

The Meaning and Function of the Apem Distribution Tradition in Pengging: A Cultural, Religious, and Social Analysis in a Javanese Context

Annisa wakhidatus Sholikhah¹

Fakultas Adab dan Bahasa Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Mas Said Surakarta

email sholikhahannisa092@gmail.com

Abstract

. Traditional Javanese cuisine often serves as a symbolic medium of communication that connects people with religious, social, and cultural values. This study examines the Sebaran Apem tradition in Pengging Village, Boyolali, which is an integral part of the annual Saparan ceremony. Apem cake, made from rice flour, coconut milk, and sugar, is believed to originate from the Arabic word 'afwun (forgiveness), making it a symbol of asking for forgiveness and praying for safety. Sari, (2025). The purpose of this study is to analyze the meaning and function of Sebaran Apem as a religious, social, and cultural medium, as well as a marker of local community identity. Using qualitative methods with data triangulation (participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation), as well as data analysis by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, this study found that the Sebaran Apem tradition strengthens social cohesion through mutual cooperation, reflects a harmonious acculturation between Islamic values and Javanese culture, and is full of deep philosophical and religious meanings. The results of the study indicate that this tradition not only maintains cultural heritage but also contributes to the formation of a more cohesive and harmonious community.

Keywords: Distribution of Apem, Pengging, Symbolic Meaning, Cultural Acculturation, Social Cohesion

INTRODUCTION

Traditional Javanese cuisine serves functions far beyond biological needs. Traditional foods are often positioned as a symbolic medium of communication, connecting people with religious, social, and cultural values. In Javanese society, food serves as an integral part of traditional ceremonies, religious rituals, and a symbol of social cohesion (Koentjaraningrat, 1984). One prominent food in this context is apem cake, which serves not only as food but also as a symbol of philosophical and religious significance. Apem is a cake made from rice flour, coconut milk, and sugar that is commonly found in various Javanese-Islamic traditions. The word apem is believed to originate from the Arabic word "afwun," meaning forgiveness, according to Sari (2025). Therefore, apem is often served at thanksgiving ceremonies, feasts, or religious rituals as a symbol of asking for forgiveness and praying for safety. Zamhari (2023) states that

Javanese-Islamic cuisine such as apem not only satisfies the body but also contains a spiritual dimension that strengthens the relationship between humans and God. The Pengging community in Boyolali considers apem (apem) an essential part of their local cultural practices, a tradition that has become their norm. The distribution of apem in this region is carried out collectively and inclusively, with participation from people from various social strata. This aligns with the Sebaran Apem Jatinom tradition in Klaten, where thousands of apem are distributed to the community as a symbol of gratitude, forgiveness, and social cohesion (Sutiyah & Herimanto, 2020). In Pengging, despite the smaller scale of the distribution, this tradition retains its deep meaning in religious and social life. Semiotically, apem cake is viewed as a sign that has denotative (as food) and connotative (as a symbol of forgiveness, perfection, and humility) meanings. Resta (2023) through semiotic analysis shows that the round shape of apem cake represents the life cycle and perfection, while its soft texture reflects humility. This is in line with the research of Fidiana, Saddhono, & Anindyarini (2024) in the Kirab Apem Sewu tradition in Surakarta, where apem is positioned as a means of cultural communication to convey collective prayers and hopes.

LITERARY REVIEWS

To understand the symbolic meaning of apem cakes, this study adopted the approaches of semiotics, cultural acculturation, and theories of ritual and social cohesion. These three approaches complement each other in uncovering the complexity of the Sebaran Apem tradition in Pengging. Cultural Semiotics To understand the symbolic meaning of apem cake, this study adopts a semiotic approach. According to Barthes in (Chandler, 2022) Semiotics, as the science of signs and meaning, allows researchers to describe how cultural objects such as apem cake function as "signs" that carry denotative (as food) and connotative (as symbols) meanings. Danesi, SIM (2023) in a cultural context, semiotics not only analyzes the structure of signs, but also how these signs are interpreted and form a system of meaning in a. Resta (2023) has applied semiotic analysis to apem cake, showing that the round shape represents the cycle of life and perfection, while the soft texture reflects humility. This approach is crucial to uncovering the layers of meaning contained in the form, ingredients, and process of making apem, as well as how these meanings are communicated and understood by the Pengging community. From a cultural

acculturation perspective, the apem tradition in Pengging demonstrates a fusion of Islamic values with Javanese traditions. The practice of distributing apem as a symbol of forgiveness is a manifestation of Islamic values, while the traditional procession involving all levels of society is a distinctive expression of Javanese culture (Mulder, 1998). Thus, this tradition demonstrates how Javanese society is able to internalize Islamic teachings into the local cultural fabric. The Theory of Ritual and Social Cohesion the Sebaran Apem Tradition is also understood through the lens of the theory of ritual and social cohesion. According to Durkheim (in Lutfhia, 2025), ritual is a collective practice that has a central role in creating and strengthening social solidarity, forming a "collective consciousness" among members of society. Turner (1969) further developed the concept of ritual as a process that creates a "community" or strong social bond among the individuals involved. The mutual cooperation activities in making and distributing apem, as well as the inclusive participation of all levels of society, will be analyzed as manifestations of this ritual's function in strengthening social cohesion and a sense of belonging in Pengging (Firmansyah, 2025). This research is crucial because studies on apem types are still dominated by traditions in Jatinom and Surakarta, while traditions in Pengging have received little academic attention. Through this study, it is hoped that we can understand how apem is distributed and the meaning of the apem cake shapes in Pengging, as they function as religious, social, and cultural mediums, as well as markers of local identity.

RESEARCH METHOD

According to Moleong (in Inanayah et al., 2025), qualitative research emphasizes the social meaning experienced by individuals, not just numbers, but rather narratives, experiences, and careful interpretations of the subjects. The method applied in this study is data triangulation, which combines various data collection techniques to ensure the validity and reliability of information. Triangulation is carried out by combining the results of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. By using this approach, researchers can obtain a more comprehensive picture of the tradition of distributing apem. In addition, data analysis was carried out by following the systematic steps developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2019). The analysis process includes three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. Data reduction

is carried out by selecting relevant information from field notes and interview transcripts. Data presentation is done by compiling a descriptive narrative about the series of traditions and interview findings, while drawing conclusions is done by interpreting the data using the theories of semiotics, cultural acculturation, and social cohesion.

This research was conducted in Pengging Village, Boyolali, known as the center of the Sebar Apem tradition. The research period lasted for 7 days, covering the preparation and culmination of the event in the month of Shafar. By focusing on a specific location and time, this study aimed to gain a deep understanding of the social and cultural context behind the Sebar Apem tradition. The advantage of the method used in this research is the depth of data obtained through an ethnographic approach and triangulation. Ethnography allows researchers to understand cultural practices directly, while triangulation ensures the accuracy and reliability of the data. Thus, this research is expected to make a significant contribution to the understanding of the Sebar Apem tradition in Pengging, as well as enrich culinary and cultural studies in Indonesia more broadly.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Apem Distribution Event Series



The tradition of distributing apem (apem) in Pengging is held annually in the month of Shafar, as part of the Saparan ceremony. This tradition has deep historical roots, dating back to the reign of Raden Ngabei Yododipuro, who played a key role in the spread of Islam in the region. The origins of this tradition stem from Raden Ngabei's efforts to combat the golden snail infestation that was disrupting the villagers' rice harvest. In this context, ritual theory can be used to understand how the procession of distributing apem serves as a means of building a collective identity for the community. This ritual is not

merely ceremonial, but also creates a sense of togetherness and solidarity among residents, reflected in their active participation in every stage of the event. According to Turner (1969), this is particularly relevant here, as the tirakatan and kirab create a collective experience that transcends ordinary social structures, forming emotional bonds and a sense of shared belonging among residents. "Rituals have the ability to create 'community' among the individuals involved, and this is clearly seen in the tradition of distributing apem, where all levels of society contribute to the making and distribution of apem.

The tradition of distributing apem (apem) requires some preparation. The night before the event, the Pengging community holds a tirakatan (temple), which includes a tahlilan (recitation of the holy water) and communal prayers. This activity aims to convey prayers to Raden Ngabei and ask for the smooth running of the main event. During the tirakatan, residents bring apem and braised chicken, which are arranged on banana leaves. This reflects a sense of gratitude and togetherness, where food is presented as a symbol of the community's hopes. One informant, Mr. Saroyo (65 years old, an elderly villager), stated, "This tirakatan is very important to do, because it is a form of our gratitude and prayer that we will always be protected, and this tirakatan strengthens our sense of togetherness."

Following the tirakatan (temple), a procession is held as part of the apem (apem) distribution procession. This procession involves neatly arranged apem mountains and carried in procession by the community. This procession not only serves as a self-purification before starting the distribution of apem, but also serves as a form of celebration that includes local cultural performances, such as dance, drum bands, and reog (traditional dance). Thus, the procession becomes an important moment that strengthens the cultural identity of the Pengging community. Observations show high enthusiasm from residents, both those directly involved in the procession and those watching along the way, indicating that the procession is the anticipated peak of the celebration.

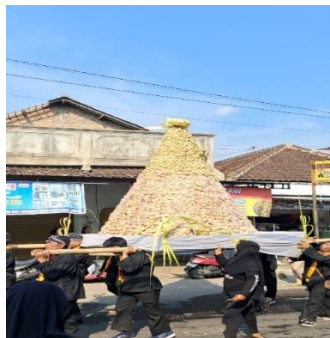
Philosophical and Religious Meaning



The round, snail-shaped apem cake holds rich symbolic meaning. In Barthes's semiotic analysis, the round shape of apem can be seen as a symbol of perfection and unity, reflecting the values of togetherness in society. Resta (2023) suggests that the shape and texture of apem cake represent the cycle of life and humility. This aligns with the view that traditional foods serve not only for physical consumption but also as a medium for conveying spiritual and social values. Thus, apem serves as a symbol of forgiveness (afwun) that connects humans with God and ancestors, creating a spiritual dimension that strengthens social relations among community members.

The word "apem" as a symbol of forgiveness in Javanese tradition is believed to be an expression of forgiveness to God for all sins and mistakes. For the Pengging community, apem is also an expression of gratitude and charity, where the activity of sharing apem reflects the act of sharing happiness. Mrs. Siti Sarofah (58 years old resident of Pengging) said "every time we make apem here, sincerely as an expression of gratitude and sharing sustenance. It feels happy and relieved when it has been distributed, seeing the people jostling for it." Apem cakes, which are round and snail-shaped, have rich symbolic meanings. In Barthes' semiotic analysis, the round shape of apem can be seen as a symbol of perfection and unity, which reflects the values of togetherness in society. In addition, apem shaped like a golden snail has a meaning that is closely related to the history of Raden Ngabei in overcoming the golden snail pest, thus symbolizing blessings, protection from danger, and hopes for an abundant harvest. Thus, this tradition not only maintains cultural heritage, but also contributes to the formation of a more cohesive and harmonious community.

Cultural Acculturation



From a cultural acculturation perspective, the apem tradition in Pengging demonstrates how Islamic and Javanese cultural values interact. The practice of distributing apem as a symbol of forgiveness is a manifestation of Islamic values, while the traditional procession involving all levels of society reflects a distinctive expression of Javanese culture (Mulder, 1998). This demonstrates that the Pengging community is able to internalize Islamic teachings into their local cultural structure, creating harmony between tradition and religion. This research aligns with Geertz's (1973) view that culture is a system of meaning constructed through social practices, and the tradition of distributing apem serves as a concrete example of how a society can integrate new values into existing cultural practices. A local religious leader, Kyai Ahmad (67 years old), explained, "This apem tradition is proof that Islam is rahmatan lil alamin (blessing for the universe), able to blend with local culture without losing the essence of the teachings but instead strengthening them."

Social Cohesion

The tradition of distributing apem (apem) also serves as a means to strengthen social cohesion within the community. The mutual cooperation activities of making and distributing apem reflect the values of togetherness and unity. According to Durkheim (in Luthi, 2025), collective rituals play a crucial role in creating social solidarity within the community. In this context, distributing apem is not merely a ritual event, but also a moment to strengthen relationships between residents, creating a sense of belonging and shared identity. Thus, this tradition not only preserves cultural heritage but also contributes to the formation of a more cohesive and harmonious community.

CONCLUSIONS

The tradition of spreading apem (apem cake) in Pengging Village, Boyolali, is a cultural manifestation rich in meaning, serving as a profound religious, social, and cultural medium in Javanese society. Apem cakes, with their symbolic meaning of forgiveness and perfection, are at the heart of an annual ritual that strengthens individuals' spiritual bonds with God and ancestors. Socially, this tradition encourages collective participation and mutual cooperation, effectively building and strengthening cohesion and solidarity among residents, creating a strong sense of togetherness. From a cultural perspective, the spread of apem demonstrates a harmonious acculturation between Islamic values and Javanese culture, where religious practices are integrated into distinctive traditional ceremonies. This research, through a qualitative approach and data triangulation, successfully uncovers the complexity and significance of this tradition as a marker of local identity, making an important contribution to the understanding of culinary and cultural practices in Indonesia.

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