

INTERPRETING SIGNS, PRESERVING TRADITION: A SEMIOTIC EXPLORATION AND CULTURAL TOURISM PERSPECTIVE ON THE JEKNEK SAPPARA RITUAL

(Membaca Tanda, Menjaga Tradisi: Eksplorasi Semiotik dan Pariwisata Budaya dalam Ritual Jeknek Sappara)

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Abstract: *This study aims to uncover the symbolic meaning and strategic potential of the Jeknek Sappara ritual in Balangloe Village, Jeneponto Regency, South Sulawesi. This ritual is an annual tradition performed during the month of Safar and holds strong spiritual, social, and cultural values in the lives of the local community. However, the ritual's existence is being threatened by modernization, a lack of documentation, and the minimal involvement of the younger generation. This study used a descriptive qualitative approach with data collection techniques including participant observation, in-depth interviews, and visual documentation. Analysis was conducted using a semiotic approach, referring to Chandler and Geertz's theory to interpret the symbols used in the ritual, such as betel leaves, dances, mantras, and heirlooms. The results show that the symbols in the Jeknek Sappara ritual not only have spiritual significance but also reflect cultural identity, social harmony, and the relationship between humans and nature. Furthermore, this study found that Jeknek Sappara has the potential to be developed as a cultural tourism destination based on local wisdom. This development must be carried out in a participatory and ethical manner to avoid diminishing the sacred values of the ritual. This research contributes to the preservation of local culture, strengthening community identity, and developing sustainable community-based tourism.*

Keywords: *Semiotics, Jeknek Sappara, Local Wisdom, Cultural Tourism, Ritual Symbols*

A. INTRODUCTION

Traditional rituals are an integral part of Indonesia's cultural system, rich in symbols, values, and meanings. However, in the midst of modernization and globalization, many local traditions are losing their relevance and experiencing a degradation of meaning. One such example facing similar challenges is the *Jeknek Sappara ritual* in Balangloe Village, Jeneponto Regency, South Sulawesi. As part of a living cultural heritage, this ritual embodies significant spiritual and social values for the local community. Unfortunately, limited documentation, weak intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, and constraints in community-based development have increasingly threatened the ritual's existence. In this context, a study is needed that not only describes the forms and symbols of the ritual but also explores its potential as a strategic cultural resource for sustainable tourism development.

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of traditional rituals in maintaining the cultural identity of communities. For instance, Indrawati et al. (2021) emphasize the role of rituals in cultural resilience; Suliyati (2020) investigates how the role of *Bissu* in Bugis society reflects cultural constructions through ritual practices; while Ramlah (2022)

examines rituals in South Sulawesi from a semiotic perspective. These studies indicate that symbols and meanings within rituals serve as an important medium for preserving cultural continuity. However, most of these works have not specifically linked the semiotic analysis of ritual symbols with their preservation strategies through locally grounded cultural tourism approaches.

This gap is evident in the limited body of research that integrates symbolic analysis with the strategic dimension of rituals as potential cultural tourism destinations. Most previous studies have focused only on documentation or social functions, without extending to an interdisciplinary approach that connects cultural semiotics, tradition preservation, and the local creative economy. Such an approach is crucial for gaining a holistic understanding of how the values embedded in rituals can be utilized without undermining their sacredness. Moreover, there is still little research that positions local communities as active subjects in the development of sustainable cultural tourism.

Based on this background, the present study aims to address three main questions: (1) what are the forms and meanings of symbols in the Jeknek Sappara ritual, (2) what social and cultural values are embedded within it, and (3) how can this ritual be developed as a cultural tourism destination based on local wisdom? The novelty of this study lies in its integration of a semiotic approach with strategic analysis for the development of cultural tourism while preserving the authenticity of traditional values. Accordingly, this study contributes not only to strengthening research on cultural semiotics but also to opening pathways for models of tradition preservation oriented toward sustainability and community empowerment.

B. METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at providing an in-depth portrayal of the forms, symbols, and meanings of the Jeknek Sappara ritual, as well as exploring its potential as a cultural tourism destination grounded in local wisdom. This approach was chosen because it aligns with the characteristics of the object of study, which is contextual, symbolic, and cultural, where meanings cannot be measured quantitatively but must be interpreted through direct interaction with cultural phenomena and the ritual community.

The subjects of this research comprised the performers and participants of the Jeknek Sappara ritual, including traditional leaders, religious figures, residents of Balangloe Village directly involved in the ceremony, as well as other parties engaged in its implementation and interpretation. The selection of informants was conducted purposively, considering their capacity to provide relevant and in-depth information. The number of informants remained flexible, adhering to the principle of “data saturation,” whereby data collection was concluded once no new information emerged from the interviews.

Data were collected through three main techniques:

1. Participant observation, in which the researcher was physically present during the ritual to observe cultural symbols and accompanying social behaviors;
2. In-depth interviews, both structured and semi-structured, with traditional leaders and community members to explore the symbolic meanings and socio-cultural values; and
3. Documentation, including photography, video recording, and the collection of notes on cultural artifacts and ritual events. The research instruments consisted of observation guidelines, interview question lists, and audio-visual recording devices.

The data collected were analyzed using descriptive-qualitative techniques within a cultural semiotics framework. The analysis was conducted in three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During the interpretation stage, semiotic theories from Chandler and Geertz were applied to explain the relationships between symbols and their meanings in the local cultural context. Data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation, by comparing findings from observations, interviews, and documentation to maintain the accuracy and consistency of information.

Through this procedure, the study was designed to provide a comprehensive, meaningful, and replicable portrayal for other researchers interested in similar objects of study. This method not only enabled a thorough examination of cultural symbols but also presented an integrative strategy linking cultural preservation with community-based tourism development.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Forms and Symbols in the Jeknek Sappara Ritual

The Jeknek Sappara ritual is held over an entire week, with the main activities taking place for six consecutive nights and culminating on the seventh day. The ritual begins with afternoon events featuring traditional sports competitions, such as takraw, designed to attract visitors, followed by evening cultural performances.

“During the six days, the events are held at night. Usually, there is a grand opening called Tulolotaurung Katarwang, featuring finalists...” (Interview, 7 June 2025)

Another informant explained:

“For six nights it’s held at night... usually it starts with a grand opening called Tulolotaurung Katarwang. And on those nights, visitors can shop at the stalls while enjoying the surrounding culture, especially a tradition called asimpak—men spar using their legs but not their hands.” (Interview, 5 July 2025)

Evening activities include cultural attractions and a local market. A distinctive performance is *asimpak*, a form of foot sparring between men performed without using hands, which serves as a traditional local entertainment.

“During the six nights, visitors can shop at the stalls while enjoying the culture around them, especially a tradition called *asimpak*, where men spar using their feet without hands.” (Interview, 7 June 2025)

On the culminating day, the procession begins with the retrieval of heirlooms from Tarawang, which constitutes the core of the ritual’s sacredness:

“The first part is retrieving the heirlooms from Tarawang to the traditional festival *Jenis-jenis Sapara*. Then we present dances such as *Dengkapada* and other performances.” (Interview, 7 June 2025)

The main symbols identified in the ritual include both physical forms and cultural functions, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Principal Symbols in the Jeknek Sapara Ritual and Their Cultural Functions

Symbol	Physical Form	Cultural Function
Betel leaves	Garland of betel leaves & areca nut	Symbol of respect and unity
Sacred water	Water in an earthenware jar	Symbol of purification and protection
Traditional dance	Rhythmic movements by local dancers	Symbol of acceptance and collective prayer
Ritual Mantra	Prayers in the local language	Medium of spiritual communication
Heirlooms	Artifacts from Tarawang	Symbol of ancestral heritage and cultural legitimacy
Asimpak	Foot sparring among men	Symbol of strength, courage, and entertainment

On the culminating day, heirlooms are retrieved from Tarawang and presented at the ritual site:

“The first part is retrieving the heirlooms from Tarawang to the traditional festival *Jenis-jenis Sapara*. Then we present dances such as *Dengkapada* and other performances.” (Interview, 7 June 2025)

2. Social and Cultural Values in the Ritual

Findings indicate that this ritual embodies enduring social and cultural values maintained by the community, such as:

- a. Collective participation, both through communal work (*gotong royong*) and youth involvement in traditional competitions.
- b. Transmission of customary values, reflected in the continuity of ritual stages, including the retrieval of heirlooms and traditional dances.

- c. Local identity and cultural pride, signified by the presence of prominent figures such as the Governor and Regent, who deliver speeches and show support.

“It is usually attended by the Governor and the Regent of Jeneponto... followed by speeches... then closing performances featuring cultural shows.” (Interview, 7 June 2025)

The study shows that the ritual is not only spiritually sacred but also rich in social and cultural values. The main values identified include:

- a. Mutual cooperation and collective participation, especially in preparing and conducting the ritual.
- b. Adherence to tradition and ancestral heritage, evident in the preservation of symbols and ritual stages.
- c. Kinship and social bonds, where the ritual serves as a gathering point for families, including those who have migrated abroad.

“We present cultural performances in accordance with the traditions practiced over time... until the closing in the afternoon.” (Interview, 5 July 2025)

These values reinforce the ritual’s function as a medium of value transmission and social cohesion within an agrarian society bound by tradition.

3. The Potential of the Jeknek Sappara Ritual as a Cultural Tourism Destination

Observations and interviews reveal that the community has begun packaging this ritual as a cultural attraction open to the public, integrating entertainment elements and a local market (bazaar):

“...in the afternoon, there are usually takraw competitions to attract visitors from outside... at night visitors can shop while enjoying the culture.” (Interview, 5 July 2025)

Promotion of the ritual has also begun to be carried out digitally to reach a wider audience:

“Yes, because of technological developments, we have to use social media... usually Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp status... that’s one way we promote it through social media because they already have their own official account.” (Interview, 5 July 2025)

Social media-based promotion is conducted informally by the organizing committee through the distribution of digital invitations, posting visual content of activities, and using local hashtags. Social media plays a modern role in introducing local traditions to outsiders, including the diaspora living abroad.

“Sometimes, people who migrate to Malaysia, Singapore... if there is Jenis-jenis Sepera, they try to return home... because it’s also a time for them to gather with family.” (Interview, 5 July 2025)

Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp are used as modern channels to disseminate information and expand visitor reach beyond the village, even abroad:

“Promotion is done via social media... usually Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp status... we already have many followers from other regencies.”

This phenomenon demonstrates that the ritual not only serves as a means of cultural preservation but also strengthens the emotional ties of migrants with their homeland. The ritual is used as a cultural reunion event, inviting youth and the productive generation to re-engage with the local community. This series of activities indicates emerging cultural management moving toward a form of community-based tourism while still maintaining sacred elements.

The Jeknek Sappara ritual performed in Balangloe Village represents a tangible manifestation of living intangible cultural heritage that remains preserved within the Bugis-Makassar community. Findings regarding the forms and symbols in the ritual show that each element used—such as betel leaves, sacred water, dances, mantras, and heirlooms—contains rich symbolic meanings. In Chandler’s semiotic perspective, these symbols are not merely physical signifiers but are historically and culturally connected to the community’s belief system. They form a system of signs conveying collective messages about identity, protection, and reverence for ancestors.

This aligns with Clifford Geertz’s view that cultural meaning cannot be separated from the context of rituals and the narratives surrounding them. Rituals serve as arenas where communities negotiate values, affirm social structures, and renew spiritual relationships. In the context of Jeknek Sappara, the presence of symbols and ritual structures embodies a collective narrative reinforcing a sense of togetherness, communal attachment, and appreciation for harmony with nature.

The findings on social values such as gotong royong (mutual cooperation), kinship, and intergenerational transmission of tradition reaffirm the ritual’s role as a space for reproducing cultural values. Previous studies by Indrawati et al. (2021) and Suliyati (2020) also emphasize the role of rituals in strengthening social cohesion and local identity. However, the present study expands this scope by highlighting how communities are leveraging these values within the context of cultural tourism. Here, the ritual is positioned not only as a heritage to be preserved but also as a strategic asset that can be developed for economic and educational purposes.

The integration of digital aspects through social media constitutes an important finding that reflects a shift in cultural communication patterns. The Balangloe community, particularly its younger generation, has begun to use platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp to promote the ritual. This reflects a form of traditional adaptation to the challenges of the digital era, while at the same time expanding the audience and strengthening diaspora networks.

Nevertheless, the development of Jeknek Sappara as a cultural tourism destination faces several challenges, including:

- a. safeguarding the ritual's sacredness amid commercialization,
- b. limited human resources for managing community-based tourism, and
- c. the risk of meaning loss due to the transformation of performance forms.

Therefore, appropriate development strategies must place local communities as primary actors, taking into account principles of sustainability, active participation, and the preservation of cultural meanings. This study contributes to the advancement of cultural semiotics research and strategies for preserving local traditions through participatory approaches. The interdisciplinary integration of symbolic analysis with tourism potential opens new opportunities for inclusive cultural management models that are adaptive to contemporary developments.

D. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Jeknek Sappara ritual constitutes some cultural heritage rich in symbols and values that remain relevant in the lives of the Balangloe community to this day. Through a semiotic approach, it was found that symbols such as betel leaves, sacred water, traditional dances, and heirlooms not only possess spiritual significance but also represent cultural identity, social harmony, and the community's transcendental relationship with nature and ancestors. The social values embedded within the ritual—mutual cooperation, adherence to tradition, and communal solidarity—reinforce its function as a cultural adhesive.

Beyond its sacred practice, the ritual demonstrates considerable potential for development as a cultural tourism destination rooted in local wisdom. Community efforts to integrate traditional elements with digital promotional media reflect an ability to adapt to contemporary dynamics. Nevertheless, the development of the ritual as a tourism object must preserve the authenticity of its values and meanings to avoid excessive cultural commodification.

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