

Types and Symbolic Meanings of Food in the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition in Gunungkidul

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Abstract: This study examines the types and symbolic meanings of food used in the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition in Gunungkidul. The research applies Roland Barthes' semiotic approach using a qualitative descriptive method. The data of this study consist of *ubarampe* (food offerings) in the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition, collected from informants, events, and documents through purposive sampling. Data collection techniques include observation, interviews, and document analysis. The findings show that the symbolic meanings of food in the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition operate at three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. At the first order of signification, each food item serves as a signifier with a literal, denotative meaning as everyday food consumed by the community. However, these denotative meanings are extended into a second order of signification, producing connotative meanings that reflect moral values, spiritual beliefs, and social ideals held by the community. The *ubarampe* further operates at the level of myth. The symbolic interpretations of the food offerings allow cultural values to be presented as part of the natural order of life. As a result, ideals such as social harmony, spiritual devotion, and moral discipline are reinforced and maintained through ritual practice.

Keywords: Barthes; *cupu panjala* tradition; food offerings; symbolic meaning;

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Introduction

Java is a region renowned for its rich cultural heritage, where many traditions continue to be preserved as part of everyday life. For Javanese communities, tradition is understood as a set of customs and practices passed down from generation to generation and maintained by those who believe that inherited ways of life represent the most appropriate social order (Nuryah, 2016). Each region possesses distinct traditions that function as cultural markers and reflect the values, beliefs, and identities of its people (Koentjaraningrat, 2009). One example of a well-preserved Javanese tradition in Gunungkidul Regency is the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition.

Historically, the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition is closely connected to the cultural and spiritual authority of the Yogyakarta Palace, originating in Kembang Lampir Hamlet, Panggang District, Gunungkidul Regency. According to oral tradition, a couple named Kyai Wanawangsa and Nyai Wanawangsa lived in this area and had a son named Seyek. Since he was ten years old, Seyek was introduced to spiritual and inner knowledge under his father's guidance. His subsequent disappearance during a spiritual journey along the southern coast marked the beginning of the sacred status attributed to the *cupu* (urns) that later became central to the tradition.

The *Cupu Panjala* Tradition emerges from this narrative, particularly the belief that Seyek returned carrying three *cupu* believed to possess spiritual power. These *cupu* were later revered as sacred heirlooms and closely associated with supernatural protection, especially through the figure of Nyi Roro Kidul. This belief forms the foundation of an annual ritual in which the *cupu*, wrapped in layers of white shroud, are ceremonially opened by Panjala's descendants. The images that appear on the shroud are interpreted by the caretaker as symbolic signs believed to predict future events and determine auspicious times, particularly for agricultural activities.

The ritual, commonly known as the *Bukaan Cupu Kyai Panjala* Tradition (*Cupu Kyai Panjala* Opening Tradition), is conducted once a year in Mendak Hamlet, Girisekar Village, Panggang District, Gunungkidul Regency. It takes place during the Fourth Wage Monday and Kliwon Tuesday night, typically falling in October according to the Javanese lunar calendar. The continuity of the tradition is supported by the involvement of various participants, including caretakers, Panjala's descendants, local community members, and pilgrims, all of whom play a role in maintaining its ritual and social significance.

One of the essential elements of the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition is the presence of ritual offerings, known as *ubarampe*. These offerings consist of various traditional foods, such as *ambengan* (rice and side dishes), yellow and white *peyek kacang* (peanut rice crackers), *adrem* (a traditional cake made from flour and palm sugar), *kerupuk* (rice crackers), *ingkung* (whole chicken), *nasi uduk* or *nasi gurih* (savory rice), and *rawisan* or *terancam* (mixed vegetables with grated coconut). Within the ritual context, these foods are not merely complements to the ceremony

but function as symbolic media that convey communal beliefs, moral values, and cosmological views embedded in Javanese culture.

Despite the central role of *ubarampe* in the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition, scholarly studies that specifically examine the symbolic meanings of ritual food using a semiotic perspective remain limited. Several previous studies have explored the symbolic meanings of food offerings within Indonesian ritual traditions. Suwandi, for instance, examined food offerings in the Baritan ceremony in Asemdayong, Pemalang Regency, and demonstrated that ritual foods function as symbols of gratitude, hopes for prosperity, and harmonious relationships between humans, nature, and the divine (Suwandi et al., 2025). Their study highlights how traditional food operates as a cultural medium for expressing communal values and collective beliefs. Similarly, Hirzi investigated the symbolic meanings of *sego langgi* in Lamongan, revealing that ritual meals embody religious devotion, social solidarity, and cultural identity within Javanese Muslim communities (Hirzi et al., 2025). Another relevant study by Hafizhah and Sutikno focused on *ingkung* in the *punggahan* tradition of a Javanese community, employing a semiotic perspective to uncover how ritual food symbolizes spiritual purification, gratitude, and social cohesion (Hafizhah & Sutikno, 2024).

Although these studies provide valuable insights into the symbolic functions of ritual food, most of them tend to examine food symbolism in isolation or focus on a single ritual element without systematically analysing the layered structure of meaning proposed by Roland Barthes, particularly the interrelation between denotation, connotation, and myth. Moreover, previous research generally concentrates on individual food items or specific ceremonies, leaving limited discussion on how a complete set of ritual foods operates collectively as a system of signs within a single tradition. In addition, studies that explicitly apply Barthes' semiotic framework to food offerings in local Javanese traditions remain relatively scarce.

To address this gap, the present study offers a comprehensive semiotic analysis of food *ubarampe* in the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition in Gunungkidul by applying Roland Barthes' theory of two-stage signification. This research does not merely identify the symbolic meanings of individual food items but also interprets how denotation, connotation, and myth interact to construct cultural values such as harmony, gratitude, purity, and diversity within the ritual context. By examining the full range of food offerings as an integrated system of signs, this study contributes a more holistic understanding of the semiotic role of ritual food in Javanese tradition, thereby extending and complementing previous studies in the field of cultural semiotics and ritual discourse.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method with Roland Barthes' semiotic framework (Barthes, 1972, 1977). as the main analytical approach. Within this framework, food offerings (*ubarampe*) in the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition are treated as cultural signs that operate through a two-stage process of signification, encompassing denotation, connotation, and myth. The object of this research consists of ritual food offerings presented during the tradition,

including *ambengan*, yellow and white *peyek kacang*, *adrem*, *kerupuk*, *ingkung*, *sega wuduk/sega gurih* (savory rice), and *rawisan/terancam*. These food items are analysed to reveal their literal meanings, culturally constructed associations, and the broader mythological values embedded within the ritual context.

Data were collected through purposive sampling, which allows researchers to select information-rich participants who possess relevant knowledge of the research topic (Creswell, 2014). The data collection process involved direct observation of the ritual practices, in-depth interviews with caretakers, descendants of Panjala, and community members, as well as document analysis of written and visual sources related to the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition. To ensure data validity, source triangulation and theoretical triangulation were applied.

The data were analysed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994). During the analysis stage, each type of food offering was examined using Roland Barthes' concept of signification. The denotative level focuses on the physical form and ingredients of the food, the connotative level examines the culturally constructed meanings attached to it, and the mythic level reveals broader communal beliefs and values embedded within the ritual practice (Barthes, 1972).

Results and Discussions

Symbolic meaning analysis was conducted on the *Cupu Panjala* tradition paraphernalia. The symbolic meaning in this research was analysed using semiotic theory from Roland Barthes.

Ambengan

The first food item in the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition is *ambengan*. *Ambengan* denotes white rice that is round, solid, and typically placed in a container known as a *tampah* (winnowing tray). This aligns with the findings of Aprilisa and Setyawan in their study, "*Makna Filosofis Ambengan Tradisi di Hari Raya Idul Fitri dan Idul Adha bagi Masyarakat Tulungagung*" ("The Philosophical Meaning of the *Ambengan* Tradition during Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha among the People of Tulungagung") which describes *ambengan* as white rice placed in a winnowing tray (Aprilisa & Setyawan, 2021). However, in the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition, a plastic bucket is used as the container for the *ambengan*. Furthermore, *ambengan* carries a connotative meaning symbolizing harmony and unity among people. The mythical significance of *ambengan* in the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition is that it fosters greater unity, harmony, and peace within the community. *Ambengan* is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Ambengan



Yellow Peyek and White Peyek

The second food in the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition is yellow *peyek* and white *peyek*. The denotative meaning of *peyek* is a food made from rice flour mixed with water and seasoned. The difference between yellow *peyek* and white *peyek* lies in their additional ingredients; yellow *peyek* includes turmeric, giving it its distinct color. In the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition, the connotative meaning of yellow and white *peyek* symbolizes inter-religious harmony. According to the research conducted by Putro, the connotative meaning of *peyek* symbolizes inter-religious harmony. Furthermore, the yellow and white *peyek* in the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition carries a mythical significance, as the community believes this offerings can unite human life (Putro, 2018). This aligns with the findings of Nabilah in her research, “*Makna Simbolik Tradisi Ruwahan di Pura Mangkunegaran Surakarta*” (The Symbolic Meaning of the *Ruwahan* Tradition at Mangkunegaran Temple in Surakarta) which indicates that *peyek* can foster greater harmony and unity within the community (Nabilah, 2022). Yellow *peyek* and white *peyek* are shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2

Yellow Peyek and White Peyek



Adrem

The third food in the *Cupu Panjala* tradition is *adrem*. Denotatively, *adrem* is a food that is slightly round, split in the middle, made from flour and coconut sugar, mixed with water, and

then fried. This aligns with the findings of Putro in his research that indicates *adrem* is similar to *cucur*, a snack made from rice flour, with a rather long shape and split in the middle (Putro, 2018). Furthermore, *adrem* has a connotative meaning that symbolizes the strengthening of the relationship between humans and God. Additionally, the mythical significance of *adrem* ubarampe in the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition lies in the community's belief that this offering can enhance their relationship with God. *Adrem* is shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3

Adrem



Kerupuk

The fourth food in the *Cupu Panjala* tradition is *kerupuk* (crackers). Denotatively, *kerupuk* are fried food made from wheat flour dough, shrimp, onions, and salt, characterized by their light, dry, and thin texture. This description aligns with the findings of Sari and Setyawan in their research, "Etnobotani Tumbuhan Ritual yang Digunakan pada Upacara Jamasan di Keraton Yogyakarta" (Ethnobotany of Ritual Plants Used in the *Jamasan* Ceremony at the Yogyakarta Palace), which explores the meaning of *kerupuk* symbolizing perseverance and enthusiasm in life (Surya Sari et al., 2019). The research suggests that *kerupuk* symbolizes the importance of not easily giving up and despairing in life. Furthermore, the connotative meaning of *kerupuk* in the *Cupu Panjala* tradition symbolizes the community's belief this food signifies God's continuous alleviation of human life's problems, thereby fostering enthusiasm and perseverance among individuals. This belief aligns with the research conducted by Lismawanty in her research, "Makna Simbolis Upacara Ritual Nadran Empang di Desa Karangsong Kabupaten Indramayu (Kajian Simbol dan Makna)" (The Symbolic Meaning of the *Nadran Empang* Ritual Ceremony in Karangsong Village, Indramayu Regency (A Study of Symbols and Meanings). The results of her research indicate that *kerupuk* symbolizes a means to alleviate burdens and problems in human life (Lismawanty et al., 2021). *Kerupuk* is shown on Figure 4 below.

Figure 4

Kerupuk



Ingkung

The fifth food in the *Cupu Panjala* tradition is *ingkung*. Denotatively, it refers to a whole chicken, usually a rooster, that is seasoned and cooked whole. This chicken is typically provided by pilgrims as an expression of gratitude. Thus, the connotative meaning of *ingkung* is an expression of gratitude.

Furthermore, *ingkung* in the *Cupu Panjala* tradition carries a mythical meaning that symbolizes the purity of the human body and soul. It is believed that this ubarampe can help guide individuals towards a better life. These interpretations align with the findings of Al Maida and Suryaman in their research, indicating that the denotative meaning of *ingkung* is a whole chicken, usually a rooster, cooked whole (Maida & Suryaman, 2023). The connotative meaning of *ingkung* as the ubarampe is an expression of gratitude. Furthermore, the mythical meaning suggests that human life should be pure, both inside and out, similar to *ingkung*, which is cleaned thoroughly, leading to a happy and fulfilling life. *Ingkung* is shown in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5

Ingkung



Sega Wuduk/Sega Gurih

The sixth food in the *Cupu Panjala* tradition is *sega wuduk/sega gurih*, or savoury rice. Denotatively, it refers to rice seasoned with coconut milk, giving it a savoury taste. This aligns with the findings of Anggraini in her research, "Tradisi Slup-slupan Omah: Prosesi: Makna Simbolik, lan Relevansine karo Pasinaon Basa Jawa ing Sekolah Menengah Pertama" (The Tradition of House Blessing: Procession, Symbolic Meaning, and Its Relevance to Javanese Language Learning in Junior High School). Her research indicates that savoury rice is white rice

cooked with coconut milk, salt, and bay leaves, resulting in its distinctive savoury flavor (Anggraini, 2024). Connotatively, this offering in the *Cupu Panjala* tradition symbolizes holy rice. This is supported by the research of Putri which suggests that savoury rice can symbolize *ulam sari*, or the holy rice (Putri et al., 2022). Moreover, the mythical meaning of nasi wuduk in the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition is rooted in the community's belief that this rice represents the sanctity of the human body and soul. This interpretation is consistent with the findings of Nabilah in her research, which indicates that savory rice symbolizes the purity of the human body and mind (Nabilah, 2022). *Sega Wuduk/Sega Gurih* (Savoury Rice) can be seen in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6

Sega Wuduk/Sega Gurih (Savoury Rice)



Rawisan/Terancam

The seventh food in the *Cupu Panjala* tradition is *rawisan*, also known as *terancam*. *Rawisan/terancam* is a dish made of sprouts, cabbage, and Chinese petai, seasoned with a mixture of mashed chillies and onions, and combined with grated coconut. This definition aligns with the findings of Fizriyani and Mutjaba in their research, "Istilah-istilah Kuliner dalam Ritual Neloni di Kabupaten Malang: Studi Etnolinguistik" (Culinary Terms in the *Neloni* Ritual in Malang Regency: An Ethnolinguistic Study). Their research indicates that *terancam* denotes a vegetable side dish mixed with grated coconut (Fizriyani & Muhtaba, 2022). Connotatively, the ingredients of *rawisan/terancam* symbolize diversity. Furthermore, the mythical meaning of *rawisan/terancam* in the *Cupu Panjala* tradition emphasizes the necessity of diversity in life. While diversity is inevitable, it is crucial to embrace and respond to it appropriately to foster a harmonious and peaceful existence.

Figure 7

Rawisan/Terancam



From the perspective of Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, the *ubarampe* in the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition function not merely as ritual complements but as a structured system of signs that operates on multiple levels of meaning. At the first order of signification, each food item—such as *ambengan*, *peyek*, *adrem*, *kerupuk*, *ingkung*, savoury rice, and *rawisan*—serves as a signifier with a literal, denotative meaning as everyday food consumed by the community. However, within the ritual context of the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition, these denotative meanings are extended into a second order of signification, producing connotative meanings that reflect moral values, spiritual beliefs, and social ideals held by the community.

At the connotative level, the findings demonstrate that the food offerings collectively symbolize key cultural values such as harmony, unity, gratitude, perseverance, purity, diversity, and devotion to God. These meanings are not attached arbitrarily but are culturally constructed through long-standing ritual practices and shared belief systems. For instance, *ambengan* symbolizes social harmony and unity, *peyek* represents inter-religious harmony, while *ingkung* and savoury rice convey ideas of purity and gratitude. Through repeated ritual performance, these connotative meanings become stabilized and widely accepted within the community.

In Barthes' terms, this process culminates in the formation of myth. Myth, as a second-order semiological system, functions by transforming culturally produced meanings into something that appears natural, self-evident, and unquestionable. In the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition, the symbolic meanings of the *ubarampe* are perceived not merely as symbolic interpretations but as inherent truths rooted in ancestral heritage and supernatural authority. As a result, values such as harmony, obedience, spiritual purity, and communal solidarity are naturalized and legitimized through myth, making them appear as part of the natural order of life rather than as socially constructed ideologies.

Furthermore, the mythical dimension of the *ubarampe* reinforces the sacred status of the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition itself. The belief that these offerings possess spiritual power and influence human life—such as strengthening relationships with God, alleviating life's burdens, or fostering social cohesion—illustrates how myth functions ideologically. In Barthes' framework, myth serves to conceal its ideological nature by presenting cultural values as timeless and divinely sanctioned. In this context, the *ubarampe* operate as material symbols that mediate between the sacred and the social, allowing abstract beliefs to be experienced concretely through ritual practices.

The findings also reveal that food, within the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition, plays a crucial role in maintaining cultural continuity. By embedding moral and spiritual values into everyday culinary objects, the tradition ensures that these values are easily understood, remembered, and transmitted across generations. This aligns with Barthes' assertion that myth is an effective semiotic mechanism for sustaining dominant cultural narratives, as it communicates ideology in a form that is familiar, tangible, and emotionally resonant.

Therefore, the *ubarampe* in the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition should be understood not only as ritual offerings but as ideological instruments that shape collective consciousness. Through the semiotic process of denotation, connotation, and myth, food becomes a powerful medium for reinforcing Javanese cosmological beliefs and social values. This discussion confirms that Barthes' semiotic theory provides a useful framework for interpreting how cultural meanings are constructed, naturalized, and perpetuated through ritual symbols within traditional Javanese society.

Conclusion

This study explores the symbolic meanings of food offerings (*ubarampe*) in the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. The findings show that the foods used in this ritual are not merely complementary elements but function as meaningful cultural signs that communicate social, moral, and spiritual values within the community.

At the most basic level, the *ubarampe* consist of everyday foods commonly found in Javanese cuisine, such as *ambengan*, *peyek*, *adrem*, *kerupuk*, *ingkung*, savoury rice, and *terancam/rawisan*. These items carry clear denotative meanings as ordinary food. However, when placed within the ritual setting of the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition, they take on deeper connotative meanings shaped by collective beliefs and long-standing cultural practices. The analysis demonstrates that these foods symbolize values such as harmony, unity, gratitude, perseverance, purity, and respect for diversity. Through repeated ritual performance, these meanings become familiar and widely accepted by the community.

Beyond their connotative meanings, the *ubarampe* operate at the level of myth, as described by Barthes. The symbolic interpretations of the food offerings are not viewed by the community as symbolic constructions, but as natural and unquestionable truths inherited from their ancestors. This process allows cultural values to be presented as part of the natural order of life. As a result, ideals such as social harmony, spiritual devotion, and moral discipline are reinforced and maintained through ritual practice.

The study also shows that food plays an important role in sustaining cultural continuity. Because food is familiar and accessible, it becomes an effective medium for conveying abstract values in a concrete and easily understood form. Through the *ubarampe*, cultural norms and beliefs are transmitted across generations without the need for formal instruction. In this way, ritual food functions not only as a symbolic representation of belief but also as a tool for preserving cultural identity.

In conclusion, the *Cupu Panjala* Tradition demonstrates how everyday objects can carry complex layers of meaning within a ritual context. By applying Barthes' semiotic theory, this study highlights how food operates as a system of signs that connects the sacred, the social, and the cultural. The findings contribute to cultural and semiotic studies by showing how ritual practices transform ordinary food into powerful symbols that shape collective understanding and reinforce shared values. Future research may further explore similar traditions to examine how symbolic meanings evolve in response to social and cultural change.

Author Contribution Statement

Amanda Pisan Pramesti: Conceptualization and Research Design Data Curation and Investigation; Methodology; Project Administration. **Budi Waluyo:** Writing - Original Draft; Writing - Review & Editing. **Winda Dwi Lestari, Kenfitria Diah Wijayanti, Astiana Ajeng Rahadini:** Writing - Review & Editing; Validation. **Favorita Kurwidaria, Tya Resta Fitriana:** Formal Analysis and Visualization; Writing - Review & Editing. **Prima Veronika:** Validation, Visualization; Writing - Review & Editing.

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