of keroncong in Solo is also sustained by the Indonesian Keroncong Music Artists Community (KAMKI), which fosters an inclusive ecosystem for its preservation and promotion. According to Didit NN, Secretary of KAMKI, the organization plays a vital role in ensuring the presence of keroncong in various events: “We will bring keroncong to every neighborhood, and that is our responsibility. Not only in certain venues such as cafés, academic settings, or university campuses—we will be present in every community.” (Didit NN, 2024).

As a community dedicated to the preservation of keroncong in Solo, KAMKI actively incorporates regeneration efforts into its programs. Ultimately, keroncong is not merely a cultural artifact of the past, but a living cultural practice that continues to evolve in accordance with the dynamics of its time.

Cultural Interpretation of Keroncong Songs

This study analyzes several well-known Solo keroncong songs that continue to be performed today. The use of the thick description approach enables the interpretation of lyrics within their cultural context, rather than through a merely literal translation.

1. Bengawan Solo

The lyrics of “Bengawan Solo,” composed in 1940 by the keroncong maestro Gesang Martohartono, narrate—at the literal level—the story of a river in the city of Solo. The Bengawan Solo River flows from the Sewu Mountains in southern Java and ends in the Java Sea.

“Bengawan Solo, riwayatmu ini. Sedari dulu jadi perhatian insani. Mata airmu dari Solo, terkurung gunung seribu. Air mengalir sampai jauh, akhirnya ke laut. Itu perahu, riwayatnya dulu. Kaum pedagang selalu, naik itu perahu.”

“Bengawan Solo, this is your story. Since long ago, you have drawn human attention. Your source springs from Solo, enclosed by the Seribu Mountains. Your waters flow far, eventually reaching the sea. That boat, such was its history. Traders in the past would always travel upon that boat.”

In the cultural context, the Bengawan Solo River is inseparable from the history and daily life of Javanese society. The song “Bengawan Solo” has become part of the community’s collective memory, serving as a temporal symbol that unites the image of nature with cultural narratives. Through its lyrical composition, Bengawan Solo is understood as more than just a river flowing through the city of Solo. In Classical Javanese, the term *bengawan* means “great river.” Historically, the river is located in a village named Solo (Sala), within the former Surakarta Residency, which was once the center of the Pajang Kingdom.

Water is inseparable from the agrarian traditions of Javanese society. The Bengawan Solo River is closely intertwined with the daily lives of communities along its course. Stretching from Central Java to East Java, the river historically served as a primary route for transportation and trade. The phrase “kaum pedagang” (traders) in the song’s lyrics reinforces the reference to Bengawan Solo as a traditional economic artery.

Within Javanese philosophy, rivers, as sources of water, are often interpreted as symbols of life, purity, and blessing. Narratives about water frequently appear in folklore, legends, and myths popular across Java. The lyric “air mengalir sampai jauh, akhirnya ke laut” (“the water flows far, eventually to the sea”) metaphorically reflects the human life journey, from its origin to its end. This life cycle resonates with the Javanese philosophical concept of *sangkan paraning dumadi*, which reminds individuals to always be mindful of their origin, purpose, and ultimate return.

2. Tirtonadi

The theme of the river’s beauty is further reflected in another *langgam* song, “Tirtonadi,” also composed by Gesang.

“Tirtonadi yang permai, di tepi sungai. Suatu kebun yang permai riuh dan ramai. Itu suaranya air mendesir desir. Darilah pintu air terjun mengalir Nun di sana tempatnya rakyat seluruhnya. Melepaskan lelahnya hibur hatinya. Sepanjang lembah sungai teratur rapi. Sungguh cantik dan permai di tirtonadi.”

“Beautiful Tirtonadi, on the river bank. A beautiful garden is noisy and busy. That’s the sound of swishing water. From the gate of the waterfall flows, there is the place of all the people. Releasing tiredness, comforting his heart. Along the river valley, the river is neatly arranged. It’s really beautiful and scenic in Tirtonadi.”

The lyrics of this song portray the beauty of a place in the city of Solo known as Tirtonadi, which holds an important place in the city’s history. The *langgam* “Tirtonadi” was composed in the 1940s, during the golden era of Tirtonadi Park. The park, a legacy of Mangkunegara VII, served as a public space and entertainment venue where artists gathered. Tirtonadi thus became a symbol of harmony in Javanese society, which places great value on tradition and culture.

Expressions in the lyrics such as “kebun yang permai” (“a delightful garden”), “air mendesir” (“rippling water”), and “lembah sungai teratur rapi” (“a neatly ordered river valley”) reflect the cosmology of Javanese society, which venerates order (tata) and beauty (ayu). Javanese culture embraces the philosophy of Memayu Hayuning Bawana, which teaches the importance of maintaining balance in life. It emphasizes the preservation of harmony between humans and the Creator, among human beings themselves, and between humanity and the natural environment.

3. Taman Jurug

The song “Taman Jurug,” composed by Andjarany, also narrates the romantic lives of young people in the city of Solo. The song “Taman Jurug” provides the clearest example of High-Context Communication integration in keroncong music. While narrating the romantic lives of Solo’s youth, it conveys deep-seated values through subtle, indirect communication.

“Ning kuto Solo muda lan mudi. Ing Taman Jurug ing pinggir Bengawan Solo. Muda lan mudi, awan lan mbengi. Do suko-suko nanging ojo ngiket janji. Ngersakne nopo, mung sarwo ono. Ning Taman Jurug taman endah kuto Solo. Papan kreasi, muda lan mudi. Sing tuwo-tuwo welinge ojo nganti lali.”

“In the city of Solo, young men and women gather. At Jurug Park, by the banks of the Bengawan Solo River. Both day and night, the youth come together in joy, yet without binding themselves to promises. They pursue what they desire, as everything unfolds naturally. At Jurug Park, the beautiful garden of Solo city, a place of creativity for the young. The elders, however, remind them not to forget their responsibilities.”

The lyrics of “Taman Jurug” describe the atmosphere of a park located on the outskirts of the Bengawan Solo River. For the people of Solo, Taman Jurug is regarded as a local tourism icon. In the past, Jurug served as both a park and a zoo, which made it a popular leisure destination. Within the song’s lyrics, Taman Jurug represents a social space a venue for the expression of youthful spirit.

The song also conveys values deeply rooted in Javanese society. Communication in Javanese culture is often indirect, layered with meaning rather than expressed explicitly. The lyric “Do suko-suko nanging ojo ngiket janji” (“Enjoy love, but do not bind it with promises”) carries a message of ethical restraint, resonating with the Javanese principle of eling lan waspada (to remain mindful and cautious). Similarly, the lyric “Sing tuwo-tuwo welinge ojo nganti lali” (“Remember the advice of the elders, do not forget”) reflects parental

counsel, known in Javanese culture as pitutur or wewarah. The song's underlying message of maintaining noble character can thus be interpreted as a symbol of preserving Javanese cultural identity. Reviewing these lyrics confirms that in HCC, the primary message is often wrapped in a broader social context to preserve the dignity of the listener and avoid direct conflict (Sheposh, 2025).

4. Kota Solo

The original keroncong song "Kota Solo" was popularized by keroncong musician Mus Mulyadi in 1984.

"Kota Solo kota tempat kesenian asli. Tarian indah murni irama yang mengiringi. Banyak pesiaran sejak purba hingga kini. Para agung serta pendeta sungguh maha sakti. Sungguh indah kota Solo banyak pemandangan. Pulau hiburan di tepinya bengawan. Kota Solo yang menjadikan kenang kenangan. Hingga dapat menghilangkan hati sedih dan duka. Sungguh indah kota Solo banyak pemandangan. Pulau hiburan di tepinya bengawan. Kota Solo yang menjadikan kenang kenangan. Hingga dapat menghilangkan hati sedih dan duka."

"Solo is a city where authentic arts flourish. Graceful dances are accompanied by pure rhythms. Since ancient times until the present, many have traveled here, including nobles and revered priests of great spiritual power. Truly beautiful is the city of Solo, with its many scenic views. Along the banks of the Bengawan lies an island of leisure. Solo is a city that leaves lasting memories, capable of dispelling sorrow and grief. Indeed, Solo is a city of beauty, rich with landscapes. By the Bengawan rests an island of entertainment. Solo is a city of remembrance, one that soothes and eases a troubled heart."

As its title suggests, the lyrics of "Kota Solo" focus on the city of Solo, also known as Surakarta. Solo is often referred to as "the spirit of Java," signifying its role as a cultural center of Javanese civilization. The city holds this title due to its richness in tradition, art, and an abundance of historical and cultural heritage.

The lyric "Para agung serta pendeta sungguh maha sakti" ("The nobles and priests are truly powerful") alludes to the presence of aristocrats and spiritual leaders who possess inner strength. These leaders embody the Javanese cosmological concept of manunggaling kawula gusti, the mystical union between the people and their ruler, which is believed to play a vital role in maintaining cosmic balance and uniting humanity with its Creator.

DISCUSSION

Cultural Symbolism in Keroncong Lyrics

The empirical data presented in the Results section demonstrate that keroncong lyrics frequently employ cultural symbols related to nature, place, and social life. These symbolic expressions reflect the cultural worldview of Javanese society.

For example, the lyric “air mengalir sampai jauh, akhirnya ke laut” in the song *Bengawan Solo* describes the physical flow of the river. However, within the broader cultural context of Javanese philosophy, flowing water is commonly associated with the cycle of life. This symbolic meaning aligns with the Javanese philosophical concept of *sangkan paraning dumadi*, which refers to the human journey from origin to final return.

Similarly, the song *Tirtonadi* describes the beauty of a park and river environment. The expressions “kebun yang permai” and “air mendesir” depict an orderly and harmonious natural landscape. These expressions resonate with the Javanese cultural philosophy of *memayu hayuning bawana*, which emphasizes the importance of maintaining harmony between humans and nature.

These findings indicate that keroncong lyrics function not only as poetic narratives but also as carriers of cultural meaning embedded within everyday language.

The table below provides a concise summary of the cultural interpretation analysis. Excerpts from keroncong lyrics serve as the primary data for this study. This thick description analysis is summarized in the following table to provide a comprehensive overview.

Table 3. Analysis Thick description Keroncong Solo song

Song Title	Literal Meaning	Cultural Context	Communication Dimension (HCC)
Bengawan Solo	Narrates the history and natural course of the Bengawan Solo River from its source to its estuary.	The river’s flow is interpreted as a metaphor for the human life cycle. In Javanese culture, water is inseparable from symbols of life, purity, and continuity.	Nature as a deep spiritual symbol.
Tirtonadi	Describes the beauty of Tirtonadi Park in Solo, located by the riverbank.	Serves as a symbol of balance in human life. Tirtonadi is positioned as a reminder of the importance of harmonizing worldly needs with spiritual well-being.	Orderly spatial layout reflecting inner order.
Taman Jurug	Depicts the romantic atmosphere of Jurug Park, a popular leisure site for youth expression.	The lyrics convey moral advice to uphold Javanese ethics. In Javanese tradition, messages (pitutur) are often communicated indirectly through symbols.	Ethical messages delivered subtly.
Kota Solo	Celebrates joy and cherished memories in the city of Solo.	Solo is symbolized as the cultural center of Javanese civilization. Known as “the spirit of Java,” the city embodies rich legacies of history, art, and culture..	Legitimacy and spirituality via art.

Source: Various references, compiled by the researcher

The thick description approach allows the interpretation of lyrics within their cultural context rather than through mere literal translation. The lyrics of the keroncong songs discussed above reflect how Javanese cultural philosophy is manifested in the everyday life

of communities in the city of Solo. Keroncong music thus embodies national identity and represents one of Indonesia's cultural treasures.

Keroncong Lyrics as High-Context Communication

The symbolic expressions found in keroncong lyrics can also be interpreted through the perspective of High-Context Communication (HCC) theory introduced by Edward T. Hall. In high-context cultures, messages are rarely conveyed directly through explicit statements. Instead, meanings are embedded in shared cultural contexts, metaphors, and implicit references. The lyric data presented in the Results section illustrate this communication pattern.

For instance, the lyric "Do suko-suko nanging ojo ngiket janji" in the song Taman Jurug literally describes young people enjoying their time without making promises. However, within the cultural context of Javanese society, the lyric conveys a deeper moral message about maintaining ethical restraint in social relationships.

Such indirect expression reflects the Javanese communication style, which prioritizes harmony and avoids direct confrontation. Through metaphorical language and poetic expression, keroncong lyrics communicate social advice without sounding instructive.

From the perspective of HCC theory, these lyrical expressions demonstrate how communication in Javanese culture relies heavily on contextual understanding rather than explicit verbal explanation.

Keroncong as Cultural Soft Power

The symbolic and contextual communication patterns found in keroncong lyrics also contribute to their potential role in cultural diplomacy. Songs such as Bengawan Solo and Kota Solo portray landscapes, historical narratives, and cultural identities associated with Indonesia. These lyrical representations allow international audiences to encounter Indonesian culture through musical performance.

According to the concept of soft power proposed by Joseph Nye, cultural attraction can become an influential diplomatic resource. In this context, keroncong music functions as a medium that introduces Indonesian cultural values to global audiences through aesthetic experience.

The presence of keroncong communities abroad, such as Keroncong Rumpit in the United States and Keroncong Suralaya in London, further demonstrates how keroncong music can operate as a cultural bridge between societies. Through workshops, performances, and educational activities, these communities help disseminate Indonesian cultural narratives embedded in keroncong songs.

Communication Barriers and Cultural Diplomacy

The cultural analysis of these songs reveals symbols forming Javanese identity. While this beauty serves as soft power, diplomacy through music is not without challenges. Based on reviewer feedback, this section specifically discusses the intercultural communication barriers encountered in this practice.

1. Language and Semantic Barriers

Language differences are a prominent barrier in intercultural communication (Ramadhan, 2025). Although “Bengawan Solo” has been translated into 13 languages, original philosophical nuances are often lost. Semantic barriers refer to words having different meanings for foreign audiences. For instance, the term “nggandul” in keroncong vocal technique contains an emotional meaning that is difficult to explain technically without Javanese cultural context (Zilmi, 2021). Furthermore, the use of local dialects or technical jargon during workshops can trigger confusion for international participants (Ramadhan, 2025).

2. Non-Verbal Misunderstandings and Musical Sensibilities

In HCC cultures like Java, hand gestures, eye contact, and voice intonation carry rich meaning (Anwar, 2018). Misunderstandings can occur when facial expressions or tones considered normal in one culture are perceived as impolite in another (Damayanti, 2024). In music, differences in sensibilities—such as appreciating a slow tempo or complex vocal ornamentation—can be a barrier for listeners from Low-Context cultures who may prefer rhythmic directness (Ramadhan, 2023).

3. Prejudice, Stereotypes, and Ethnocentrism

Prejudice and stereotypes significantly hinder objective cultural views (Ramadhan, 2025). Impressions that keroncong is “music for the elderly” or “outdated” often hinder interest among younger generations abroad.⁶ Ethnocentrism, the tendency to judge other cultures by one’s own standards, also creates psychological boundaries (Ramadhan, 2025). Researchers found that some workshop participants abroad initially held stereotypes about Indonesian traditional music, but direct interaction and explanation of lyric meanings

were able to break those barriers.

4. Structural and Logistical Challenges

Cultural diplomacy also faces practical constraints such as limited financial and logistical resources and bureaucratic hurdles (Wahidin, 2025). Institutions running cultural diplomacy sometimes struggle to ensure the actors involved do not feel “used” by specific state political interests (Winandy, 2022). On the other hand, digitalization poses resistance among some traditional musicians toward electric instruments, potentially disrupting group stability on international stages (Ramadhani & Rachman, 2011).

From a communication studies perspective, such barriers appear prominent, however, when integrated with the concept of cultural diplomacy, keroncong music manifests a distinct form of soft power.

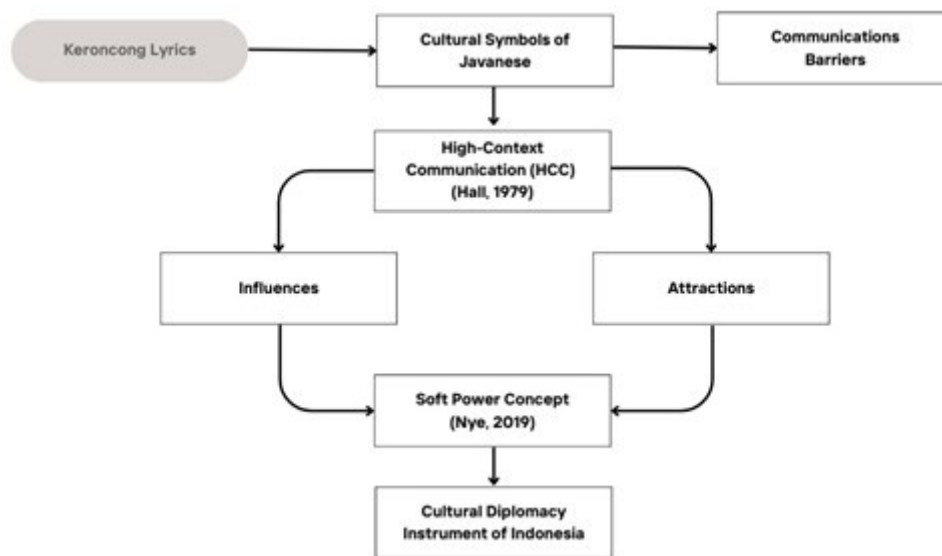


Image 1. The Transformation of Cultural Symbols in Keroncong Lyrics

The cultural analysis of the songs Bengawan Solo, Tirtonadi, Taman Jurug, and Kota Solo reveals cultural symbols that form part of the identity of Javanese society. The beauty of the music and lyrics of these songs functions as a form of soft power in Indonesia’s cultural diplomacy. Referring to (Nye, 2019), the concept of soft power in diplomacy relies on cultural attraction and persuasion.

The song *Bengawan Solo* by the keroncong maestro Gesang has achieved significant popularity abroad. It has been translated into 13 languages, including English, Russian, Mandarin, and Japanese. Remarkably, in 1949 *Bengawan Solo* was featured as the soundtrack of Akira Kurosawa's film *Stray Dog* (Switzy Sabandar, 2023).

In the 1960s, the works of the prominent Malaysian artist P. Ramlee were influenced by keroncong music, which he blended with Malay cultural elements. Although its popularity has since declined, several keroncong groups continue to exist in areas such as Johor Bahru and Kuala Lumpur. These groups remain active in rehearsing and performing songs in the keroncong style. They even invite instructors from Solo to teach them *langgam* and keroncong *asli* repertoires, while also frequently incorporating Malaysian songs into their performances (Mamoor Jantan et al., 2024).

The keroncong music community in Malaysia also actively participates in festivals held in Solo. At the Solo Keroncong Festival (SKF) 2025, for instance, Malaysian singer Rosita Rohaizad performed together with the Orkes Keroncong Maktab from Sabah, Malaysia. (Aryadi, 2025). Rozita Rohaizad was introduced to keroncong music from an early age through her uncle, the legendary Malaysian artist P. Ramlee (Rozita Rohaizad, 2024).

The existence of the Orkes Keroncong Suralaya in London can be regarded as a successful example of Indonesia's cultural diplomacy. The name Suralaya is an acronym for Surakarta–London–Yogyakarta, derived from the cities where its members had studied Indonesian arts. In 2002, Andy McGraw, the founder of the ensemble "Rumput," traveled to Solo specifically to study keroncong music. He later employed keroncong songs to introduce Indonesia to his students at Richmond University, where he teaches. Keroncong songs with themes of struggle were used as a medium to explain the history of colonialism in Southeast Asia and Indonesia. According to McGraw, the lyrics of "Caping Gunung" and "Pejuang Sejati" are profoundly heroic, resembling a historical text in musical form. For him, keroncong lyrics that highlight the beauty and history of Indonesia provide an engaging entry point for learning about the country (McGraw, 2024).



Image 2. Participants of the Keroncong Workshop in London
Source: (Personal archive, Author's collection)



Image 3. Keroncong Workshop at Richmond University
Source: (Personal archive, Author's collection)

Keroncong communities abroad demonstrate an interest that goes beyond the musicality of the genre. They are emotionally engaged with Javanese culture by learning the meanings embedded in keroncong lyrics. Keroncong thus serves as a medium through which they cultivate an appreciation of Indonesian culture. In doing so, these communities become active agents of cultural diplomacy, promoting keroncong music through their activities.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the literal and cultural interpretation of keroncong lyrics, particularly those rooted in the city of Solo, serves as a profound reflection of Javanese life philosophy and Indonesia's national identity. Beyond their aesthetic value, canonical songs such as Bengawan Solo establish a powerful emotional resonance with international audiences, subtly fostering a sense of affection toward Indonesia through cultural engagement. While previous scholarship has predominantly focused on musical hybridity, colonial history, or ethnomusicological classification, this research departs from those traditional frameworks by conceptualizing keroncong as a symbolic communicative system with significant diplomatic potential.

The novelty of this research lies in its multi-dimensional approach, which integrates Thick Description and High-Context Communication (HCC) into a unified analytical framework that operationalizes interpretive theory into transparent coding indicators. By positioning keroncong lyrics as structured cultural narratives rather than passive heritage artifacts, this study advances a conceptual model that explicitly links ethnomusicological analysis to soft power theory. Consequently, by bridging the gap between musicology and international relations, this research expands the analytical horizon of keroncong studies toward the broader discourse of global cultural diplomacy.

From a diplomatic perspective, the poetic depictions of Javanese philosophy and Solo's landmarks function as strategic cultural signposts that enhance the national allure. However, optimizing keroncong as a diplomatic instrument necessitates a sophisticated communication strategy that addresses intercultural barriers, particularly by providing sufficient context for Low-Context audiences to ensure the profound meanings of the lyrics are accurately received. Ultimately, the success of such diplomacy depends on sustained engagement with global art communities and continuous innovation in the digital era. This research confirms that Indonesia's cultural richness is a strategic asset which, if managed through a precise communicative approach, serves as a vital bridge for sustainable international cooperation.

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