

## Construction of Masculinity and Regional Identity in Song Lyrics "Nyong Timur": Marcel Danesi Semiotics Study

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### ABSTRACT

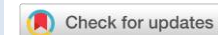
*The purpose of this study is to examine how the constructions of masculinity and regional identity of Eastern Indonesian men are represented in the lyrics of the song "Nyong Timur" by Gihon Marel and Jacson Zeran. This research employs a qualitative approach with Marcel Danesi's cultural semiotics to identify and interpret cultural signs embedded in the lyrics. Data were collected from the full text of the song and analyzed through stages of sign identification, denotative and connotative interpretation, and thematic categorization. The findings reveal that masculinity is represented through physical traits such as dark skin and curly hair, as well as values of bravery, loyalty, and confidence. Regional identity is affirmed through references to geographical areas (Papua, Maluku, East Nusa Tenggara, and Sulawesi), local vocabulary, and cultural symbols such as traditional drinks and communication styles. The study concludes that "Nyong Timur" functions as a cultural artifact that affirms masculinity and regional pride, while simultaneously challenging negative stereotypes of Eastern Indonesian men.*

**Keywords:** Masculinity, Regional Identity, Cultural Semiotics, Eastern Indonesia, Song Lyrics

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## 1. Introduction

Music is a powerful medium of cultural expression that not only conveys aesthetic values but also plays a key role in shaping social identities such as masculinity and regional identity. In Indonesia, songs often serve as cultural texts that articulate values, affirm regional pride, and represent gender constructions (Danesi, 2018). Through lyrics, melodies, and performance styles, music reflects the collective worldview of a community and transmits cultural norms across generations. It also functions as a tool of resistance and negotiation, allowing marginalized voices to challenge dominant ideologies (Mahdori et al., 2025; Salsabila et al., 2025; Sosrohadi & Lutfhu, 2022). Furthermore, the popularity of regional songs highlights how local traditions are continuously reinterpreted to remain relevant in contemporary Indonesian society.

The song “*Nyong Timur*” by Gihon Marel and Jacson Zeran vividly portrays masculinity and regional identity among men from Eastern Indonesia, particularly Maluku, East Nusa Tenggara, Sulawesi, and Papua. Its lyrics highlight physical traits such as *kulit hitam manis* (sweet dark skin) and *rambut keriting* (curly hair), as well as personal qualities including bravery, loyalty, and charm. These depictions indicate that masculinity in this context is constructed not only through physical appearance but also through moral-emotional values.

Although masculinity and identity have been explored in cultural texts, specific studies addressing the representation of Eastern Indonesian men remain scarce. This gap underscores the need to analyse how local songs construct both masculinity and regional identity through symbolic language and cultural codes. Examining these representations can provide deeper insights into how cultural narratives shape perceptions of manhood in marginalized regions. It also highlights the importance of considering regional diversity in discussions of Indonesian identity. Ultimately, such studies contribute to a more inclusive understanding of how gender and culture intersect in the nation’s musical traditions.

Accordingly, this study applies Marcel Danesi’s cultural semiotics and Connell’s concept of masculinity to examine how the lyrics of “*Nyong Timur*” function as a cultural artifact. The objectives are to identify the signs embedded in the song, interpret their connotative meanings, and explain how they affirm both masculinity and regional identity. This research is significant because it contributes to cultural semiotics and gender studies by providing insights into how marginalized groups can reconstruct positive identities that challenge dominant stereotypes within Indonesia’s multicultural society. By situating the analysis within both semiotic and gendered frameworks, this study bridges the gap between textual interpretation and social context. It also sheds light on how music serves as a narrative space where cultural values and power relations are negotiated. Ultimately, the findings are expected to enrich broader academic conversations on identity politics in Indonesian popular culture.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Previous Studies

Studies on the representation of masculinity in popular culture have been conducted across various media. Utomo et al. (2022) analyzed Dior Homme Sport advertisements using Roland Barthes' semiotics, revealing masculinity constructed through strength, sexuality, and dominance. Deviana (2021) similarly examined masculinity in L-Men Gain Mass television advertisements, emphasizing the association between muscular physique and ideals of health. Eviyani and Mustofa (2021) investigated E-Juss Gingseng commercials and demonstrated how the male body is symbolized as a marker of strength, while Fikriyati (2012) explored hegemonic masculinity in cigarette, supplement, and fitness advertisements, showing recurring values of power and control. These studies, while insightful, largely focus on commercial advertising and tend to adopt structural semiotics frameworks, resulting in universal depictions of hegemonic masculinity that are less sensitive to local contexts.

Beyond advertisements, several researchers have explored alternative or localized masculinities. Muda (2019), for instance, examined the Japanese Visual Kei subculture, illustrating that masculinity can also be feminine, expressive, and theatrical. Mashudi and Thoyib (2019) highlighted Javanese folklore, where masculinity is constructed through chivalry and wisdom, while Budiastuti (2017) showed that urban adolescents negotiate ideals of masculinity by blending traditional gender norms with contemporary popular culture. These studies strengthen the notion that masculinity is plural and context-dependent, shaped by both cultural traditions and global popular influences.

Meanwhile, the representation of regional identity in Indonesian music has also been addressed. Laksono (2021) emphasized the role of contemporary music in preserving local identity amidst globalization, while Irawan (2022) examined regional songs in the 1950s–1960s as instruments of national identity formation. Afriandi (2019) studied the link between community identity and regional commodities, and Pebriani et al. (2024) discussed cultural identity as a dynamic construct within social transformation. While these studies highlight the significance of music in shaping cultural identity, they rarely apply cultural semiotics to explore how regional identity is symbolically constructed through song lyrics.

In summary, previous research has provided valuable insights into masculinity and regional identity but has tended to emphasize commercial advertising, folklore, or broad cultural dynamics. Few studies have specifically investigated how local songs from Eastern Indonesia employ cultural codes to construct masculinity and regional identity. This study addresses that gap by applying Marcel Danesi's cultural semiotics to analyze the song "Nyong Timur", thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of how popular music functions as a cultural artifact in affirming identity and challenging stereotypes.

## 2.1.1 Theoretical Basis

### a. Conceptual Framework

This study adopts Marcel Danesi's cultural semiotics as its main theoretical framework. Danesi (2018) argues that signs in popular culture not only convey denotative meanings but also embody cultural values and ideologies through connotation. Popular texts such as songs function as cultural artifacts that mythologize everyday experiences (Danesi, 2008), transforming ordinary traits into symbols of identity. Within this framework, the lyrics of "*Nyong Timur*" are understood as sign systems that construct narratives of masculinity and regional identity through repetition, symbolism, and metaphor.

To complement this, R.W. Connell's (1995) concept of masculinity is employed. Connell emphasizes that masculinity is socially constructed, plural, and context-specific. Hegemonic masculinity typically dominates, yet it is constantly negotiated and challenged by alternative forms. This dual framework enables the study to decode the semiotic signs in the lyrics and analyze how they both reproduce and resist hegemonic notions of masculinity while affirming regional identity.

### b. Empirical Evidence

Previous research demonstrates the relevance of both semiotic and masculinity frameworks to cultural analysis.

#### 1) Semiotics in Popular Culture

Danesi's semiotics has been applied in various media studies to show how cultural codes embed ideology. For instance, Utomo et al. (2022) analyzed masculinity in fashion advertisements using semiotic frameworks, while Deviana (2021) examined body imagery in *L-Men Gain Mass* commercials. These studies illustrate how symbolic representations naturalize ideals of male identity, though they often focus on commercial advertising.

#### 2) Masculinity as a Social Construction

Connell's concept has been used in folklore and music studies to reveal localized constructions of masculinity. Mashudi and Thoyib (2019) found that Javanese folklore emphasizes chivalry and wisdom, while Nugraha (2021) showed that Indonesian popular songs in the 1970s–1980s depicted non-violent, tender masculinities. These findings support the view that masculinity is fluid and culturally specific, affirming the need to analyse regional identities such as those represented in Eastern Indonesian songs.

In summary, the theoretical basis of this study rests on integrating Danesi's cultural semiotics and Connell's masculinity framework. Danesi provides the tools to decode signs and metaphors in song lyrics, while Connell contextualizes these signs within broader gender dynamics. This dual approach positions the present study to

contribute uniquely to cultural semiotics and gender studies by analyzing how “*Nyong Timur*” constructs and affirms both masculinity and regional identity in the context of Eastern Indonesia.

### 3. Method

This study applied a qualitative research design using cultural semiotics to interpret symbolic meanings in song lyrics. The primary data were the full lyrics of “*Nyong Timur*” by Gihon Marel and Jacson Zeran, obtained from official platforms to ensure accuracy. Because the focus is on textual analysis, no human participants were involved, and the researcher served as the main instrument supported by Marcel Danesi’s semiotics and R.W. Connell’s masculinity framework.

The analysis began with repeated readings of the lyrics to identify cultural signs, which were examined through denotative and connotative interpretation. Danesi’s semiotics was used to decode the cultural and ideological meanings of the signs, while Connell’s theory provided a lens to understand how the lyrics reflect and challenge hegemonic masculinity. This method was chosen because it allows both cultural and gendered perspectives to be integrated into the analysis. The data were finally organized into thematic categories of masculinity traits and regional identity markers. Through this process, the study revealed how the song “*Nyong Timur*” constructs and affirms Eastern Indonesian masculinity and regional pride.

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1 Findings

The cultural semiotic analysis of the song “*Nyong Timur*” identified nine key signs that represent the constructions of masculinity and regional identity. Each lyric line, when examined through Danesi’s model of semiotics, reveals both denotative and connotative meanings that elevate ordinary features into cultural symbols. These findings highlight how physical traits, emotional qualities, and cultural markers are integrated to construct a positive representation of Eastern Indonesian men.

**Tabel 1. Semiotics Signs and Cultural Meaning in “*Nyong Timur*”**

No	Lyric (English translation)	Quote	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning (Cultural)	Representation
1	“Dari Maluku, Sulawesi, Papua”	NTT, deng (From NTT, and	Names of regions in Eastern Indonesia	Symbol of unity and pride across regional groups	Affirmation of regional solidarity

Papua)				
2	“Jang tanya lai torang gagah samua” (Don’t ask again, we are all strong/handsome)	Men described as handsome/strong	Collective affirmation of regional masculinity	Local hegemonic of masculinity
3	“Senyum manis, pipi congka mama e” (Sweet smile, dimpled cheeks)	Smiling expression	Warmth, friendliness, charm	Symbol of charismatic masculinity
4	“Su kariting, mata manyala” (Curly hair, fiery eyes)	Physical features (hair and eyes)	Distinctiveness, bravery, confidence	Pride in natural physical identity
5	“Nyong Timur pung senyum macam hipnotis” (Eastern man’s smile seems hypnotic)	Captivating smile	Emotional charm and charisma as main attraction	Repositioning masculinity to emotional values
6	“Satu kali kedip mata bisa overdosis” (A single wink can cause overdose)	Exaggerated metaphor	Extreme appeal, irresistible attraction	Mythologizing male charm
7	“Kulit hitam manis” (Sweet dark skin)	Dark skin complexion	Exoticism, pride in racial features	Affirmation of racial/physical identity
8	“Mo cap sopi ka moke, Nyong Timur tetap PD” (Whether drinking sopi or moke, still confident)	Traditional drinks (sopi, moke)	Cultural authenticity, communal values, brotherhood	Pride in local traditions
9	“Bet senyum sekali lapis dengan lesung pipi, biking dorang jatuh hati” (One smile with dimples makes people fall in love)	Smiling expression with dimples	Emotional power, charm as symbolic capital	Symbol of attractiveness and social appeal

The data obtained show that the lyrics of “*Nyong Timur*” are rich with semiotic signs that construct a distinctive image of Eastern Indonesian masculinity. Interpreted

through Marcel Danesi's cultural semiotics, the lyrics move beyond literal denotation to connotative and ideological levels. At the denotative level, the lyrics describe ordinary features such as dark skin, curly hair, smiles, and daily practices. At the connotative level, these features become cultural codes that instill values of pride, uniqueness, and solidarity. For instance, the phrase "*kulit hitam manis*" (sweet dark skin) redefines a stigmatized racial trait into a symbol of attractiveness and authenticity, while "*senyum manis pipi congka*" (sweet smile with dimples) conveys charm and emotional appeal that elevate everyday expressions into markers of charisma.

According to Danesi (2007), popular texts operate as cultural artifacts that reflect and shape social values. The song "*Nyong Timur*" functions in this way, transforming external stereotypes of Eastern men as rough or marginal into a positive collective identity. Metaphors such as "*mata manyala*" (fiery eyes) and "*senyum macam hipnotis*" (a smile like hypnosis) symbolize charisma and male attractiveness, mythologizing ordinary traits as sources of social power. In line with Danesi's (2008) idea of "mythologizing the ordinary," the lyrics elevate common physical and emotional features into extraordinary cultural symbols.

Repetition also plays a key role in naturalizing these ideals. The recurring line "*gagah samua*" (all strong) reinforces the collective image of Eastern Indonesian men as handsome and powerful, embedding this notion into the cultural imagination. Thus, through signs, metaphors, and repetition, the song constructs a counter-narrative that reclaims identity from stigma and redefines it into pride. These findings demonstrate how "*Nyong Timur*" serves as a cultural artifact that affirms masculinity, loyalty, charisma, and regional solidarity, fully in line with Danesi's conception of semiotics in popular culture.

## 4.2 Discussion

The findings indicate that the song "*Nyong Timur*" constructs masculinity in ways that correspond to Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity while simultaneously introducing local variations. Expressions such as "*Jang tanya lai torang gagah samua*" and "*Trada lawang, Nyong Timur ni beda nah*" emphasize collective strength and competitiveness, which align with Connell's (1995) view of hegemonic masculinity as grounded in dominance and superiority. Likewise, the focus on male attractiveness and heterosexual appeal corresponds with Connell's notion of compulsory heterosexuality as a core dimension of hegemonic masculinity.

However, the lyrics also highlight traits that nuance and challenge hegemonic ideals. References to "*senyum manis*", "*pipi congka*", and "*setia*" emphasize charm, emotionality, and loyalty qualities that contrast with the emotional restraint and assertive authority typically associated with hegemonic masculinity. Instead of depicting aggression, the song portrays masculinity through charisma, resilience, and cultural pride. This suggests that hegemonic ideals in Eastern Indonesia are reconstructed to include emotional appeal and authenticity.

These findings support Connell's claim that masculinity is context-dependent and shaped by local cultural values. In the case of "*Nyong Timur*", the construction of masculinity not only reaffirms strength and attractiveness but also redefines stigmatized features such as dark skin and curly hair as symbols of pride. Thus, the song articulates a regionally specific hegemonic masculinity that resists negative stereotypes and contributes to a broader recognition of Indonesia's cultural diversity.

## 5. Conclusion

This study analyzed the construction of masculinity and regional identity in the song "*Nyong Timur*" through Marcel Danesi's cultural semiotics and R.W. Connell's concept of masculinity. The findings reveal that the lyrics portray Eastern Indonesian men as strong, loyal, confident, and charismatic, while also celebrating physical distinctiveness such as dark skin and curly hair. Regional identity is reinforced through references to geography and local cultural symbols, transforming everyday traits into cultural codes of pride. These results contribute to cultural semiotics and gender studies by showing how popular music functions as a cultural artifact that affirms marginalized identities and challenges dominant narratives.

Despite these contributions, the study is limited to the analysis of a single song and textual data. Future research could broaden the scope by examining other songs, music videos, or comparative regional studies to capture a more comprehensive picture of masculinity and identity in Indonesia. Such expansions would enrich our understanding of how cultural expressions in popular music continue to shape and redefine social identities across diverse contexts.

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