

Decoding the Meaning of Tumpeng in Roland Barthes's Semiology Perspective

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Abstract

This research uses Roland Barthes's theoretical framework to investigate the cultural importance of the traditional Indonesian dish, Tumpeng. In order to better comprehend this cultural artifact, this study seeks to unravel the underlying symbolic meanings and dimensions that are constructed throughout the Tumpeng tradition. It also shows how Barthes's concepts of objects, interpretations, and myths might be useful in this endeavor. It draws attention to the connections among cuisine, culture, and semiotics and emphasizes the relevance of Tumpeng as a unique expression of Indonesian cuisine. This study shows that Tumpeng functions as a potent cultural signifier within Indonesian society, representing communal identity, social hierarchy, and spirituality through an investigation of its visual and philosophical aspects. Tumpeng's aesthetic style, color scheme, and physical arrangement all convey ideas about societal norms and beliefs. Practices of Tumpeng consumption also entail several layers of interpretation, whereby personal and collective meanings are created and communicated. Further, by decoding the meaning of Tumpeng, it is hoped to comprehend the interactions between cultural artifacts, interpretation, and myth-making techniques.

Keywords: *Tumpeng, symbolism, semiotic analysis, semiology, roland barthes*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menggunakan kerangka teori Roland Barthes untuk menyelidiki pentingnya budaya hidangan tradisional Indonesia, Tumpeng. Untuk lebih memahami artefak budaya tersebut, penelitian ini berupaya mengungkap makna dan dimensi simbolik yang dibangun sepanjang tradisi Tumpeng. Hal ini juga menunjukkan bagaimana konsep Barthes tentang objek, interpretasi, dan mitos dapat bermanfaat dalam upaya ini. Hal ini menarik perhatian pada hubungan antara masakan, budaya, dan semiotika serta menekankan relevansi Tumpeng sebagai ekspresi unik masakan Indonesia. Kajian ini menunjukkan bahwa Tumpeng berfungsi sebagai penanda budaya yang kuat dalam masyarakat Indonesia, mewakili identitas komunal, hierarki sosial, dan spiritualitas melalui penelusuran aspek visual dan filosofinya. Gaya estetika, skema warna, dan penataan fisik Tumpeng semuanya menyampaikan gagasan tentang norma dan kepercayaan masyarakat. Praktik konsumsi Tumpeng juga terdapat beberapa lapisan penafsiran, dimana makna pribadi dan kolektif diciptakan dan dikomunikasikan. Selanjutnya, dengan menguraikan makna Tumpeng, diharapkan dapat dipahami interaksi antara artefak budaya, interpretasi, dan teknik pembuatan mitos.

Kata Kunci: *Tumpeng, simbolisme, analisis semiotika, semiologi, roland barthes*

INTRODUCTION

Traditional Indonesian food known as "Tumpeng" has significant cultural and symbolic meanings. It is frequently offered throughout many rituals and festivals as a symbol of harmony, gratitude, and blessings (Radix A.P. Jati, 2014). However, little research has been undertaken to investigate the precise meanings and symbolic levels that Tumpeng possesses.

The study is placed within the realm of communication science, where Tumpeng is a cultural symbol that is exchanged and interpreted through a variety of communication channels, like visual representations or cultural traditions. It examines how communication plays a role in forming and sustaining the cultural meanings connected to Tumpeng and how significant these meanings are as cultural artifacts (Geertz, 2017). By drawing on Barthes' semiotic approach, which provides a theoretical framework to comprehend the cultural importance of objects and symbols, the study seeks to discover the layers of signification as well as the social, historical, and ideological contexts that affect how Tumpeng is perceived (Barthes, 1988).

Only a few studies that specifically address the semiotic analysis of Tumpeng are found in the review of the literature. On the other hand, there are already works on the cultural importance of Tumpeng in Indonesian society, its ritualistic elements, and its connection to philosophical ideas like religiosity, unity, gratitude, and heritage (Hariyanto, 2016). The analysis of the literature also demonstrates the applicability of Barthes' semiotic theories to the study of cultural symbols and their broader social connotations (Barthes, 1986).

The main goal of this study is to adopt Roland Barthes' semiotic perspective to decode the meaning of Tumpeng. In more detail, the study aims to: (1) analyze the symbolic aspects and visual representations of Tumpeng; (2) examine the cultural, historical, and social circumstances that shape Tumpeng's meanings; and (3) investigate the connection between Tumpeng and Indonesian cultural identity. The goal of the study is to reveal Tumpeng's rich cultural value and advance understanding of the area beyond its culinary merits.

METHOD

The technique provides a strong foundation for the inquiry and a framework for analyzing the results. Following the development of the study questions and the identification of the data required to address them, the researchers select the best approach. There are considerations made for items like the required data type and the manner in which the results are presented. In an effort to understand a phenomenon or investigate the attitudes and behaviors of a particular demographic, this study uses an exploratory approach (Creswell, 2007). This approach works especially well when there is a shortage of previous research or when investigating novel subjects (Patton, 2015).

The semiotic perspective of Roland Barthes, which emphasizes the investigation of signs and symbols in cultural phenomena, is a major source of inspiration for the research design (Barthes, 1991). The method used by Barthes offers a theoretical foundation for comprehending the more profound meanings that are buried in texts, pictures, and other cultural artifacts (Barthes, 1977).

Qualitative research, which avoids making generalizations, aims to understand particular problems. An emergent and naturalistic methodology sets it apart. Purposive sampling is used in the study to draw participants with the necessary knowledge and abilities (Patton, 2015). Subject matter culinary practitioners or specific participants are chosen as respondents. The participants' opinions on the symbolic elements of Tumpeng were obtained through in-depth interviews. Instead of the total number of participants, the emphasis is on the quality of the information. The gathering and interpretation of data involves making subjective value judgments (Creswell, 2014).

Further, using Barthes's methodology for semiotic analysis, visual elements and textual sources pertaining to Tumpeng were examined (Barthes, 1986). As a summary and a starting point for consideration throughout the study process, the collected results, generated through an analytical process, represent the participants' experiences and conditions (Creswell, 2007).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Within Indonesian society, the traditional dish Tumpeng has considerable cultural and symbolic value. Tumpeng has profound cultural symbolism and has deeper meanings for those who consume it, going beyond just being aesthetically pleasing. It is frequently served at a variety of events, including weddings, birthdays, religious services, and public holidays. The dish is composed of a mound of rice

in the form of a cone that is surrounded by some accoutrements, creating an eye-catching and vivid composition (Gardjito, 2010).

Studies have shown that Tumpeng acts as a visual depiction of the Indonesian worldview and cultural values, conveying ideas like togetherness, unity, and gratitude toward the wealth of nature and ancestral blessings (Radix A.P. Jati, 2014). Tumpeng preparation and sharing is a collective activity that strengthens social ties and exemplifies the virtues of unity and harmony, particularly in multiculturalism environment (Purwani et al., 2020).

Although the Tumpeng tradition predates the introduction of Islam to the island of Java, it was eventually incorporated into Javanese philosophy and is regarded as an ancestor's message addressing petitions to the Almighty. There are several abbreviations related to the word Tumpeng itself that have been believed by most Javanese. First, the phrase *tumapaking panguripan (tumindak lempeng) tumuju Pangeran* signifies that people must live according to and in God's way (Ulfa, 2018). Second, Tumpeng is an abbreviation meaning *yen metu kudu sing mumpeng* (when it comes out, it has to be done in earnest) in Javanese. In simple meaning, these acronyms refer to pleading for assistance from the All-Powerful Creator in order to pursue goodness, stay away from evil, and achieve praise from the Most Helpful (Sugiman, 2019).

The traditions and cultural legacy of Javanese culture are deeply ingrained and permeate their way of life. The Javanese calendar and rituals are important because they serve as ways to offer appreciation to God and ask for favors. Tumpeng is revered in Javanese culture because it represents the stages of human life and is used as an offering in some rites. With its physical shape resembling a mythical Hindu Mountain, Meru symbolizes the universe, and the goal of conforming to Islamic teachings, which demonstrates the blending of Hindu and Islamic elements (Pianto et al., 2023). In Hinduism, mountains are a significant representation of the cosmos and are held in high regard by Javanese Hindus. Mountains stand in for nature and are alive only in the presence of plants. When creating Tumpeng, vegetables are placed around the dish's circumference to represent the interaction between mountains and plants (Mabbett, 1983).

Tumpeng comprises seven side dishes made from animal and plant products (see Table 1). The number seven itself symbolizes *pitulungan*, or is known as *pitu* in Javanese (help) (Sugiman, 2019).

Table 1. Tumpeng Components

Food products	Cooking process	Meaning
Padi (<i>Oryza sativa</i>)	Rice	A staple meal of the Javanese people and represents life.
Rooster (<i>Gallus gallus domesticus</i>)	<i>Ingkung</i> , a yellow seasoning	Slaughtering a rooster entail abstaining from traits associated with roosters, such as being conceited, unfaithful, neglectful, or always speaking. The cooking process represents a calm heart, while the bowing-down serving position represents solemn worship of God (<i>manekung</i>).
Chicken egg	Boiled, served with shell intact	Life needs to be planned, like the procedure of removing an egg shell. Eggs also symbolize new life or new hope to be better and that all actions should be done wholeheartedly.

Catfish (<i>Clarias Batrachus</i>)	Fried	The catfish represents strength, perseverance in life, and the ability to survive in even the worst circumstances because of its character, which includes the ability to survive in stagnant water and at the river's bottom.
Anchovies (<i>Stolephorus sp.</i>)	Fried	The fact that anchovies inhabit the sea and are almost usually found in groups conveys a sense of unity and harmony.
Red chili (<i>Capsicum annum</i>)	Raw as garnish	As a representation of fire that can serve as a valuable light source for others.
Vegetables		
Water spinach (<i>Ipomoea aquatica</i>)	Boiled	Derived from the word <i>jinangkung</i> means "protecting."
Spinach (<i>Amaranthus sp.</i>)	Boiled	Originating from the word <i>ayem</i> , denotes "tranquility."
Beansprout (<i>Flammulina Velutipes</i>)	Boiled	Came from the word <i>cambah</i> means "to sprout" or "to develop."
Long bean (<i>Vigna cylindrica</i>)	Boiled	From its physical shape, it entails planning.
Red shallot (<i>Allium cepa</i>)	Garnish	Red represents maturity and weighing everything, both good and bad.
Breadfruit (<i>Artocarpus camansi</i>)	Boiled	Derived from the word <i>linuwih</i> , which implies to be superior to others.
Coconut (<i>Cocos nucifera</i>)	Grated	Rooted in the word <i>urip</i> , which means "life" or "capable of supporting and providing for a family."

Source: Adapted from (Ababil et al., 2021)

Roland Barthes developed a theoretical framework of semiology, or semiotics as it is commonly referred to, that examines signs, symbols, and their interpretations within a cultural context. Communication, language, and representation are all shaped by sign and symbol systems, which are the subject of semiotics. Semiology, in the words of Barthes, is the study of how signs work to convey meaning and how people in a particular culture or community interpret them. A sign is made up of two parts: the signified, which is the concept or meaning connected to the physical form or representation known as the signifier, and the signified. Signs are socially and culturally produced rather than having inherent or set meanings (Barthes, 1986).

His approach to semiotics placed a strong emphasis on the value of comprehending the social, cultural, and historical settings in which signals function as well as the ways in which they contribute to the creation of meaning in society, can be applied with the analysis of Tumpeng. Tumpeng serves as a carrier of meaning within Indonesian culture. It is prepared, presented, and shared in a way that follows societal norms and conveys messages regarding social hierarchy, communal identity, and spirituality through its aesthetic form, colors, and arrangement.

The preparation of Tumpeng requires great attention to every last detail, from the choice and placement of ingredients to the deft molding of the rice mound into a cone, or piling rice until it is *anteng* (stable), which has a core value as the more hardship we experience, the more mature we become. The presentation and serving of Tumpeng also send messages about social rank and societal conventions. Its sharply pointed cone, signifying devotion to the one God. It also representing *kasampurnaan* (perfection), as a reminder that the ideal being is not as prevalent as the common. The form also makes a reference to Java's rugged terrain, which is typical of several Indonesian provinces. The dishes encircling the cone stand in for the landscape, the trees, and the wildlife, symbolizing ecosystem. Moreover, teamwork is required to make Tumpeng, which is an expression of the people's common trait of *gotong royong* (mutual support) (AW, 2020).

Additionally, several types of Tumpeng are prepared with different types of rice as the fundamental ingredient, from white rice to *uduk* rice (boiled with coconut milk) and yellow rice. Traditionally, white rice has been the main option. White denotes sinlessness and is reserved for special occasions like birthdays, the seventh month of pregnancy, *pasaran* (one of the five days in the Javanese week), *wetonan* (a birthday celebrated according to the Javanese week), and *gusur tanah* (land clearing). The term *wudhu*, which denotes that the cook must make a ceremonial ablution, has its roots in the region where *uduk* rice is preferred for Islamic religious occasions like Ashura and Mawlid. The last Tumpeng is yellow rice, representing the color of gold, which is frequently offered at events like birthday celebrations and office inaugurations. It frequently serves as the focal point of significant festivities or gatherings and is positioned in the middle of the dining table to denote its importance. The host or another reputable person frequently performs the task of serving Tumpeng, underscoring the event's hierarchical structure (Lestari, 2018).

Further, the Javanese people hold the belief that they are subject to a supernatural force that exists outside of humankind. They consequently feel the need to maintain a relationship with these elements in order to retain a sense of balance in their lives, specifically through staying safe. When conducting a *selamatan* (communal gathering), Tumpeng is the one that is served, along with each of the components, including the side dishes, that has a specific historical significance. In the past, when leading the prayer, the elders would typically give a brief explanation of the significance of the Tumpeng dish beforehand, where the guests were informed of the significance of the Tumpeng and were given life lessons and guidance as a warning as a result of their attendance. The concerned individual (usually the host of the ceremony) discreetly prays and requests his wishes to be granted before Tumpeng is being dredged by the first person, who often was a respected or an elderly person, such as the group leader, the senior citizen, or a close friend (Ketaren, 2015).

One illustration is the Tumpeng's shape, which is tapered upward and represents worship of God Almighty since it is closely related to heaven and heaven represents the optimism that our lives will be better. Likewise, the many side dishes piled around the Tumpeng represent a prosperous people. The positioning of the Tumpeng and its accouterments also represents the mountains and the rich surrounding area in another sense. The summit of the Tumpeng or *kemuncak* represents God as the supreme ruler of the cosmos. The many veggies and side dishes arrayed at the base of the Tumpeng represent life (plants, animals, and people). According to Hindu-Javanese beliefs, nature comprises the natural world of humans, animals, and plants. Ingredients, animal flesh, and the shape of Tumpeng itself all represent the nature of vegetation, the animal kingdom, and human character (Krisnadi, 2020). Therefore, the interpretation of the Tumpeng's shape, denotes optimism for those performing the ritual, that life can improve and soar to new heights like the *kemuncak* Tumpeng's own design. For instance, a newborn baby is predicted to grow up brilliant and prosperous, and the afterlife may offer the deceased a higher quality of life.

Moreover, the Javanese *sesanti* (proverb) *mangan ora mangan waton kumpul* (the act of eating is not that important; gathering is what most count) is familiar not only to Javanese, but to most Indonesians. This can also have the implication that being with family is more important even if you

lack other material things. Prioritizing family unity, defending parents' rights for their children, and valuing the closeness of family should all be central to the concept (Tandywijaya, 2020).

Also, consuming Tumpeng entails a complex interaction of personal and societal interpretations that extends beyond the simple act of eating food. The proper way to serve Tumpeng in accordance with an ancient Javanese custom starts by dredging it from the very bottom and rises to the top. Once the request has been fulfilled, begin side-by-side dredging of the Tumpeng to be eaten by other participants as a representation of dividing the fortune. This symbolizes the lesson in a harmonious world (Gardjito, 2010).

Another Javanese proverb of *mikul dhuwur mendhem jero*, can also relate to how Tumpeng is served. *Mikul dhuwur* (carrying high) indicates to hold the highest esteem, and *mendhem jero* (planted deeply) means to deeply respect someone. So, the elderly only get the smaller piece at the top, and the younger generation may consume the bigger portion. The proverb also advises children to respect their parents well, reflecting this. When used in this context, children might be thought of as descendants, the younger generation, or subordinates, whereas parents can be thought of as parents by blood, elder individuals, people who have served before, leaders, or superiors (Nugroho, 2021).

Cutting off the cone's top and removing the banana leaf (that cover the top of Tumpeng) signifies the liberation of the sacred house's emblem from the inner tie that must be knitted to God or the spirits of the ancestors, symbolizes an appreciation to God. In mystical belief, the cone is still wrapped with banana leaves as an offering to God or ancestral spirits, where it is deposited in a location that is revered. This is a form of spiritual communication that is weaved through Tumpeng as a medium. It also correlates with Barthes' idea that myths serve as means of expressing meaning and values, using the ornate presentation and symbolic components of Tumpeng, which represent a set of cultural ideals and principles ingrained in Javanese society (Barthes, 1991).

Barthes claims a different interpretation of denotation and connotation, linking the latter to ideology, which he refers to as "myth" in his theory. According to Barthes, connotation functions as an ideological manifestation that reveals and defends prevailing values during a particular time period, in contrast to the common belief that denotation has a literal or "real" meaning. Because of their similar driven interactions between connotative signifiers and signifieds, Barthes connects mythology with ideology. Despite the disparate realities of their life, he believes that ideology creates a false awareness that causes people to live in an idealized and fictional world (Herwendo, 2014).

Further, as a cultural item, Tumpeng represents a number of myths that help shape Indonesian identity. According to Barthes, myths represent intricate systems of signs and symbols that communicate deep meanings and cultural ideologies rather than merely being made-up tales or folklore (Barthes, 1991). The myth of the American Dream, which promotes the idea that everyone can succeed and find happiness through perseverance, is one example. Tumpeng also denotes the idea of being safe by the protection of God or the ancestral spirits. By delivering the intended message to God or the ancestral spirits, in which the person will receive the blessings, and therefore his wishes will be granted. After all, Barthes contends that this myth is a sophisticated artifact that obscures systemic hurdles and inequities in favor of communicating deeper cultural values like individuality and the quest of material gain and by seeing myths as systems of signals, the underlying ideologies and presumptions woven into cultural narratives. Moreover, Barthes underlines that myths are not always good or bad; rather, they are means of expressing particular meanings and values. They frequently serve to "naturalize" and "universalize" specific concepts, giving them the appearance of being accepted wisdom or unassailable facts. On significant occasions, such as religious rites or cultural festivals, serving Tumpeng strengthens societal values, beliefs, and customs. Beyond its culinary merits, Barthes' research of myths sheds light on Tumpeng's cultural relevance.

Additionally, In the context of international culinary events or diplomatic settings, Tumpeng's presentation may serve as a sophisticated statement of culinary diplomacy. In this sense, Tumpeng becomes more than just a meal; it becomes a potent cultural ambassador that connects people and leaves a lasting impact on the world about the traditions and values that are ingrained in Indonesian

cooking. This creates a gesture of warmth and hospitality and, at the same time, promotes intercultural understanding by sharing Indonesia's culinary legacy (Pertiwi et al., 2023). According to semiotic interpretation, Tumpeng becomes a visual language that conveys to a worldwide audience the fundamental principles of Indonesian culture, surpassing its culinary origins. Every aspect of Tumpeng—from its shape to its constituent parts—becomes a symbol that, when deciphered, reveals Indonesia's cultural story, making it a powerful instrument for cultural diplomacy that goes beyond simple culinary representation.

CONCLUSION

In light of Barthes' emphasis on comprehending the cultural and historical contexts of signs, this research has been able to explore the specific cultural codes, customs, and practices related to Tumpeng. Tumpeng is not merely a simple dish; it is also a cultural icon that supports societal ideals, group identification, and religious convictions. Tumpeng has a wealth of cultural value and profound symbolism, which is reflected in its conical shape, ingredient choice, preparation, and rituals. The analysis of Tumpeng's symbolism, myth, and activities has revealed its ties to philosophical meaning of traditional Javanese rites, the interaction between Hindu and Islamic cultural influences, and the significance of Tumpeng in conveying messages of unity, harmony, gratitude, and spirituality to a higher force. Therefore, it is a symbolic representation of cultural, historical and social conditions that reflect Tumpeng as a part of Indonesian cultural identity.

The study's analysis of Tumpeng identifies the semiotic elements found in its physical layout, color scheme, and aesthetic appearance. These elements operate as signifiers, conveying deeper meanings regarding accepted social norms and ideas. Furthermore, Barthes's notion of myth is the conversion of historical or cultural occurrences into enduring, culturally relevant stories. The study's conclusions imply that Tumpeng serves as a cultural signifier for social hierarchy, communal identity, and spirituality. This is consistent with the myth-making concept, in which Tumpeng becomes a symbolic story that conveys cultural values that go beyond simple gastronomic beauty. Put differently, Barthes's semiotics offers a framework for interpreting Tumpeng's visual and symbolic components, and the mythical viewpoint fits with the cultural narrative that has been created around the dish.

Methods based on qualitative research provide a detailed investigation of the meanings generated and conveyed by Tumpeng consumption habits through layers of interpretation, exposing individual and communal meanings. It entail the in-depth examination and interpretation of human experiences and meanings. The breadth and depth of qualitative research methodologies are in line with this. This study could contribute to disclose Tumpeng's function as a medium for interconnectedness of the natural world and the resources it provides for people to live healthy, prosperous lives within Javanese society by interpreting it as a composite sign system through the prism of Roland Barthes' theoretical framework as meaning-making process, which denotes that objects are a part of intricate networks of signs and signifiers through which meaning is created and communicated.

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