



Symbols, Identity, and Tradition: The Linguistic Anthropology of Javanese Traditional Food

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A B S T R A C T

This article examines the meanings and functions of Javanese traditional food through a linguistic anthropological lens. Food is approached not merely as a biological necessity, but as a cultural artifact embedded with social significance. Drawing on a corpus of traditional food names compiled by Endang Nurhayati (2013), this study analyzes how naming practices reflect the cultural logic and symbolic values of Javanese society. The findings demonstrate that the meanings and functions of traditional foods are flexible and contingent upon their socio-cultural contexts, whether in ritual ceremonies or everyday consumption. Naming conventions are shaped by sensory attributes (such as color, taste, texture, and form), sound symbolism (onomatopoeia), and acronyms. These linguistic strategies reveal how language mediates cultural understanding and expresses identity, history, and communal values. The study contributes to broader discussions on the role of food in semiotic systems and the intersection between language, culture, and social practice in Javanese tradition.

A. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia possesses a remarkably rich and diverse culinary heritage, as evidenced not only by its vast array of food and beverages but also by the traditions, rituals, and customary practices embedded within its culinary culture (Freeman, 2008; Van Esterik, 2008). This diversity is deeply rooted in the archipelagic structure and demographic composition of the nation, which encompasses a wide spectrum of ethnicities, races, and cultural traditions (Rahman, 2018; Sondakh, 2020). Assertions that reduce Indonesian cuisine to a simplistic combination of rice, side dishes, sambal, and crackers—as suggested by von Holzen and Arsana (2006)—fail to capture the complexity of Indonesian culinary traditions, which also encompass aesthetic presentations and symbolic meanings (Harmayani et al., 2019). Research conducted by Nurhayati (2013a) and Fitaliya et al. (2019) illustrates this richness through the documentation of dozens of traditional food items across different regions.

Despite the considerable anthropological and historical scholarship on Indonesia's culinary legacy—including that of Javanese cuisine—the linguistic and semiotic dimensions of food remain significantly underexplored. Existing studies have largely concentrated on cataloguing food items and examining their roles in ritual and cultural traditions, while neglecting to interrogate how language, naming practices, and culinary symbols articulate social structures, cosmologies, and power relations within Javanese society. From the standpoint of cultural semiotics, food must be understood not merely as a material entity but as a system of signs through which societies interpret and negotiate their world (Barthes, 2012; Danesi, 2004).

In Javanese culture, traditional food items such as *tumpeng*, *jenang abang-putih*, *apem*, and *lemper* carry multilayered symbolic meanings and are used in various ceremonial contexts (Khamimiya & Sudrajat, 2023). These dishes function not solely as nourishment but also as symbolic expressions of fertility, supplication, and aspirations for safety and harmony, thereby reflecting a

complex linguistic-semiotic system that has yet to be systematically studied. A closer examination of the phonetic, morphological, and semantic structures within Javanese culinary terminology may reveal how cultural values—such as gender roles, social hierarchies, and spiritual beliefs—are encoded and transmitted across generations (Bouyahya, 2018; Papadima & Kourdis, 2022).

A linguistic-semiotic study of Javanese cuisine not only complements existing anthropological and sociological approaches but also offers a new epistemological pathway in the study of Nusantara food cultures. This approach is crucial for addressing the marginalization of linguistic dimensions in culinary practices, a tendency that is increasingly exacerbated by the forces of modernization and globalization. The symbolic erasure of food language may result in a profound loss of cultural identity. Therefore, this inquiry is both urgent and necessary—not only for the preservation of Javanese cultural heritage, but also for informing cultural policy, educational initiatives, heritage-based tourism, and Indonesia's culinary diplomacy (Balirano & Guzzo, 2019; Mintz & Du Bois, 2002).

Food as culture

Traditional food is not merely about sustenance; it serves symbolic and cultural functions deeply embedded in rituals and social practices. Scholars such as Arbai (1997), Besseiere (1998), and Montanari (2004) emphasize that food is part of a system of signs, imagination, and identity. Rather than consuming food as a mere biological necessity, humans choose, process, and present food in culturally meaningful ways. The act of eating, therefore, becomes a form of cultural engagement, encompassing techniques, aesthetics, and social significance.

The development of Indonesian culinary culture reflects this complexity and has undergone three historical phases, as outlined by Wijaya (2019). The original phase emphasized indigenous culinary traditions rooted in early kingdoms like Kutai Kartanegara and Banten. The multicultural phase followed, shaped by centuries of trade and cultural exchanges with Europe, India, China, and the Middle East. In the modern phase, global influences became more dominant, marked by the spread of international fast food chains beginning in the 1980s and 1990s. These transformations illustrate the continuous evolution of culinary culture in response to shifting sociopolitical and global contexts.

Religion also plays a significant role in shaping culinary traditions. Sudarwan et al. (2019) reveal how Islamic discourse is woven into Indonesia's culinary heritage, particularly through the legacy of Islamic kingdoms. Foods such as ketupat are not only consumed during religious celebrations but also reflect broader symbolic values and flexible cultural meanings, as highlighted by Rianti et al. (2018). These findings suggest that culinary culture is dynamic and adaptable, responding to historical, religious, and societal changes.

Food consumption today is increasingly linked to lifestyle, identity, and aesthetics. Hammond (1978) identifies six elements of food behavior—ranging from food choices to presentation and dining etiquette—that define culinary practices as a lifestyle. Alnizar (2020) notes a contemporary shift in food discourse: from practical nourishment to aesthetic pleasure and identity construction. This evolution reveals how food functions not only as nourishment but also as a medium of self-expression, social distinction, and cultural performance in society.

Theoretical framework

In linguistic anthropology, language is understood not as a neutral tool for communication, but as a socially embedded practice, as emphasized by Ahearn (2011). This perspective highlights that language is inherently tied to the social lives and cultural contexts of its speakers. Recognizing a language, therefore, involves acknowledging the worldview and life experiences of those who use it. This view diverges from traditional linguistic approaches like that of Ferdinand de Saussure, who advocated for studying language in isolation from its social context.

This research focuses on the semantics of Javanese traditional food, particularly examining the meanings behind the names of dishes. Rather than assuming fixed or universal meanings, the study considers names as dynamic and evolving in response to cultural changes. In line with Ahearn's (2011) notion of semantics as the analysis of words or names, the research explores how the naming of food carries social and symbolic significance, reflecting broader cultural transformations over time.

Naming in the Javanese context is not merely a linguistic act but one deeply rooted in cultural and philosophical traditions. According to Bucholtz & Hall (2004), and Wijana (2016), names function as cultural symbols, and in Java, they often hold sacred and philosophical meanings (Askuri & Kuipres, 2019). Foods like *Bubur Asyura*, *Nasi Berkat*, *Sego Rosulan* and *Kue Apem*, which are associated with religious rituals, embody historical and cultural layers that include Islamic influences and traces of pre-Islamic belief systems. These culinary names thus serve as markers of both spiritual continuity and cultural adaptation (Indrahti et al., 2018).

Fuad and Hapsari (2013) argue that the names of Javanese dishes contain cosmic dimensions, symbolizing unwritten systems of values. In this way, food names go beyond ingredients or taste—they reflect philosophical and cosmological views. These naming practices express a worldview in which food is intertwined with nature, spirituality, and social order. Each name becomes a vessel for transmitting cultural meaning, not only describing what is eaten but also conveying moral and symbolic significance.

Ultimately, analyzing the naming of traditional Javanese food reveals how language operates as a living archive of collective memory, belief, and identity. These

naming traditions exemplify the depth of Javanese culture and its engagement with cosmic, ethical, and societal concerns. Understanding these practices provides insight into how the Javanese people encode and transmit their worldview through culinary expression. The study of food names, therefore, becomes an important entry point for exploring how language and culture are interwoven in the everyday lives of a community.

B. METHOD

This research explores the dynamic relationship between culture and language by examining the names of traditional Javanese foods. Using a qualitative approach grounded in interpretation (*verstehen*), the study focuses on how language—particularly lexical items—reflects cultural meanings. As qualitative research relies on verbal description rather than quantification, this study emphasizes the importance of context, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity in analyzing culinary heritage (Karaosmanoğlu, 2020). The linguistic data are drawn from a corpus of 46 Javanese food names compiled by Endang Nurhayati (2013b), selected for their detailed representation of traditional cuisine and documented through note-taking.

To analyze these food names, the research applies linguistic anthropology and extralingual correspondence, interpreting lexical items within their broader cultural, symbolic, and social contexts (Duranti, 1997; Foley, 2020). Rather than treating names as fixed semantic units, the study considers how they are embedded in ritual, mythology, gender roles, and communal events. Drawing from semiotic and cultural theory (Chandler, 2017; Peirce, 1994), each name is analyzed not only for its literal meaning but also for its sociocultural significance. This method reveals how language operates as a symbolic system intertwined with cultural memory and values, demonstrating that traditional food names are more than labels—they are cultural texts that encode worldviews.

By investigating how language conveys meaning in the realm of culinary tradition, the study illustrates how food names serve as powerful expressions of cultural identity and collective memory. These names are not artificially constructed but emerge organically from community practices, reflecting lived experiences and local knowledge. Ultimately, the research provides a deeper understanding of how language functions as a vehicle for preserving and communicating cultural heritage through everyday practices like naming food.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research delved into the anthropological aspects of ten traditional food names in Java. The following findings describe these food names. These ten foods have been passed down through more than two generations, relying on ingredients sourced from the nearby natural environment. Some of them serve ritual, social, and cultural functions.

1. Wajik

Wajik, a traditional Javanese confection, is made from glutinous rice, Javanese sugar or granulated sugar, grated coconut or coconut milk, and is typically cut into diamond-shaped pieces (Fig. 1). Semantically, the name “*wajik*” is closely associated with its shape, resembling a geometric diamond (♦). This association reflects what de Saussure (1960) describes as the signifier (the word “diamond”) and the signified (the diamond shape and its associated meanings), where the linguistic sign acquires meaning not in isolation but in relation to cultural conventions. In this sense, *wajik* functions not just as a label for a food item but as a semiotic node, encapsulating a network of symbolic associations within Javanese culture.

Figure 1. *Wajik*



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As a key part of Javanese wedding ceremonies, *wajik* is not merely consumed but ritually enacted. It is commonly presented alongside other traditional items such as *jadah*, *krasikan*, *jenang alot*, and *tabonan*—a quintet of offerings symbolizing a future life full of sweetness, unity, and enduring affection. In linguistic anthropological terms, this reflects what Bucholtz and Hall (2004) refer to as the indexicality of language and practice: the foods index broader social and moral values, such as harmony, fidelity, and communal cohesion. Specifically, *wajik*'s sticky texture and sweet flavor serve as embodied metaphors for marital attachment, where the physical properties of the food index desired relational qualities—closeness, steadfastness, and joy (Army, 2017, p. 21).

The use of the *wajik* of the ritual also extends beyond matrimonial symbolism. In slametan gatherings—a central ritual of Javanese communal life—*wajik* functions as a marker of solidarity and spiritual unity. These ceremonial acts highlight what linguistic anthropologist Ahearn (2011) calls language as a socially embedded practice. Here, *wajik*, as a material sign, becomes a communicative act that performs social belonging and collective identity. Its uniform, symmetrical shape reinforces cultural ideals of balance and togetherness, echoing the idea that language and other semiotic forms (such as food) are not merely expressive but constitutive of social relations and cultural meanings.

Thus, *wajik* holds deep cultural and symbolic significance that transcends its culinary identity. It is a semiotic artifact embedded in the discursive and ritual life of Javanese society. Through its name, shape, ingredients, and contexts of use, diamond serves as what Peircean semiotics (1980; 1994) would term an iconic and indexical sign: it not only resembles a desirable form (the diamond, sweetness, stickiness) but also points to and evokes specific socio-cultural values. As such, the naming and ritual use of *wajik* reveal how food operates as a site of meaning-making, where language, culture, and identity are intricately woven together in everyday practices.

2. Mendut

Mendut is a traditional Javanese confection made from glutinous rice flour, filled with grated young coconut sweetened with palm or Javanese sugar, and wrapped in a four-sided prism-shaped banana leaf (Fig. 2). Beyond its culinary composition, *mendut* functions as a culturally charged signifier within Javanese ritual life.

Figure 2. *Mendut*



Image retrieved from diahdidi.com, July 29, 2021

Although the etymological link between the name “*mendut*” and Mendut Temple in Magelang remains uncertain (Yaqin, 2020), its linguistic form evokes historical and sacred imagery, suggesting what de Saussure (1960) would call an arbitrary but socially motivated sign, where meaning is generated through shared conventions. In this way, the name *mendut* carries semiotic weight beyond its referent, indexing a cultural connection between food, history, and sacred geography.

This traditional cake features prominently in slametan rituals and other ceremonial contexts such as childbirth celebrations, brokohan harvest feasts, memorial events, weddings, and thanksgiving rites (Sunjata et al., 2014). In these contexts, *mendut* acts as more than a mere offering—it becomes a vehicle for expressing and enacting social values such as harmony, fertility, gratitude, and remembrance. From a linguistic anthropological perspective, Ahearn (2011) emphasizes that language—and by extension, culturally embedded symbols like food—are forms of practice that do not merely reflect social reality but help constitute it. The recurrent use of

mendut in rites of passage and communal gatherings thus serves as a performative act, reinforcing social bonds and the continuity of cultural identity.

The semiotic dimension of *mendut* also lies in its texture and form. Its sticky consistency metaphorically symbolizes the cohesive unity desired in relationships, especially in matrimonial contexts. This iconically links the physical sensation of stickiness with the moral aspiration for enduring human bonds. Drawing on Peircean semiotics (1980; 1994), *mendut* functions both as an icon (through its texture and shape) and as an index (through its ritual contexts), anchoring abstract social ideals within sensory and material experience. Meanwhile, Bucholtz and Hall’s (2004) notion of identity as interactional and emergent can be observed in the communal sharing of *mendut* during ceremonies—an act that reaffirms relational identities and cultural belonging. Through its continued ritual use, *mendut* illustrates how food, as a semiotic artifact, participates in the transmission of cultural knowledge and values across generations.

3. Ceni/Cethil

Ceni or *cethil* is a vibrant traditional Javanese snack, widely recognized and enjoyed especially among rural communities in Yogyakarta and other parts of Java (Fig. 3). Despite regional variations in its form and ingredients, its cultural salience remains consistent. The snack is prepared from a mixture of sago flour and water, cooked over fire with constant stirring until it thickens (Meilawati, 2012). Its sweet and chewy nature is often accompanied by colorful presentation—an aesthetic quality that contributes to its enduring popularity. Notably, *ceni* is mentioned in the *Serat Centhini* (1814), a monumental Javanese literary work, signaling its deep historical and cultural roots.

Figure 3. *Ceni/Cethil*



Image retrieved from primarasa.co.id, July 29, 2021

From a semiotic perspective, *ceni* operates as a cultural signifier. According to de Saussure (1960), the relationship between the signifier (the word “*ceni*”) and the signified (the concept it refers to) is arbitrary but socially entrenched. The term *ceni*, as Kuswanto (2018) notes, is semantically linked to the notion of being “playful” or “colorful,” evoking cheerfulness and vitality—qualities encoded in its multicolored appearance. This iconically links its visual features with social

meanings associated with joy, informality, and community festivity.

Moreover, the sticky and elastic texture of *cenil* carries indexical meaning—it symbolically represents the notions of interconnectedness, closeness, and brotherhood among members of Javanese society. Charles Peirce's (1994) model of signs helps us understand how *cenil* serves as both an index (pointing to communal cohesion) and an icon (through its tangible stickiness) of social relationships. This material-symbolic quality transforms *cenil* into a foodway that enacts and reinforces social bonds.

From the lens of linguistic anthropology, as Ahearn (2011) proposes, cultural symbols—including food—are embedded in practice and serve as modes of social action. In ceremonial contexts such as *tingkeban*—a prenatal ritual—*cenil* is not merely consumed but performed, becoming part of the speech acts and ritual exchanges that constitute Javanese identity and cultural continuity. This aligns with Bucholtz and Hall's (2004) framework of identity as emergent and relational, wherein food practices function as indexes of collective identity and socio-cultural alignment.

Historically, some accounts suggest that *cenil* originated as a subsistence adaptation during times of rice scarcity (Alamsyah, 2006). In this view, the creation of *cenil* exemplifies the discursive agency of local communities—transforming scarcity into creativity. This connects to Ahearn's (2011) discussion of agency as the socioculturally mediated capacity to act. Here, the production of *cenil* under constrained material conditions can be seen as an expression of resilience and adaptive knowledge.

Functionally, *cenil* occupies a dual role: it is both a ritual food in formal cultural ceremonies and a daily snack available in traditional markets. This duality highlights its semiotic versatility—the ability of a single food item to move across registers and contexts, retaining symbolic weight while adapting to everyday consumption. Its embeddedness in both sacred and secular spheres underscores its social adaptability and cultural durability, illustrating the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity in Javanese culinary life.

4. Gatot

Gatot is a traditional food known widely across Yogyakarta, especially in Gunungkidul. Etymologically, the name “*gatot*” is a popular acronym of the Indonesian phrase *gagal total*, meaning “total failure” (Kuswanto, 2018, p. 31). This phrase, rich in semantic layering, is more than a colloquialism—it encapsulates a socio-historical experience rooted in hardship, resourcefulness, and adaptation. From a semiotic standpoint, as de Saussure (1916/1983) would argue, the signifier “*gatot*” (the word itself) is arbitrarily linked to the signified concept of transformation through failure. Over time, the term has evolved into a symbol of resilience and creative survival.

The food originated from the community's shift from rice, an increasingly unaffordable staple, to cassava as a primary source of sustenance. Cassava, requiring less water, was well-suited to the dry climate of Gunungkidul. However, due to its perishability, it had to be processed quickly. Delays, often due to unpredictable rainfall, led to fermentation and discoloration of the dried cassava or *gaplek*, a situation perceived as a “total failure.” Yet, out of this apparent failure emerged *gatot*, a chewy, darkened dish that became not only edible but delicious. (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. *Gatot*



Image retrieved from bisnisukm.com, July 22, 2021

From the perspective of linguistic anthropology, Ahearn (2011) reminds us that language is not just a tool for communication but a form of social action. The naming of this food item as “*gatot*” performs several sociolinguistic functions: it encodes collective memory, narrates environmental hardship, and reflects Javanese values of humility and acceptance. It also indexes a culturally specific response to scarcity—not merely surviving, but creatively transforming misfortune into something meaningful. This is what Ahearn describes as “agency through language”—the community acts upon its reality using linguistic strategies that generate cultural value.

Drawing from Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) theory of identity and performativity, *gatot* functions as a discursive tool in the production of local identity. The humorous or ironic naming (“total failure”) contrasts with its current status as a desirable delicacy, signaling how linguistic practices participate in identity formation and community solidarity. Through indexicality (Silverstein, 1976), *gatot* not only points to a foodstuff but also to a historical context of drought, ingenuity, and collective endurance. It marks those who consume or know about *gatot* as culturally literate members of a shared heritage.

In terms of semiotics, the visual and textural signs of *gatot*—the darkened color, fermented aroma, and chewy consistency—operate as material signs that carry layers of meaning. The transformation from spoiled cassava to a respected local snack illustrates what Barthes (2019) would call mythologization: a process where the mundane is elevated into a symbol with cultural resonance. *Gatot* becomes a myth of survival, where decay and disruption are re-signified as nourishment and continuity.

The consumption of *gatot* does not require ritual timing; it can be eaten casually or ceremonially, alone or shared—making it semantically flexible. This versatility

reflects the Javanese philosophy of *nrimo ing pandum*—acceptance of one’s fate while also striving to make the best of it. In this sense, *gatot* serves as a semiotic object that conveys ethical instruction, functioning similarly to proverbs or moral narratives.

To consume *gatot*, then, is not merely to ingest a snack—it is to participate in a cultural discourse that affirms gratitude, resilience, and communal identity. As such, *gatot* is both a sign and a site of cultural meaning-making.

5. Tempe Gembus

Tempe gembus (Fig. 5), also known as *tempe bosok*, is a culinary product with regional variations in naming: *tempe gajes* in Banyumas and *tempe menjes* in East Java (Shurtleff & Aoyagi, 2007). Although these terms differ lexically, they share a referent—a food item made from tofu residue, a byproduct once regarded as waste, animal feed, or cleaning material. Its rise as a human food source around 1943, during the Japanese occupation of Indonesia, coincided with widespread food shortages, reflecting a historical context of deprivation and resilience.

Figure 5. *Tempe Gembus*



Image retrieved from shutterstock.com/Dicky Algofari, July 23, 2021

Semantically, the sign *tempe gembus* consists of two components: *tempe*, rooted in Old Javanese *tumpi*, and *gembus*, which semantically implies softness, puffiness, or deterioration. In the Saussurean (1960) model of the sign, the signifier “*tempe gembus*” indexes both a sensory experience and a social history: the signified includes its physical texture and symbolic value as a food of the poor. This multilayered signification supports Barthes (2019) notion of myth—*tempe gembus* becomes not just a food, but a cultural emblem of survival and anti-waste ethics (*tidak mubazir*).

Furthermore, from Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005) sociocultural linguistic perspective, *tempe gembus* is an identity resource. Its low-status origins are renegotiated into symbols of ingenuity and moral virtue. As language constructs identities through interaction, the local use of *gembus*, *gajes*, or *menjes* enables communities to produce differentiated regional culinary identities, while sustaining shared ethical orientations toward resourcefulness.

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The historical evolution of *tempe gembus* reflects what Ahearn (2011) calls the practice theory of language: the term is embedded in sociohistorical practices of adaptation and survival. It is not merely a descriptor, but part of a broader linguistic economy in which language, food, and memory intersect. Eating or naming *tempe gembus* thus becomes an act of cultural remembering and identity negotiation, situated within the legacies of colonization, poverty, and vernacular knowledge.

The embeddedness of fermentation in Javanese food culture also reinforces the indigenous knowledge system. The word *tempe* appears in Serat Centhini, linking it to older culinary practices and cosmologies (Priyatmoko, 2020). Scholars like Lombard (2005) and Nuraida (2020) tie the etymology of *tempe* to *tape* (fermentation), and *tempayan* (large clay jars used in fermentation), further rooting the food in the indigenous semiotics of transformation—from decay to renewal.

6. Jadah

Jadah is a traditional Indonesian food made from glutinous rice (*ketan*) and grated coconut, known for its sticky, chewy texture and typically white appearance (Fig. 6). Historically, *jadah* was not merely a culinary item but a ritual object—especially prominent in wedding ceremonies. Its tactile quality—the glue-like stickiness of glutinous rice—served as a metaphor for marital bonds. In Javanese belief systems, this stickiness symbolized the ideal marital relationship: one that is intimate, enduring, and inseparable. Such symbolism reflects the cultural semiotics of food, where the physical qualities of ingredients are transmuted into moral and social lessons.

Figure 6. *Jadah*



Image retrieved from diahdidi.com, July 29, 2021

In de Saussure’s (1960) semiotic framework, *jadah* operates as a linguistic sign—a pairing of a signifier (the word “*jadah*”) and a signified (the concept and material form of the sticky rice cake). While the term *jadah* may lack a confirmed etymological origin, its cultural signification emerges through social practices and shared understandings. The symbolic link between texture and relationship serves as what Barthes (2019) would call a myth: a second-order signification that naturalizes cultural ideology—in this case, the value of marital unity and perseverance.

The lexical derivation of *jadah* is speculated to stem from *juwada*, though this remains debated (Suryadi et al., 2019). Regardless, the term functions as a cultural index, pointing toward values encoded in Javanese wedding traditions. From a linguistic anthropological lens, as articulated by Ahearn (2011), *jadah* exemplifies language as social action—its use and naming participate in the cultural transmission of marriage ideals. The act of preparing and offering *jadah* at weddings performs what Austin (1962) termed a speech act—a performative gesture that reinforces marital commitment not through language alone, but through food-as-discourse.

The evolution of *jadah* from a sacred ritual food into a commodity sold in traditional markets (Nurhayati et al., 2013b) underscores the fluid nature of cultural signs. What was once limited to ceremonial use is now part of everyday consumption. This transformation reflects broader social shifts, including the commodification of tradition and the adaptation of ritual symbols to market logic. Here, *jadah's* semiotic value is not erased but recontextualized—its symbolic meanings diluted for some, but for others, preserved as nostalgic references to familial values.

Drawing on Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) tactics of intersubjectivity, we can interpret the continued consumption of *jadah*—whether in weddings or daily life—as a way to perform and reaffirm group identity. In Javanese kinship and community structures, food operates as a medium of relationality. By preparing *jadah*, individuals participate in a shared cultural script that emphasizes endurance (*sabar*), harmony (*rukun*), and collectivity (*gotong royong*). The lengthy, labor-intensive process of cooking *jadah*—soaking, steaming, and mixing—embodies these virtues, encoding them into practice.

From the perspective of semiotics and symbolic anthropology, the texture of *jadah* is not merely a sensory characteristic but a sign vehicle (Peirce, 1994). It functions indexically to point to deeper social meanings. Its white color may also carry connotations of purity or sanctity in the wedding context, further enhancing its role as a symbolic artifact.

Thus, *jadah* is more than a culinary object; it is a cultural text. Its preparation and presentation are laden with symbolic meanings that convey moral instruction, community values, and emotional resonance. As linguistic anthropology teaches us, meaning is not confined to spoken words; it is also embedded in the material and ritual life of a culture. *Jadah*, as both food and sign, occupies a significant place in this semiotic ecology.

7. Bledus

The traditional food *bledus*, a corn-based dish found in East and Central Java (Fig. 7), offers fertile ground for linguistic anthropological and semiotic analysis, revealing how language, food, and memory intersect to construct cultural identity, especially in the context of postcolonial and nationalist discourse.

From a semiotic perspective inspired by de Saussure (1960), *bledus* can be seen as a sign composed of the signifier (the word “[bledus]”) and the signified (the concept or cultural image of cracked corn served with grated coconut). Saussure emphasized that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary but socially constructed and maintained. In this case, the sign “[bledus]” has acquired a culturally resonant meaning, especially among Javanese communities, where it denotes not only a traditional dish but also evokes historical narratives of endurance and patriotism.

Figure 7. *Bledus*



Image retrieved from shutterstock.com, July 23, 2021

The lexical derivation of *bledus* from the Javanese word *mbledos* (“to explode”) suggests a metaphorical mapping of linguistic form to sensory experience. This reflects what Ahearn (2011) refers to as language as practice, where meanings are not static but emerge through use in specific sociocultural contexts. The reference to explosion might metaphorically describe the burst or transformation of the corn kernels during preparation, or even the emotional and historical “explosion” of resilience during the wartime period.

Historical memory embedded in food, such as *bledus* being a staple during the Indonesian War of Independence—particularly by PETA (*Pembela Tanah Air*) soldiers—illustrates what Bucholtz and Hall (2005) term indexicality, wherein language and practices point to social identities, histories, and stances. *Bledus*, therefore, indexes a specific nationalist temporality and embodies symbolic resistance. Its continued presence today signals not only culinary continuity but also the survival of a collective memory of resistance and poverty endured with dignity.

In terms of iconicity, a semiotic principle where the form of the sign resembles its meaning, the cracked, burst appearance of the corn kernels physically mirrors the linguistic root *mbledos*, making *bledus* an example of how natural language draws from embodied, sensorial experience. This echoes Peircean semiotics, where signs may function as icons (resemblance), indexes (causal or contextual connection), or symbols (arbitrary association). *Bledus* contains all three: its form (icon), its wartime history (index), and its cultural-linguistic term (symbol).

From the standpoint of linguistic relativity, the cultural understanding of *bledus* is shaped through the Javanese language and worldview, which places value on

humility, resourcefulness, and community endurance. These values are encapsulated in the dish's simplicity, its communal serving style (on banana leaves, or *pincuk*), and its historical associations with collective struggle—supporting Sapir (1929) and Whorf's (1957) notion that language not only reflects but also structures thought and experience.

Thus, *bledus* is not merely a food item but a culturally charged sign that sustains a layered semiotic and historical meaning. It operates as what Ahearn (2012) calls a linguistic artifact—a product of historical processes, social interaction, and symbolic negotiation.

8. Bakmi Pedes

Mie Des or *Bakmi Pedes* is a traditional noodle-based culinary specialty originating from Pundong District, Bantul Regency, Yogyakarta. As indicated by its name, the dish features a distinctive spicy flavor ("*pedes*" in Javanese and Indonesian denotes "spicy"), and uses noodles as its central ingredient. Unlike typical market noodles made from wheat or rice flour, the noodles in *Bakmi Pedes* are made from cassava, an abundant local agricultural product in the Pundong area (Budi, 2014).

The noodles are notably thicker than standard noodles—about the size of a valve (*pentil*)—leading locals to colloquially refer to the dish as *Mie Pentil*. This descriptive term reflects both the physical properties of the noodle and a cultural practice of naming that draws on humor and embodied familiarity (see Fig. 8).

Figure 8. *Bakmi Pedes*



Image retrieved from [phinemo.com/kulinerjakarta](https://www.phinememo.com/kulinerjakarta), July 28, 2021

Traditionally consumed as a snack or a substitute for rice, *Bakmi Pedes* gained local popularity around the 1960s and gradually became a staple food in Bantul Regency. In recent years, it has been proposed as a symbol of Bantul's culinary heritage, offering a distinct local alternative to the nationally popular *Mie Ayam* (Santosa, 2016). This culinary identification marks a regional attempt to assert gastronomic uniqueness and promote local foodways as cultural heritage.

The linguistic designation of the dish—*Bakmi Pedes* and *Mie Pentil*—does more than merely name a food; it encodes cultural values, sensory experience, and regional identity. The integration of cassava as a main ingredient further reflects a reliance on indigenous food resources, promoting sustainability and reinforcing regional distinctiveness.

From a linguistic anthropological and semiotic standpoint, *Mie Des* or *Bakmi Pedes* functions as a rich site for examining how language, food, and cultural identity are entangled. Drawing on Saussure's theory of the sign (1960), the label *Bakmi Pedes* operates as a signifier that points to both a literal (spicy noodle dish) and symbolic (marker of regional culinary identity) signified. The word *pedes* serves an indexical function, pointing not only to taste but also to the affective and embodied experiences central to Javanese culinary culture (Chandler, 2002).

The alternative name, *Mie Pentil*, introduces a layer of local semiotic play. By comparing the noodles to a *pentil* (valve), speakers engage in what Ahearn (2011) refers to as indexicality—the way language points to social contexts and shared knowledge. This naming practice is not merely descriptive; it functions as a form of pragmatic entextualization, embedding the dish within a web of local humor, tactile memory, and social intimacy. *Bakmi Pedes* becomes a semiotic site of what Bucholtz and Hall (2005) term tactics of intersubjectivity—positioning local people in opposition to more dominant (often urban or globalized) food trends, such as the widespread popularity of *Mie Ayam*.

Moreover, the evolution of *Bakmi Pedes* from local fare to regional emblem underscores how language, food, and identity co-produce cultural meaning. It shows how naming practices, ingredients, and culinary narratives become key mechanisms for indexing locality, reinforcing belonging, and engaging in discursive resistance against the homogenizing forces of national and global cuisine.

9. Ketan Ireng

Ketan Ireng, derived from black glutinous rice (*oryza sativa glutinosa*), holds deep cultural, symbolic, and linguistic value in Javanese society. In this article, the term "*ketan ireng*" specifically refers to its preparation as a sweet porridge—*bubur ketan ireng*—cooked with palm sugar and coconut milk. The term *ireng*, meaning "black" in Javanese, acts as a linguistic marker, indexing not only the visual appearance of the dish but also activating cultural associations tied to color, texture, and ceremony (Fig. 9).

From a semiotic perspective, the lexical choice *ireng* (Javanese) or *hitam* (Indonesian) serves as a signifier, referencing the color of both the rice and its porridge form. In Saussurean terms, this establishes a signifying relationship between the word and the sensory referent—the dark, rich hue of the glutinous rice (de Saussure, 1960). Yet the word does more than denote a color; it indexes cultural meanings associated with darkness, fertility, and

the sacred—common in Javanese cosmology, where black often symbolizes depth, mystery, and spiritual grounding.

Figure 9. Ketan Ireng



Image retrieved from shutterstock.com/Riana Ambarsari, July 23, 2021

The sticky texture of *ketan ireng* holds symbolic resonance in Javanese ritual contexts. Its culinary adhesiveness metaphorically expresses ideals of emotional and familial cohesion. In marriage ceremonies, the dish is served to signify the hope for an enduring, inseparable union between spouses. This symbolism operates through iconicity, in which the physical qualities of the dish resemble the social ideal it is meant to evoke—what Peirce (1994) would classify as iconic signs. According to linguistic anthropologist Ahearn (2011), such symbolic associations are not mere metaphors but are embedded in pragmatic performativity, where food becomes a medium for enacting and reinforcing social values.

Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) theory of identity as interactionally constructed and discursively mediated can be employed here to analyze how the serving and consumption of *ketan ireng* during *selamatan* (ritual feasts), weddings, and family gatherings becomes an act of affiliative identity work. These practices do not merely preserve tradition; they enact cultural belonging and reinforce collective memory through shared symbolic forms. The dish thus becomes a site of cultural indexicality, where texture and taste index values such as unity (*guyub*), endurance (*langgeng*), and reciprocity (*tepo sliro*).

The choice of black glutinous rice also reflects Javanese ecological pragmatism and local resource use. In a broader ethnosemiotic frame, this preference for *ketan ireng* over white rice in ritual settings reflects a conscious orientation toward agricultural indigeneity and spiritual efficacy. Its use in other dishes—*tape* (fermented rice), *klepon*, and *madumongso*—suggests not only culinary versatility but also symbolic continuity. These foods are often served at rites of passage and religious festivals, thus contributing to what anthropologists call the ritualization of everyday life (Spickard & Bell, 1993).

Furthermore, the naming of the dish—*ketan ireng*—reveals an embedded linguistic ideology, wherein language is not only descriptive but also indexical of place, identity, and cultural aesthetics. As Bucholtz and

Hall (2005) argue, language is a key site for the production of sociocultural meaning. The preference for the Javanese term *ireng* rather than the Indonesian *hitam* marks the dish as a distinctly Javanese identity object, reaffirming the speaker's and the community's cultural alignment.

Thus, *ketan ireng* is not merely a food product; it is a semiotic artifact—a confluence of material culture, linguistic expression, and social performance. It exemplifies how culinary practices are entangled with language, ritual, and ideology, where a dish becomes both a literal and symbolic sustenance for the community.

10. Jenang Abang

Jenang Abang, or what is commonly referred to as *jenang merah* in Indonesian, is a traditional porridge widely recognized in Javanese society for its symbolic and ritualistic significance. While the term *abang* or *merah* literally translates to “red,” the actual color of the porridge is brownish, deriving primarily from the presence of gula aren (shaved palm sugar) (Fig. 10). Despite this chromatic discrepancy, the use of the term *abang* indexes deeper symbolic associations—specifically courage, vitality, and spiritual energy—rooted in the cultural semiotics of color within the Javanese worldview.

Figure 10. Jenang Abang,



Image retrieved from yummy.co.id/Astri Anjarwati, July 23, 2021

From a Saussurean perspective, the term *abang* functions as a signifier, while the porridge's hue and associated meanings act as the signified. This connection is not arbitrary but culturally motivated—what Saussure (1960) refers to as a socially constructed sign system. In Javanese cosmology, red is a powerful semiotic resource, frequently associated with masculine energy, spiritual protection, and strength—particularly in ritual contexts. As Ahearn (2011) argues, language is not only a system of signs but a form of practice; naming *jenang abang* thus performs a cultural act that embeds the food in a broader symbolic economy.

The pairing of *jenang abang* with *jenang putih*—producing *jenang abang putih*—invokes a binary symbolic

system that mirrors the union of opposites: red and white, masculine and feminine, father and mother. This duality is often performed in ceremonies related to pregnancy and childbirth, wherein the dish functions as an embodied metaphor for human generation. Such culinary practices reflect what Peirce (1994) would classify as iconic signs, where the fusion of color and texture resembles the harmonious balance of cosmic and social forces.

The alternate term *jenang sengkala*, used when the dish is prepared for periods of crisis or liminality, introduces a further layer of indexicality. According to Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) sociocultural linguistic framework, identity and meaning are contextually produced through interaction. The term *sengkala*, often associated with omens or chronological markers of fate, repositions the dish from an everyday delicacy to a ritual agent of transition—marking thresholds, healing intentions, or protective boundaries. In this way, the dish becomes a semiotic actant in the ritual performance of crisis navigation and communal resilience.

From a linguistic anthropological perspective, the lexicon surrounding Javanese culinary practices reflects a deeply ideological relationship between language, ritual, and identity. As Ahearn (2011) notes, such ideologies shape the ways in which communities understand and enact social life. The proliferation of culinary terms—*jenang abang*, *jenang putih*, *jenang sengkala*—reveals a complex system of classificatory logic where food names encode not only ingredients but affective states, cosmological beliefs, and social roles. The dish is both a product of and a participant in the cultural narrative of life cycles, agricultural abundance, and religious cosmology.

Moreover, the presence of key ingredients—*beras* (rice), *santan kental* and *encer* (thick and thin coconut milk), *gula aren*, *daun pandan*, and salt—not only speaks to the agro-ecological base of Javanese life but also forms a material semiotics of taste and texture. These ingredients signal *kebersamaan* (togetherness), *kesuburan* (fertility), and *keselarasan* (harmony), values that are often enacted through the performative consumption of food during religious and social gatherings.

Thus, *jenang abang* operates as more than just sustenance; it is a culturally charged semiotic artifact. Through its naming, preparation, and ceremonial consumption, it mediates spiritual meaning, social identity, and ritual action. It affirms Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) claim that language—and by extension, naming and food discourse—is central to the continual construction and negotiation of cultural life.

D. CONCLUSIONS

Javanese traditional foods are not merely culinary artifacts but are cultural signifiers embedded in long-standing historical trajectories and localized ecological systems. These foods—some of which trace their lineage back to the 18th century—reflect intergenerational continuity and resilience, serving as

living repositories of regional identity. Their reliance on staple crops such as rice, cassava, corn, coconut, and sweet potatoes underscores a profound connection between food practices and the agrarian foundations of Javanese society. The persistence of dishes like *jenang abang*, *wajik*, and *ketan ireng* in both ritual and everyday settings illustrates how food operates as both material sustenance and symbolic medium for expressing communal values, cosmology, and social cohesion.

From a linguistic anthropological perspective, the naming practices of Javanese traditional foods reveal complex intersections between language, sensory perception, and cultural memory. While some food names may appear philosophically neutral or devoid of cosmic symbolism, they nevertheless function as linguistic signs that reflect local epistemologies. Names based on sensory attributes—such as color (*abang*, *ireng*), shape (*wajik*), taste (*pedes*), and texture (*gembus*)—encode everyday experiences into culturally meaningful labels. Meanwhile, onomatopoeic forms like *cenil* or *bledus* and acronyms like *gatot* illustrate the creative, playful, and adaptive nature of vernacular naming. In Saussurean (1960) terms, these names operate within an arbitrary yet socially constructed sign system, in which the signifier indexes locally shared knowledge and embodied experiences.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the linguistic anthropology of food by highlighting how traditional culinary practices function as a nexus of identity, symbolism, and sociolinguistic patterning in Javanese culture. Food is not only consumed but spoken, signified, and ritualized—situating it within what Bucholtz and Hall (2005) term the “discursive construction of identity.” By examining food as both a linguistic object and a cultural symbol, this research sheds light on the ways local communities preserve, transform, and transmit intangible heritage through everyday acts of naming, preparing, and sharing meals. Thus, traditional foods serve as both tangible and semiotic tools in the ongoing process of cultural reproduction and identity articulation.

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