



CONSTRUCTION OF SYMBOLIC MEANINGS IN THE JEMBUL TULAKAN TRADITION IN JEPARA: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY THROUGH THE PARADIGM OF SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

The Jembul Tulakan tradition is a cultural practice preserved by the people of Tulakan Village, Jepara Regency, as a form of cultural expression and collective meaning. This study aims to examine the symbolic meanings embodied in Jembul Lanang, Jembul Wadon, and ritual culinary practices through the perspective of symbolic interpretation. An ethnographic approach was employed using participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The participants included traditional leaders, ritual custodians, village officials, and local community members. The findings reveal that Jembul Lanang symbolizes strength, protection, and the continuity of agrarian life, whereas Jembul Wadon represents fertility, harmony, and spiritual relationships. Ritual foods function as symbolic media that connect social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions through the practice of *ngalap berkah*. The Jembul Tulakan tradition serves not only as an annual ritual but also as a means of preserving cultural values and strengthening collective identity. The study demonstrates that cultural symbols within local traditions continue to be constructed and transmitted through the social experiences of the community.

Keywords: *cultural symbols; ethnography; jembul tulakan; local wisdom; symbolic interpretation.*

INTRODUCTION

In community life, cultural traditions are not merely understood as hereditary ceremonial practices, but also as symbolic spaces that contain various social, spiritual, and cultural meanings. Through the symbols embedded in traditional practices, communities construct their perspectives on life while transmitting values and beliefs to subsequent generations. From the perspective of symbolic interpretation, culture is understood as a web of meanings that humans create and interpret through their social experiences (Geertz, 1973). This view is consistent with the ideas of (Koentjaraningrat, 2009) who defines culture as a system of ideas, actions, and human creations that exist within society. Therefore, traditions should not be understood solely through their outward forms; rather, they need to be interpreted as cultural texts that contain multiple layers of symbolic meaning. This perspective is reflected in the Jembul Tulakan tradition, which serves as a cultural representation of the community. Beyond functioning as a customary practice, it also represents how people interpret social relationships, spirituality, and their collective identity through cultural symbols that have been continuously preserved to the present day.

Symbols play an important role in the cultural life of a community as they serve as a primary cultural medium for constructing and conveying meaning. From the perspective of symbolic anthropology, culture is not merely understood as a collection of

social practices, but as a system of symbols that helps people interpret and understand the realities of their lives. These symbols may take the form of rituals, cultural artifacts, or collective actions that embody particular values and meanings according to the social and cultural experiences of the communities that sustain them. The meanings embedded in cultural symbols are not fixed or singular; rather, they remain open to interpretation based on the social and cultural experiences of community members (Yuliana et al., 2022). Cultural symbols also play a significant role in preserving collective identity, strengthening social relationships, and maintaining values that have been passed down from generation to generation. Symbols should not be viewed solely as material cultural forms; instead, they function as media that connect members of a community through shared meanings and cultural understandings. According to (Kurniawan, 2024) symbolic practices within cultural traditions serve not only to preserve social values but also to reinforce community integration. Therefore, the study of symbolic interpretation is essential for understanding how cultural meanings are constructed, transmitted, and sustained, including within the Jembul Tulakan tradition.

The significance of symbols in culture becomes more evident when examined through local traditional practices, one of which is the Jembul Tulakan tradition. This tradition presents a unique symbolic dimension through the presence of *Jembul Lanang* and *Jembul Wadon*, which differ not only in form but also in the meanings they convey regarding balance and complementary relationships within community life. From the perspective of symbolic anthropology, this distinction is understood as a representation of complementary duality, in which male and female symbols are often interpreted as supporting social harmony within a cultural structure (Atkinson, 2017). *Jembul Lanang* is commonly interpreted as a symbol of strength and protection, while *Jembul Wadon* represents fertility, gentleness, and the continuity of life. The presence of ritual cuisine within this tradition further enriches its symbolic dimension, as each dish served is not merely intended for consumption but also carries philosophical meanings related to gratitude, hope, and the relationship between humans, nature, and the Divine. Studies in the anthropology of food have demonstrated that consumption practices within rituals serve symbolic functions, acting as expressions of cultural values while simultaneously strengthening social cohesion within a community (Anderson, 2014). Through these various elements, the Jembul Tulakan tradition emerges not only as a cultural practice but also as a symbolic space through which community members construct, negotiate, and sustain their collective meanings.

The discussion of meaning construction within the Jembul Tulakan tradition is important because every cultural element embedded in the tradition reflects the community's worldview, which is not always immediately visible. *Jembul Lanang* and *Jembul Wadon* do not merely represent differences in form within the ritual procession; they also symbolize the relationship of balance that serves as a fundamental principle of life for the people of Tulakan. In cultural studies, symbolic relationships are understood as forms of collective meaning that function to maintain social order and harmony within a community (Anismar et al., 2021). Likewise, the ritual cuisine associated with the tradition is not simply regarded as traditional food but also as a cultural medium through which gratitude, hope, and beliefs concerning blessings and prosperity are expressed. Studies in culinary anthropology have shown that food in ritual contexts functions not only as a means of biological sustenance but also as a cultural symbol that embodies spiritual values and social solidarity (Rizqianah et al., 2021). Together, these elements form an interconnected system of meanings that continues to exist through collective



cultural practices. Therefore, this study focuses on exploring how symbolic meanings embodied in *Jembul Lanang*, *Jembul Wadon*, and ritual cuisine are constructed, interpreted, and maintained by the people of Tulakan as part of a living cultural system that continues to evolve and endure over time.

The interpretation of cultural symbols cannot be separated from the ways in which communities understand their social experiences and cultural lives. Within symbolic interpretation, meaning is not viewed as something fixed; rather, it is constructed through processes of interaction, experience, and the community's interpretation of the symbols embedded in their cultural traditions. This approach is consistent with the ideas of (Weber, 1978) who emphasized the importance of understanding social action based on the subjective meanings held by individuals, as well as the perspective of (Geertz, 1973) who viewed culture as a web of meanings that must be interpreted in order to understand human life. Cultural symbols are not merely components of ritual practices; they also function as mediums through which communities express their values, beliefs, and worldviews. In the context of the Jembul Tulakan tradition, the symbolic interpretive paradigm is particularly relevant because it enables a deeper understanding of the meanings attached to symbols such as *Jembul Lanang*, *Jembul Wadon*, and ritual cuisine, all of which represent the community's values and beliefs. The meanings embodied in *Jembul Lanang* and *Jembul Wadon* are not simply understood as differences in form or representations of gender. Rather, they reflect a relationship of balance and harmony that underpins social life and serves as a fundamental principle within the cultural system of the Tulakan community.

The ethnographic approach was employed in this study to gain a deeper understanding of cultural practices through direct engagement with the social life and traditions of the community. Through this approach, the researcher not only observed cultural activities but also sought to understand how community members interpret the symbols embedded within the Jembul Tulakan tradition (Pink et al., 2021). This research was conducted in Tulakan Village, Donorojo District, Jepara Regency, the primary location where the Jembul Tulakan tradition is practiced. Through participation in ritual processions and interactions with traditional leaders, custodians of sacred sites, village officials, and local community members, the researcher sought to understand the cultural symbols that continue to be preserved and interpreted within the community's everyday life. In this context, tradition is understood as a living and dynamic cultural practice that continuously undergoes processes of interpretation in response to social and cultural developments. The primary focus of this study is not merely to describe the outward forms of the ritual but to explore how community members assign meaning to these symbols in their daily lives. Symbolic interpretation views cultural symbols as products of ongoing social processes that are continuously reproduced through collective experience. Accordingly, the analysis in this study examines how *Jembul Lanang*, *Jembul Wadon*, and ritual cuisine function not only as components of a traditional ceremony but also as cultural mediums through which the community fosters solidarity, maintains social harmony, and strengthens interpersonal relationships.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative method with an interpretive ethnographic approach. This approach was selected because the study aims to understand the symbolic meanings constructed by the community in the Jembul Tulakan tradition through lived

experiences, cultural practices, and social interpretations embedded within society. Qualitative research is used to explore social phenomena from the participants' perspectives in a comprehensive and contextual manner (Jhon, 2024). Meanwhile, ethnography enables researchers to examine cultural systems, social practices, and meanings constructed by particular social groups (Resnik, 2019). The research was conducted in Tulakan Village, Donorojo District, Jepara Regency, as the center of the Jembul Tulakan tradition. The research paradigm employed was Clifford Geertz's symbolic interpretation, which views culture as a web of meanings interpreted by humans through cultural symbols (Geertz, 1973). Through this paradigm, the symbols embodied in *Jembul Lanang*, *Jembul Wadon*, and ritual cuisine are understood as representations of values, beliefs, and the worldview of the local community. The sources of data consisted of informants, events, and documents. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their involvement and knowledge regarding the Jembul Tulakan tradition. The research participants included the village caretaker (*juru kunci*), village head, traditional leaders, religious leaders, and community members actively involved in the implementation of the tradition. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Participant observation was conducted by following the entire sequence of the tradition, beginning from the preparation stage to the *ngalap berkah* procession. In-depth interviews were carried out to gain a deeper understanding of the symbolic meanings attributed to the tradition by the community. Documentation in the form of photographs, field notes, and archival materials was used as supporting data. Data validity was established through triangulation by comparing various data sources and data collection techniques (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data analysis employed the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Huberman, 2014). The interpretation of the data was conducted through symbolic readings of cultural practices observed in the field so that the meanings embedded within the Jembul Tulakan tradition could be understood comprehensively and in depth.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The construction of meaning within the Jembul Tulakan tradition cannot be separated from an understanding of the cultural context that underlies it. This tradition is not merely an annual ritual event; rather, it constitutes a cultural practice rich in symbols and values that have been preserved and continuously maintained to the present day. Every element of the tradition, including the form of the *Jembul*, the arrangement of offerings, and the sequence of ritual processions, carries meanings that cannot be understood literally but instead require interpretation by the community that sustains the tradition. Therefore, before proceeding to a more in-depth analysis of the construction of meaning embodied in *Jembul Lanang*, *Jembul Wadon*, and ritual cuisine, it is important to first present an overview of the Jembul Tulakan tradition. Such an overview provides a foundation for understanding the broader symbolic system embedded within the tradition and the cultural meanings that are continuously reproduced through its practice. Articles may contain tables and/or images. Tables or figures should not be too long, too big and too numerous. Tables or pictures should use a variety of presentations. The tables and figures presented must be referenced in the text.



Overview of the Jembul Tulakan Tradition

The Jembul Tulakan tradition is an annual cultural celebration observed by the people of Tulakan Village, Donorojo District, Jepara Regency. The tradition is held every *Senin Pahing* (Monday Pahing) during the month of *Apit* (*Dzulqa'dah*) in the Javanese calendar as a form of *Sedekah Bumi* (earth almsgiving), expressing gratitude for the harvest while also seeking protection and blessings from God Almighty. Beyond its association with the thanksgiving practices of an agrarian society, the tradition is closely connected to the commemoration of the oath and curse of Queen Kalinyamat (*Ratu Kalinyamat*), who sought justice for the death of her husband. The death of Sultan Hadiri represented not only a personal loss for the Queen but also a political insult that disrupted the stability of the Jepara region. Within Javanese cosmology, a ruler who loses a spouse under unjust circumstances is often expected to undertake spiritual actions to restore cosmic balance (Darmoko, 2022). In response, Ratu Kalinyamat performed *topo wudo* in Tulakan, a form of extreme ascetic retreat involving complete detachment from worldly affairs in order to obtain divine strength for avenging Arya Penangsang. During this period, she made a solemn vow that she would not cease her meditation until she could wash her hair with the blood of Arya Penangsang. This vow became the central narrative that underlies the Jembul tradition. The term "*Jembul*" is derived from the word *jambul* (hair), referring to the Queen's hair, which symbolizes her sacred vow and unwavering commitment to seeking justice. As a result, the tradition functions not only as an expression of communal gratitude but also as a cultural remembrance of Ratu Kalinyamat's spiritual struggle, resilience, and determination, values that continue to be preserved and transmitted through the symbolic practices of the Jembul Tulakan tradition.

Jembul has long been regarded as a symbolic representation of the head of Arya Penangsang after his defeat. The annual procession of the *Jembul* through the streets of Tulakan Village serves as a celebration of the triumph of justice over oppression, as well as the restoration of honor to Ratu Kalinyamat and the people of Jepara. Through this ritual act, a painful historical experience is transformed into a lasting expression of gratitude and collective remembrance. In addition to this historical narrative, the community also preserves a local legend concerning Nyai Suci. Unlike the story of Ratu Kalinyamat, which is rooted in royal politics and power struggles, the tale of Nyai Suci is more domestic in nature and closely connected to the everyday lives of ordinary villagers. Nyai Suci is said to have been a mother who lost her child in the forests of Tulakan, an event that brought profound sorrow to her family. In her desperation, she made a vow that if her child were returned by whatever force had taken him whether a wild animal or a supernatural entity she would hold a grand thanksgiving ceremony. The miraculous return of her child inspired a communal celebration involving the entire village. Over time, this event came to be regarded as the origin of the Jembul tradition as a form of *Sedekah Bumi* (earth almsgiving). Consequently, the Jembul Tulakan tradition embodies multiple layers of meaning, combining historical memory, spiritual devotion, communal gratitude, and local cultural identity. These narratives continue to shape how the community understands and preserves the tradition as a living cultural heritage.

The presence of the two narratives Ratu Kalinyamat and Nyai Suci demonstrates a duality within the Jembul Tulakan tradition. On one hand, the ritual serves as a commemoration of "Great History," connecting the village to the broader political dynamics of Java's past. On the other hand, it represents a celebration of "Little History," validating the lived experiences of an agrarian community in confronting the challenges

of nature and everyday life. The integration of these two narratives gives the Jembul Tulakan tradition a broad appeal and profound significance for all segments of society, ranging from traditional elites to ordinary farmers. In its implementation, the tradition is characterized by the presence of two types of *Jembul*: *Jembul Lanang* and *Jembul Wadon*. *Jembul Lanang* contains traditional foods such as *jadah* (glutinous rice cake), *tape ketan* (fermented glutinous rice), and *apem* (rice cake), while *Jembul Wadon* consists of various side dishes, with buffalo satay serving as its principal element. These differences do not merely indicate variations in form; rather, they reflect a symbolic division that carries particular meanings within the cultural life of the community. The preparation of the *Jembul* is carried out collectively through mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*), highlighting the enduring spirit of solidarity and communal responsibility among the people of Tulakan. Through this collaborative process, the tradition functions not only as a ritual event but also as a social mechanism for strengthening community bonds and reinforcing shared cultural values across generations.

The Jembul Tulakan procession consists of several stages, beginning with the preparation of materials, followed by the construction of the *Jembul*, and culminating in a ceremonial procession to the residence of the village head (*Petinggi*). After the procession, a ritual foot-washing ceremony for the *Petinggi* is performed, symbolizing purification and respect for community leadership. This is followed by a *Tayub* performance, a traditional cultural event that serves to strengthen social relationships and foster interaction among community members. The climax of the entire celebration is the distribution and collective scrambling for the contents of the *Jembul*. This activity is locally known as *ngalap berkah*, reflecting the community's belief that participation in the ritual can bring blessings and prosperity for the future. The tradition is carried out simultaneously by four hamlets Krajan, Winong, Ngemplak, and Drojo. However, an exception exists in Dukuh Pejing. Historically, the people of Dukuh Pejing conduct their Jembul celebration one week after the main event held in the village center. This delayed observance originated from a past incident in which the hamlet leader, Mbah Cabuk, became seriously ill and was therefore unable to deliver the required offerings on time. Rather than being regarded as a violation of customary rules, this event was incorporated into the community's collective memory and eventually institutionalized as part of the tradition itself. This phenomenon demonstrates that cultural practices are not rigid but rather dynamic and adaptive to historical experiences, enabling the emergence of ritual variations that enrich local cultural diversity (Hanan, 2022). This arrangement illustrates that the Jembul Tulakan tradition is not merely a one-day ceremonial event but a continuing series of inter-village interactions that reinforce a shared identity among the people of Tulakan Village. The tradition's flexibility in accommodating local historical experiences, as demonstrated by the case of Dukuh Pejing, further highlights its living and adaptive nature. Through this capacity for adaptation, the tradition remains relevant while embracing new narratives within the community. Taken as a whole, the Jembul Tulakan tradition creates a distinctive cultural atmosphere in which ritual activities, cultural performances, and social interactions take place simultaneously within a shared communal space. This integration of religious, cultural, and social dimensions strengthens the tradition's role as a vital expression of collective identity and cultural continuity within the Tulakan community.



Figure 1. The Jembul Tulakan Traditional Procession

Source: Author's Documentation, 2026.

Figure illustrates the dynamic implementation of the Jembul Tulakan tradition, which involves the active participation of a large number of community members. The presence and engagement of local residents in this process demonstrate that the tradition functions not only as a ritual practice but also as a social space that strengthens cohesion among members of the community. The interactions that take place throughout the event reflect the vitality of the tradition and highlight its continuing relevance and significance in the social and cultural life of the people of Tulakan.

Although the Jembul Tulakan tradition has deep roots in pre-Islamic customs and the legend of Ratu Kalinyamat, its contemporary practice has undergone a profound assimilation with Islamic teachings. This phenomenon is common along the northern coast of Java, where the process of Islamization was not carried out through confrontation but rather through a cultural approach that integrated Islamic values into existing local traditions and cultural practices. The missionary strategies employed by the Wali Songo demonstrate a process of cultural acculturation that enabled Islam to be widely accepted without erasing local identities (Mahfudh & Susetiyo, 2025). In its present form, prayers offered before the *Jembul* are led by Islamic religious figures, such as the *modin* or *kiai*, and are delivered in Arabic and Javanese. These prayers contain supplications to Allah SWT, seeking blessings, protection, and prosperity for the community. The *Sedekah Bumi* ritual is reinterpreted as a form of *sadaqah* (charitable giving), which is encouraged in Islam as an expression of gratitude for the blessings and sustenance granted by God. Likewise, the traditional practice of honoring ancestors and village guardian spirits (*dhanyang*) has been transformed into prayers for deceased forebears, asking that they be granted an honorable place in the presence of God. This process of assimilation has been crucial to the continuity of the tradition. By incorporating Islamic elements, the Jembul Tulakan tradition has largely avoided being stigmatized as *shirk* (polytheism) or *bid'ah* (religious innovation), criticisms that may arise from more puritan religious perspectives. Instead, the ritual is widely perceived as a form of cultural da'wah that strengthens *ukhuwah* (brotherhood) among villagers through collective activities that are simultaneously religious and cultural in nature. As a result, the tradition continues to function as a bridge between local cultural heritage and Islamic values, allowing both to coexist harmoniously within the social life of the Tulakan community.

Symbolic Meaning Construction of *Jembul Lanang*

Jembul Lanang in the Jembul Tulakan tradition is not merely understood as a mountain-shaped arrangement of ritual offerings; rather, it functions as a cultural symbol that embodies a complex and multilayered process of meaning-making. Materially, *Jembul Lanang* consists of various traditional foods, such as *jadah* (glutinous rice cake), *tape ketan* (fermented glutinous rice), and *apem* (rice cake), all of which are prepared by community members. This composition reflects the community's close relationship with the agrarian resources that form the foundation of their livelihood. For agrarian societies, agricultural products are not viewed solely as economic resources but also possess social and symbolic dimensions that shape cultural practices and value systems within the community (Eka et al., 2025). However, the meaning of *Jembul Lanang* extends beyond its representation of agricultural abundance. Its significance develops through the social practices that accompany and sustain the tradition. At the symbolic level, the term *lanang* does not simply refer to the male gender category; rather, it carries cultural meanings associated with strength, resilience, and protective roles within the social structure (Keeler, 1987). These meanings are expressed through ritual symbols such as *Jembul Lanang*, which represent not only a physical form but also the social values embedded within the community. The meanings attached to *Jembul Lanang* are not fixed or static. Instead, they are continuously constructed through collective experiences that have been transmitted across generations. Community members do not merely understand these meanings at a conceptual level; they internalize and experience them through direct participation in ritual activities. This is reflected in the position of *Jembul Lanang* as an essential element of the ceremony, inseparable from the broader symbolic system of the Jembul Tulakan tradition. The physical form of *Jembul Lanang*, composed of various traditional foods arranged in a distinctive structure, illustrates how material objects are transformed into cultural symbols that communicate collective values, historical memory, and shared understandings within the Tulakan community. Its appearance can be seen in the following figure.



Figure 2. *Jembul Lanang* in the Jembul Tulakan Tradition

Source: Author's Documentation, 2026.

Figure above depicts *Jembul Lanang*, which is predominantly composed of agricultural food products such as *jadah* (glutinous rice cake), *tape ketan* (fermented glutinous rice), and *apem* (rice cake), arranged in the form of a ceremonial mountain (*gunungan*). This structure not only represents the visual aspect of the tradition but also



reflects the close relationship between the community and the agrarian way of life that serves as the primary foundation of their livelihood. From an anthropological perspective, cultural practices of this nature cannot be separated from the relationship between humans and their environment, as the symbols embodied within them are part of a system of meanings constructed through the social experiences of a community (Saturnino & Borrás, 2009). The form and contents of *Jembul Lanang* do not merely symbolize agricultural produce; rather, they represent blessings, strength, and the continuity of life as collectively understood by the people of Tulakan. The symbolic meaning of *Jembul Lanang* becomes more evident when observed within the ritual process itself, particularly during the communal scrambling for the *gunungan*. At this stage, the symbol moves beyond the realm of representation and becomes part of lived experience. Community members compete to obtain portions of the *Jembul Lanang* with the belief that every item carries blessings and positive fortune. Through this practice, symbolic meanings are not only communicated but also actively experienced and reaffirmed by participants. This interpretation is supported by an interview with the ritual custodian (*juru kunci*) conducted on Monday, 20 April 2026, as follows.

"Receiving a portion of the Jembul brings us happiness because it is regarded as a blessing. The food is usually taken home and shared with family members. We believe that it carries blessings, prosperity, and protection for those who receive it."
(Interview with the Ritual Custodian (Juru Kunci), 20 April 2026).

Interview excerpt demonstrates that the meaning of *Jembul Lanang* is not merely understood at a conceptual level but is also experienced directly by community members. The act of obtaining a portion of the *gunungan* becomes a symbolic experience that connects individuals with spiritual values and aspirations for a better life. The communal scrambling for the offerings is not perceived as a spontaneous or disorderly act; rather, it functions as a cultural mechanism through which meaning and blessings are collectively distributed throughout the community. Contemporary studies of ritual suggest that rituals are social practices that not only represent symbols but also foster interpersonal bonds and reinforce collective meanings through shared participation (Cain & Scrivner, 2021). Within the *Jembul Tulakan* tradition, active involvement in the ritual enables community members to engage directly with the symbolic values embodied in *Jembul Lanang*, thereby strengthening their sense of belonging and shared cultural identity. Community members often use fibers or components taken from the *Jembul*, as well as the food obtained from it, as a means of warding off misfortune. Others consume the food immediately as a way of receiving and internalizing its blessings. These practices indicate that the symbolic meaning of *Jembul Lanang* does not end when the ritual concludes. Instead, its significance continues to extend into everyday life, where the objects acquired during the ceremony remain connected to beliefs concerning protection, prosperity, and well-being. In this way, the ritual's symbolic meanings are continuously reproduced and sustained beyond the ceremonial context, becoming part of the lived cultural experience of the Tulakan community.

HGVGHNF Community involvement throughout the entire tradition from the preparation of the *Jembul* to the communal scrambling for its contents has fostered a strong emotional attachment and sense of ownership toward the tradition. This collective experience reinforces the belief that *Jembul Lanang* is not merely a symbolic object but an integral part of community life that possesses tangible significance. From the

perspective of symbolic interpretation, this condition demonstrates that meaning is formed through the interaction between symbols, practices, and social experiences (Lems, 2022) In other words, the meaning of *Jembul Lanang* is not inherently fixed within the object itself; rather, it is continuously constructed and reconstructed through the active participation of community members. Beyond its symbolic significance, *Jembul Lanang* also serves an important social function in maintaining community cohesion. The practice of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) during its preparation, together with collective participation in the ritual procession, creates opportunities for social interaction that strengthen relationships among community members. Furthermore, the symbolic distribution of blessings through the communal scrambling for the *gunungan* fosters a sense of togetherness, as every individual is given an equal opportunity to obtain a share of the blessings associated with the ritual. In this context, *Jembul Lanang* functions not only as a cultural symbol but also as a social mechanism that supports the continuity of shared values, beliefs, and communal solidarity. Through repeated participation in the tradition, these cultural meanings are reaffirmed and transmitted across generations, ensuring the preservation of both the symbolic and social dimensions of the Jembul Tulakan tradition.

Symbolic Meaning Construction of *Jembul Wadon*

In contrast to *Jembul Lanang*, *Jembul Wadon* in the Jembul Tulakan tradition embodies a symbolic dimension that is more strongly associated with fertility, the continuity of life, and the spiritual relationship between humans and the non-material forces believed to influence community life. Materially, *Jembul Wadon* is composed of various side dishes, with buffalo satay serving as its principal and indispensable element within the offering structure. The presence of these dishes indicates that the symbol is not solely related to agricultural products but also reflects the ways in which people process, interpret, and dedicate the fruits of their labor within a ritual context. At the symbolic level, the term *wadon* does not merely refer to women as a biological category. Rather, it represents a cultural construct associated with fertility, gentleness, nurturing qualities, and the continuity of life. Symbols of womanhood are often interpreted as representations of social reproduction and the preservation of life, shaped through a society's value systems and cultural practices (Ortner, 2020) Within the Javanese cultural context, women are frequently regarded as sources of life and guardians of harmony. Consequently, the presence of *Jembul Wadon* functions as a symbolic counterpart that complements and balances *Jembul Lanang* within the broader ritual system. The meaning embodied in *Jembul Wadon* extends beyond a simple symbolic duality between male and female representations. It develops into a broader representation of the interconnected relationship among humans, nature, and the spiritual realm. Through this symbolic framework, *Jembul Wadon* reflects cultural understandings of balance, sustainability, and the maintenance of harmony within both social and cosmic life. The composition of *Jembul Wadon*, dominated by various side dishes with buffalo satay as its central element, visually illustrates these symbolic meanings and can be observed in the following figure.



Figure 3. The *Jembul Wadon* Offering Structure in the Jembul Tulakan Tradition

Source: Author's Documentation, 2026.

As shown in the figure above, *Jembul Wadon* is predominantly composed of various side dishes, particularly buffalo satay, which occupies a central position within the offering structure. The presence of this element not only highlights a variation in the types of food included in the ritual but also conveys a deeper symbolic meaning when compared to *Jembul Lanang*. Buffalo satay is not merely understood as a consumable food item; rather, it functions as a symbolic offering associated with the village's spiritual guardians and the community's beliefs regarding protection and well-being. The visual structure of *Jembul Wadon* represents the relationship between humans and the spiritual dimension. Within this symbolic framework, food serves as a medium of communication through which cultural values, beliefs, and spiritual aspirations are expressed. The arrangement of the offerings reflects the community's understanding that maintaining harmony in life requires not only material sustenance but also a balanced relationship with spiritual forces. Consequently, *Jembul Wadon* embodies a symbolic expression of interconnectedness between the human, natural, and spiritual realms, reinforcing the cultural values that continue to shape the social life of the Tulakan community.

Symbolic meaning of *Jembul Wadon* becomes increasingly complex when examined in relation to the presence of buffalo satay as the principal element of the offering. For the people of Tulakan, buffalo satay is not merely regarded as food; rather, it is understood as an offering imbued with symbolic and spiritual significance. Its inclusion is closely associated with beliefs concerning the *dhanyang*, or village guardian spirits, who are believed to play an important role in maintaining safety, protection, and balance within the social environment of the community. Belief in local guardian spirits is understood as part of a broader system of beliefs that functions to protect the community while preserving harmony among humans, nature, and the spiritual realm (Koentjaraningrat, 1984). Within this framework, *Jembul Wadon* serves not only as a symbol of fertility and the continuity of life but also as a medium of symbolic communication between human beings and forces that transcend the material world. This dimension of meaning becomes particularly evident during the ritual process itself, especially in the procession and subsequent distribution of the *Jembul* to community members. Through these practices, symbolic meanings are not only represented but also actively experienced and reaffirmed by participants. This interpretation is supported by an interview conducted with the Village Head (*Petinggi*) on Monday, 20 April 2026, as presented below.

"The Jembul Wadon holds a distinct significance, particularly due to the presence of buffalo satay. It is not regarded merely as food symbolism but as an essential component of the ritual offering. The offering is dedicated to the village guardian

spirit (Dhayang), who is believed to safeguard the community and ensure the village's safety."

The quotation indicates that the community perceives *Jembul Wadon* not merely as a tradition passed down through generations, but as a symbol closely connected to their spiritual beliefs. This tradition is regarded as a means of *ngalap barakah* (seeking blessings), which is not solely oriented toward personal interests but is also associated with efforts to maintain harmony between humans and the spiritual realm believed to be present in village life. This interpretation is reflected in the practice of obtaining a portion of the *Jembul Wadon*, which differs from that of the *Jembul Lanang*. While *Jembul Lanang* is more commonly associated with the expectation of gaining individual blessings, *Jembul Wadon* is understood as a representation of collective protection and well-being for the entire village community. Therefore, the portion obtained from the *Jembul Wadon* is valued not only as a medium for receiving blessings but also as a symbol of community participation in maintaining a harmonious relationship with the spiritual forces believed to safeguard their lives.

From the perspective of symbolic interpretation studies, this condition demonstrates that the meaning of *Jembul Wadon* is constructed through the interaction of symbols, beliefs, and social practices that continuously shape community life. Meaning is not fixed or inherently given; rather, it is produced through collective experiences that simultaneously involve both material and non-material dimensions (Lems, 2022). This perspective helps explain the greater complexity of *Jembul Wadon*, whose significance extends beyond social and cultural aspects to encompass the domains of belief and spirituality. Furthermore, *Jembul Wadon* serves a social function in maintaining balance and sustaining the continuity of community life. Through this symbol, the community not only expresses gratitude but also establishes a connection with the spiritual forces they believe safeguard their existence. Consequently, *Jembul Wadon* has become a symbolic space that occupies a central position in the construction of collective meaning within the Tulakan community.

Symbolic Meaning of Culinary Elements in the Jembul Tulakan Ritual

Culinary elements in the *Jembul Tulakan* tradition cannot be understood merely as supplementary components of the ritual; rather, they constitute an essential part of the symbolic system through which the community constructs cultural meaning. The various foods arranged in both *Jembul Lanang* and *Jembul Wadon* demonstrate that food occupies a strategic position as an expression of collective values, beliefs, and aspirations. Food functions not only as a means of biological sustenance but also as a symbolic medium that connects the material and spiritual dimensions of life (Khamimiya & Sudrajat, 2025). Within ritual practices, food can be understood as a symbolic medium that embodies religious values, cultural identity, and social solidarity, while simultaneously reinforcing communal bonds through collective participation. On a material level, the foods used in this tradition are produced and prepared by community members themselves, including *jadah* (glutinous rice cake), *tape ketan* (fermented glutinous rice), *apem* (traditional rice cake), and various side dishes, including buffalo satay. The selection of these foods reflects the community's close relationship with its agrarian environment and illustrates local wisdom in utilizing available resources. However, the significance of ritual cuisine does not end with its material aspects. Its meaning is further developed and continuously reproduced through the social practices that accompany and give context to its use within the ritual tradition.



The meaning of culinary elements becomes more complex when food is placed within a ritual context. The foods arranged in the *Jembul* are no longer understood merely as ordinary objects of consumption; rather, they undergo a process of symbolization through prayers, customary rituals, and the beliefs upheld by the community. At this stage, the food experiences a transformation of meaning, shifting from the profane to the sacred. This interpretation is reinforced by the findings of an interview conducted on April 20, 2026, with the custodian (*Juru Kunci*) of Tulakan Village, as presented below. This interpretation is further supported by an interview with the village custodian (*Juru Kunci*) of Tulakan Village conducted on April 20, 2026, as follows.

“The food presented in the Jembul differs from ordinary food because it has undergone a process of prayer and blessing. Consequently, the people of Tulakan Village believe that it carries blessings for those who receive it.”

The quotation indicates that the community perceives food not merely as a biological necessity, but also as a spiritual medium believed to have a meaningful impact on their lives. This experience constitutes a ritual process that is both personal and collective in nature. The culinary elements of the tradition reveal a process of meaning distribution through the practice of *ngalap berkah* (seeking blessings). Food that has undergone ritual processes is subsequently contested for and distributed among community members, forming a sequence of traditional practices that has been preserved to the present day. Each portion received is understood not simply as ordinary food, but as a symbol of blessings in everyday life. From the perspective of contemporary anthropology, ritual food is interpreted as a symbolic medium that embodies religious values, hopes, and the relationship between humans and the spiritual realm. Consequently, its significance extends beyond the fulfillment of biological needs and becomes a source of blessings in the lives of community members (Hirzi et al., 2024). Residents of Tulakan Village typically consume the food with their families or keep it as a form of symbolic protection. This practice demonstrates that the meaning of ritual cuisine does not end when the ceremony concludes; rather, it continues to exist and be reproduced within the everyday lives of the community.

From the perspective of symbolic interpretation, this condition underscores that the meaning of ritual cuisine is constructed through the interaction of symbols, practices, and social experiences (Lems, 2022). Food has become a medium through which community members interpret their relationships with nature, with one another, and with the spiritual realm. Ritual cuisine functions not only as a component of tradition but also as a means through which meaning is continuously constructed and reproduced. Beyond its role as a cultural practice, ritual cuisine also serves an important social function in strengthening relationships among community members. The practice of communal dining during ritual events provides a significant means of fostering solidarity, cultivating a sense of togetherness, and encouraging collective participation. Through these activities, social relationships are not merely maintained but are continuously reproduced over time (Gelfand, Caluori, & Taylor, 2020). The preparation of food through mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*) and its subsequent distribution create spaces for interaction that reinforce social solidarity. Food thus becomes a unifying medium within shared experiences, strengthening both communal bonds and collective identity. Viewed from this perspective, the ritual cuisine of the *Jembul Tulakan* tradition can be understood as a symbol that embodies multiple layers of meaning, ranging from material and spiritual dimensions to social significance. Food is not present merely as an object of consumption;

rather, it functions as a medium that connects various dimensions of community life. Through ritual cuisine, this tradition not only preserves cultural values but also provides a symbolic space in which meanings are constructed, negotiated, and transmitted across generations.

Symbolic Meaning of the Ritual in Strengthening Social Cohesion within the Tulakan Community

The *Jembul Tulakan* tradition not only conveys symbolic meanings through the presence of *Jembul Lanang*, *Jembul Wadon*, and ritual cuisine, but also creates a social space that strengthens relationships among community members. This ritual serves as a collective medium that brings residents together in a shared cultural activity. Community participation, beginning with the preparation stage, the construction of the *Jembul*, the procession, and culminating in the scramble for the ritual offerings (*gunungan*), demonstrates that this tradition is inseparable from the social practices that foster communal solidarity. From the perspective of ritual anthropology, collective activities function as an important means of strengthening social bonds, as rituals enable community members to experience emotional attachment and a shared sense of identity through recurring cultural practices (Gelfand, Caluori, Jackson, et al., 2020). Therefore, *Jembul Tulakan* is not merely understood as a form of cultural heritage; it also serves as a social mechanism for maintaining harmonious relationships among members of the community.

The social interconnectedness embedded in the *Jembul Tulakan* tradition is reflected in the strong practice of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) that continues to be maintained by the community. Every stage of the ritual is carried out collectively, from preparing the food ingredients and arranging the *Jembul* to organizing the customary procession. This collective involvement demonstrates that the tradition is not merely perceived as a ceremonial activity, but also as a social space that strengthens solidarity and fosters a sense of togetherness among community members. From a sociocultural perspective, *gotong royong* is understood as a form of social relationship that promotes community integration through shared participation in cultural activities (Husama & In'am, 2025). Through such involvement, community members not only perform the ritual but also build emotional connections that reinforce their collective identity as members of the Tulakan community.

The meaning of social cohesion is also reflected in the *ngalap berkah* (seeking blessings) moment during the ritual scramble for the contents of the *Jembul*. This practice is not understood merely as a competition to obtain food, but rather as a symbol of collective participation in receiving blessings. All members of the community are given an equal opportunity to partake in these blessings. This condition demonstrates that the ritual functions as a social space that promotes equality within the community. The collective experience of *ngalap berkah* fosters a sense of togetherness, as community members directly participate in a shared belief and common hope for blessings in their lives (Cain & Scrivner, 2021). From the perspective of contemporary ritual studies, shared experiences in cultural practices are understood to create social bonds and strengthen group solidarity through collective participation. Therefore, *ngalap berkah* serves not only as a symbolic practice but also as a social mechanism that reinforces relationships among members of the Tulakan community.

The presence of the *tayub* performance within the *Jembul Tulakan* tradition further illustrates the social function of the ritual as a space for cultural interaction. *Tayub*



serves not only as a form of traditional entertainment but also as a medium that brings community members together in a collective atmosphere rich in social interaction. Its presence creates opportunities for communication among residents, allowing social relationships to be nurtured not only through sacred ritual activities but also through recreational cultural practices. The *Jembul Tulakan* tradition thus embodies an integration of ritual and social dimensions that operate simultaneously. According to (Hanan, 2022) within the context of Javanese culture, collective cultural practices such as these can be understood as mechanisms for maintaining social harmony and strengthening relationships among community members through shared experiences that are transmitted across generations. From an interpretive perspective, social cohesion within the *Jembul Tulakan* tradition is formed through the interaction of symbols, ritual practices, and community experiences that are continuously reproduced over time. The meaning of togetherness does not emerge as an abstract concept; rather, it is constructed through the active participation of community members in every stage of the tradition. The ritual functions as a symbolic space that enables people to develop a sense of belonging to their cultural heritage while simultaneously strengthening social relationships within the community. Therefore, the *Jembul Tulakan* tradition serves not only as a means of cultural preservation but also as a medium of social integration that sustains solidarity, harmony, and the collective identity of the Tulakan community.

Integration of Symbolic Meanings in the Jembul Tulakan Tradition

Jembul Lanang and *Jembul Wadon* in the *Jembul Tulakan* tradition cannot be understood as two separate entities; rather, they constitute a complementary symbolic unity that forms an integrated system of meaning. Together, they embody a dualistic relationship that is not oppositional but complementary, in which difference serves as the foundation for creating balance within community life. *Jembul Lanang* is interpreted as a symbol of strength and protection, while *Jembul Wadon* represents fertility and continuity. Collectively, they construct a framework of meaning that reflects social harmony. The integration of these meanings is evident not only at the symbolic level but also in ritual practices that consistently involve both elements simultaneously. During the *Jembul Tulakan* procession, *Jembul Lanang* and *Jembul Wadon* are never separated; instead, they are always presented as parts of a single, unified ritual sequence. This demonstrates that the community does not perceive them as independent entities, but rather as a symbolic pair whose meanings are mutually reinforcing. This relationship can be understood as a form of symbolic dualism, in which contrasting elements function together to create balance and harmony within a cultural system (Rofiq & Fatholla, 2023). Consequently, their existence does not represent an oppositional relationship in which one negates the other; rather, they form an integrated system of meanings that support and strengthen one another. This concept is reflected in the relationship between *Jembul Lanang* and *Jembul Wadon*, which not only highlights difference but also symbolizes balance and harmony within social life.

Integration has shown a relationship between the material, social, and spiritual dimensions within a cultural system, indicating that each cultural element does not stand alone but is interconnected in creating balance and sustainability in community life (Khamimiya & Sudrajat, 2025) *Jembul lanang* contains food based on processed agricultural products, emphasizing the relationship between humans, nature, and collective labor in fulfilling life needs. Meanwhile, *Jembul wadon*, with the presence of

buffalo satay as part of the offerings, affirms the relationship between humans and the spiritual dimension, particularly in the context of respect for forces believed to maintain life's balance. When both are present as a unified whole, this tradition does not merely represent material life, but also reflects a broader relationship between humans, nature, and the spiritual world. This integration of meaning becomes even stronger when viewed in the collective experience of the community, especially in the practice of *rebutan gunung*. The community does not strictly distinguish between *Jembul lanang* and *Jembul wadon* in the process of seeking blessings, but instead interprets them as an integrated series of sources of blessing. This shows that meaning is not constructed in a fragmented way, but through a unifying experience of symbols within a single social practice. In symbolic interpretation, this condition affirms that meaning arises from the interaction between symbols, practices, and lived experiences that continuously exist within community life.

Integrity of *Jembul lanang* and *Jembul wadon* can also be understood as a reflection of the community's worldview, which places balance as a central principle. The duality presented is not interpreted as opposition, but as a complementary relationship that cannot be separated. In this context, the *Jembul Tulakan* tradition becomes a symbolic space where the value of balance is not only understood but also practically enacted through rituals and social interactions within the community. Ultimately, the integration of meaning in *Jembul lanang* and *Jembul wadon* shows that the *Jembul Tulakan* tradition is not merely a cultural practice passed down through generations, but a living symbolic system that continues to evolve. The meanings contained within it are not static, but are continuously constructed through the collective experiences of the participating community. This tradition does not only function as a means of cultural preservation, but also serves as a medium for society to understand, construct, and sustain life in a more continuous and meaningful way.

CONCLUSION

The *Jembul Tulakan* tradition cannot be understood as merely a ceremonial cultural practice, but rather as a symbolic system that contains complex and layered constructions of meaning within community life. Through the analysis of *Jembul lanang*, *Jembul wadon*, and ritual cuisine, it can be seen that each element within this tradition does not stand alone, but is interconnected in forming a unified whole of meaning. *Jembul lanang* represents strength, resilience, and the relationship between humans and nature through agricultural products. *Jembul wadon* presents dimensions of fertility, continuity, and spiritual relationships with non-material forces, while ritual cuisine serves as the primary medium that bridges the material and symbolic dimensions within the community's cultural practices. Construction of meaning in this tradition is formed through the interaction between symbols, practices, and collective experiences that continuously take place across generations. Meaning does not exist in a static form, but is constructed and reinterpreted in accordance with changing social contexts. Practices such as the making of *Jembul*, ritual processions, and the moment of *ngalap barakah* show that the community does not merely understand symbols conceptually, but also lives them through real experiences that connect them with cultural values, life expectations, and spiritual beliefs. Integration of *Jembul lanang* and *Jembul wadon* reflects the principle of balance as the foundation of the community's worldview. The duality presented is not understood as opposition, but as a complementary relationship that creates social



harmony. The *Jembul Tulakan* tradition becomes a symbolic space that not only represents community life but also shapes the way people understand and live their lives.

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