

## An Analysis of the Meaning of Apem in Java: Semiotics Analysis

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### Abstract

For generations, kue apem has been widely known as part of Indonesian hors d'oeuvre tradition, particularly for the Javanese. In the earlier times, the famous snack was often served in receptions or for ritual ceremonies. Today, kue apem has slowly been replaced by the more trending and modern cakes and bakeries coming from different countries that leads to the rarity and familiarity of the snack for newer generation. This phenomenon is believed to be caused by the rapid movement of global cultures that has alternated the paradigm and dietary habit of Indonesian people including the out-of-date perception of serving and having traditional meals. Kue apem as a cultural heritage carries local genius meanings that should be preserved. This research is an analysis in cultural problems that involve humans, activities and objects in naturalistic condition, approached with qualitative descriptive method. Results show that in general the younger generation of the Javanese are not familiar with kue apem neither are they aware of the meaning. On the other hand, the older generation still serves the cake as part of the rituals. The efforts for revitalizing kue apem are resorted by varying the choice of fillings and toppings decorated in assorted colors and attractive presentations in order to catch more attention from the young generation. Preserving kue apem eventually becomes an important action to prevent the national culture and identity from declining due to the abundance of foreign culinary coming to the country that may endanger the existence of local tradition.

**Keywords** : *Meaning and revilatization, Indonesia tradition kue apem, younger, eventually, modern*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Language occupies a special place in a culture. Apart from being one of the elements of culture, language also functions as the most important means in the inheritance, development and delivery or dissemination of a cultural system. On the other hand Noam Chomsky (1957) said the idea that all languages contain similar structures and rules (a universal grammar), and the fact that children everywhere acquire language the same way, and without much effort, seems to indicate that we're born wired with the basics already present in our brains. Children are born with all of

the structures necessary to create language and that they instinctively know how to use them. Each child has the ability to acquire further language and structures because the categories for language already exist within their brains and language is a natural object, a component of the human mind, physically represented in the brain and part of the biological endowment of the species.

Culture is activity that continues to grow from year to year, time to time, and never disappears and is always preserved for generations. Everything will die but culture will always live. Ferdinand de Saussure to assert that the meaning of cultural elements is fundamentally arbitrary and that signs gain meaning only through relations of opposition to other signs. Culture is constituted by the relations between different classes and groups bounded by structural forces and material conditions and informed by a range of experiences mediated, in part, by the power exercised by a dominant society (Hendry Giroux 1983), one of the cultures that continue to develop from generation to generation is the culture of Indonesia.

Indonesia has a huge selection of traditional snacks that are very close to the people. Many traditional snacks can be found in various regions in Indonesia and they vary greatly. There are many types of snacks ranging from quick breads and yeast products. Light snacks that are often eaten for a temporary meal before eating heavy food or food eaten while relaxing, one of which is traditional apem. The main ingredient used to make traditional apem is yeast. Similar to tape, ragi can also make apem more fluffy and puffy. Traditional apem adorns various events that are still often carried out by the community so that this traditional cake is timeless. Since ancient times until now, traditional apem has become one of the cakes that has never become extinct and appears with various new creations.

Traditional apem is favored by the public, this sweet and delicious cake is popular from children to adults. As part of tradition, traditional apem has been widely presented as a medium of communication to convey messages, intentions, ethics and moral teachings in human relationships with God and fellow humans. Javanese people often use traditional apem as one of the cakes that cannot be missed in various events in the community, ranging from traditional events, welcoming Ramadan, thanksgiving, sending prayers and others.

According to Koentjaraningrat (1996) as an anthropologist agrees everyone that each region has a distinctive and unique culture, which can be similar or completely different from other

region and on the other hand, David Henley as a geographer and Indonesianist with a background in education, explains that culture in Indonesian terms is understood as something that organizes the lives of traditional people so as to achieve a calm, harmonious and peaceful life. Therefore, it can be interpreted that the people of Java have a unique culture for a long time. One example is the traditional apem which relate between language and culture.

However, some of the outsiders who visit Java do not know the meaning contained in the apem cake, to preserve the meaning that exists in traditional apem is by continuing to pass on this culture to the next generation and this is one of the objectives of this research so that the meaning contained in traditional apem remains channeled in the future. In other words, traditional apem can also be a means of communication between people. The way Javanese communicate with traditional apem cakes is one of the cultures that must be held tightly. **3.2 History of Traditional Apem Cake**

There are many versions of the origin of apem cake, one of which is that apem was introduced by Ki Ageng Gribig, a descendant of Prabu Brawijaya who returned from a trip and brought 3 apem cakes. He wanted to share apem cake with everyone but it was lacking so Ki Ageng's wife recreated this cake using Indonesian ingredients and flavors, then they distributed the apem cakes to the surrounding community.

#### **Point of View on Apem**

Point of view is how the perspective or position of someone who will capture and then explain what he has experienced or seen. With that statement the point of view of ordinary people and Javanese about traditional apem is different. From this research, the writer can identify that traditional apem has a different meaning when viewed by ordinary people and native Javanese.

#### **Ordinary People**

While ordinary people see apem they will feel the unique shape of apem. From various shapes and colors but apem has a dominant white color makes them curious about the taste. Then when they start eating apem what they think about for the first time is the savory, delicious, sour taste, which mixes together and then leaves a sweet mark on the mouth. Sometimes they look at the appearance of the apem and then don't eat it because they only admire its cute shape.

## **Javanese**

The apem tradition is a culture commonly practiced by Javanese people as a medium of communication to offer prayers to the almighty to bless their good intentions. Apem is also interpreted as a symbol that humans can always forgive the mistakes of others against themselves (a symbol of forgiveness of various mistakes) and is also interpreted as a determination to ask for protection from God.

In the Javanese point of view when holding a prayer event for the deceased, apem has a meaning as a pillow for the deceased in the grave. Apem in the event of giving prayers to the deceased is often juxtaposed with banana and nagasari (nogosari), they also have their own meaning, banana which have meaning as an umbrella that will be given to the deceased to cross the river in the grave and nagasari (nogosari) which has meaning as a walking stick.

## **Process of Traditional Apem Cake**

Before getting into the process of making a pem, there are several ingredients used to make apem, including; rice flour, diluted coconut milk, granulated sugar, coconut water, egg, milk powder (optional), screwpine leaf, and salt. There also several biang ingredients, including; warm water, instant yeast (tape, if you already use instant yeast you don't need to use tape), wheat flour, granulated sugar.

The writer also got one of the findings, that is the process of making it from sources who came from Java. Therefore it can be explained that the way to make apem are; (1) bring the coconut milk, salt, and screwpine leaf to a boil. Stir continuously so that the coconut milk does not break. Remove and let stand until the temperature drops; (2) mix all biang ingredients, then let stand for 15 minutes or until bubbly; (3) mix rice flour, eggs, sugar, milk powder, and ingredients. Pour in warm coconut milk little by little. Stir well until there are no more lumps and bubbles; (4) close the dough container with a clean cloth, then let it rest for about 1 hour for the development process; (5) heat the apem mold with medium heat. Pour the batter into the mold, then press and twist slightly to form a lace. Close the mold for perfect cooking; (6) to check for doneness, you can stick a skewer into the apem. (7) and then for the last, after cooked let apem stand until the temperature drops before serving it.

The processes described using Javanese and the writer will interpretation them;

No	Verb / Nomina			Activity
	Javanese	Bahasa	English	
1.	Didang	Merebus	Boiling	Boiling coconut milk, salt, and screwpine leaf for the first step
2.	Biang	Ragi	Yeast	Yeast ingredients that are made into one
3.	Adah Lio	Wadah	Holder food	Distinguish with a holder food or plate between the main ingredients and the biang
4.	Adoni	Mencampurkan semua bahan	Stir	Mix all the ingredient
5.	Suntek	Menuangkan sesuatu	Pour	Pouring warm coconut milk little by little when ingredient mixed
6.	Jeladrenan	Semua bahan yang telah menjadi satu	All ingredients	All ingredients that are already mixed
7.	Sujen	Tusuk sate	Skewers	Check the level of doneness, by piercing the apem
8.	Godhok godong	Merebus daun	Boiling leaf	Fresh screwpine leaf that have just been picked and will be boiled
9.	Ler	Mendinginkan sebelum disajikan	Cooling	Let stand until the temperature drops

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10.	Tempeh	Wadah panjang	Long holder food	Lined up the apem in a long holder food and tried not to stack the apem on top of each other.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

Duranti has a concept of language and cultural learning, one of which is performance. The concept of performance comes from a number of sources and as such can be interpreted in a variety of ways. In this research, the writer will focus on the meaning of apem in Java which is related to language and culture and becomes an indirect means of communication with the almighty and society. In the society, people who do not know will know that the object that will be brought by the writer, namely "apem", carries an implied social expression, so it must be interpreted and understood to decipher the message behind it. The principles and knowledge possessed by the speakers or sources become the data that will be used in elaborate the object.

In elaborating object, performance is the most human life that is typically emphasized and performance can also describe social have a particular attention to and skills in the delivery of a message. All of that will be overcome by the writer by juxtaposing performance with Javanese culture, and will choose "apem" as the object to be analyzed. Performance is one of the main scopes of anthropolinguistics. Anthropolinguistics is not only interested in language as a cultural resource but also in speech as a cultural practice. How was it applied and then used daily from the past and is valid until now. The object of this study "apem" has its own history, meaning, application and the writer will describe it thoroughly and explain its cultural practices

The data sources of this research are native Javanese and people who have lived in Java for a long time so they know Javanese traditions. Other data sources are obtained from several journals and books that can support this research. Subject from the data can be obtained from Kusworini who is born in East Java (60th) and Mei (62nd) who is lived for a long time in Malang, East Java. One of them now lives outside Java but still remembers the traditions they practiced over the years.

Interviewing them was conducted to obtain information on various matters related to the research needs.

In conducting this research, there are several stages that must be carried out so that everything is exposed correctly. The data collecting was collected in the steps; (1) finding questions that really need answers coming from native Javanese informants; (2) not asking directly to reduce the discomfort of local people who are reluctant to be asked; (3) observing topics and concepts from informants directly; (4) active role direct observation; (5) in-depth interviews so that there are no misunderstandings that come in the future; (6) write down all the important points that have been gained without leaving any out for validation between data from the theory obtained on the site with pure Javanese; (7) asking for validation between data from the theory obtained on the site with pure Javanese.

The draft list of questions for the interview is as follows:

1.	How is traditional apem made?
2.	Who makes the traditional apem?
3.	Why is there traditional apem in the event of sending prayers to the deceased?
4.	Why should there be traditional apem served for the event of sending prayers to the deceased?
5.	Is traditional apem served every day in sending prayers to the deceased?
6.	Does apem symbolize anything other than forgiveness in the Javanese perspective?
7.	Obsessional questions (questions that arise when something new is heard)

In analyzing the data, the writer uses a descriptive method. What is meant by this method is an investigation that is not only centered on collecting and compiling data, but also includes analysis and interpretation of the data. After the data had collected then writer analyzed them in the following steps; (1) divide the data that has been obtained from several questions into several categories; (2) categorized the data so that it is easier for readers to understand; (3) elaborate some of the verbs and nouns that have been obtained in several languages; (4) added some interpretations that were supposed to be there in some cases but still based on theory.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The writer has found the findings of some of the issues that are in this invention and decided to categorize the findings of this research into several sections, which are; (1) review of the related literature; (2) history of traditional apem cake; (3) point of view ordinary people and Javanese on apem; (4) process of traditional apem cake; (5) the meaning of apem as a main traditional food in an event.

#### **The Meaning of Apem as a Main Traditional Food in Event.**

One of the cakes that cannot be missed during various events in the community is apem, starting from traditional events, welcoming Ramadhan, thanksgiving, sending prayers, and is often used when offering prayers for the deceased. Apem is used as a symbol of communication in Javanese culture when offering prayers for the deceased. Round shape of apem symbolize unity, white color represents pure soul and good intention, and soft texture represents kindness and devotion to the almighty. For the day of giving prayers to the deceased is done when the deceased has entered the 3<sup>rd</sup> days, 7<sup>th</sup> days, 40<sup>th</sup> days, 100<sup>th</sup> days, 1 year, 2 years, 1000 days, before fasting and before Eid.

As said in the Javanese point of view, that when holding a prayer event for the deceased, apem has a meaning as a pillow for the deceased in the grave. Apem in the event of giving prayers to the deceased is often juxtaposed with banana and nagasari (nogosari), they also have their own meaning, banana which have meaning as an umbrella that will be given to the deceased to cross the river in the grave and nagasari (nogosari) which has meaning as a walking stick.

History of kue apem: There have been many versions of the origin of kue apem (Woodward, 2010) one of which comes from Kelaten where a wise man named Ki Ageng Kribig visited Mecca for pilgrimage. As he returned home, he brought three pieces of white round cake. Initially, he wanted to share them with his family and friends but they were not enough, so he and his wife made the similar version of the cakes that looked like the ones from Mecca. They later shared the branch to express their gratitude for those who had prayed for and welcomed him home after the pilgrimage. It is common from the Indonesian people to give food or souvenirs after a trip to family and friends (Nurani and Subekti, 2016). Today, such tradition is only reserved to family members Cake apem recipe: Kue apem is mainly made from rice flour and coconut milk (Herryani et al., 2016). Sugar



may be added for sweetener and tapai or coconut water may serve as baking agent. The mix is kept for an hour or overnight and later cooked on charcoal or wood stove using a small wok made out of clay that looks like that used for cooking surabi (Nurani and Subekti, 2016). The mix is poured spoon by spoon into the wok and closed until it is cooked

(Fig. 2).



Meanings in kue apem: Etymologically-speaking, the word "apem" is derived from Arabic "affan" which means mercy as a denotational meaning (Islami and Ikhsanudin, 2014). The term mercy is used to remind human beings to always seek for God's forgiveness. From several sources, the apeman tradition is common in Javanese communities as a medium for prayers to the Almighty to bless their good intentions. The apeman tradition carries four meanings and signs and symbols (Herryani et al., 2016): to ask for God's forgiveness and to clean the soul from all the sins and to seek for his mercy upon the deceased family members (denotative); to ask for God's blessings upon their intentions (connotative); Kue apem to welcome the Holy month of Ramadan, clean the soul and to get closer to God (connotative) and to show compassion and attention to others as a form of silaturahmi (hospitality) (connotative). The apeman tradition in Javanese communities to welcome Ramadan is called ruwahan apeman (Nurhayati, 2013). For the majority of Javanese people in Central Java, it has become an annual ritual to visit the late family member's grave to clean the tombstone and to pray for their sinful soul to be forgiven. After the visit, the family would bake kue apem and share them to other members and neighbors. As a mother told to her daughter in Javanese language, Nduk, apem kuwi jare wong Jowo dijupuk soko kata 'ampun'. Jaman ndisik lek kape poso mesti kudu gawe apem pertondo awak dewe iki njaluk ampunan nang Gusti Allah which means that the word "apem" comes from the word "ampun" or "mercy" (denotative meaning) as a

medium and symbol to seek for God's (Gusti Allah) and other people's forgiveness (denotative). In Jepara, the apeman tradition is held every year in the month of Dzulqodah, Jumat (Friday) Wage in Javanese calendar to pray for protection and to prevent themselves from misfortune (connotative) (Masudi, 2013). In Keraton (monarch) Kanoman (new) Cirebon, the apeman tradition is held every 25 in the month of Safar where people would gather to pray together and the palace's servants would serve kue apem to them as a symbol of purity and the monarch's intention to get closer to the people (connotative) (Hariyanto, 2015). Apeman in keraton kasepuhan (old) Cirebon is a series of events celebrating the birthday of Prophet Muhammad SAW (Muludan) held every 15 of the month of Sapar (Hariyanto, 2015). The tradition is a pre-ritual activity as the beginning of a series of Ritual Panjang Jimat (Endless Fortune Ritual) which also marks the opening of people's fair in the palace's square (alun-alun). The semiotical explanation on the apeman tradition in Keraton Kasepuhan Cirebon is as follows:

- In a concrete sense, kue apem is round, white and soft-textured (representamen)
- In semiosis as a cognitive process, kue apem as an object is observed
- In interpreting kue apem, the cake is analyzed from the shape, color and texture by relating the representamen and the object. The signification process prevails through a convention and supported by the community and human imagination. From the shape, color and texture of kue apem, the apeman tradition in keraton kasepuhan cirebon may be interpreted as follows:
  - The round shape symbolizes unity or integrity (as a sign with connotative meaning)
  - The white color represents pure soul and good intention (as a sign with denotative meaning)
  - The soft texture represents kindness and devotion to the Almighty (as a sign with connotative meaning)

On the whole, kue apem may be interpreted that first in doing a work or an activity, we need a solid cooperation; second, before we start to work or hold a big event, we must introspect and ask for God's forgiveness with pure and forgiving soul and third, we must express our prayer for blessing and protection in doing the work or event. In semiosis process, kue apem is a sign and

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symbol carrying both denotative and connotative meanings. In philosophical sense, kue apem at the pre-ritual of Ritual panjang jimat means that essentially, humans as God's creation, may only try but it is God's willing that decides. Preserving and revitalizing kue apem: It is suggested that kue apem is enhanced and processed with various kinds of flavor and color such as the original white, green or pink with toppings such as banana, chocolate or quail eggs and some even pour brown sugar sauce as the dressing. It also can be in large or small size, therefore kue apem would have more interesting presentations that would attract more attention (Chen et al., 2016). The production and sale would increase and the traditional hors d'oeuvre would invent its new audience. Today, many traditional foods are on the verge of extinction, knowledge of how to utilize and prepare them has been severely diminished (Bray and Nelson, 2015). Indigenous people around the world are finding unique and innovative ways to adapt and revitalize their foodways on reservations.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Indonesia is rich in extensive range of traditional hors d'oeuvre developed by each tribe. Kue apem is a culinary treasure from Java. In semiosis process, kue apem carries both denotative and connotative meanings as a form of local genius m.vned by the Javanese. The snack is served in rituals and as part of tradition as a sign and symbol and Geertz, C., 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures. Ritual and Food Long* philosophically it means the essence of hwnan being as God's creation. Jimat and In Kasepuhan Meainng). Palace Cirebon (Structure Universitas Padjadjaran, The expansion of global culture from different countries has changed the lifestyle and perception of ymmg generation on the traditional hors d'oeuvre. They perceives kue apem as out-of date; they even never see kue apem and it can be said that the local genius of kue apem would gradually cease to exist. To preserve the cultural heritage, attention from all groups of people such as the government, communities and family is required. Efforts of revitalizing may also be resorted by doing a wide range of culinary experiments in flavor, color and presentation. Traditional hors d'oeuvre must be presented both in formal and informal events. Parents should also take part in introducing kue apem at the earlier stage to their children, so that they would grow up loving traditional snacks from their own region. This may lead to growing popularity of kue apem that eventually will preserve the snack to be inherited from generation to generation as an identity and treasure from Indonesia.

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