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The Symbolic Meaning of Traditional Cuisine in the Mongaruwa Tradition among the Gorontalo Community

(Makna Simbolik Kuliner Tradisional dalam Tradisi Mongaruwa pada Masyarakat Gorontalo)

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Abstract

This study aims to explore and describe the symbolic meanings of traditional cuisine in the Mongaruwa tradition among the Gorontalo community. A qualitative approach with a descriptive design was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of cultural practices embedded in traditional food. Data were collected through literature review, cultural observation, and documentation of several traditional foods, including Bajoe, Tiliaya, Nasi Kuning, Bilindi, Lutu, and Watingo. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and underlying meanings. The findings reveal that traditional foods in the Mongaruwa tradition embody important cultural values such as togetherness, gratitude, prosperity, and respect for guests and family. Each type of food carries symbolic meanings that reflect the social and cultural norms of the Gorontalo community. Furthermore, the tradition shows how traditional cuisine functions as a medium for preserving and transmitting local wisdom across generations. In conclusion, traditional cuisine in the Mongaruwa tradition not only serves a consumptive purpose but also represents a meaningful cultural expression that supports identity and continuity.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi dan mendeskripsikan makna simbolik kuliner tradisional dalam tradisi Mongaruwa pada masyarakat Gorontalo. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain deskriptif untuk memperoleh pemahaman mendalam mengenai praktik budaya yang terkandung dalam makanan tradisional. Data dikumpulkan melalui studi literatur, observasi budaya, dan dokumentasi terhadap beberapa jenis makanan tradisional, seperti Bajoe, Tiliaya, Nasi Kuning, Bilindi, Lutu, dan Watingo. Data tersebut dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola yang berulang dan makna yang mendasarinya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa makanan tradisional dalam tradisi Mongaruwa mengandung nilai-nilai budaya penting seperti kebersamaan, rasa syukur, kemakmuran, serta penghormatan terhadap tamu dan keluarga. Setiap jenis makanan memiliki makna simbolik yang mencerminkan norma sosial dan budaya masyarakat Gorontalo. Selain itu, tradisi ini menunjukkan bahwa kuliner tradisional berfungsi sebagai media dalam melestarikan dan mentransmisikan kearifan lokal antar generasi. Kesimpulannya, kuliner tradisional dalam tradisi Mongaruwa tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai pemenuhan kebutuhan konsumsi, tetapi juga sebagai ekspresi budaya yang bermakna serta mendukung identitas dan keberlanjutan budaya masyarakat.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Culture plays a fundamental role in shaping the identity and character of a community; however, it should not be understood as a static entity. Instead, culture is continuously constructed and negotiated through everyday practices, including food consumption. In this regard, traditional cuisine cannot be reduced to a mere cultural artifact, as it actively participates in the production and reproduction of social meanings. Food functions not only to fulfill biological needs but also as a symbolic medium through which values, identities, and collective memories are expressed within a community (Trisutaguna et al., 2025; Ulijaszek, 2024). Within the Indonesian context, the role of food in customary ceremonies reflects a complex interplay between tradition, symbolism, and social structure. Traditional dishes are not merely served as part of ritual obligations but function as cultural texts that convey meanings such as gratitude, unity, prosperity, and social harmony. These practices are embedded in systems of local knowledge that regulate not only what is consumed but also how and why it is presented. Previous studies have emphasized that traditional cuisine embodies local wisdom and cultural values (Wardana & Setiarto, 2024). Furthermore, food symbolism operates within broader cultural systems in which meanings are socially constructed and interpreted through ritual and tradition (Khamimiya & Sudrajat, 2023).

From an anthropological perspective, food serves as a form of cultural communication that reflects and shapes social relationships. Culinary practices are structured by cultural norms and social relations that influence how meanings are produced and interpreted. Food is deeply interconnected with broader cultural systems, indicating that its symbolic functions cannot be separated from the social environment in which it exists (Parrish et al., 2025). Therefore, analyzing traditional cuisine requires moving beyond descriptive accounts toward a deeper interpretation of its symbolic and cultural functions. Despite the growing body of literature on traditional cuisine and cultural symbolism, several limitations remain evident. Many previous studies tend to focus on traditional food as cultural heritage or tourism, without providing an in-depth analysis of its symbolic meanings within specific cultural contexts. In addition, existing research often presents generalized discussions of Indonesian traditional cuisine, with limited attention to particular local traditions. These limitations indicate a lack of contextual and interpretative studies that explore how symbolic meanings are constructed and sustained within local communities.

The Mongaruwa tradition in the Gorontalo community represents a cultural practice in which traditional cuisine plays a central role. Foods such as Bajoe, Tiliaya, Nasi Kuning, Bilindi, Lutu, and Watingo are not only culinary elements but also cultural symbols that reflect values of togetherness, gratitude, prosperity, and respect for guests and family. The use of these foods is deliberate, as each dish carries specific symbolic meanings that reinforce social values and cultural identity. This study addresses the existing research gap by focusing on the symbolic meanings of traditional cuisine within the Mongaruwa tradition. The novelty of this research lies in its emphasis on interpreting traditional cuisine as a dynamic cultural medium rather than merely a cultural product. Accordingly, this study aims to examine and interpret the symbolic meanings of traditional cuisine in the Mongaruwa tradition among the Gorontalo community. This article is organized as follows. The introduction presents the research background, significance, and objectives. The next section reviews relevant literature, followed by the methodology. The findings and discussion analyze the symbolic meanings of traditional cuisine, and the article concludes with conclusions and recommendations.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive design to explore the symbolic meanings embedded in traditional cuisine within the community's cultural context. This approach is considered appropriate as it enables an in-depth understanding of culturally constructed meanings, allowing the researcher to interpret how traditional foods function not only as material objects but also as carriers of social values and local wisdom within the Mongaruwa tradition. Through this approach, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive and contextualized interpretation of cultural practices related to traditional cuisine.

The data sources in this study consist of multiple forms of qualitative evidence to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research context. These include literature related to Gorontalo culture and customs, which provides a theoretical and cultural foundation for the study. In addition, documentation of traditional Gorontalo cuisine is utilized to identify the types and characteristics of foods associated with the Mongaruwa tradition. Furthermore, data are drawn from cultural practices within the Mongaruwa tradition itself, offering contextual insights into how traditional cuisine is presented and interpreted within the community. The use of these diverse data sources allows the study to capture both conceptual and contextual dimensions of the research topic.

The data were gathered through a combination of qualitative techniques to ensure depth and contextual understanding. To begin with, an extensive review of relevant literature was conducted to explore existing knowledge on Gorontalo cultural practices and traditional cuisine. This process helped to establish a theoretical basis for interpreting the symbolic meanings of food. In addition, direct observation of cultural activities was undertaken to capture how traditional foods are utilized and interpreted within the Mongaruwa tradition. Through observation, the researcher was able to document the presentation and use of traditional cuisine in its natural setting. Moreover, documentary evidence, including photographs, field notes, and written records, was examined to complement and substantiate the findings derived from the other data collection methods. The combination of these techniques enabled the researcher to obtain rich and detailed data relevant to the research objectives.

Data analysis in this study followed an interactive model consisting of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. First, data reduction was carried out by selecting, organizing, and simplifying the collected data to focus on relevant information related to the symbolic meanings of traditional cuisine in the Mongaruwa tradition. At this stage, unnecessary or unrelated data were excluded, while key themes and patterns were identified to support further analysis. Second, the reduced data were systematically presented through data display. This process involved organizing the information into descriptive narratives and thematic categories to facilitate interpretation and to clearly illustrate the relationships between different symbolic meanings and cultural values. The organization of data in this form allowed for a clearer understanding of how traditional cuisine functions within the cultural context of the Gorontalo community. Finally, conclusions were drawn through an interpretative process in which the researcher examined the patterns and meanings emerging from the data. This stage also involved verifying the consistency of the findings to ensure their validity. Through this process, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how traditional cuisine functions as a symbolic and cultural system within the Mongaruwa tradition in the Gorontalo community.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that traditional cuisine in the Mongaruwa tradition embodies rich symbolic meanings that reflect the cultural values and social structures of the Gorontalo community. The data indicate that each type of food is not merely consumed for sustenance but also functions as a cultural medium through which shared meanings are constructed, expressed, and maintained within the community. This finding supports the view that food extends beyond its biological function and operates as a powerful social and cultural symbol embedded in human life (Patra, 2022). In many cultural contexts, food serves as a marker of identity, a form of communication, and a means of strengthening social relationships. In line with this perspective, the traditional dishes in the Mongaruwa tradition represent collective beliefs, social norms, and cultural continuity. Therefore, the discussion below elaborates on how each traditional food embodies specific symbolic meanings that contribute to the preservation and expression of local cultural identity.

3.1 Symbolic Meaning of Bajoe

Bajoe is a traditional food commonly served during customary events in the Gorontalo community and functions as a symbol of togetherness and collective gratitude for sustenance. Empirical observations indicate that its presence in communal gatherings reflects a deeply embedded cultural practice of sharing, where food is distributed and consumed collectively. This practice extends beyond fulfilling material needs, as it actively reinforces social bonds and promotes communal harmony. The act of sharing Bajoe signifies mutual appreciation and interconnectedness, emphasizing the role of collective participation in sustaining social relationships within the community. These findings indicate that food is not merely consumed for nourishment but also plays an important role as a symbolic medium through which cultural values and social relationships are constructed and maintained (Maulana et al., 2025). In this sense, traditional cuisine embodies local wisdom that preserves collective identity and transmits shared meanings across generations (Trisutaguna et al., 2025). Furthermore, the concept of commensality highlights how shared eating practices contribute to trust-building and social cohesion among individuals (Michopoulou & Jauniškis, 2020).

However, this interpretation should not be viewed as universally fixed. Communal food practices may change over time due to social change, modernization, and different ways people interact. In certain

contexts, participation in such practices may be influenced by social roles, generational differences, or changing lifestyles. Therefore, while Bajoe strongly represents togetherness and gratitude, its symbolic meaning remains dynamic and context-dependent rather than entirely stable across time and social settings.

3.2 Symbolic Meaning of Tiliaya

Tiliaya, a traditional sweet dish in the Gorontalo community, is strongly associated with the idea of a harmonious and prosperous family life. Its sweetness is not only perceived as a taste but also understood as a symbol of happiness, emotional balance, and positive relationships within the family. This means that taste, in this case, works as a kind of "language" used by the community to express important social values. The frequent use of Tiliaya in traditional ceremonies also strengthens its role as a symbol of shared hopes and continuity across generations. This is line with previous studies which state that food used in traditional events often represents collective values and social expectations, especially those related to harmony and stability in family life (Han, 2023). In addition, food practices can function as a way to communicate cultural beliefs and maintain emotional connections among community members (Cheng, 2023). Therefore, Tiliaya is not just a type of food, but also a cultural medium that helps preserve and express shared meanings within the community.

However, it is important to note that the meaning of food symbols is not always fixed. Sathya et al. (2024) explain that food can have different meanings depending on context, including connections to social status, power, and even cultural tensions. In this context, the sweetness of Tiliaya may not always be seen as harmony by everyone, but could also reflect social expectations about what an ideal family should be like. Therefore, the meaning of Tiliaya should be understood as flexible and influenced by social and cultural conditions. This shows that cultural meanings are not always the same for everyone, but can change over time and across situations.

3.3 Symbolic Meaning of Nasi Kuning

Nasi Kuning in the Gorontalo tradition is closely associated with prosperity, blessings, and gratitude for life granted by God. Its consistent presence in ceremonial contexts reflects collective expressions of thankfulness and hopes for well-being within the community. Its distinctive yellow color, commonly associated with gold, signifies wealth, glory, and divine favor, thereby reinforcing its symbolic role within cultural practices. This visual representation further demonstrates how material elements, such as color, function as carriers of meaning shaped by shared cultural beliefs. From a theoretical perspective, these findings align with the notion that food operates not only as sustenance but also as a medium of cultural and spiritual expression. Michopoulou and Jauniškis (2020) argue that food is closely related to "lived religion," where spiritual values are expressed through everyday practices rather than abstract beliefs.

In this context, the use of Nasi Kuning in ritual practices reflects how spirituality is expressed through tangible cultural actions. The processes of preparing, presenting, and sharing this dish represent lived expressions of gratitude and devotion within the community. This finding aligns with anthropological perspectives that view ritual food as a medium for communicating religious beliefs and social values (Parrish et al., 2025). Moreover, studies on Indonesian ceremonial cuisine demonstrate that rice-based dishes often carry symbolic meanings related to prosperity, harmony, and cultural continuity, particularly in ritual contexts (Lubis et al., 2025). This indicates that the symbolic role of Nasi Kuning is not only rooted in its visual appearance, such as its yellow color, but also in broader cultural systems that connect food with belief, identity, and social structure. While Han (2023) supports the idea that food in rituals embodies culturally constructed meanings, the Indonesian context further emphasizes the importance of local interpretation. Therefore, Nasi Kuning functions as a cultural mechanism that preserves and transmits values across generations, although its meanings may evolve across different social contexts.

3.4 Symbolic Meaning of Bilindi

Bilindi, as a traditional food in the Gorontalo community, represents simplicity and togetherness in everyday social life. Its modest preparation and presentation reflect deeply rooted cultural values of humility, showing that meaningful social relationships are not defined by material abundance but by shared experiences, mutual respect, and emotional connection. This suggests that simplicity functions not merely as an aesthetic aspect but also as a guiding cultural principle that prioritizes substance over appearance in maintaining social harmony and collective well-being. Bilindi represents a significant form of cultural expression through which values of solidarity, equality, and communal living are continuously reinforced and practiced within the community.

This interpretation aligns with previous studies suggesting that traditional food embodies rich symbolic meanings, functioning as a representation of shared identity, collective belonging, and socio-cultural cohesion within a community (Nadra et al., 2025). In addition, traditional cuisine has been widely understood as an important cultural medium that strengthens social cohesion through both everyday practices and ritual occasions across different cultural settings. Supporting this view, previous studies highlight that food functions as a cultural symbol that reflects identity, heritage, and a sense of belonging, where culinary

practices play an important role in shaping and maintaining social relationships within communities (Trisutaguna et al., 2025).

However, not all perspectives fully support this harmonious interpretation. Previous research also suggests that food can act as a marker of social distinction, reflecting differences in social class, lifestyle, and cultural identity, and thereby shaping boundaries within society (Boutaud et al., 2016). In multicultural or rapidly changing social contexts, food practices may simultaneously connect and divide communities, depending on how they are represented, interpreted, and experienced by different groups. Therefore, while Bilindi reflects values of simplicity and togetherness, its symbolic meaning should also be understood within broader and more complex social dynamics, where food can both promote cohesion and highlight distinctions. This indicates that traditional cuisine operates as a dynamic cultural medium, embodying both integrative and differentiating functions within society, and suggests that simplicity may also reflect underlying social and cultural positioning.

3.5 Symbolic Meaning of Lutu

Within the Gorontalo community, Lutu is widely recognized not only as a traditional dish but also as a meaningful cultural symbol that reflects family unity and social cohesion in everyday life. The findings demonstrate that the significance of Lutu lies primarily in the social processes surrounding it rather than in the food itself as a material object. Its preparation often involves collaborative efforts, where family members actively participate in various stages of cooking, creating a shared experience that strengthens interpersonal connections and reinforces a sense of belonging. This collective involvement transforms the act of cooking into a meaningful and interactive social activity that fosters cooperation, mutual support, and emotional closeness among participants. Moreover, the practice of consuming Lutu together further reinforces these social ties in a more visible and sustained manner. Sharing food in a communal setting encourages interaction, mutual appreciation, and a sense of inclusion, all of which are essential elements in maintaining harmonious and stable relationships within the community. Here, Lutu functions as a cultural medium through which values of togetherness, solidarity, and collective identity are continuously enacted and reproduced in everyday social practices.

This interpretation is supported by studies suggesting that food-related practices provide a social arena where identities and relationships are negotiated and sustained through shared experiences and interactions (Arcadu & Migliorini, 2025). Additionally, traditional foods play an important role in maintaining cultural continuity, as they carry embedded meanings and values that are passed down across generations (Pugra et al., 2025). However, it is also important to recognize that such communal practices may not be equally experienced by all individuals, as participation can be shaped by social roles, generational differences, and group dynamics within the community. In some cases, certain individuals may have more active roles than others, which can influence their sense of inclusion. Despite these variations, Lutu remains a strong representation of collective identity, highlighting how food can serve as both a social connector and a cultural anchor within the community, even though participation in such practices may not equally involve all community members.

3.6 Symbolic Meaning of Watingo

Watingo plays a significant role in the Gorontalo community as a traditional dish associated with showing respect to guests and family members. Its presence in customary events reflects a strong cultural norm where offering food becomes a meaningful gesture of honor, acceptance, and social recognition. More than just a type of food, Watingo functions as a symbolic practice that helps build and strengthen relationships between hosts and guests, reinforcing social bonds and mutual respect within the community. The practice of serving Watingo is strongly linked to the cultural value of hospitality, reflecting respect, generosity, and the importance of maintaining social relationships within the community. Providing food in communal settings creates opportunities for interaction, where social relationships are initiated, maintained, and continuously reaffirmed through shared experiences. This supports broader perspectives suggesting that food plays a central role in mediating social relationships, particularly in societies where hospitality functions as a key cultural practice (Han, 2023). In addition, communal food traditions often embody values of generosity, respect, and mutual care, contributing to the maintenance of social harmony and cohesion within the community (Cheng, 2023).

However, hospitality practices are not always neutral or purely voluntary, as they may also reflect implicit social expectations and cultural obligations that influence individual behavior. In some cases, the act of offering food may be shaped by norms that require individuals to conform to established social roles. Despite this, traditional foods are widely understood as expressions of respect and belonging, while also serving as important media for transmitting shared values and preserving cultural identity across generations (Lin et al., 2021).

More broadly, the findings of this study demonstrate that traditional cuisines in the Mongaruwa tradition function not merely as sources of sustenance but as complex cultural systems through which values,

beliefs, and social relationships are continuously constructed and maintained. Through processes of preparation, presentation, and collective consumption, these foods actively contribute to the transmission of cultural knowledge and the reinforcement of communal identity. This study contributes to the field of cultural and gastronomic studies by demonstrating that food symbolism in the Mongaruwa tradition operates as a dynamic cultural system shaped by social interaction, belief systems, and local wisdom. Unlike previous studies that primarily focus on general food symbolism, this research highlights the contextual specificity of Gorontalo culture, offering a more localized understanding of how traditional cuisine functions as both a social connector and a cultural transmitter.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS/RECOMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusion

Traditional cuisine in the Mongaruwa tradition embodies significant symbolic meanings within the social and cultural life of the Gorontalo community. Foods such as Bajoe, Tiliaya, Nasi Kuning, Bilindi, Lutu, and Watingo function not merely as culinary items but also as cultural media that represent and transmit essential values, including togetherness, gratitude, prosperity, and respect for guests and family. These findings indicate that each type of traditional food carries specific symbolic meanings that are closely related to the social and cultural norms upheld by the community. Furthermore, the existence of these symbolic meanings demonstrates that traditional cuisine plays an important role in expressing and maintaining social relationships within the Mongaruwa tradition. Through the preparation, presentation, and consumption of these foods, cultural values are continuously communicated and reinforced among community members. In this case, food serves not only as a physical necessity but also as a cultural medium that reflects shared beliefs and practices.

In addition, the values embedded in traditional cuisine reflect the local wisdom that shapes and sustains the identity of the Gorontalo community. The Mongaruwa tradition illustrates how cultural practices are preserved through symbolic representations that are meaningful to the community. The continuity of these practices depends on the consistent transmission of values across generations. In conclusion, traditional cuisine in the Mongaruwa tradition functions as a meaningful cultural expression that integrates symbolic, social, and cultural dimensions. Therefore, preserving these culinary practices is essential to ensure the sustainability of cultural heritage and to maintain the transmission of important values to future generations.

4.2 Suggestions/Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several recommendations are proposed. First, it is important for the community to maintain and preserve traditional culinary practices within the Mongaruwa tradition, as these foods serve not only as cultural heritage but also as a medium for transmitting essential values such as togetherness, gratitude, and respect. The continuity of these practices is necessary to sustain the cultural identity of the Gorontalo community.

Second, cultural preservation efforts should be supported through documentation and promotion of traditional cuisine, so that the symbolic meanings embedded in these foods can be better understood and appreciated by younger generations. This may help ensure that local wisdom is not only maintained but also continuously practiced in daily and ceremonial contexts.

Finally, future research is recommended to explore traditional cuisine in other cultural traditions or regions in order to provide broader insights into the role of food as a symbolic and cultural system. Further studies may also examine how these cultural values are interpreted and practiced across different generations.

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