



A Semiotic Analysis of the Manulak Sere Tradition in the Wedding Ceremony of the Batak Mandailing Tribe

Mirnawati Siregar^{1*}, Hafniati²

¹⁻²Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Jerman, Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: mirnasiregar2314@gmail.com

Abstract. Abstract. Indonesia is characterized by a rich cultural diversity, which includes various traditions with symbolic significance. One such tradition, which is still practiced today by the Batak-Mandailing community in the South Labuhanbatu Regency, is the “Manulak Sere” tradition, which forms part of the traditional wedding ceremony. The aim of this study is to identify the symbols used in the “Manulak Sere” tradition and to analyze their meanings based on Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotic theory. The study was conducted using a descriptive-qualitative method. Data were collected through observation, interviews with three traditional leaders representing the Mora, Kahanggi, and Anak Boru, and through documentation. The results identify fourteen symbols in the “Manulak Sere” tradition, namely Batang Boban/Mahar, Piring (plate), Kain Adat (traditional cloth), Beras Kuning (yellow rice), Keris, Uang Logam (coins), Silua/Oleh-oleh (souvenirs), Pulut Inti, Tepak, Napuran/Daun Sirih (betel leaves), Gambir, Kapur Siirh (betel lime), Pinang (areca nut), and Tembakau (tobacco). The analysis shows that each symbol has a signifier and a signified that represent cultural values such as responsibility, respect, cohesion, harmony, and counsel within the Batak Mandailing community. These findings contribute to the preservation of the cultural values embodied in the Manulak Sere tradition and enrich research on semiotics in local culture.

Keywords: Batak Mandailing; Ferdinand De Saussure; Manulak Sere; Semiotics; Symbol.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country with a diversity of ethnic groups, languages, and cultures that define the identity of each region. Every region has traditions passed down from generation to generation, embodying values that serve as guidelines for community life. Traditions not only serve as part of the culture but also act as a medium for passing down social and moral values, as well as a philosophy of life, to the next generation. Therefore, preserving traditions is a vital effort in safeguarding the nation’s cultural identity (Sari, 2022).

One tradition still upheld by the Batak Mandailing community in South Labuhanbatu Regency is the *Manulak Sere* tradition. This tradition is part of the Batak Mandailing traditional wedding ceremony, carried out through the presentation of the *Batang Boban* by the groom’s family to the bride’s family. In practice, the *Manulak Sere* tradition not only complements the traditional procession but also embodies various symbols that carry cultural significance and reflect the life philosophy of the Batak Mandailing people (Pandapotan, 2021:196).

Each traditional artifact used in the *Manulak Sere* tradition has a distinct form, function, and meaning. The symbols in the *Manulak Sere* tradition are not only used as ceremonial items but also represent the values of responsibility, respect, togetherness, harmony, and various cultural values passed down from generation to generation. However, as times have changed, the public’s understanding particularly among the younger generation of the meanings of these

symbols has begun to diminish, so that the tradition is often viewed merely as a series of ceremonies without an awareness of the values embedded within them.

To understand the meanings of these symbols, an approach is needed that can explain the relationship between a symbol's form and the meaning it represents. One theory that can be applied is Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics, which explains that every sign consists of two elements: the signifier and the signified. Through this theory, the meaning of each symbol in the *Manulak Sere* tradition can be systematically analyzed based on the relationship between the symbol's form and the concept it represents.

Based on this explanation, this study aims to identify the symbols found in the *Manulak Sere* tradition during traditional Batak Mandailing wedding ceremonies in South Labuhanbatu Regency and to analyze the meanings of these symbols based on Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Semiotics is the study of signs and the meanings they convey. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, semiotics is the study of the life of signs in society. Signs are not limited to language; they can also take the form of symbols, objects, actions, or various cultural expressions that carry specific meanings. Therefore, semiotics is used to understand how a sign conveys meaning to society (Saragih et al., 2024:44).

In Saussure's theory, a sign consists of two interrelated elements: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the physical form that can be seen, heard, or perceived by the five senses, while the signified is the concept or meaning understood from that form. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is conventional because it is formed based on societal agreement within a given culture. These two elements cannot be separated because together they form a system of signs that produces meaning (Atthallah, 2023).

Semiotics is used not only to analyze language but also the various cultural symbols that exist within society. Through a semiotic approach, the meaning contained within a symbol can be understood based on the relationship between the symbol's form and the concept it represents. Therefore, Ferdinand de Saussure's theory is widely used in cultural research because it systematically explains the meanings contained within cultural symbols (Hallet, 2022).

The *Manulak Sere* tradition is one of the rituals in the traditional Batak Mandailing wedding ceremony, carried out through the presentation of the *Batang Boban* and other traditional items from the groom's family to the bride's family. This tradition symbolizes

respect for the bride's family while reflecting responsibility, kinship ties, and the preservation of the cultural values of the Batak Mandailing community. The ceremony incorporates various traditional symbols, each carrying philosophical meanings passed down through generations (Pandapotan, 2021:196).

Based on this concept, this study employs Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics to analyze the relationship between the signifier and the signified in each symbol found within the *Manulak Sere* tradition. Through this theory, the meanings of the cultural symbols in the *Manulak Sere* tradition can be understood more systematically, thereby allowing the cultural values embedded within them to be explained scientifically.

3. METHODS

This study employs a descriptive method with a qualitative approach. This approach was chosen because the study aims to describe the symbols in the *Manulak Sere* tradition and analyze the meanings of these symbols based on Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics. The research was conducted in Bunut Village, Torgamba Subdistrict, South Labuhanbatu Regency, North Sumatra Province. This location was chosen because the community in the area still preserves the *Manulak Sere* tradition as part of the Batak Mandailing traditional wedding ceremony.

Research data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted by directly observing the performance of the *Manulak Sere* tradition. In-depth interviews were conducted with three traditional leaders representing the *mora*, *kahanggi*, and *anak boru* elements. In "*Mandailing dengan adatnya*" addition to the interview data, this study also utilized the book by Pandapotan (2021) as a supporting data source to strengthen the analysis results.

The data analysis technique involved identifying all symbols found in the *Manulak Sere* tradition and then grouping them based on the concepts of "signifier" and "signified" in Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics. Subsequently, each symbol was analyzed to uncover the cultural meanings it contains, based on the results of observations, interviews, and documentation, and supported by relevant literature. The results of the analysis are then presented descriptively to provide an understanding of the meanings of the symbols in the *Manulak Sere* tradition.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The *Manulak Sere* tradition is one of a series of traditional Batak Mandailing wedding ceremonies still practiced by the community in Bunut Village, Torgamba Subdistrict, South Labuhanbatu Regency. This tradition is carried out as a form of respect from the groom's family to the bride's family through the presentation of the Batang Boban along with traditional items agreed upon by both parties. In addition to being part of the traditional procession, each item used holds symbolic meaning that reflects the cultural values of the Batak Mandailing people (Pandapotan, 2021:196).

Based on observations, interviews, and documentation, fourteen symbols were identified in the *Manulak Sere* tradition: the *Batang Boban/Mahar*, *Piring* (plate), *Kain Adat* (traditional cloth), *Beras Kuning* (yellow rice), *Keris*, *Uang Logam* (coins), *Silua/Oleh-oleh* (souvenirs), *Pulut Inti*, *Tepak*, *Napuran/Daun Sirih* (betel leaves), *Gambir*, *Kapur Siirh* (betel lime), *Pinang* (areca nut), and *Tembakau* (tobacco). Next, these fourteen symbols were analyzed using Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics through two main elements: the signifier and the signified.

Table 1. Analysis of the Symbols of the Manulak Sere Tradition Based on Ferdinand de Saussure's Theory of Semiotics.

Signifier	Signified	Picture
<i>Batang Boban/Mahar</i> : <i>Batang Boban</i> is a dowry consisting of money, gold, a set of bridal accessories, and clothing given to the bride's relatives in accordance with customary agreements made prior to the ceremony.	<i>Batang Boban</i> symbolizes the man's sincerity and responsibility in proposing to a woman, as a sign of respect for her family and a way to soothe their hearts so that they may wholeheartedly allow their daughter to become part of the man's family.	
<i>Piring</i> (plate): <i>Piring</i> (plate) is used to hold the money or sere (gold) that will be presented to the bride's family during the <i>Manulak Sere</i> ceremony.	A plate symbolizes respect for the recipient. The use of a plate indicates that the presentation is made with courtesy, good manners, and respect in accordance with custom.	
<i>Kain Adat</i> (traditional cloth) : <i>Kain Adat</i> (traditional cloth used to wrap the tepak, one of the items used in the community's traditional wedding ceremonies Mandailing.	Traditional cloth symbolizes authority and holds magical and religious significance; the Mandailing people regard it as part of their cultural identity, passed down from generation to generation.	

Beras Kuning (yellow rice):
Beras Kuning (yellow rice) is rice that has been dyed yellow and is used as one of the items in the *Manulak Sere* tradition.

Yellow rice symbolizes gold, which represents glory, blessings, and something of great value and significance in the lives of the Mandailing people.



Keris:
The *keris* consists of two pairs: a *keris* with a curved hilt, symbolizing the male, and a *keris* shaped like a gaping snake's mouth, symbolizing the female.

The *keris* symbolizes the continued existence of a customary debt whose value cannot be measured in material terms. The *keris* serves as collateral, the repayment of which is realized through harmonious family relationships marked by mutual respect and affection.



Uang Logam (Coins):
Uang Logam (coins) were distributed directly to everyone present in equal amounts.

Coins symbolize the bonds of family, togetherness, and brotherhood, and serve as a reminder of the traditional ceremonies that have been witnessed together. Coins were chosen because they are more durable, ensuring that these traditional ceremonies will be remembered for a long time.



Silua/Oleh-oleh (souvenirs):
Silua (souvenirs) consisting of rice and side dishes placed in a lunchbox and brought by the groom's family to the bride's family's home.

Souvenirs symbolizes the generosity of the man toward the woman's family, as well as the hope that all goals, good intentions, and desires may be achieved and granted.



Pulut Inti:
Pulut Inti is a traditional dish made from glutinous rice cooked with coconut meat and served during traditional ceremonies.

Pulut Inti symbolizes the hope that all the outcomes of the discussions, deliberations, and agreements between the two parties will remain close to our hearts and continue to be upheld together.



Tepak:

A *tepak* is a container used to store *Daun Sirih* (betel leaves) and their accompaniments: *gambir*, *Kapur Sirih* (betel lime), *Pinang* (areca nut), and *tembakau* (tobacco).

The *tepak* symbolizes a place to preserve the advice and teachings conveyed during traditional ceremonies.



Napuran/Daun Sirih (betel leaves):

Napuran (betel leaves) are used as traditional ceremonial accessories and are durable, resistant to damage, and do not wilt easily.

Betel leaves symbolizes steadfastness, strength, and commitment to upholding the results of deliberations and the consensus reached jointly by both parties.



Gambir:

Gambir is a sap-producing, creeping plant; after being harvested and sun-dried, it turns white and is used as an accompaniment to betel.

Gambir symbolizes the human lungs.



Kapur Sirih (Betel lime):

Kapur Sirih (betel lime) is a powder made from shells that are burned to charcoal and then ground into a fine powder; it is used as an accompaniment to betel.

Betel lime symbolizes the human spleen.



Pinang (Areca nut):

Pinang (areca nut) is the fruit of the areca palm, a tall plant resembling a coconut tree but with a smaller trunk, and is used as an accompaniment to betel leaf.

Areca nut symbolizes the human heart.



Tembakau (Tobacco):

Tembakau (tobacco) consists of tobacco leaves that are sliced, then sun-dried, and used as an accompaniment to betel in the *Manulak Sere* tradition.

Tobacco symbolizes human bile.



After analysis using Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics, all symbols in the *Manulak Sere* tradition reveal a close relationship between the signifier and the signified. The signifier is embodied in the traditional regalia used during the procession, while the signified is the meaning understood and passed down by the Mandailing Batak community through the use of these symbols.

The results of the analysis show that most symbols in the *Manulak Sere* tradition represent the values of respect, responsibility, togetherness, and harmony. The *Batang Boban/Mahar*, *Piring* (plate), and *Kain Adat* (traditional cloth) symbolize respect and appreciation for the bride's family. *Beras Kuning* (yellow rice), *Keris*, *Uang Logam* (coins), *Silua/Oleh-oleh* (souvenirs), and *Pulut Inti* reflect hopes for a harmonious family life, full of blessings, and grounded in strong family bonds. Meanwhile, the *Tepak* and *Napuran/Daun Sirih* (betel leaves) convey the importance of advice, commitment, and steadfastness in upholding the outcomes of collective deliberations that have been mutually agreed upon.

In addition, *Gambir*, *Kapur Sirih* (betel lime), *Pinang* (areca nut), and *Tembakau* (tobacco) hold unique significance because they are associated with the human organs—namely, the lungs, spleen, heart, and gallbladder. These symbols illustrate that human life must be lived in a balanced, wise, and complementary manner, just as each organ in the body functions. This demonstrates that the *Manulak Sere* tradition serves not only as a series of traditional ceremonies but also as a medium for conveying life values passed down from generation to generation.

Based on this analysis, it can be understood that the symbols in the *Manulak Sere* tradition exhibit a clear relationship between signifier and signified, as explained in Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics. Through these symbols, the Mandailing Batak people convey various cultural values that serve as guidelines for community life and reinforce a cultural identity that has been preserved to this day.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study successfully identified fourteen symbols used in the *Manulak Sere* tradition during traditional Batak Mandailing wedding ceremonies in South Labuhanbatu Regency, namely *Batang Boban/Mahar*, *Piring* (plate), *Kain Adat* (traditional cloth), *Beras Kuning* (yellow rice), *Keris*, *Uang Logam* (coins), *Silua/Oleh-oleh* (souvenirs), *Pulut Inti*, *Tepak*, *Napuran/Daun Sirih* (betel leaves), *Gambir*, *Kapur Siirh* (betel lime), *Pinang* (areca nut), and *Tembakau* (tobacco). These fourteen symbols constitute traditional ritual items that serve specific functions and hold cultural significance in the practice of the *Manulak Sere* tradition.

Based on an analysis using Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiotics, each symbol involves a relationship between the signifier and the signified. The meanings contained within these symbols represent the cultural values of the Mandailing Batak people, such as respect, responsibility, solidarity, harmony, commitment, and life lessons passed down through generations. The research findings indicate that the symbols in the *Manulak Sere* tradition serve not only as ceremonial regalia but also as a medium for conveying the cultural values and identity of the Batak Mandailing community. This study is expected to serve as a reference in the study of semiotics and Mandailing Batak culture and to support efforts to preserve the *Manulak Sere* tradition. Future research is expected to further develop the study of this tradition by examining different objects, locations, or approaches, thereby enriching the study of Mandailing Batak culture.

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