

## Conference Paper

# Symbolic Meanings of Tepak Sirih in Malay Ethnic Weddings Conducted at Desa Mahato Kecamatan Tambusai Utara Kabupaten Rokan Hulu Provinsi Riau

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**Abstract**

This study aimed to analyze the symbolic meanings of *Tepak Sirih* in weddings conducted at Desa Mahato Kecamatan Tambusai Utara Kabupaten Rokan Hulu Provinsi Riau, predominantly by the Malay community. Descriptive qualitative methods were applied in the study. Social phenomena occurring naturally were described, with the aim of helping us to understand the world in which we live. The main theory to support this study is the theory of Semiotics. Data collection was through observation, interviews, questionnaires and documentation with 20 key informants consisting of community leaders, scholars and community members. There are seven forms of symbolic meanings in *Tepak Sirih*: *pinang* (areca nut), which symbolizes good offspring of good character, honesty and a high degree; *kapur* (lime), which symbolizes kindness and sincerity, but when in a predicament one will turn aggressive and angry; *gambir* (gambier), which symbolizes determination; *tembakau* (tobacco), which symbolizes a steadfast heart and a readiness to sacrifice for all things; *cengkih* (cloves), which symbolizes the ability to maintain a reputation; *sirih* (betel Leaves), which symbolizes patience, brotherhood and unity; and *kacip* (scoop used primarily for gouging areca nut), which symbolizes a mutual agreement in making good decisions. The seven forms of *Tepak Sirih* are compulsory in the wedding with the main objective being to achieve a happy, harmonious and peaceful life for the bride and bridegroom and their offspring, which is in line with the general concept of marriage.

**Keywords:** honesty, kindness, self-determination, steadfast, reputation, patience

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## 1. Introduction

Humans are creatures of meaning, who live in a natural and symbolic environment; then objects around humans do not have their own meanings, it is because they get their meanings from humans. (Aksan, Kisac, Aydin, & Demirbukan, 2009). Humans use symbols in communication so that messages can be understood by the recipient of the message. The ability to think using symbols is a great achievement in individual

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cognitive development, and anyone who interacts with cultural learning (White, Carlson & David Zelazo, 2019). The differences of cultural backgrounds make a symbol with different meanings. The interpretation of a symbol is related to the context, sub-context and history of the symbol in a cultural environment.

The study is Symbolic Meanings of *Tepak Sirih* in Malay Ethnic Wedding at Desa Mahato Kecamatan Tambusai Utara Kabupaten Rokan Hulu Provinsi Riau. There are seven symbolic meanings to be analyzed under this title: symbols of honesty, kindness, self determination, steadfast, reputation, patience, and agreement.

*Tepak Sirih* is an object which has symbols and meanings. *Tepak sirih* is a place to store the ingredients used for the tradition of eating betel. *Tepak Sirih* is not only a decoration or a souvenir given by someone, but in eating betel tradition, one will find that every ingredient has meaning for the Malay community. To start the coming of engagement and marriage, the Malay community use *Tepak Sirih* as an opening word. *Tepak Sirih* is used as a device that should not be forgotten in official Malay traditional ceremonies. Since *Tepak Sirih* is a symbol that has an important meaning, its use should not be arbitrary. (Mahyudin Al Mudra, 2006:3).

Inside *Tepak Sirih*, there is a *combol* which is used to store betel nut ingredients. *Combol* is a component of *tepak* betel, amounting to four or five pieces. *Combol* is round and covered, and at the bottom it is flat, so that things can be placed properly. *Combol* is made of metal such as copper, silver or gold. These *Combols* are arranged according to predetermined rules. The *Tepak Sirih* part is divided into two parts. At the top are placed four *combols* with a certain arrangement, namely areca nut, lime, *gambier*, and tobacco. At the bottom are arranged cloves, betel leaves and scoop.

Betel is arranged in such a way as to indicate the sequences when eating the betel, which comes first and then later. The betel leaves are arranged in a *Tepak Sirih* folded into one another and the stalk is equalized, arranged as many as five or six strands in a row. One *Tepak Sirih* usually contains four or five stacks of betel. This betel is folded in such a way so that the betel tail is not visible. The betel tail should not be shown because it is considered impolite and not respecting guests.

## 2. Literature Review

The study is concerned with symbolic meanings. Then semiotics becomes the base of interpreting the objects of research. Semiotics is the study of sign process (semiosis), which is any form of activity, conduct, or any process that involves signs, including the production of meaning. In the beginning, the meaning does not exist prior to interaction.

For each meaning, a symbol is needed to be interpreted together in a communication process. After that, an object or a 'symbol' becomes a certain symbol and has meaning. Through repeated acts of interaction, individuals as actors in relation to social groups share symbolic meanings (Del Casino & Thien, 2009).

Communication is an exchange of symbols. Communication will be effective if communicators and communicants have the same perception of symbols. Mulyana (2006: 83-120) suggests communication as a symbolic process. Symbols are used as expressions of thoughts, feelings of an individual, cultural group or a community. Knowledge of symbols will support the effectiveness of communication. Symbolic interactionism does not deny uniqueness; it is directly related to how different meanings are adapted and interpreted through social practices (Del Casino & Thien, 2009)

Symbols are thought processes. This is in line with John Dewey's pragmatism philosophy in Firmanto (2019) which has the view that thought is not a matter or a structure, but a process that goes through various stages. The human mind exists as a result of the activities of man himself. Symbols are the product of thought. Communication in symbolic interaction theory is the exchange of symbols to give meaning. The meaning of symbols in a culture is the result of social interaction which is then interpreted together. Symbolic interactionism is a distinct sociological perspective that emphasizes analytic centrality in investigating the meaning that people give to their activities (Dennis & Smith, 2015).

The symbolic interaction theory developed by Blumer (1986: 2) rests on three premises: First, humans act on something based on the meaning that the objects. Second, meaning arises because of one's social interactions with other people. Third, meaning is modified through an interpretive process in its involvement with the objects and signs used. Furthermore, Blumer (1986: 15) says that in symbolic interactions, the meanings that objects have are very important. The study between symbols and culture, ignoring the meaning of a cultural symbol is seen as ambiguity and also falsification of the behavior of the people being studied.

Symbolic interaction theory recognizes the principle of meaning as central to human behavior. Language gives meaning to humans through symbols. A symbol distinguishes human social relations from the level of animal communication. Humans give meaning to symbols and they express these things through language. Therefore, symbols form the basis of communication (Aksan et al., 2009).

All forms of communication are symbols that depend on the interaction and meaning of these symbols. In human communication behavior, language and thoughts have important roles.

### 3. Research Method

The research was conducted by means of descriptive qualitative method. Qualitative Descriptive Research is a research method based on the philosophy of positivism which is used to examine the conditions of natural objects where the researcher is the key instrument (Sugiyono, 2008:15). Descriptive qualitative method is commonly used in social sciences to describe the existing phenomenon and in this matter is concerned to find out Symbolic Meanings of *Tepak Sirih* in Malay Ethnic Wedding. Data collection techniques include questionnaire, observation, documentation, notetaking and data analysis to obtain accurate data leading to symbolic meanings. Interviews were conducted with 20 key informants consisting of government officials, community leaders, scholars and members.

Hancock (as cited in Panjaitan, 2019) states that qualitative research is concerned with the opinions, experiences and feeling of individuals producing subjective data. It describes social phenomena as they occur naturally. No attempt is made to manipulate the situation under the study as is the case with experimental qualitative research.

Triangulation technique was used to crosscheck the data validity, such as, (i) comparing the data of observation result with the data of interview result, (ii) comparing the words said in public with those in privacy, (iii) comparing what people said about the research situation with what was said all the time, (iv) comparing the situation and perspective of a person with those of various classes, and (v) comparing the results of interviews with the contents of related documents.

### 4. Result and Discussion

For the Malay community in Mahato Village, marriage is an expression of tradition as well as fulfilling religious orders. Therefore, there are several conditions that must be fulfilled such as: similar faith, maturity, physically and mentally health, responsibility and views of marriage as something sacred. There are several stages of wedding preparation that must be carried out by the prospective Malay groom and bride, namely proposal, engagement and marriage.

From the preparation stage until the wedding is held, the man arrives with a set of tools in the form of *Tepak Sirih* and its contents. *Tepak Sirih* is a very important tool in marriage because every ingredient has meaning for the Malay community.

There are seven forms of symbolic meanings in *Tepak Sirih*:

#### 4.1. Pinang (Areca Nut), symbolizing a good offspring of good character, honesty, and a high degree

According to Mustari (2014: 11) being honest is behavior based on efforts to make a person have a high dignity in society. In *Tepak Sirih*, *Pinang* (Areca Nut) symbolizes a good offspring of good character, honesty, and a high degree, willing to do work with an open heart and earnestness. This meaning is drawn from the nature of the areca tree which is tall straight up and has dense fruits in bunches. All parents want their children to have honest behavior. With the *Pinang* (Areca nut) as a part of *Tepak sirih*, it is hoped that the bride and groom will get offspring who have honest behavior.

#### 4.2. Kapur (Lime), symbolizing kindness and sincerity, but when in predicament turning to aggressive and angry

All forms of human actions refer to goodness or badness. The values of goodness or badness will always be a source of reference in carrying out various actions in life. Aristotle states that in all actions, humans pursue something good. Therefore, the definition of goodness is something that is pursued or aimed at which is essentially divided into two kinds of values, namely: goodness as a tool and goodness as a separate value (Burhanudin: 2000).

*Kapur* (Lime) is white, tough like cream produced from the shells of sea snails that have been burned. The powder of the shell is mixed with water so that it is easy to rub on the betel leaf. It symbolizes kindness and sincerity, but when in predicament one will turn aggressive and angry. This meaning is taken from chalk obtained from processing shellfish, physically white and clean, but the chemical reaction can destroy.

#### 4.3. Gambir (Gambier), symbolizing self determination

Self determination is the ability to determine options based on consideration of the needs of autonomous, competent social relations, so that it can function optimally. Aspects of self-determination can be a predictor of optimal human function in various spheres of life (Broeck, Vansteenkiste, Witte, Soenensm Lens, 2010).

*Gambir* (Gambier) has a slightly bitter taste, symbolizing self determination. This meaning is taken from the yellowish color of the *gambier* leaves, and to obtain the juice it must be processed first so that it can be eaten with betel. This is what it means that before achieving something we must be patient through the process.

#### 4.4. **Tembakau (Tobacco), symbolizing a steadfast heart and readiness to sacrifice for all things**

*Tembakau* (Tobacco), symbolizes a steadfast heart and readiness to sacrifice for all things. This meaning is taken from tobacco leaves, which taste bitter and intoxicating when finely sliced, and are durable when stored.

Steadfastness is strength in facing trials, dangers, tests, difficulties (Ali, 1991). Steadfastness also means an individual's resilience in the face of something that hinders and displeases, so how an individual responds to and deal with a situation that is unpleasant or displeasing is to be learned. Resilience includes endurance, fighting power, tolerance for frustration, ability to learn from failure, and willingness to accept feedback to improve oneself.

With the existence of this tobacco ingredient in *Tepak Sirih*, the bride and groom are expected to endure trials in the household to achieve a happy life.

#### 4.5. **Cengkih (Cloves), symbolizing the ability to maintain a reputation**

*Cengkeh*, symbolizes the ability to maintain a reputation. Cloves give off a distinctive aroma, used as a spice in several dishes, also eaten with betel leaves to add sweet and delicious taste. Clove oil is used in the manufacture of medicine and perfume. It is hoped that the bride and groom will imitate the nature of the cloves in order to maintain their honor and avoid things that are prohibited by religion. Ideally, in a household prioritizing principles, mutual care and fame for partners is a must.

The bride and groom are expected to be accustomed to telling the goodness of their partner. Husband and wife are like one body. If one is in trouble, the other must feel. That is the function of marriage. In addition to preserving human life, marriage is also intended to provide a sense of security, comfort and peace. Therefore, it is the obligation of the couple to help each other to get rid of distress and create happiness together.

#### 4.6. **Sirih (Betel Leaves), symbolizing patience, brotherhood, and unity**

*Sirih (Betel Leaves)*, symbolizes patience, brotherhood, and unity, The betel leaves from the groom are arranged face down, meaning to be humble and to surrender. Meanwhile,

on the part of the bride, the betel leaf is arranged on her back which means acceptance and surrender. This meaning is based on the ease with which the betel leaf grows on the trunk of a tree without damaging the trunk or anything where it lives and has medicinal properties. The dense and lush betel leaves provide shade in the surrounding.

#### 4.7. Kacip (scoop used primarily for gouging areca nut), symbolizing a mutual agreement in making good decision

*Kacip*, is a tool for cleaving betel nut or making areca nut into pieces, made of iron, but it can also be used to peel betel nut skin. *Kacip* symbolizes a mutual agreement in making good decisions.

Everyone wants a happy family, which is able to give love and affection to the family members, so that they have a sense of security, serenity, peace and happiness in striving for the welfare of life in the world and the hereafter. To realize this wish, the bride and groom are expected to be able to agree on making decisions well.

TABLE 1: Triangulation Symbolic Meanings of *Tepak Sirih* in Malay Ethnic Wedding at Desa Mahato Kecamatan Tambusai Utara Kabupaten Rokan Hulu Provinsi Riau

No.	Research component	Document	Interview Informant																							
			CF								RF								YG							
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4				
1	A	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	X	√	X				
2	B	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	X	X	√	√				
3	C	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	X	X				
4	D	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	X	X	X	X				
5	E	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	X	X	√	√				

Research components:

1. Existence of *Tepak Sirih* consisting of the seven symbolic meanings: Pinang (Areca Nut), *Kapur* (Lime), *Gambir* (Gambier), *Tembakau* (Tobacco), *Cengkeh* (Cloves), *Sirih* (Betel Leaves), *Kacip* (scoop).
2. Meaning existence of the seven symbolic meanings in each of the ingredients,
3. Meaning substance of the seven symbolic meanings in each of the ingredients,
4. Educational function of the seven symbolic meanings in each of the ingredients,
5. Religious function of the seven symbolic meanings in each of the ingredients

CF 1: Informant of the first Community Figure

CF 2: Informant of the second Community Figure

RF 1: Informant of the first Religious Figure

RF 2: Informant of the second Religious Figure

YG 1: Informant of the first Young Generation

YG 2: Informant of the second Young Generation

√: existing, answered, and can be used

X: not answered or not complete

Remarks:

CF: Community Figure

RF: Religious Figure

YG: Young Generation

TABLE 2: Symbolic Meanings of *Tepak Sirih* in Malay Ethnic Wedding at Desa Mahato Kecamatan Tambusai Utara Kabupaten Rokan Hulu Provinsi Riau

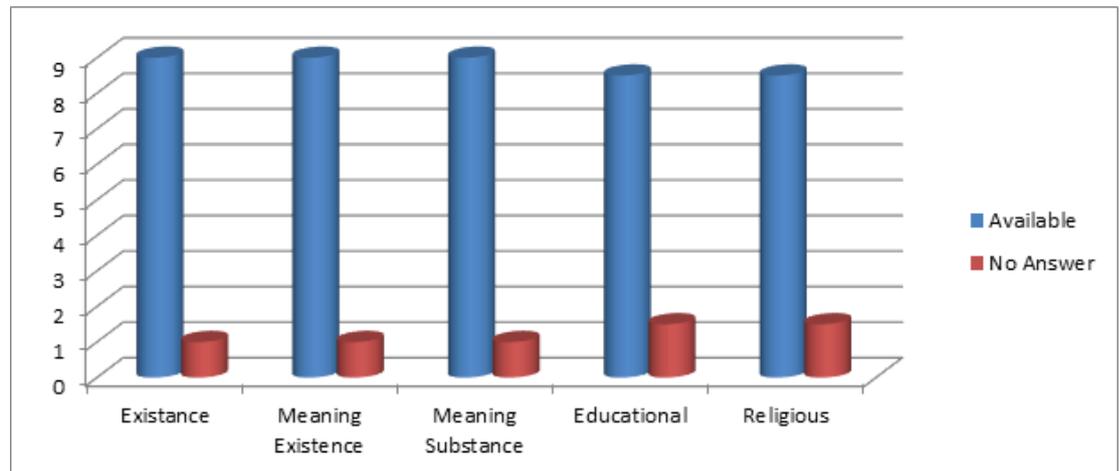
1. Question Indicator		
No.	Indicator	Number of Question
1	Existence	5
2	Meaning Existence	5
3	Meaning Substance	5
4	Function	5
Amount		20

2. Interview Result				
No	Question Indicator	Answer		
		Answer Result	No. of Respondent	Percentage (%)
1	Existence: - <i>Pinang</i> (Areca Nut) - <i>Kapur</i> (Lime) - <i>Gambir</i> (Gambier) - <i>Tembakau</i> (Tobacco) - <i>Cengkeh</i> (Cloves) - <i>Sirih</i> (Betel Leaves) - <i>Kacip</i> (scoop)	Available	18	90%
		No Answer	2	10%
2	Meaning Existence: - <i>Pinang</i> (Areca Nut) - <i>Kapur</i> (Lime) - <i>Gambir</i> (Gambier) - <i>Tembakau</i> (Tobacco) - <i>Cengkeh</i> (Cloves) - <i>Sirih</i> (Betel Leaves) - <i>Kacip</i> (scoop)	Having Meaning	18	90%

No	Question Indicator	Answer		
		Answer Result	No. of Respondent	Percentage (%)
		No Idea/No Answer	2	10%
3	Meaning Substance: - <i>Pinang</i> (Areca Nut) - <i>Kapur</i> (Lime) - <i>Gambir</i> (Gambier) - <i>Tembakau</i> (Tobacco) - <i>Cengkeh</i> (Cloves) - <i>Sirih</i> (Betel Leaves) - <i>Kacip</i> (scoop)	- <i>Pinang</i> (Areca Nut), symbolizing a good offspring of good character, honesty, and a high degree; - <i>Kapur</i> (Lime), symbolizing kindness and sincerity, but when in predicament one will turn aggressive and angry; - <i>Gambir</i> (Gambier), symbolizing self determination; - <i>Tembakau</i> (Tobacco), symbolizing a steadfast heart and readiness to sacrifice for all things; - <i>Cengkih</i> (Cloves), symbolizing the ability to maintain a reputation; - <i>Sirih</i> (Betel Leaves), symbolizing patience, brotherhood, and unity; - <i>Kacip</i> (scoop), symbolizing a mutual agreement in making good decisions.	18	90%
		No Idea/No Answer	2	10%
4	Function: - <i>Pinang</i> (Areca Nut) - <i>Kapur</i> (Lime) - <i>Gambir</i> (Gambier) - <i>Tembakau</i> (Tobacco) - <i>Cengkeh</i> (Cloves) - <i>Sirih</i> (Betel Leaves) - <i>Kacip</i> (scoop)	Educational Function: - Introducing Cultural Identity - Cultural Education - Cultural Existence - Regeneration and Cultural Preservation	17	85%
		No Idea/No Answer	3	15%
		Religious Function: - Respecting and appreciating anyone - Respecting Islamic law by increasing knowledge of the religion and piety towards Allah SWT.	17	85%
		No Idea/No Answer	3	15%

Note: Number of respondents: 20

**Symbolic Meanings of Tepak Sirih in Malay Ethnic Wedding at Desa Mahato  
Kecamatan Tambusai Utara Kabupaten Rokan Hulu Provinsi Riau**



## 5. Conclusion

Marriage is a tie carried out by two people with the intention of formalizing the marriage bond according to religious, legal and social norms. The wedding is an expression of tradition as well as fulfilling religious orders. Marriage has a very noble purpose, namely to form a happy family and marriage is related to physical and mental ties.

Legal validation of a marriage usually occurs when a written document that records the marriage is signed. The wedding itself is an event held to carry out a ceremony based on prevailing customs, and an opportunity to celebrate with friends and family. Women and men who are married are called brides, and after the ceremony is finished, they are called husband and wife in the marriage bond.

To achieve the goal of marriage in the form of happiness and good descent, the use of certain customs or rules is part of the wedding, as done in Malay Ethnic Wedding at Mahato Village, North Tambusai District, Rokan Hulu Regency, Riau Province, using *Tepak Sirih* as a device.

The research results show that *Tepak Sirih* has got some symbolic meanings: *Pinang* (Areca Nut), symbolizing a good offspring of good character, honesty, and a high degree; *Kapur* (Lime), symbolizing kindness and sincerity, but when in predicament one will turn aggressive and angry; *Gambir* (Gambier), symbolizing self determination; *Tembakau* (Tobacco), symbolizing a steadfast heart and readiness to sacrifice for all things; *Cengkih* (Cloves), symbolizing the ability to maintain a reputation; *Sirih* (Betel Leaves), symbolizing patience, brotherhood, and unity; *Kacip* (Scoop), symbolizing a mutual agreement in making good decisions.

Through this study, it is hoped that the revitalization of *Tepak Sirih* can be carried out and with the use of *Tepak Sirih* the Mahato Malay wedding tradition can be preserved.

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