

PRESERVING CULTURAL HERITAGE THROUGH CUISINE: SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF NASI HADAP-HADAPAN IN MALAY WEDDINGS IN TANJUNG BALAI

Suci Ramadhani Lubis, Purwarno Purwarno, Zulfan Sahri,
Andang Suhendi

Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara (UISU), Medan, Indonesia
E-mail: ucilubis.ul@gmail.com

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Abstract

Food plays a pivotal role in the construction of cultural identity and the preservation of intangible heritage across societies. This study explores the symbolic meanings embedded in the *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* tradition, a central element in Malay wedding rituals in Tanjung Balai, North Sumatra. The practice of *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan*—a ceremonial meal shared by the bride, groom, and their families—represents not only a social gathering but also a transmission of philosophical values and cultural wisdom. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through interviews with cultural practitioners, community elders, and government officials, complemented by participant observation. The findings reveal that each component of the food—such as rice, *ayam masak bulat* (whole chicken), assorted cakes, sweets, and vegetables—carries symbolic meanings that reflect prosperity, harmony, perseverance, and readiness for married life. Despite its deep cultural significance, the tradition is increasingly perceived as a form of entertainment rather than a sacred practice, largely due to modernization and diminishing intergenerational knowledge. This article argues that revitalizing and contextualizing *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* is essential for safeguarding Malay intangible heritage while reinforcing social cohesion in multicultural Indonesia.

Keywords: *Cultural heritage; Food symbolism; Malay wedding; Nasi Hadap-Hadapan; Tradition*

1. Introduction

Food transcends its role as sustenance—it is a profound cultural expression that embodies identity, heritage, and collective memory. Across societies, food-related rituals operate as symbolic systems through which communities transmit values, social roles, and philosophical worldviews (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013; Williams, 2016). In Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, traditional cuisines form an essential part of intangible cultural heritage, sustaining community bonds and shaping intergenerational

identity (Amalia, 2020). Yet these traditions face increasing challenges from modernization, globalization, and the diminishing engagement of younger generations.

One of the most distinctive examples of this heritage is the *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* tradition practiced by the Malay community in Tanjung Balai, North Sumatra. This wedding ritual involves a ceremonial meal shared by the bride, groom, and their families, symbolizing prosperity, harmony, and readiness for marital life. Each element of the meal—rice as a sign of fertility and abundance, and the whole chicken representing perseverance and responsibility—carries symbolic meanings that extend beyond nourishment. Beyond its culinary form, the ritual reinforces familial ties and serves as a channel for transmitting cultural wisdom from elders to younger generations (Lubis, 2023).

However, despite its rich symbolism, *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* has increasingly become a performative element of wedding celebrations, valued more for its aesthetic appeal than its philosophical or moral content. This transformation reflects broader issues in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage within rapidly modernizing and multicultural contexts such as Tanjung Balai, where external cultural influences and shifting social values reshape traditional practices (UNESCO, 2021; Heryanto & Widodo, 2021).

This article refines and expands upon the author's earlier undergraduate thesis (Lubis, 2023) by offering a deeper theoretical interpretation and broader cultural analysis of *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* through a semiotic lens. It advances current discussions on food symbolism and intangible heritage by revealing how culinary practices function as living texts that encode and communicate Malay cultural identity. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this study seeks to answer the following research question: What symbolic meanings are embedded in the foods of Nasi Hadap-Hadapan, and how do they reflect Malay cultural identity?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Culture and Tradition

Culture is broadly defined as a system of knowledge, values, and practices shared by a community, shaping their worldview and social life (Koentjaraningrat, 2002). Traditions, as a subset of culture, are practices transmitted across generations, providing continuity and identity (Yahya, 2009). They function not only as rituals but also as cultural markers that distinguish one group from another. In contemporary societies, traditions face pressures from globalization, modernization, and shifts in community priorities, leading to a gradual erosion of cultural practices (Ismail, 2019). For the Malay community in Tanjung Balai, *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* embodies a tradition that links individuals to their cultural heritage while reinforcing social ties.

2.2 Symbolic Meaning and Semiotics

Symbols are central to understanding cultural practices. Derived from the Greek *symbolon*, symbols function as signs that convey meanings beyond their physical form (Susanto in Kusumawardani, 2003). Geertz (1973) emphasizes that culture is essentially a system of symbols that provides a framework of meaning for individuals and communities. Semiotics, the study of signs and meaning-making, offers a methodological lens for analyzing such traditions. Roland Barthes' theory of denotation and connotation is particularly useful: denotation refers to the literal meaning of signs, while connotation reflects cultural, emotional, and contextual meanings (Kusumarini,

2006). In the case of *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan*, food items serve as semiotic texts, where rice, chicken, sweets, and vegetables are encoded with philosophical messages for newlyweds.

2.3 Food and Culture

Food is deeply intertwined with culture, functioning as both sustenance and a symbolic medium (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013). Scholars argue that food is a “system of communication” that reflects identity, social relations, and cultural continuity (Barthes in Williams, 2016). Recent studies reinforce this perspective, noting that traditional cuisines serve as “archives of cultural memory” and are vital for community resilience in the face of globalization (Huang & Lee, 2020; Suh & MacPherson, 2022). Within Indonesia, food traditions are increasingly recognized as intangible heritage requiring preservation, as they encapsulate values such as hospitality, harmony, and collective identity (Amalia, 2020; Pratiwi, 2021).

2.4 Malay Wedding Traditions and Intangible Heritage

Marriage rituals among the Malay are rich in symbolism, combining Islamic teachings with local customs. These rituals emphasize family unity, moral conduct, and cultural identity (Rasool, 2020). The *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* tradition is one such ritual that distinguishes Malay weddings in North Sumatra, reflecting the blending of religious and cultural values. Recent scholarship on intangible cultural heritage stresses the importance of documenting and revitalizing practices like *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan*, which are vulnerable to decline due to social change and urbanization (UNESCO, 2021; Abdullah & Abdillah, 2021; Heniwati & Syahputra, 2022). By situating food as cultural heritage, scholars argue that rituals can be both preserved and adapted to contemporary contexts without losing their symbolic essence (Heryanto & Widodo, 2021).

While previous studies have examined Malay wedding traditions broadly (Sutrisno, 2008; Rasool, 2020), little scholarly attention has been given to the symbolic role of food within these rituals, especially in the context of Tanjung Balai. Moreover, existing literature often highlights intangible cultural heritage in general but lacks specific analyses of how food operates as a medium of symbolic communication. This study fills the gap by providing an in-depth semiotic analysis of *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* and its significance in sustaining Malay cultural identity.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design, which is appropriate for exploring cultural meanings and interpreting symbolic practices. As Creswell (2014) notes, qualitative approaches enable researchers to understand social phenomena from the perspectives of participants. The focus of this research was to uncover the symbolic meanings of foods in the *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* tradition and to examine their cultural significance in contemporary Malay wedding ceremonies in Tanjung Balai.

3.2 Research Site and Time

The study was conducted in Tanjung Balai, North Sumatra, an area characterized by a strong Malay cultural presence alongside other ethnic groups such as Javanese, Batak, and Chinese. Fieldwork took place between February and May 2023, coinciding with a series of wedding ceremonies that incorporated the *Nasi Hadap-*

Hadapan tradition. The location was selected due to the persistence of Malay customs in the community and its accessibility for participant observation.

3.3 Participants and Informants

Four key informants participated in this study, comprising cultural practitioners, community elders, and local officials who were directly involved in the implementation and preservation of Malay wedding traditions. These included: a cultural practitioner with decades of experience preparing *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan*, Head of the Cultural Affairs Section of Tanjung Balai Education Authority, a *Telangkai* (master of ceremonies) with 14 years of experience leading Malay wedding rituals, and a community elder and cultural advisor in Malay wedding traditions.

Their insights provided rich perspectives on both the symbolic meanings of the foods and the evolving role of the tradition.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected using three complementary techniques:

1. Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the four informants to explore their interpretations of the symbolic meanings of foods and the perceived importance of the *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* tradition.
2. Participant Observation: The researcher attended several wedding ceremonies to directly observe the implementation of the tradition, including the arrangement of food, the recitation of rhymes, and the interactions among participants.
3. Document Analysis: Relevant documents, such as local cultural archives and previous studies, were reviewed to contextualize the findings within broader Malay traditions.

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring symbolic meanings and cultural themes within the data. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis involved coding interview transcripts, observational notes, and documents, then grouping them into categories reflecting symbolic meanings (e.g., prosperity, harmony, perseverance). Semiotic theory, particularly Barthes' concepts of denotation and connotation, was employed to interpret how foods in *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* function as cultural texts that communicate philosophical and moral values.

3.6 Trustworthiness

To ensure the credibility of findings, triangulation was applied by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documents. Member-checking was conducted by sharing interpretations with participants to validate accuracy. Reflexivity was also maintained, with the researcher acknowledging her positionality as both an observer and interpreter of cultural practices.

4. Discussion

4.1 Symbolic Meanings of Foods in *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan*

The *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* ritual is not simply a communal meal; it represents a complex semiotic system in which food serves as both material sustenance and symbolic communication. Each item presented in the ritual is deliberately chosen, functioning as a cultural text that conveys layers of meaning rooted in Malay values,

beliefs, and social expectations. As Barthes (1977) explains, cultural objects operate on two semiotic levels: the denotative level, which refers to their literal, material form, and the connotative level, which encodes broader cultural and philosophical meanings.

Within *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan*, this duality transforms ordinary food into extraordinary cultural signs. Rice, chicken, cakes, sweets, vegetables, and other ritual foods are not consumed merely for nourishment; instead, they are read by participants as symbols of prosperity, perseverance, harmony, and marital readiness. In this sense, food becomes a pedagogical medium that teaches the newlyweds about the virtues required in family life, while simultaneously reinforcing the collective identity of the Malay community.

This symbolic coding illustrates what Geertz (1973) describes as the interpretive nature of culture: rituals do not merely reflect reality but actively shape it by prescribing ideals of behavior. Thus, the *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* ritual is both a reflection of Malay cosmology and a model for proper conduct in marriage. It underscores the idea that the success of a household depends not only on material wealth but also on moral qualities such as diligence, cooperation, and balance.

In this way, *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* exemplifies how food operates as a living archive of cultural wisdom, encoding values that guide individuals while sustaining community cohesion across generations. What appears as a simple act of sharing a meal is, in fact, a symbolic performance of identity and continuity, ensuring that cultural memory is preserved through embodied practice.

a. Rice (*Nasi Kuning/ Nasi Lemak*)

Rice is the most significant component of the ritual, both materially and symbolically. Denotatively, rice is the staple food for Malay communities, forming the basis of everyday sustenance. However, in the ritual context, its preparation with turmeric (*nasi kuning*) or coconut milk (*nasi lemak*) elevates it into a **sacred offering**. The golden color of turmeric rice connotes prosperity, triumph, and divine blessing, symbolizing the hope that the couple's household will flourish like fertile rice fields.

From a semiotic perspective, rice serves as a **cultural metaphor for life itself**. Its growth cycle—from planting, nurturing, and harvesting—mirrors the human life cycle, emphasizing the importance of patience, diligence, and humility. Informants noted that rice is considered a “blessed food” (*makanan berkah*), and wasting it is taboo, reinforcing values of respect for sustenance. This aligns with broader Southeast Asian traditions, where rice is often personified as a life-giving entity or “mother” figure, embodying fertility and continuity (Huang & Lee, 2020).

In contemporary weddings, substitutions such as plain white rice or fried rice are sometimes made due to convenience or cost. Yet, the symbolic essence persists: regardless of its form, rice continues to represent continuity, sustenance, and abundance. This adaptability demonstrates the resilience of cultural symbols—their meanings endure even as their material forms evolve. As one informant remarked, “*beras itu hidup*” (rice is life), underscoring its inseparable link to Malay identity and household prosperity.

b. Whole Chicken (*Ayam Masak Bulat*)

The presentation of a whole chicken, complete with head, wings, and feet, symbolizes wholeness, resilience, and familial responsibility. At the denotative level, the chicken is a protein-rich dish consumed at the feast. At the connotative level,

however, its symbolic layers are manifold. The intact form represents the idea of completeness in life and marriage—the notion that a family must be whole, united, and balanced to prosper.

The chicken's feet, in particular, carry a symbolic teaching. Chickens are known to scratch persistently for food, a behavior interpreted as a lesson in perseverance and self-reliance. Newlyweds are thus expected to emulate this diligence in securing sustenance and maintaining their household. Similarly, the chicken's early-rising habit reflects values of discipline and industriousness, reminding couples that success in family life requires effort and dedication from the start of each day.

The chicken also embodies the principle of responsibility and care for others. As a domesticated animal that nurtures its chicks, it becomes a metaphor for the protective and nurturing roles of spouses toward one another and their future children. Informants stressed that this symbolism is crucial: a married couple should not only sustain themselves but also extend care and responsibility to the broader family network, reflecting the communal ethos of Malay culture.

From a semiotic angle, the chicken operates as both a signifier of material nourishment **and** a signified moral guide, demonstrating Barthes' (1977) theory of connotation. Its dual role as food and symbol positions it as a key pedagogical element in the ritual, reminding the couple and community of the ethical obligations tied to family life.

Although modernization has introduced changes in presentation—such as pre-cut chicken dishes for convenience—the symbolic preference for a whole chicken remains strong. Its absence, some informants argued, would leave the ritual “incomplete,” suggesting that certain symbols are so deeply entrenched in cultural consciousness that they resist substitution.

c. Assorted Cakes and Malay Sweets

Cakes and sweets hold an essential place in *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan*, functioning not merely as celebratory desserts but as symbolic vehicles of harmony, prosperity, and sweetness in marital life. Denotatively, they are confections prepared from flour, sugar, eggs, coconut, and other ingredients. Connotatively, however, they convey cultural ideals that extend beyond their culinary forms.

The symbolic meaning of cakes is rooted in their compositional diversity. Each cake is produced by blending multiple ingredients that, in isolation, may have contrasting flavors or textures but, when combined, yield a harmonious taste. This process is interpreted as a metaphor for marital life: two individuals with different temperaments, backgrounds, and family traditions must learn to cooperate and blend their differences to create a harmonious household. Informants noted that the sweetness of cakes serves as a reminder that a marriage should be imbued with kindness, affection, and mutual understanding, ensuring that conflicts are resolved with gentleness rather than hostility.

Malay sweets (*kue Melayu*)—such as *kue lapis*, *kue seri muka*, and other colorful confections—are equally significant. Their bright colors and layered textures symbolize diversity within unity, reflecting the multicultural and pluralistic ethos of Malay communities in Tanjung Balai. Just as sweets come in many forms but share a unifying sweetness, a household is expected to embrace diversity and cultivate joy. The inclusion of **bon-bon flowers** (decorative sugar confections) further amplifies this

symbolism, serving as visual and edible reminders that family life should be both prosperous and aesthetically enriched.

From a semiotic standpoint, cakes and sweets illustrate Barthes' notion of myth-making through food. At the literal level, they are celebratory treats. At the symbolic level, they encode the myth of an ideal household—one that is colorful, prosperous, and filled with harmony. The act of sharing sweets during the ceremony is thus not a simple gesture of hospitality but a ritualized communication of values: it reassures the couple and community that the sweetness of the moment will extend into the sweetness of married life (Barthes, 1977; Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013).

This symbolism also resonates with Malay cultural emphasis on hospitality and generosity. In Malay society, offering sweets to guests is considered a moral and social obligation, reflecting the household's capacity for abundance and kindness (Amalia, 2020). In this way, the cakes and sweets in *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* symbolize not only internal marital harmony but also the couple's readiness to extend generosity to others, reinforcing the communal dimensions of marriage.

In contemporary practice, the preparation of traditional cakes and sweets has sometimes been replaced with modern confections or store-bought pastries. While practical, such substitutions risk diluting the symbolic depth, as modern cakes may not carry the same cultural associations. Nevertheless, as informants stressed, the essential meaning—sweetness, cooperation, and prosperity—remains central. Even when reinterpreted, the symbolism continues to act as a moral compass for married life, bridging tradition with modernity.

d. Vegetables and *Kolak*

Raw vegetables once played an important role in the *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* ritual, though their use has diminished in contemporary practice. Traditionally, the inclusion of carefully carved vegetables symbolized the maturity, diligence, and readiness of the bride to assume domestic responsibilities. The intricacy of preparing and arranging raw vegetables was viewed as a reflection of the bride's culinary skills, patience, and creativity—qualities that were considered essential for managing a household. In Malay society, the ability to prepare food extended beyond sustenance; it was a cultural marker of a woman's preparedness to nurture her family and contribute to domestic harmony (Yahya, 2009; Pratiwi, 2021). Although modern lifestyles have reduced the emphasis on such symbolic displays, the underlying values of responsibility and capability remain embedded in community memory.

Kolak, a sweet dish made from bananas or pumpkin simmered in coconut milk and palm sugar, adds another layer of meaning to the ritual. Its combination of contrasting flavors—sweet, creamy, and slightly salty—serves as a metaphor for the diverse experiences within married life. Just as the ingredients blend harmoniously despite their differences, marriage is expected to bring together two individuals with distinct backgrounds, temperaments, and families into a balanced and unified whole. Informants highlighted that while *kolak* is rarely featured in present-day ceremonies, its symbolic depth is profound. It embodies the philosophical teaching that harmony in marriage is achieved not through uniformity, but through the successful integration of differences (Huang & Lee, 2020; Zhuang, Wan, & Zheng, 2022).

The decline in the use of raw vegetables and *kolak* reflects broader cultural transformations. Younger generations often view these foods as impractical or unnecessary in the context of modern weddings, where efficiency and spectacle take

precedence over symbolism. However, their meanings—maturity, balance, and unity—remain relevant to marital life. Revitalizing the inclusion of these elements could serve not only as a preservation of tradition but also as a pedagogical tool for transmitting cultural values to future generations.

4.2 Semiotic Interpretation

Applying Barthes' semiotic framework to the *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* tradition allows us to see how food operates simultaneously on literal and symbolic levels. At the denotative level, the items presented during the ritual—such as rice, whole chicken, assorted cakes, sweets, and vegetables—are tangible foods consumed by the participants. They are concrete, edible objects central to the communal meal. At the connotative level, however, these same foods take on layered meanings that extend far beyond nourishment. They serve as cultural codes, embodying values such as prosperity, harmony, perseverance, and readiness for family life (Barthes, 1977).

For example, rice is denotatively the primary staple of Malay diets, but connotatively it is invested with symbolic meanings of fertility, abundance, and divine blessing. Its golden variant, *nasi kuning*, particularly signifies wealth and triumph, reflecting aspirations for success in household life. Similarly, the whole chicken is denotatively a source of protein, yet connotatively it becomes a model of persistence and responsibility: just as a chicken diligently scratches for food at dawn, a newlywed couple is expected to rise early, work hard, and nurture their household with care and vigilance. Cakes and sweets, at the denotative level, are celebratory desserts, but at the connotative level, they embody sweetness, fortune, and the ideal of marital harmony achieved through cooperation of diverse ingredients. Even less common items such as vegetables and *kolak* encode values of maturity and balance, teaching that unity in marriage arises from the blending of differences into harmony.

This duality underscores Barthes' insight that cultural objects are never "innocent" but always embedded with meanings constructed by and for the community. Food in *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* functions as a semiotic text, where signs are organized into a system of communication that transmits social expectations to participants and observers alike (Huo, Abd Jamil, & Yang, 2025). In this sense, the ritual meal is a form of cultural pedagogy: it teaches the newlyweds not only how to eat together but how to live together in accordance with Malay values.

Geertz's (1973) perspective further illuminates this process. He argued that rituals serve as both "models of" and "models for" reality. As a "model of," *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* reflects the collective worldview of the Malay community, embodying ideals of prosperity, harmony, and endurance. As a "model for," it prescribes behaviors for newlyweds, guiding them toward fulfilling their roles as responsible spouses and community members. In this way, the ritual is both descriptive and normative, simultaneously affirming cultural identity and shaping future practice.

Contemporary semiotic research reinforces the idea that symbols within rituals are not static but dynamic, shifting in meaning as they are reinterpreted by new generations (Inai et al., 2020; Abdullah & Abdillah, 2021). In Tanjung Balai, while modernization has reduced the strictness of ritual practice, the symbolic codes embedded in the food continue to act as carriers of cultural memory. Even when participants are unaware of the deeper meanings, the act of performing the ritual sustains the continuity of tradition and reaffirms communal belonging.

Therefore, the *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* ritual demonstrates the powerful role of food as a semiotic system that encodes both explicit and implicit meanings. It is at once a material practice and a symbolic performance, where denotative foods become connotative texts that instruct, remind, and reinforce the values of Malay cultural identity.



Figure 1. Bride and groom during the *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* ritual

In figure 1, the bride and groom are seated opposite each other during the *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* ritual, a position that carries deep symbolic significance. Their face-to-face seating arrangement embodies the principles of harmony and balance, suggesting that a successful marriage requires constant dialogue, mutual respect, and emotional reciprocity. The physical act of sitting across from one another symbolizes not opposition but complementarity—two distinct individuals coming together in unity. This spatial orientation reflects the Malay cultural understanding that marriage is a partnership built on mutual commitment, cooperation, and shared responsibility. At the same time, it visually communicates to the attending families and community that the couple is now entering into a social contract, not only with each other but also with the wider collective that sustains them.



Figure 2. The *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* Ritual during a Malay Wedding Ceremony in Tanjung Balai

4.3 Shifts in Tradition and Modernization

Although the symbolic meanings of foods in *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* remain profound, their practice and perception have undergone significant shifts in response to modernization, globalization, and changing social dynamics. Informants noted that many younger couples perform the ritual more as a formality or spectacle than as a deeply understood cultural expression. In some cases, the foods are displayed for aesthetic purposes, photographed for social media, and consumed perfunctorily, rather than engaged with as conveyors of philosophical and moral values.

This transformation illustrates what UNESCO (2021) has described as the vulnerability of intangible cultural heritage: traditions transmitted orally or through practice are easily eroded when younger generations fail to internalize their symbolic content. In Tanjung Balai, where multiple ethnic groups coexist and modern wedding trends increasingly favor efficiency and spectacle, the symbolic depth of *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* is at risk of being overshadowed by commercialized practices such as catering services, imported culinary items, and entertainment-driven ceremonies. This trend reflects broader issues faced by intangible cultural heritage globally (UNESCO, 2021). In Tanjung Balai, modernization, urbanization, and the absence of strong customary institutions contribute to the ritual's gradual transformation (Fong & Chang, 2024).

The reduction of *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* from a sacred tradition to a decorative performance reflects broader semiotic shifts in cultural practice. As Abdullah and Abdillah (2021) argue, cultural symbols are not static but subject to reinterpretation across historical contexts. In the past, the whole chicken connoted diligence and familial responsibility; today, it may simply be perceived as a festive dish with little symbolic depth. Similarly, rice, once explicitly linked to fertility and abundance, may now be seen merely as a staple food, its symbolic weight diluted by routine consumption outside of ritual settings.

Globalization and digital media also contribute to these transformations. Fong and Chang (2024), studying Malaysian commensality in digital contexts, observe how the act of eating together increasingly takes on symbolic forms through digital spectacles such as Mukbang videos, where food becomes a performative object rather than a lived cultural text. In parallel, rituals like *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* risk being commodified into visual displays for social media consumption, where the visual “aesthetic” of tradition eclipses its embedded cultural wisdom.

Furthermore, modernization has altered gender expectations embedded in the ritual. Raw vegetables and *kolak*, once used to symbolize the bride's maturity and readiness to manage domestic responsibilities, are increasingly omitted. Their absence reflects not only practical considerations but also changing perceptions of women's roles in contemporary households. While these omissions may signal progress in terms of gender equality, they also highlight the loss of nuanced symbolic teachings previously transmitted through food rituals.

Zhuang, Wan, and Zheng (2022) emphasize that landscapes of intangible cultural heritage must be adaptively preserved—not by freezing traditions in time but by recontextualizing them to remain meaningful in modern society. For *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan*, this could mean maintaining the symbolic essence of prosperity, harmony, and perseverance while adapting its material forms to suit contemporary tastes and practices. For instance, modern couples might substitute certain foods while still honoring their symbolic meanings through reinterpretation or education.

Thus, the shifts observed in *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* illustrate both the fragility and resilience of cultural symbols. While the ritual's original symbolic depth may be diluted in practice, its continued performance ensures that at least fragments of meaning persist. The challenge lies in revitalizing the practice so that future generations not only perform the ritual but also understand and internalize its philosophical messages.

4.4 Implications for Cultural Heritage Preservation

The symbolic depth of *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* highlights how food traditions function as **living archives of cultural memory**—repositories of collective wisdom encoded in everyday practices (Huang & Lee, 2020). Unlike written texts, these archives are embodied, performed, and transmitted through ritual, making them both powerful and fragile. Their continuity depends not only on documentation but also on active participation and intergenerational engagement within the community. Without sustained efforts, informants warned, *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* risks losing its essence and surviving merely as a decorative performance staged for photographs or tourism.

This challenge reflects UNESCO's (2021) broader observation that **intangible cultural heritage** is particularly vulnerable to erosion because it relies on lived practice rather than fixed material forms. Preservation, therefore, cannot be limited to recording or archiving the tradition in books and videos. Instead, it requires strategies that allow the ritual to remain embedded in everyday life while retaining its symbolic and pedagogical functions.

Abdullah and Abdillah (2021) emphasize that cultural preservation should not mean rigidly “freezing” traditions in time, as doing so risks fossilizing them into static museum pieces disconnected from the communities that sustain them. Instead, preservation must be dynamic and adaptive, allowing traditions to evolve while safeguarding their symbolic core. For *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan*, this could mean permitting substitutions in food items to reflect contemporary tastes or economic realities, provided that the connotative meanings—prosperity, perseverance, harmony—are explained and honored. Several pathways emerge for ensuring continuity:

1. Integration into Cultural Education

Schools and community learning centers in Tanjung Balai could incorporate lessons on the symbolic meanings of *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan*. By framing the ritual as part of local heritage, younger generations can learn not only the “how” of the practice but also the “why” behind it. This aligns with Suh and MacPherson's (2022) call for embedding food heritage into formal and informal education as a way to sustain cultural identity.

2. Promotion through Local Tourism and Cultural Festivals

As Pratiwi (2021) notes, culinary traditions can be preserved by linking them to tourism and community-based cultural festivals. Showcasing *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* during cultural weeks or heritage festivals would allow the practice to gain visibility while also providing economic incentives for communities to continue performing it. Importantly, such promotion must be designed collaboratively with local practitioners to avoid reducing the ritual to a commodified spectacle.

3. Intergenerational Storytelling and Community Transmission

Oral storytelling and mentorship by elders remain critical for sustaining symbolic depth. Community leaders and cultural practitioners should be encouraged to

explain the meanings behind each food item during ceremonies, ensuring that rituals are not only performed but also **interpreted and internalized**. This storytelling component could revitalize the ritual's role as a pedagogical tool for imparting values such as diligence, unity, and harmony.

4. Digital Documentation and Media Innovation

In today's digital era, documenting *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* through short films, social media storytelling, and online exhibitions could expand its reach, particularly among urban youth who are increasingly detached from traditional rituals. Fong and Chang (2024) highlight that digital platforms, while sometimes reducing food to spectacle, can also be harnessed as tools for cultural education when used intentionally.

Ultimately, safeguarding *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* requires a community-based approach in which cultural bearers are not passive objects of preservation but active agents in revitalization. By situating the ritual within education, tourism, storytelling, and digital innovation, the practice can adapt to contemporary lifestyles while maintaining its symbolic essence. In this way, food becomes not only a means of nourishment but also a cultural bridge connecting the past with the present and guiding future generations in the values of prosperity, perseverance, and harmony.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the symbolic meanings of foods in the *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* tradition practiced in Malay wedding ceremonies in Tanjung Balai. Through a qualitative and semiotic lens, it was found that each element of the ceremonial meal embodies profound cultural values: rice signifies prosperity and fertility; the whole chicken represents perseverance, diligence, and responsibility; cakes and sweets symbolize harmony and sweetness in married life; and vegetables and *kolak* reflect maturity and the balance required in family life. Together, these foods serve as a cultural text that communicates moral guidance and social expectations for newlyweds.

The findings further demonstrate that *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* is more than a wedding ritual—it is a living repository of Malay cultural heritage. However, the tradition faces challenges in contemporary practice, where its symbolic meanings are increasingly overlooked and the ritual is reduced to entertainment. This transformation reflects broader global patterns in which modernization and urbanization threaten the continuity of intangible cultural heritage.

The contribution of this study lies in its dual focus: first, it enriches scholarly understanding of how food operates as a symbolic medium in cultural rituals; and second, it emphasizes the urgency of preserving food-based traditions as part of Indonesia's diverse intangible heritage. By applying semiotic analysis, the study illustrates how rituals function as both reflections of cultural identity and vehicles for transmitting moral values.

To ensure the sustainability of *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan*, several recommendations are proposed. Local governments and cultural institutions should prioritize the documentation and promotion of the ritual, integrating it into heritage education and tourism initiatives. Community elders and practitioners should be actively involved in intergenerational knowledge transfer, ensuring that younger generations understand not only the practice but also its meanings. Finally, adaptation strategies should allow the

tradition to evolve in form while preserving its symbolic core, ensuring its relevance for contemporary Malay society.

Taken as a whole, *Nasi Hadap-Hadapan* exemplifies the intricate relationship between food, culture, and identity. Preserving such traditions is not only about safeguarding the past but also about ensuring that cultural values continue to guide and enrich the lives of future generations.

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