

The Symbolic Communication of *Kenduri*: Ritual Adaptation, Identity Formation, and Social Cohesion in Javanese Diaspora Communities

Leylia Khairani

Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara

leyliakhairani@umsu.ac.id

Yan Hendra

Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara

yanhendra@umsu.ac.id

Abstract:

Kenduri, a form of slametan ritual rooted in Javanese traditions, integrates religious devotion with cultural and social dimensions. It symbolizes collective identity, sustains moral values, and links individuals to the divine. This study aimed to understand how *kenduri* functions as a symbolic communication system, transmitting meanings through foods, prayers, spatial arrangements, and adaptive practices. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in a Javanese diaspora community in North Sumatra, employing participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Data were coded and thematically analyzed to uncover how participants interpret and negotiate the ritual's symbolic elements. The results indicate that *kenduri*'s constituent symbols—such as *bubur merah putih* and *ingkung*—convey notions of purity, spirituality, and life cycles, while seating arrangements and prayer recitations foster communal unity and reinforce moral cohesion. Local adaptations, including the incorporation of regional ingredients, demonstrate *kenduri*'s resilience in a pluralistic environment. These findings reveal *kenduri* as a dynamic communicative event, linking cultural heritage with contemporary realities and maintaining relevance despite historical shifts and demographic changes. By underscoring the ritual's integrative and adaptive nature, this research advances our understanding of how religious practices generate and convey meaning across diverse contexts. Ultimately, *kenduri* exemplifies how ritual communication can preserve core values, reinforce community solidarity, and guide spiritual engagement, offering valuable insights for future comparative and interdisciplinary studies.

Keywords: Symbolic Communication, Social Interaction, Ethnic Identity, Javanese Deli, Slametan

INTRODUCTION

Rituals such as *kenduri* are deeply embedded in the religious, cultural, and social fabric of Javanese communities (Haryati et al., 2020). More than a religious obligation, *kenduri* functions as a symbolic medium integrating Islamic values with local wisdom, generating unique symbols that reinforce collective identity (Al-Zaman, 2020). As part of slametan, it encompasses prayers, communal feasting, and symbolic offerings (*sesaji*) to seek blessings (Kodiran, 1975; Koentjaraningrat, 1993), blending tangible and intangible cultural elements (Sulaeman et al., 2019).

While previous studies have examined *kenduri* from religious, sociological, and anthropological perspectives (Awalin, 2018; C. Geertz, 1981; Nurazizah, 2022), its role as a

medium of symbolic communication remains underexplored (Jakaria et al., 2023). The ritual adapts dynamically, as seen in Javanese migrants in Sumatra who modified *kenduri* to fit new socio-cultural settings while maintaining its symbolic functions (Breman, 1997; Susanti & Rumondor, 2022). This adaptability underscores *kenduri*'s role in sustaining identity within pluralistic societies.

Beyond its religious formality, *kenduri* serves as a communicative system that transmits moral values, prayers, and social solidarity. Traditional foods such as *bubur merah putih* and *ingkung* embody spiritual significance and communal bonds (Nasir, 2019; Saputra et al., 2023). These elements function as semiotic markers that reinforce *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), while collective participation strengthens community solidarity (C. Geertz, 1981). From a symbolic communication perspective, rituals are dynamic practices where symbols transcend materiality, linking worldly realities with spiritual aspirations (Hsu & Palitsky, 2023; Vaz et al., 2021).

Interdisciplinary insights from communication and religious studies suggest that rituals should be analyzed as symbolic exchanges that reinforce and sometimes contest norms, values, and identities (Durkheim, 1995; Singh et al., 2021). *Kenduri* not only reflects local religious expressions but actively communicates worldviews, forging connections between individuals, communities, and the divine (Hajri, 2023; Nasir, 2019). Food, prayers, and participation become mediums for transmitting and negotiating meanings across generations.

In multicultural regions such as North Sumatra, *kenduri* plays a crucial role in mediating intercultural relations. Among the Jawa Deli community, it functions as a negotiation tool, reinforcing Javanese-Islamic identity while integrating broader Muslim and indigenous traditions (Khairani, 2020). These interactions reshape *kenduri* as a bridge for social cohesion and cultural continuity amid diversity (Tampake et al., 2020). The ritual exemplifies how religious and cultural practices are continuously recontextualized through migration, socio-political shifts, and translocal exchanges (Breman, 1997; Stoler, 2005a).

The universality of ritual communication is evident in how *kenduri* parallels other communal religious practices worldwide. Anthropological studies highlight that rituals incorporating food, prayer, and collective participation serve as shared cultural expressions of gratitude, purity, protection, and moral instruction (Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019; Vaz et al., 2021). In various traditions, food offerings carry layered meanings that bridge the mundane and the sacred, serving as vehicles for moral teachings and identity formation (Anacin, 2015; Hsu & Palitsky, 2023). Viewing *kenduri* as a symbolic communication system expands Javanese ethnographic scholarship while offering comparative insights into how rituals encode and transmit meaning.

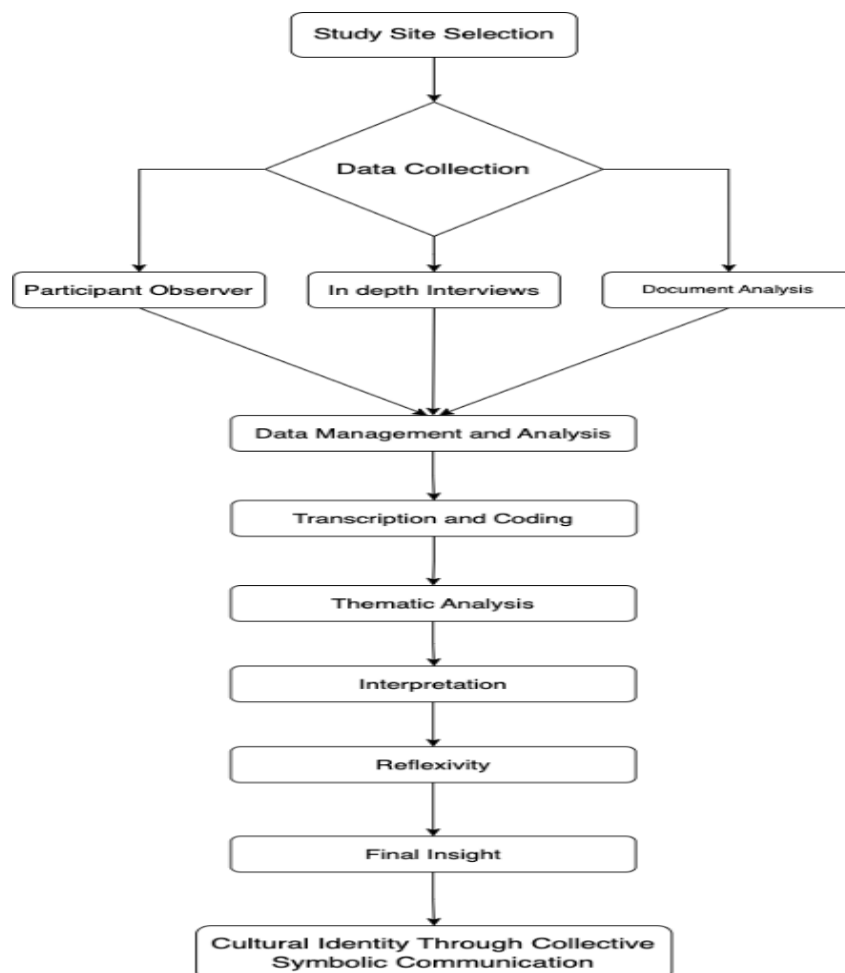
Despite its rich symbolic dimensions, existing research has yet to fully explore *kenduri* as a dynamic communicative system. Most studies treat its symbols as static cultural artifacts rather than elements in a fluid exchange of meaning. This study integrates anthropological, religious, and communication theories to analyze how *kenduri* operates as a semiotic system where meanings are actively interpreted and renegotiated.

Using ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and textual analysis, this research examines the symbolic elements of *kenduri* and their role in meaning-making. It investigates how the Javanese diaspora in Sumatra adapts *kenduri* for cultural sustainability, how participants interpret ritual symbols, and how these interpretations reinforce religious devotion, social cohesion, and identity formation. By situating *kenduri* within interdisciplinary debates on ritual, religion, and communication, this study highlights its role as a reflective and evolving cultural form.

Ultimately, this research contributes to broader discussions on ritual communication, demonstrating how *kenduri* embodies religious and cultural integration through a complex interplay of symbols. Its findings enrich Javanese ethnographic studies and provide a comparative framework for understanding ritual communication in diverse cultural and religious settings.

This research was conducted within a Javanese diaspora community located in the Deli Serdang Regency of North Sumatra, Indonesia, encompassing the villages of Bulu Cina, Klumpang, Manunggal, and Saentis. Historically formed through labor migration during the late nineteenth century (Breman, 1997; Stoler, 2005a), this community, often referred to as Orang Jawa Deli, has developed distinct cultural and religious practices that blend Javanese traditions with local influences (Susanti & Rumondor, 2022). Ethnographic inquiry was deemed suitable to investigate how *kenduri*, as a form of slametan ritual, functions as a medium of symbolic communication within this multicultural environment (Leonardo, 2006).

Figure 1. Stages of Ethnographic Data Collection and Analysis



The study site was selected based on its rich history of cultural adaptation and its ongoing practice of *kenduri* rituals. Selection criteria included the presence of Javanese-origin families maintaining regular *kenduri* observances, community acceptance of the

researcher's presence, and local informants' willingness to participate (Nasir, 2019; Saputra et al., 2023). Participants in this study primarily consisted of adult community members involved in the preparation, execution, and interpretation of *kenduri*, including religious leaders, cultural specialists, elders with long-standing ritual expertise, and younger participants learning these traditions. This purposive sampling strategy aimed to capture a broad range of perspectives and experiences related to *kenduri*, ensuring a nuanced understanding of both its symbolic and communicative dimensions (Hajri, 2023).

To obtain what Barker, (2011) and Geertz, (1981) term a "thick description" of the ritual process and its symbolic meanings, data were collected through a combination of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The ethnographic fieldwork approach allowed for sustained engagement with the community and enabled the researcher to witness the enactment of *kenduri* in its natural context (Leonardo, 2006). Fieldwork spanned several months, encompassing both routine and special occasions on which *kenduri* was performed, such as life-cycle ceremonies (birth, marriage, death) and ritual events tied to the Islamic calendar (Suroan and Punggahan) (Annisa & Wardana, 2020; Koentjaraningrat, 1993; Nurazizah, 2022).

Participant observation entailed the researcher's active involvement in preparatory stages of *kenduri* (e.g., selecting and preparing foods, organizing seating arrangements, distributing offerings), as well as attending the ritual itself. Close attention was paid to symbolic elements such as foods (e.g., *bubur merah putih*, *ingkung*), prayers, modes of address, and the spatial organization of participants. Detailed fieldnotes documented the sequences of ritual actions, the language used in prayers and ceremonial speeches, and the ways participants interpreted symbolic acts (Awalin, 2018; Jakaria et al., 2023; Kurniawati & Ahmadi, 2022). Observations focused on capturing the sensory, performative, and interactive aspects of *kenduri*, thereby elucidating how meaning is collectively generated, negotiated, and communicated.

Interviews aimed at understanding how informants personally interpreted the symbolic aspects of *kenduri* and how they conceived of the ritual's communicative functions. Interviews were conducted with key informants chosen for their expertise, such as religious figures who recited prayers (Ekayanti, 2017; Kholil, 2009), cultural specialists who explained the ritual's historical and cosmological significance (Sulaeman et al., 2019), and community members who regularly participated in *kenduri*. Interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing the researcher to probe informants' understandings of particular symbolic elements while also enabling participants to introduce topics or interpretations not anticipated by the researcher (Hsu & Palitsky, 2023).

During these interviews, specific attention was given to identifying the underlying values and meanings participants attached to ritual foods, prayers, and social interactions. Questions prompted informants to reflect on why certain foods were chosen, how prayers were understood as a bridge to the divine, and how the communal setting influenced their perceptions of solidarity and identity (Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019; Singh et al., 2021; Vaz et al., 2021).

In addition to primary ethnographic data, historical archives, family photo collections, and local texts on ritual practices were examined. These secondary materials provided context on the evolution of *kenduri*, tracing its adaptation from Java to the Deli region and noting changes influenced by local cultural elements (Anacin, 2015; Owoc, 2008; Revilla & Salet, 2018). Such documents helped triangulate data gathered through observation and interviews, strengthening the study's contextual grounding and reliability.

All interviews were recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed. Fieldnotes and transcripts were managed using qualitative data analysis

software, facilitating systematic coding and retrieval of information. A thematic analysis approach (Hajri, 2023; Saputra et al., 2023) guided the identification and organization of symbolic elements and communicative patterns in *kenduri*. Initial coding highlighted recurring symbols—foods, prayers, spatial arrangements—and their attributed meanings. Subsequent rounds of coding and memo writing refined these initial categories into overarching themes that linked symbolic acts to social cohesion, cultural identity, and spiritual communication (Awalin, 2018; Kurniawati & Ahmadi, 2022).

To ensure methodological rigor, several strategies were employed. First, prolonged engagement in the field and the researcher’s participation in multiple *kenduri* events helped establish rapport, thereby encouraging candid responses from participants (C. Geertz, 1981; Leonardo, 2006). Second, methodological triangulation combined participant observation, interviews, and document analysis, reducing reliance on any single data source and enhancing the credibility of the findings (Barker, 2011; Koentjaraningrat, 1993). Third, member checking was utilized by sharing preliminary interpretations with a selection of informants who were invited to comment on the accuracy and relevance of these interpretations, thereby increasing the confirmability of the results (Hsu & Palitsky, 2023). Finally, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process. The researcher critically examined personal biases, assumptions, and positionality, documenting these reflections in a research journal. This practice aimed to improve the dependability of the study and strengthen its alignment with ethical and epistemological standards in ethnographic research (Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019).

Table 1. Overview of Data Sources and Participant Characteristics

Data Source	Description	Quantity/Number of Events	Participant Profile
Participant Observation	Attendance at <i>kenduri</i> rituals, note-taking, and active participation	5 <i>kenduri</i> events observed over 6 months	Families, elders, religious figures, cultural specialists
In-depth Interviews	Semi-structured interviews (1-2 hours each), audio-recorded and transcribed	15 informants interviewed	3 religious figures, 2 cultural experts, 10 community members (varied age and gender)
Document Analysis	Archival records, historical photographs	Approx. 8 documents reviewed	Historical archives, private family collections

Source: Data processed from research findings, 2024.

DISCUSSION

Symbolic Communication Theory in the Context of *Kenduri*

The theory of symbolic communication provides a critical framework for understanding how rituals function as communicative acts that transmit cultural identity, values, and religious meanings (C. Geertz, 1981; Nasir, 2019). In this framework, symbols—whether verbal, material, or spatial—serve as signifiers through which communities negotiate and sustain their collective identity. In the context of the Javanese Deli community, which migrated to East Sumatra in the late 19th century, *kenduri* functions

as a symbolic medium that bridges their ancestral traditions with their current socio-cultural realities.

Symbolic communication theory posits that rituals do not merely reflect pre-existing cultural meanings but actively shape and sustain them through performative enactments (Durkheim, 1995; Singh et al., 2021). Rituals such as *kenduri* enable participants to engage with religious values, affirm social cohesion, and articulate their identity in a multicultural setting. By focusing on the communicative dimensions of *kenduri*, this study extends previous research on *slametan* traditions and highlights how symbols within the ritual are continually interpreted and renegotiated to maintain cultural continuity in diasporic settings.

The Javanese Deli Community and the Significance of *Kenduri*

Historically, the migration of Javanese laborers to East Sumatra was driven by Dutch colonial policies aimed at addressing labor shortages for plantation operations. This migration began with the establishment of plantations in 1867 and saw a significant increase in the number of contract workers from Java, particularly from impoverished areas in Central and East Java (Breman, 1997; Stoler, 2005b). By 1911, over 50,000 laborers were recruited, primarily from regions such as Semarang, Betawi, Yogyakarta, Surakarta, Purworejo, and Banyumas. These workers, marginalized by their status as contract laborers, faced structural inequalities that rendered them unable to negotiate their rights or social positions (Khairani, 2020, 2021). In response to these challenges, *kenduri* emerged as a vital ritual that reinforced communal bonds, preserved cultural heritage, and provided spiritual solace.

As a collective religious and social practice, *kenduri* embodies both Javanese and Islamic traditions, blending elements of *slametan* with Islamic supplications and prayers. The ritual serves multiple functions: it marks significant life-cycle events, fosters intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, and strengthens social solidarity within the community. The adaptation of *kenduri* in the North Sumatra context demonstrates its resilience as a dynamic cultural practice that integrates both historical and contemporary influences.

The Stages and Symbolic Elements of *Kenduri*

Based on field observations and interviews, *kenduri* follows a structured sequence that consists of the following key stages:

1. **Preparation and Invitation:** Community members collectively contribute food and resources, reinforcing the value of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation). Invitations are often extended to religious leaders, elders, and neighbors, signifying inclusivity and communal participation.
2. **Ritual Setup and Spatial Arrangement:** Participants gather in a circular or semi-circular seating arrangement, minimizing rigid social hierarchies and symbolizing communal unity (C. Geertz, 1981; Koentjaraningrat, 1993). Food offerings are placed centrally, emphasizing shared blessings and social egalitarianism.
3. **Recitation of Prayers and Blessings:** Islamic prayers and *doa selamat* (prayers for well-being) are recited by religious leaders, reinforcing the spiritual dimension of *kenduri*. The collective *amin* (amen) response signifies communal endorsement of the blessings sought (Ekayanti, 2017; Kholil, 2009).
4. **Sharing of Ritual Foods:** Traditional dishes such as *bubur merah putih* (red and white porridge) and *ingkung* (whole seasoned chicken) are served, each carrying specific symbolic meanings. *Bubur merah putih* represents the duality of worldly life

and spiritual purity, while *ingkung* signifies ritual completeness and spiritual devotion (Kurniawati & Ahmadi, 2022; Nasir, 2019).

5. **Distribution of Offerings and Closing:** The ritual concludes with the distribution of food to all attendees and, in some cases, to neighboring households. This act symbolizes the circulation of blessings and reinforces the communal ethic of generosity.

Symbolic Communication in *Kenduri*: Bridging Religion and Tradition

Food as a Communicative Medium

Field observations and interviews highlight that foods served during *kenduri* carry symbolic significance that extends well beyond their nutritional value. Informants consistently noted that items such as *bubur merah putih* (red and white porridge) and *ingkung* (whole, seasoned chicken) convey layered meanings related to life cycles, purity, spiritual blessings, and communal well-being. Participants explained that the red and white colors of the *bubur* evoke the duality of worldly life and spiritual purity: red, often associated with vitality and the “sweetness” of worldly existence, and white, symbolizing moral cleanliness and the human soul’s ideal state (Kurniawati & Ahmadi, 2022; Nasir, 2019). Similarly, the preparation of *ingkung*—a chicken cooked intact and seasoned with coconut milk and traditional spices—was often linked to notions of spiritual cleansing, ritual completeness, and readiness to transition through life stages (Hsu & Palitsky, 2023).

Such interpretations resonate with Owoc’s (2008) and Anacin’s (2015) discussions of how ritual foods worldwide serve as communicative devices that mark critical junctures in individual and communal life. Informants stressed that these foods are not consumed daily but reserved for ritual occasions, thereby reinforcing their extraordinary status. Through interviews, cultural experts explained that particular dishes are “read” by participants as messages. For instance, *bubur merah putih* was often mentioned in relation to pregnancy rituals (*keboh*) and the commencement of new life phases, symbolizing both the hopes for a newborn’s moral purity and the mother’s role in nurturing life (Saputra et al., 2023).

The arrangement of foods, placed centrally and then distributed, also symbolizes communal sharing and the circulation of blessings. As participants explained, everyone’s presence matters, and the circle’s openness is intended to reflect inclusivity. The absence of rigid seating hierarchies aligns with previous ethnographic insights that communal rituals convey messages about social order (Durkheim, 1995; Singh et al., 2021). Here, the layout of the *kenduri* ritual space communicates values of togetherness, egalitarian relations, and social harmony.

Figure 2. *Kenduri* Suroan ceremonial food



Spatial and Nonverbal Symbolism

Participant observation revealed that seating arrangements and spatial orientation carry their own semiotic weight during *kenduri*. The community often gathers on woven mats arranged in a circle or semi-circle, ensuring that no single individual dominates the spatial hierarchy. Elders, religious leaders, and cultural specialists may occupy a slightly more prominent position—often near the food offerings or at the focal point of prayer recitation—but strict hierarchies are minimized. Informants described this spatial configuration as expressing ideals of equality, unity, and collective responsibility (H. Geertz, 1981; Koentjaraningrat, 1999)(C. Geertz, 1981; Koentjaraningrat, 1999).

Figure 3. Circular seating arrangement during the *Kenduri* Suroan event



Verbal and Spiritual Expressions

Interviews with religious leaders and observation of prayer sessions confirmed that verbal expressions—Qur’anic recitations, doxologies, and vernacular prayers—are central to *kenduri*. Participants unanimously agreed that the spoken word serves as a bridge between the community and the divine (Ekayanti, 2017; Kholil, 2009). Prayer leaders carefully select verses and supplications that ask for blessings, protection, health, and guidance. The communal *amin* (amen) responses signal collective participation, reinforcing the communal nature of spiritual requests.

Such verbal exchanges exemplify what communication scholars refer to as the transmission of shared values and moral commitments through symbolic speech (Hajri, 2023; Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019). The language of the ritual is understood not merely as a performative utterance, but as an act that imprints spiritual significance onto the participants. Informants emphasized that listening to and chanting prayers fosters a sense of interconnectedness, as everyone is implicated in the moral and spiritual economy of blessing and gratitude.

Table 2. Symbolic Elements of *Kenduri*

Element	Examples	Symbolism	Cultural and Social Meaning
Food	1) <i>Bubur merah putih</i> 2) <i>Ingkung</i> (whole	1) <i>Bubur merah putih</i> : Balance	1) Reinforces gratitude for

	chicken)	and harmony (red: life, white: purity). 2) <i>Ingkung</i> : Surrender, devotion, and wholeness before God.	life's dualities. 2) Shared meals promote unity and communal bonds.
Spatial Arrangement	1) Circular seating 2) Communal mats	1) Circular seating: Equality and inclusivity, eliminating hierarchy. 2) Mats: Humility and grounding, closeness to the earth.	1) Emphasizes collective identity and interconnectedness. 2) Reflects respect for simplicity and equality.
Verbal Expression	1) Prayers 2) Qur'anic recitations	1) Invoking divine blessings and expressing gratitude. 2) Connecting to spiritual traditions and faith.	1) Strengthens communal spirituality and cultural heritage. 2) Preserves traditions across generations.

Source: Data processed from research findings, 2024.

Figure 4. Ritual food in wedding ceremonies



Kenduri plays a vital role in fostering social cohesion and reinforcing a sense of belonging within the community. The ritual involves inter-household and intergenerational cooperation, reflecting the enduring *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) tradition in Indonesian society (C. Geertz, 1981; Koentjaraningrat, 1999). Interviews indicate that participation in *kenduri* is more than a social obligation; it embodies mutual respect and strengthens trust among community members. This aligns with Singh et al., (2021), who argue that rituals synchronize individual behaviors and emotions, fostering social solidarity.

For the Javanese Deli community, *kenduri* serves as a cultural identity marker, linking them to their Javanese heritage while adapting to Sumatra (Breman, 1997; Stoler, 2005a; Susanti & Rumondor, 2022). Despite local adaptations, core elements such as ritual foods, prayers, and spatial arrangements remain intact, ensuring cultural continuity. *Kenduri* thus acts as a living archive, facilitating the intergenerational transmission of values and identity.

Beyond its social role, *kenduri* educates participants on moral and religious values. Observing elders and understanding symbolic meanings in food and prayers allow younger generations to internalize respect, patience, and piety. This experiential learning aligns with Koentjaraningrat's (1999) view that *slametan* transmits cultural ethics. Over time, younger members assume active roles, sustaining the tradition and reinforcing communal bonds.

Spiritually, *kenduri* serves as symbolic communication, linking participants to the divine. Through communal prayers, the community collectively voices hopes and supplications to God (Ekayanti, 2017; Kholil, 2009). Religious leaders emphasize that these prayers seek blessings and protection, reinforcing spiritual closeness. Rituals like *kenduri* facilitate direct engagement with the sacred, strengthening gratitude and human dependency on divine grace (Nasir, 2019; Vaz et al., 2021).

Kenduri also bridges the physical and spiritual realms through food offerings, prayers, and communal interaction. The ritual structure—from preparation to distribution—functions as a symbolic transaction between humans and God, where food and prayers signify devotion and the hope for divine mercy (Hsu & Palitsky, 2023; Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019). Observations of *kenduri* in life-cycle events, such as childbirth or Ramadan preparation (*Punggahan*), highlight its role in acknowledging life's transitions under divine providence.

Beyond spiritual dimensions, *kenduri* reinforces ethical teachings. Although not a formal sermon, it imparts religious values through tangible actions. Humility, gratitude, and communal care are expressed not only in prayers but also in food-sharing and collective preparation. Participants view *kenduri* as both religious practice and social responsibility, reflecting Durkheim's (1995) and Singh et al.'s (2021) argument that rituals internalize moral values at emotional and social levels.

As the Javanese Deli community evolves in a multicultural environment, *kenduri* demonstrates its adaptability by integrating local elements while preserving its essence. In some cases, traditional ingredients have been replaced with locally available produce, reflecting adjustments to North Sumatra's agricultural landscape (Jakaria et al., 2023; Susanti & Rumondor, 2022). However, these modifications do not alter the fundamental meaning of *kenduri* but underscore its flexibility as a symbolic communication system relevant across diverse social contexts.

Kenduri also facilitates identity negotiation and religious boundaries in a pluralistic society. Community members frequently interact with different ethnic and religious groups, with non-Muslim neighbors sometimes participating or observing. This inclusion signifies

hospitality and an openness to broader social interactions, reinforcing *kenduri*'s role as both a cultural marker and a medium for interfaith engagement.

Despite adaptations, *kenduri* maintains its theological foundation. The prayers remain rooted in Islamic teachings, while food symbolism and spatial arrangements consistently convey spiritual and cultural messages across generations. Consequently, *kenduri* serves as both religious worship and a communicative mechanism that conveys religious, social, and cultural meanings to all participants.

This study demonstrates that *kenduri* is a complex symbolic communication system in which ritual foods, spatial arrangements, prayers, and communal practices interact to convey spiritual messages, cultural identity, and social solidarity. By applying a symbolic communication perspective, this research highlights that rituals are not static traditions but dynamic practices that help individuals and communities continuously negotiate their identities amid social change (Durkheim, 1995; Hajri, 2023; Singh et al., 2021).

Moreover, *kenduri* provides empirical evidence that traditions remain vibrant by adapting certain elements while preserving their core communicative functions. Rituals do not merely reflect culture; they actively shape it through ongoing reinterpretation by practitioners. By maintaining its fundamental values, *kenduri* continues to be relevant despite demographic and societal transformations, making it a compelling example of a sustainable and evolving tradition.

Table 3. Symbolic Elements, Associated Meanings, and Communicative Functions Identified in *Kenduri*

Symbolic Element	Associated Meanings	Communicative Function
<i>Bubur merah putih</i>	Moral purity, life cycles, duality of worldly and spiritual realms	Communicates hopes for well-being, moral guidance, and continuity of life
<i>Ingkung</i> (Whole Seasoned Chicken)	Spiritual cleansing, ritual completeness, humility before God	Serves as a semiotic link bridging physical nourishment and spiritual devotion
Circular Seating Arrangement	Equality, unity, communal solidarity	Embodies social cohesion, mutual respect, and egalitarian values
Verbal Prayers and Qur'anic Recitations	Divine connection, seeking blessings, moral orientation	Transmits religious values, collective aspiration, and communal pleas for guidance
Integration of Local Ingredients	Adaptation, resilience, cultural negotiation	Symbolically negotiates identity, blending tradition with current socio-cultural contexts

Source: Data processed from research findings, 2024

Interpreting the Symbolic Elements

The symbolic elements of *kenduri* operate as communicative channels through which cultural values and religious beliefs are expressed, reinforced, and adapted. Foods such as *bubur merah putih* and *ingkung* emerge as potent symbols that denote life cycle transitions, spiritual purity, and moral ideals (Kurniawati & Ahmadi, 2022; Nasir, 2019; Saputra et al., 2023). Their restricted use in ritual contexts sets them apart from everyday foods, imbuing them with a sacred aura and contributing to a layered experience of meaning (Awalin, 2018; Jakaria et al., 2023). In this regard, the present findings align with

broader anthropological insights that highlight how ritual foods worldwide function as cultural texts, encoding messages about cosmology, identity, and moral order (Anacin, 2015; Owoc, 2008).

The spatial arrangements and verbal prayers observed also reinforce existing scholarship. The seating patterns that emphasize egalitarian relations and communal unity echo Geertz (1981) notion that slametan rituals strive to maintain social harmony. Such arrangements serve as nonverbal signals, communicating that everyone's presence is valued, thereby fostering inclusive group identity (Koentjaraningrat, 1999; Singh et al., 2021). Similarly, prayer recitations—Qur'anic verses and supplications—function as verbal symbols linking the community to the divine (Ekayanti, 2017; Kholil, 2009). Their collective performance underscores that religious devotion in *kenduri* is not a private matter but a public, participatory act that aligns human aspirations with divine grace.

Social And Cultural Cohesion

The results also illustrate how *kenduri* serves as a significant medium for reinforcing social and cultural cohesion. Each symbolic element carries multiple communicative functions, from articulating moral guidance to signaling group solidarity. The cooperative efforts required in planning and executing *kenduri*—preparing dishes, organizing seating, and coordinating prayers—embody the principle of gotong royong (C. Geertz, 1981; Koentjaraningrat, 1999). In this sense, the ritual itself is a microcosm of social organization, where shared labor reflects communal norms and mutual trust. Scholars have long emphasized that communal rituals are powerful instruments for strengthening collective identity (Durkheim, 1995; Singh et al., 2021), and the present study's findings corroborate this, demonstrating how *kenduri* participants see their involvement as a moral obligation and a form of cultural stewardship.

Additionally, the data suggest that *kenduri* functions as an informal mechanism of cultural education, particularly in a diasporic setting. Younger participants learn about ancestral traditions, moral values, and religious teachings through embodied practice rather than formal instruction. This intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge supports previous assertions that slametan rituals act as repositories of communal memory and ethical orientation (Annisa & Wardana, 2020; Koentjaraningrat, 1999; Nurazizah, 2022). By actively participating in *kenduri*, younger members do not merely inherit a static tradition; they receive a dynamic communicative system through which they can interpret the world and locate their place within it.

Religious and Spiritual Dimensions

From a religious standpoint, the findings underscore *kenduri*'s role as an embodied communicative act that bridges the material and spiritual realms. As participants pray and share sanctified foods, they enact a form of symbolic exchange with the divine, seeking blessings, protection, and guidance (Ekayanti, 2017; Kholil, 2009). Unlike passive religious observances, *kenduri*'s interactive nature encourages participants to perceive themselves as co-creators of meaning. The ritual's multi-sensory experience—tasting foods, reciting prayers, occupying shared space—intensifies the feeling that spiritual communication is tangible and immediate.

This resonates with the arguments of Vaz et al., (2021) and Hsu & Palitsky (2023), who note that rituals facilitate a direct engagement with the sacred by employing symbolic acts that integrate bodily sensation, communal participation, and religious devotion. In *kenduri*, these acts underscore a moral economy grounded in humility, gratitude, and reverence. Participants perceive that by attending to the ritual's symbolic elements, they are

actively “speaking” to God through gestures, tastes, and words, reinforcing the notion that religious faith is embedded in the lived experiences of believers rather than detached theological abstractions.

Adaptation and Cultural Resilience

The study’s results also highlight the adaptive character of *kenduri*. Although rooted in Javanese-Islamic traditions, the ritual has evolved in the Deli region’s pluralistic context. Adjustments such as incorporating local ingredients or accommodating shifts in seasonal availability exemplify how *kenduri*’s symbolic repertoire remains open to reinterpretation (Breman, 1997; Stoler, 2005a; Susanti & Rumondor, 2022). Far from diluting the ritual’s meaning, these changes demonstrate cultural resilience. By assimilating local produce or adjusting ritual timing, the community ensures that *kenduri* remains relevant and accessible to its members, allowing it to persist despite historical and demographic transformations.

This capacity for adaptation resonates with research on religious and cultural syncretism, which shows that rituals are often sites of innovation, negotiation, and recontextualization (Anacin, 2015; Tampake & Katampuge, 2022). In line with Kurniawati and Ahmadi’s (2022) conceptualization of cultural dialectics, *kenduri*’s communicative power lies partly in its malleability. By accommodating new elements while retaining core symbolic forms, *kenduri* continuously reaffirms its role as a cultural anchor amidst flux, serving as a bridge between past and present, homeland and diaspora, tradition and innovation.

Implications for Understanding Ritual As Symbolic Communication

The present study’s emphasis on *kenduri* as a mode of symbolic communication aligns with theoretical perspectives that view rituals as dynamic communicative events. Rather than treating rituals as static traditions or mere religious duties, this research demonstrates how *kenduri*’s symbolic elements function as media that transmit messages about identity, morality, spirituality, and social order (Durkheim, 1995; Hajri, 2023; Singh et al., 2021). The findings thus have implications for interdisciplinary scholarship on religion, culture, and communication.

First, the study provides empirical support for models that conceptualize rituals as semiotic systems, where signs and symbols—foods, gestures, prayers—are encoded with culturally specific meanings that participants actively interpret and negotiate (C. Geertz, 1981; Moufahim & Lichrou, 2019). Second, by demonstrating how *kenduri* links the tangible (material offerings, communal presence) to the intangible (spiritual aspirations, moral values), this research adds evidence to arguments that religious rituals are potent sites of embodied knowledge production (Hsu & Palitsky, 2023; Vaz et al., 2021). Third, the adaptive nature of *kenduri* exemplifies how ritual communication is not merely reproductive but also productive, generating new meanings as contexts change. Such insights can inform comparative studies of religious rituals in other cultural settings, broadening our understanding of how human societies use symbolic communication to navigate complexity and preserve coherence.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that *kenduri*, as a Javanese slametan ritual, functions as a dynamic system of symbolic communication within the diaspora community of Jawa Deli in North Sumatra. Grounded in the theory of symbolic communication, the ritual’s elements—such as food, prayers, spatial arrangements, and local adaptations—are not merely cultural

reproductions but serve as mediums for negotiating meaning within evolving social and historical contexts. For instance, *bubur merah putih* and *ingkung* symbolize strong moral and spiritual values, while the circular seating arrangement underscores inclusivity and community solidarity. *Kenduri* not only preserves the core values of Javanese-Islamic culture but also demonstrates remarkable flexibility in responding to modernity, pluralism, and migration, positioning itself as a continuously adaptive communicative process relevant across diverse social contexts. This study contributes novel insights to the field by reframing *kenduri* as an active semiotic mechanism that constructs and sustains collective identity.

However, the study is limited to a single diaspora community in Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra, and caution should be exercised in generalizing its findings to other communities. Furthermore, the qualitative approach employed here focuses on symbolic interpretations without incorporating quantitative methods to map participation patterns or demographic influences. Future research is recommended to adopt a comparative approach, examining *kenduri* practices in other Javanese diaspora communities or comparing them with similar rituals in other cultures to identify universal patterns or contextual differences. Quantitative methods, such as surveys or social network analysis, could also provide deeper insights into how demographic factors such as age, education, or social status influence the interpretation of *kenduri*'s symbols. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches integrating semiotics, cross-cultural communication studies, or digital anthropology could explore the impact of modernity, globalization, and technology on *kenduri* practices and meanings, advancing scholarly understanding of ritual and symbolic communication in dynamic sociocultural contexts.

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