

Symbols and Meanings in The Mandailing Traditional Wedding (Rituals and Cultural Attributes) in The Cultural Revitalisation of The Alpha Generation

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ABSTRACT

The rapid advancement of globalization and digital technology has significantly influenced the cultural orientation of younger generations, resulting in a declining understanding of local traditions and cultural values. This situation poses a serious challenge to the preservation of indigenous cultural heritage, including the Mandailing Batak culture, whose traditional wedding ceremonies serve as an important medium for transmitting social, moral, and cultural values across generations. Understanding the symbolic meanings embedded in these cultural practices is therefore crucial to support cultural revitalization efforts and ensure the continuity of cultural identity among Generation Alpha. This study aims to investigate the symbols and meanings embedded in the rituals and cultural attributes of the Mandailing traditional wedding ceremony and to examine their relevance to the revitalization of Mandailing Batak culture among Generation Alpha. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, with data collected through observation, interviews, and documentation in Hutagodang Village. The data were analyzed using Roland Barthes's semiotic theory, focusing on denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings. The findings reveal that the rituals of makkobar, berinai, marhaban, and mangupa-upa, as well as traditional clothing and food, embody symbolic values related to respect, togetherness, responsibility, prayer, and hopes for a harmonious married life. The semiotic analysis demonstrates that these rituals and cultural attributes contain interconnected denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings that reflect the cultural identity and worldview of the Mandailing community. Furthermore, the study shows that although Generation Alpha remains familiar with the practices of Mandailing traditional weddings, their understanding of the underlying symbolic meanings is still limited. Therefore, cultural revitalization efforts are essential to preserve and transmit Mandailing cultural values to younger generations, ensuring the continuity of this cultural heritage in contemporary society.

Keywords: Mandailing traditional wedding, Roland Barthes' semiotics, cultural symbols, cultural revitalisation, Generation Alpha.

ABSTRAK

Pesatnya perkembangan globalisasi dan teknologi digital telah secara signifikan memengaruhi orientasi budaya generasi muda, yang mengakibatkan berkurangnya pemahaman terhadap tradisi dan nilai-nilai budaya lokal. Situasi ini menjadi tantangan serius bagi pelestarian warisan budaya asli, termasuk budaya Batak Mandailing, yang upacara pernikahannya berfungsi sebagai sarana penting dalam meneruskan nilai-nilai sosial, moral, dan budaya dari satu generasi ke generasi berikutnya. Oleh karena itu, memahami makna simbolis yang terkandung dalam praktik-praktik budaya ini sangat penting untuk mendukung upaya revitalisasi budaya dan memastikan kelangsungan identitas budaya di kalangan Generasi Alpha. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki simbol dan makna yang terkandung dalam ritual serta atribut budaya upacara pernikahan tradisional Mandailing, serta mengkaji relevansinya terhadap revitalisasi budaya Mandailing Batak di kalangan Generasi Alpha. Pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif digunakan, dengan data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi di Desa Hutagodang. Data dianalisis menggunakan teori semiotik Roland Barthes, dengan fokus pada makna denotatif, konotatif, dan mitis. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa ritual makkobar, berinai, marhaban, dan mangupa-upa, serta pakaian dan makanan tradisional, mewakili nilai-nilai simbolis yang berkaitan dengan rasa hormat, kebersamaan, tanggung jawab, doa, dan harapan akan kehidupan pernikahan yang harmonis. Analisis semiotik menunjukkan bahwa ritual-ritual dan atribut budaya tersebut mengandung makna denotatif, konotatif, dan mitis yang saling terkait, yang mencerminkan identitas budaya dan pandangan dunia masyarakat Mandailing. Selain itu, penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa meskipun Generasi Alpha masih akrab dengan praktik-praktik pernikahan tradisional Mandailing, pemahaman mereka terhadap makna simbolis yang mendasarinya masih terbatas. Oleh karena itu, upaya revitalisasi budaya sangat penting untuk melestarikan dan mewariskan nilai-nilai budaya Mandailing kepada generasi muda, guna memastikan kelangsungan warisan budaya ini dalam masyarakat kontemporer.

Kata kunci: pernikahan adat Mandailing, semiotika Roland Barthes, simbol budaya, revitalisasi budaya, generasi alfa.

A. Introduction

The rapid development of globalization and digital technology has transformed the way younger generations interact with culture, knowledge, and social values. While technological advancement offers various opportunities for communication and learning, it also poses challenges to the preservation of local cultural heritage. Many traditional practices continue to be performed by communities; however, the meanings and values embedded within them are increasingly overlooked by younger generations. This phenomenon is particularly evident among Generation Alpha, who have grown up in a highly digital environment and are more exposed to global culture than previous generations (McCrinkle & Fell, 2020). Consequently, efforts to preserve and revitalize local cultural heritage have become increasingly important in contemporary society.

One important form of cultural heritage is the traditional wedding ceremony, which serves not only as a social institution

but also as a medium for transmitting cultural values, beliefs, and identities across generations (Koentjaraningrat, 2009). Traditional ceremonies are rich in symbols that communicate specific meanings within a cultural context. According to Saussure (1983), a symbol is a sign that represents a concept through social convention, while meaning is created through the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Likewise, Barthes (1977) argues that meaning operates at three levels: denotative meaning, connotative meaning, and myth. Therefore, symbols and meanings play a significant role in understanding how cultural values are communicated and preserved through traditional practices.

The relationship between symbols and meanings is closely connected to the field of English linguistics, particularly semantics and semiotics. Semantics is concerned with the study of meaning, while semiotics examines how signs and symbols generate meaning within social and cultural contexts (Chandler, 2022). Through semiotic analysis, cultural rituals can be understood as systems

of communication that convey messages, beliefs, and social values. Therefore, investigating the symbols and meanings embedded in traditional ceremonies contributes not only to cultural studies but also to linguistic studies concerned with meaning-making processes.

Among the diverse ethnic groups in Indonesia, the Mandailing Batak community possesses a rich cultural heritage that is reflected in its traditional wedding ceremony. The Mandailing traditional wedding is a customary institution that involves a series of rituals designed to unite not only two individuals but also two extended families while reinforcing social relationships and cultural values (Nasution, 2005). Several rituals commonly performed in Mandailing traditional weddings include *makkobar*, *berinai*, *marhaban*, and *mangupa-upa*. The *makkobar* ritual functions as a customary deliberation and communication process among family members. *Berinai* is a ceremonial application of henna that symbolizes purity and preparation for married life. *Marhaban* is an Islamic ritual involving prayers and blessings, while *mangupa-upa* is a traditional blessing ceremony intended to express gratitude and provide guidance for the newly married couple (Lubis, 2018).

In addition to rituals, Mandailing traditional weddings involve various cultural attributes, including traditional clothing, ceremonial ornaments, and traditional foods. Traditional attire such as *bulang* and *ampu*, together with ceremonial accessories and symbolic foods, represent social status, responsibility, harmony, respect, and hopes for prosperity in married life (Siregar, 2020). These rituals and cultural attributes function as cultural symbols through which the Mandailing community communicates its worldview, collective identity, and cultural values.

The symbolic meanings embedded in these rituals and cultural attributes are important because they contribute to the continuity of cultural identity and local wisdom. However, cultural practices cannot

survive solely through performance; their meanings must also be understood and transmitted to younger generations. This concern is closely related to the concept of cultural revitalization. Cultural revitalization refers to deliberate efforts undertaken by communities, institutions, and individuals to preserve, strengthen, and reintroduce cultural traditions, values, and practices that may be declining or at risk of disappearing (Hinton & Hale, 2001). UNESCO (2023) further emphasizes that safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is essential for maintaining cultural diversity and promoting cultural sustainability. Previous studies have demonstrated that cultural revitalization plays a significant role in strengthening cultural identity and encouraging intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge (McCarty & Nicholas, 2014).

The present study focuses on Generation Alpha, which refers to individuals born approximately between 2010 and 2024 (McCrinkle & Fell, 2020). As the first generation to be fully immersed in digital technology from birth, Generation Alpha is characterized by extensive engagement with digital media, online learning environments, and global information networks. Although these characteristics provide educational and social advantages, they may also reduce direct exposure to local cultural traditions. Therefore, understanding Generation Alpha's knowledge and interpretation of traditional cultural symbols is crucial for designing effective cultural revitalization strategies.

Several previous studies have investigated traditional wedding ceremonies, cultural symbols, and cultural preservation in various Indonesian ethnic communities. However, most studies have focused on describing cultural practices or documenting ceremonial procedures. Limited research has specifically examined the symbolic meanings embedded in Mandailing traditional wedding rituals and cultural attributes through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. Furthermore, few studies have explored how these meanings contribute to cultural revitalization efforts among Generation Alpha. This gap highlights the need for a comprehensive

investigation of the symbolic meanings contained in Mandailing traditional wedding ceremonies and their relevance to sustaining cultural heritage among younger generations.

Based on the research gap identified above, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What symbols are embedded in the rituals and cultural attributes of the Mandailing traditional wedding ceremony?
2. What denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings are represented by these symbols according to Roland Barthes' semiotic theory?
3. How do these symbols and meanings contribute to the revitalization of Mandailing Batak culture among Generation Alpha?

Accordingly, the objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the symbols embedded in the rituals and cultural attributes of the Mandailing traditional wedding ceremony.
2. To analyze their denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework.
3. To examine the relevance of these symbols and meanings to the revitalization of Mandailing Batak culture among Generation Alpha.

By addressing these objectives, the study is expected to contribute to the fields of semiotics, semantics, cultural studies, and English linguistics while providing insights into the preservation and transmission of Mandailing cultural values in contemporary society.

B. Research Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate the symbols and meanings embedded in the rituals and cultural attributes of the Mandailing traditional wedding ceremony

and to examine their relevance to the cultural revitalization of Generation Alpha. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to explore cultural phenomena in depth and to interpret meanings within their natural social and cultural contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study focused on understanding the symbolic meanings conveyed through traditional wedding rituals and cultural attributes rather than measuring variables quantitatively.

Research Site

The research was conducted in Hutagodang Village, Mandailing Natal Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia. This location was selected because Mandailing traditional wedding ceremonies are still actively practiced and preserved by the local community. The village provides a suitable setting for examining the cultural symbols, rituals, and values that continue to be transmitted through traditional wedding ceremonies.

Participants

The participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their knowledge, experience, and involvement in Mandailing traditional wedding ceremonies. Purposive sampling was chosen because qualitative research requires participants who can provide rich and relevant information related to the research topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

A total of five participants were involved in this study. They consisted of two traditional leaders (*tokoh adat*), one community elder, one cultural practitioner, and one member of Generation Alpha. The traditional leaders and community elder were selected because of their extensive knowledge of Mandailing customs and wedding traditions. The cultural practitioner was included due to his or her active involvement in preserving and implementing traditional cultural practices. Meanwhile, the Generation Alpha participant was selected to provide insights into how younger

generations understand and interpret the symbols and meanings embedded in Mandailing traditional wedding ceremonies.

Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about the objectives and procedures of the study. Their participation was entirely voluntary, and verbal informed consent was obtained before conducting the interviews. Participants were assured that their personal information would remain confidential and would only be used for academic and research purposes.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation.

Observation

Observation was conducted during Mandailing traditional wedding ceremonies to identify the symbols represented in various rituals and cultural attributes. The researcher used non-participant observation, meaning that the researcher observed the ceremonies without actively participating in the rituals. The observation focused on the implementation of wedding rituals such as *makkobar*, *berinai*, *marhaban*, and *mangupa-upa*, as well as the use of traditional clothing, ceremonial ornaments, traditional foods, and other cultural attributes.

An observation guideline was developed based on Roland Barthes' semiotic framework (Barthes, 1977). The guideline focused on identifying symbols, observing the contexts in which they appeared, recording participants' interactions, and noting cultural meanings associated with the observed symbols. During the observation process, the researcher recorded field notes and took photographs to document relevant cultural practices and symbolic elements.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all five participants to obtain in-depth information regarding the meanings

and cultural values embedded in the wedding rituals and cultural attributes. This type of interview allowed the researcher to follow a prepared interview guide while also exploring participants' responses in greater detail.

The interview questions focused on participants' understanding of the symbols used in the wedding ceremony, the meanings associated with specific rituals and cultural attributes, the cultural values represented by these symbols, and the importance of preserving Mandailing cultural traditions among younger generations. Each interview was conducted individually and recorded with the participants' permission to ensure the accuracy of the collected data.

Documentation

Documentation was used to support and complement the data obtained through observation and interviews. The documentation included photographs of wedding rituals, traditional clothing, ceremonial ornaments, traditional foods, field notes, and other relevant cultural records. These documents provided additional evidence for interpreting the symbolic meanings identified during the research process.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory (Barthes, 1977), which examines meaning through three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the literal or surface meaning of a sign, connotation refers to the cultural and emotional associations attached to the sign, and myth refers to broader cultural beliefs and ideologies represented by the sign.

The analysis was conducted through several stages. First, the researcher identified symbols found in the rituals and cultural attributes of the Mandailing traditional wedding ceremony. Second, the identified symbols were interpreted according to their denotative and connotative meanings. Third,

the researcher analyzed the myths and cultural ideologies represented by these symbols within the context of Mandailing culture. Finally, the findings were interpreted in relation to the cultural revitalization of Generation Alpha.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was employed by comparing information obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation. This process helped ensure that the interpretations were supported by multiple sources of evidence and accurately reflected the participants' perspectives and cultural practices.

C. Result and Discussion

a. Symbols and Meanings of Mandailing Traditional Rituals

1. Symbols and Meanings in the *Makkobar* Ritual

The findings reveal that *makkobar* is one of the most important rituals in the Mandailing traditional wedding ceremony. This ritual involves discussions among family representatives regarding marriage arrangements and customary obligations. During the ceremony, participants communicate using formal customary language that reflects respect, kinship, and social responsibility.



Figure 1. The *Makkobar* Ritual in a Mandailing Traditional Wedding Ceremony

At the denotative level, *makkobar* refers to a customary discussion conducted by representatives of both families before the marriage ceremony. At the connotative level, it symbolizes mutual respect, collective decision-making, and family unity. At the mythical level, the ritual reflects the Mandailing cultural belief that marriage is not merely a union between two individuals but a bond between two extended families. This finding supports Barthes' (1977) theory that cultural practices function as signs that convey ideological meanings beyond their literal functions.

Furthermore, the findings are consistent with Saussure's (1983) view that meaning is socially constructed through cultural conventions. In the Mandailing community, the meaning of *makkobar* is collectively understood and transmitted across generations. Similar findings have been reported in studies of Indonesian traditional ceremonies, which emphasize the role of customary deliberation in maintaining social harmony and kinship relationships (Koentjaraningrat, 2009).

2. Symbols and Meanings in the *Berina* Ritual

The *berina* ritual is performed before the wedding ceremony by applying henna to the bride's hands. Community members consider this ritual an important preparation for marriage.



Figure 2. The *Berina* Ritual

Denotatively, *berina* refers to the application of henna on the bride's hands. Connotatively, it symbolizes purity, beauty, readiness, and blessings for married life. At the mythical level, the ritual reflects the cultural belief that marriage marks a

transition into a new stage of adulthood and social responsibility.

These findings support Barthes' (1977) concept of connotation, which suggests that cultural symbols often carry emotional and social meanings beyond their physical appearance. The symbolic use of henna demonstrates how cultural values are embedded in ceremonial practices and communicated through visual signs.

3. Symbols and Meanings in the Marhaban Ritual

The *marhaban* ritual involves the recitation of Islamic prayers and praises to the Prophet Muhammad. This ritual highlights the integration of religious values into Mandailing cultural traditions.



Figure 3. The *Marhaban* Ritual

At the denotative level, *marhaban* is a religious gathering where prayers and praises are recited. At the connotative level, it symbolizes gratitude, spiritual guidance, and divine blessings for the newly married couple. At the mythical level, the ritual reflects the belief that a successful marriage should be grounded in religious values and moral conduct.

This finding demonstrates the close relationship between culture and religion in Mandailing society. Similar observations have been reported in studies of Indonesian Muslim wedding traditions, where religious rituals function as mechanisms for transmitting moral values and strengthening social cohesion.

4. Symbols and Meanings in the *Mangupa-upa* Ritual

The *mangupa-upa* ritual is one of the most distinctive elements of the Mandailing traditional wedding ceremony. During this ritual, elders provide advice, prayers, and symbolic foods to the bride and groom.



Figure 4. The *Mangupa-upa* Ritual

Denotatively, *mangupa-upa* is a blessing ceremony involving symbolic offerings and advice. Connotatively, it represents parental affection, guidance, responsibility, and hopes for prosperity. At the mythical level, the ritual reinforces the cultural belief that elders play a crucial role in maintaining social order and transmitting cultural wisdom.

The findings support Barthes' (1977) notion that myths operate as systems of cultural values embedded within everyday practices. The symbolic foods and ceremonial objects used in *mangupa-upa* function as signs that communicate expectations for harmony and success in married life.

5. Symbols and Meanings in the Mamuhun (*Berangkat Boru*)



Figure 5. The Mamuhun Ritual

The findings indicate that the mamuhun ritual is an important stage in the Mandailing traditional wedding ceremony. This ritual is performed as a form of requesting blessings, forgiveness, and approval from parents and elders before the bride and groom enter married life. The ritual reflects the strong kinship values embedded in Mandailing culture and emphasizes respect for family members, particularly parents and elders.

At the denotative level, mamuhun refers to the act of asking for blessings and forgiveness from parents and family elders. At the connotative level, the ritual symbolizes humility, respect, obedience, and gratitude toward those who have nurtured and guided the bride and groom. At the mythical level, mamuhun reflects the Mandailing cultural belief that parental blessings are essential for achieving harmony, prosperity, and success in married life.

The findings support Barthes' (1977) theory that cultural rituals function as symbolic systems that communicate values and beliefs shared within a community. The ritual demonstrates that marriage is not only a personal commitment but also a social and cultural responsibility that requires recognition and support from family members. Furthermore, the symbolic act of seeking blessings illustrates how cultural meanings are transmitted through ritual practices and preserved across generations.

From the perspective of semantics and semiotics, the actions performed during mamuhun operate as cultural signs that communicate messages of respect, filial responsibility, and family solidarity. This finding is consistent with Chandler's (2022) view that symbols derive meaning from shared cultural interpretations and social conventions. Therefore, mamuhun serves as an important mechanism for maintaining cultural values and strengthening intergenerational relationships within the Mandailing community.

b. Symbols and Meanings of Mandailing Traditional Attire

In addition to rituals, several cultural attributes were identified as important symbols in the Mandailing traditional wedding ceremony. These include traditional clothing, ceremonial ornaments, and traditional foods.

1. The traditional wedding dress is one of the most prominent cultural attributes in the Mandailing traditional wedding ceremony. Worn by both the bride and groom, the wedding dress represents not only ceremonial attire but also cultural identity, social values, and customary traditions that have been preserved across generations.



Figure 6. Traditional Mandailing Wedding Attire.

At the denotative level, the traditional wedding dress refers to the ceremonial clothing worn by the bride and groom during the wedding ceremony. The attire is characterized by distinctive traditional designs, colors, and decorative elements that differentiate it from everyday clothing. It serves as the official costume for the wedding procession and customary rituals.

At the connotative level, the traditional wedding dress symbolizes honor, dignity, respect, and the transition from single life to married life. The attire signifies that the bride and groom are entering a new social status and assuming new responsibilities within their families and communities. Wearing traditional wedding clothing also reflects respect for ancestors and adherence to Mandailing cultural traditions. The elaborate appearance of the attire communicates the importance and sacredness of the marriage ceremony.

At the mythical level, the traditional wedding dress reflects the Mandailing cultural belief that marriage is a sacred institution that should be celebrated according to customary values and social norms. The attire symbolizes the continuity of cultural heritage and reinforces collective identity within the community. Through the use of traditional wedding dress, cultural values are visually represented and transmitted from one generation to another.

These findings support Barthes' (1977) theory that cultural objects function as signs that communicate meanings beyond their practical functions. The wedding dress is not merely clothing but a cultural symbol that embodies social values, beliefs, and cultural identity. Similarly, Saussure (1983) argues that meaning is constructed through shared cultural conventions. Within the Mandailing community, the symbolic meanings associated with traditional wedding attire are collectively understood and preserved through customary practices.

The findings also indicate that Generation Alpha participants could easily recognize the traditional wedding dress as an

important part of the ceremony. However, their understanding was generally limited to its visual appearance, while the deeper meanings related to identity, responsibility, and cultural continuity were less understood. This suggests that cultural revitalization efforts should focus on explaining the symbolic meanings embedded in traditional attire, not merely preserving its physical form.

Therefore, the traditional wedding dress serves as an important cultural symbol that communicates Mandailing values, social identity, and cultural continuity while supporting efforts to revitalize local culture among Generation Alpha.

2. *Bulang*

Bulang is a traditional headdress worn by the bride during the Mandailing traditional wedding ceremony. It is one of the most recognizable cultural symbols in Mandailing attire.



Figure 7. *Bulang* Worn by the Bride

At the denotative level, bulang is a traditional headdress worn as part of the bridal attire. At the connotative level, it symbolizes dignity, honor, beauty, and the elevated social status of the bride. At the mythical level, bulang reflects the cultural belief that a married woman carries responsibilities not only toward her husband but also toward her extended family and community. This finding supports Barthes' (1977) argument that cultural objects function as signs that communicate ideological meanings beyond their physical appearance.

3. Bracelets

Traditional bracelets are worn by the bride as part of the ceremonial attire and complement other traditional accessories



Figure 8. Traditional Bracelet Worn by the Bride

Denotatively, bracelets are ornaments worn on the wrists. Connotatively, they symbolize commitment, continuity, loyalty, and the enduring bond between husband and wife. The circular form of the bracelet is often associated with unity and continuity in family relationships. At the mythical level, bracelets represent the cultural expectation that marriage should be maintained through mutual support, responsibility, and harmony. These findings indicate that bracelets function not merely as ornaments but as cultural symbols that communicate social and moral values.

4. (*Rante Bulan*) Traditional Necklaces



Figure 9. Traditional Necklace Worn by the Bride

Traditional necklaces are important accessories worn by the bride during the Mandailing traditional wedding ceremony.

These necklaces are carefully selected and form an essential part of the ceremonial attire. At the denotative level, the necklace functions as a decorative accessory worn around the neck. At the connotative level, it symbolizes beauty, dignity, family honor, and prosperity. The necklace enhances the bride's appearance and signifies the respect and appreciation given to her by both families. At the mythical level, the necklace reflects the Mandailing belief that marriage should bring prosperity, happiness, and social harmony. The findings support Barthes' (1977) theory that material objects can function as cultural signs carrying meanings beyond their practical purposes.

5. The *Keris*

The *keris* is an important cultural attribute worn by the groom during the Mandailing traditional wedding ceremony. As part of the traditional attire, the *keris* is typically placed at the groom's waist and serves not only as a ceremonial accessory but also as a symbol of cultural identity and responsibility.



Figure 10. Keris Worn by the Groom

At the denotative level, the *keris* is a traditional dagger carried by the groom as part of his ceremonial attire. Its physical form consists of a decorated blade and sheath, which are often crafted with artistic and cultural significance. At the connotative level, the *keris* symbolizes courage, responsibility, wisdom, and leadership. It signifies the groom's readiness to assume his role as the head of a household and to protect and guide his family. The *keris* also represents honor and self-discipline, qualities that are highly valued within Mandailing society.

At the mythical level, the keris reflects the cultural belief that a husband is entrusted with moral and social responsibilities toward his family and community. Rather than symbolizing aggression, the keris embodies the ideals of protection, maturity, and commitment. The presence of the keris in the wedding ceremony reinforces the expectation that the groom will uphold cultural values and maintain family harmony throughout married life.

These findings support Barthes' (1977) theory that cultural objects operate as signs carrying ideological meanings beyond their practical functions. The keris serves as a cultural sign through which values of leadership and responsibility are communicated and preserved. Similarly, Saussure's (1983) theory suggests that the meanings associated with the keris are socially constructed through shared cultural understandings within the Mandailing community.

Furthermore, interviews revealed that Generation Alpha participants could generally recognize the keris as part of the groom's traditional attire. However, they often associated it merely with traditional decoration and were less familiar with its symbolic meanings related to leadership and responsibility. This finding indicates the need for cultural revitalization efforts that emphasize not only the preservation of traditional objects but also the transmission of the values they represent.

6. Ulos

Ulos is one of the traditional woven textiles used in Mandailing wedding ceremonies. Although commonly associated with Batak culture in general, *ulos* continues to play an important role in expressing kinship, blessings, and social relationships during customary events.

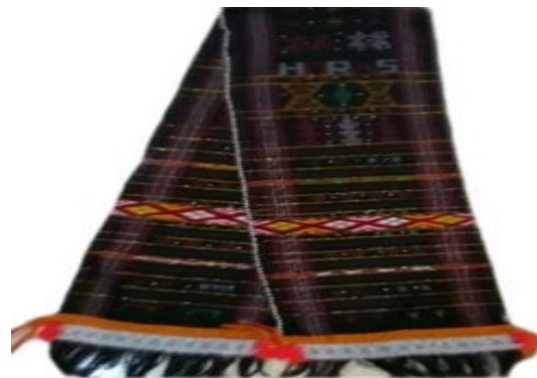


Figure 11. Ulos Used in the Mandailing Traditional Wedding Ceremony.

At the denotative level, *ulos* is a traditional handwoven cloth used during wedding ceremonies and other customary occasions. At the connotative level, it symbolizes affection, blessings, respect, and emotional bonds among family members. The presentation of *ulos* to the bride and groom signifies the family's hopes for happiness, prosperity, and harmony in their married life. At the mythical level, *ulos* reflects the cultural belief that familial love and ancestral blessings are essential foundations for a successful marriage. The cloth serves as a cultural symbol that strengthens relationships among family members and reinforces collective identity within the community.

The findings support Barthes' (1977) argument that cultural objects function as signs carrying layers of meaning beyond their material form. In addition, Saussure's (1983) theory of signs helps explain how the meaning of *ulos* is socially constructed and understood through shared cultural conventions within the Mandailing community.

7. Abit Godang

Abit Godang is another important ceremonial cloth used in the Mandailing traditional wedding ceremony. Unlike *ulos*, which is often associated with blessings and kinship, *Abit Godang* has a broader symbolic role in representing protection, unity, and customary authority.

At the denotative level, *Abit Godang* is a large traditional ceremonial cloth used during important customary events. At the connotative level, it symbolizes protection,

togetherness, family solidarity, and social unity. The cloth represents the collective support provided by family members and the wider community to the newly married couple. At the mythical level, *Abit Godang* reflects the Mandailing belief that marriage should be protected and guided by customary values, family support, and communal responsibility. It symbolizes the continuity of cultural traditions and the preservation of social harmony across generations.

These findings are consistent with Chandler's (2022) view that material objects function as semiotic resources through which cultural meanings are communicated and maintained. Through the use of *Abit Godang*, cultural values are not only displayed but also transmitted from older generations to younger members of the community.

Furthermore, interviews with the Generation Alpha participant revealed that while *Abit Godang* was recognized as an important part of the wedding ceremony, its symbolic meanings were not fully understood. This finding indicates that cultural symbols may remain visible in contemporary practices while their deeper meanings gradually diminish. Therefore, cultural revitalization efforts should focus on preserving both the physical artifacts and the cultural knowledge associated with them.

c. Symbols and Meanings of Mandailing Traditional Food

Traditional food constitutes an important cultural attribute in the Mandailing traditional wedding ceremony. Besides serving as food for participants and guests, traditional dishes function as cultural symbols that communicate values, beliefs, and expectations for the newly married couple. The findings reveal that several traditional foods, namely yellow rice, goat's head, eggs, sweet rice (*wajid*), and *sisagun*, possess significant symbolic meanings within the Mandailing community.

1. Yellow Rice

At the denotative level, yellow rice is a rice dish colored with turmeric and served during the wedding ceremony. At the connotative level, it symbolizes prosperity,



Figure 13. Yellow Rice

happiness, gratitude, and blessings. The golden-yellow color represents success and good fortune for the bride and groom. At the mythical level, yellow rice reflects the Mandailing cultural belief that marriage should bring abundance, prosperity, and well-being to the newly established family. This finding supports Barthes' (1977) theory that food can function as a cultural sign carrying meanings beyond its nutritional purpose.

2. Goat's Head

The goat's head is one of the most distinctive traditional foods presented during the *mangupa-upa* ritual.



Figure 14. Goat's Head Used in the Mangupa-upa Ritual

Denotatively, the goat's head is a ceremonial food served during important customary events. Connotatively, it symbolizes leadership, dignity, responsibility, and wisdom. The head represents the expectation that the bride and groom, particularly the husband, will lead their family wisely and responsibly. At the mythical level, the goat's head reflects the cultural belief that successful family life requires strong leadership, maturity, and commitment. The

symbolic use of the goat's head demonstrates how cultural values are embedded in ceremonial practices.

3. Eggs

Eggs are commonly included among the ceremonial foods served during the wedding ceremony.

Figure 13. Eggs Served in the Wedding Ceremony

At the denotative level, eggs are food items presented as part of the ceremonial offerings. At the connotative level, they symbolize fertility, continuity, and the beginning of a new life. The round shape and life-giving nature of eggs represent hopes for descendants and family continuity. At the mythical level, eggs reflect the cultural belief that marriage should result in the continuation of family lineage and the preservation of cultural heritage across generations.

4. Sweet rice (*Wajid*)

Wajid is a traditional sweet rice delicacy prepared and served during important customary celebrations.



Figure 14. Sweet Rice (*Wajid*)

Denotatively, wajid is a sweet food made from glutinous rice, coconut milk, and palm sugar. Connotatively, it symbolizes sweetness, harmony, affection, and happiness in married life. The sweet taste represents the hope that the bride and groom will experience a harmonious and joyful relationship. At the mythical level, wajid reflects the cultural belief that marriage should be characterized by mutual love, understanding, and emotional balance.

5. *Sisagun*

Sisagun is a traditional Mandailing food that is closely associated with customary



ceremonies and communal gatherings.

Figure 18. *Sisagun* in the Wedding Ceremony

At the denotative level, *sisagun* is a traditional food made from roasted rice flour mixed with coconut and sugar. At the connotative level, it symbolizes togetherness, unity, gratitude, and communal solidarity. The preparation and sharing of *sisagun* among participants reinforce social relationships and collective identity. At the mythical level, *sisagun* reflects the Mandailing belief that harmony and social cohesion are essential foundations of family and community life.

The findings indicate that these traditional foods function not only as culinary elements but also as cultural symbols that communicate values of prosperity, leadership, fertility, harmony, gratitude, and social solidarity. This interpretation supports Barthes' (1977) notion that everyday cultural objects operate as signs carrying multiple layers of meaning. Likewise, Chandler (2022) argues that material objects and cultural practices serve as semiotic resources through which communities construct and communicate meaning.

Interviews with the Generation Alpha participant revealed that most traditional foods were recognized visually; however, their symbolic meanings were not fully understood. This finding suggests that cultural practices continue to exist, but the cultural knowledge associated with them is gradually weakening among younger generations. Therefore, cultural revitalization

efforts should focus not only on preserving traditional foods as culinary heritage but also on transmitting the meanings and values embedded within them.

Overall, Mandailing traditional foods serve as important cultural symbols that communicate collective beliefs, social values, and cultural identity. Their continued preservation and interpretation are essential for strengthening the revitalization of Mandailing culture among Generation Alpha.

D. Conclusion and Suggestion

This study examined the symbols and meanings embedded in the rituals and cultural attributes of the Mandailing traditional wedding ceremony and explored their relevance to the cultural revitalisation of Generation Alpha. Using Roland Barthes's semiotic theory, the analysis of denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings revealed that the rituals of *makkobar*, *berinai*, *marhaban*, *mangupa-upa*, and *mamuhun*, together with traditional attire, ornaments, and ceremonial foods, function as interconnected cultural signs that communicate values of respect, togetherness, responsibility, religiosity, and hope for a harmonious married life. These symbols are not arbitrary; they encode the Mandailing community's collective worldview and reinforce kinship, social hierarchy, and moral expectations that have been passed down across generations.

The findings further indicate that although Generation Alpha participants remain familiar with the visible practice of these rituals and the use of traditional attributes, their understanding of the underlying denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings is still limited. This suggests that the physical performance of Mandailing wedding traditions persists in contemporary society, while the cultural knowledge that gives these traditions their significance is gradually weakening. Consequently, cultural revitalisation efforts among Generation Alpha must move beyond preserving the outward forms of rituals and attributes; they must also actively transmit the symbolic meanings and values embedded within them.

In doing so, this study contributes to the fields of semiotics, semantics, and English linguistics by demonstrating how Barthes's framework can be applied to local cultural practices, while also offering practical insight into strengthening the cultural identity and continuity of the Mandailing Batak community in the digital era.

Based on these conclusions, several suggestions are proposed. First, for the Mandailing community and traditional leaders (*tokoh adat*), it is recommended that the symbolic meanings of wedding rituals and cultural attributes be explicitly explained to younger generations during ceremonies, rather than assuming that meaning will be absorbed through observation alone. Second, educational institutions and local governments are encouraged to incorporate local cultural content, such as the symbolism of Mandailing wedding traditions, into school curricula or community-based cultural programmes to support the cultural revitalisation of Generation Alpha. Third, parents and families are advised to actively introduce children to the meanings behind customary practices from an early age, given that Generation Alpha's exposure to digital and global culture may otherwise outweigh their exposure to local traditions. Fourth, cultural practitioners and local institutions may consider documenting these symbols and meanings in accessible digital formats, such as videos or social media content, so that they reach Generation Alpha through media they are already accustomed to using. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to expand this study by examining other rituals, comparing symbolic meanings across different Batak sub-ethnic groups, or employing quantitative or mixed-methods approaches to measure the extent of Generation Alpha's comprehension of cultural symbols, thereby providing a more comprehensive picture of cultural revitalisation efforts in contemporary Indonesian society.

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