



A Semiotic Analysis of the Meaning of Traditional Karo Wedding Attire

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Abstract. This study aims to identify and analyze the symbolic meanings embedded in traditional Karo wedding attire based on Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory. It employed a qualitative descriptive approach. Data were collected through questionnaires, internet-based research, and interviews with individuals knowledgeable about Karo culture and customary practices. Data credibility was assessed through methodological triangulation by comparing information obtained from different sources. The data were analyzed using Peirce's triadic model, consisting of the representamen, object, and interpretant. The findings identified seven principal elements of traditional Karo wedding attire: uis nipes, beka buluh, tudung, uis julu, uis kelam-kelam, sertali, and kampil. These elements represent various social and cultural meanings, including social status, honor, authority, communication, cultural identity, mourning, luxury, openness, responsibility, hospitality, thriftiness, gracefulness, politeness, gentleness, wisdom, and protection. The findings indicate that traditional Karo wedding attire serves not only as ceremonial clothing but also as a system of signs that represents the cultural values and identity of the Karo community. This study is expected to provide a source of information for improving understanding of the symbolic meanings of traditional attire and supporting efforts to preserve Karo cultural heritage.

Keywords: Charles Sanders Peirce; Cultural Identity; Karo Wedding; Semiotics; Symbolic Meaning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country characterized by extensive cultural diversity, with distinct cultural traditions found throughout the archipelago, from Sabang in the west to Merauke in the east. Each region possesses its own cultural characteristics, which form an essential part of the identity of its people. Culture can be understood as a system of meaning constructed through symbols and social practices and transmitted within community life. Geertz (1973, p. 89) describes culture as a system of inherited conceptions expressed through symbols, through which people communicate, preserve their knowledge of life, and develop their perspectives on the world. This perspective highlights the significant role of symbols in transmitting cultural values across generations. Within Karo society, traditional wedding attire represents one form of cultural expression that reflects ethnic identity, social values, and the community's social structure.

According to Bangun (2006), the Karo ethnic group possesses several characteristics that distinguish it from other ethnic communities, including clan names, language, traditional clothing, food, kinship relations, belief systems, arts, mutual cooperation practices, customs, and traditions. These cultural elements complement one another and contribute to the preservation of Karo cultural heritage. Karo identity is also closely associated with the inheritance of clan names through the paternal line. A clan name functions not only as an indicator of family identity but also as an element connected to the kinship system known as

rakut sitelu (Sembiring, 2022). The term *rakut sitelu* refers to three kinship bonds that form the foundation of social relationships within Karo society. Understanding this system enables community members to identify kinship relations and facilitates the proper implementation of traditional ceremonies (Tarigan, 2017; Tarmizi, 2018).

One cultural element of Karo society that carries symbolic significance is traditional wedding attire. Each component of this attire conveys meanings associated with the community's cultural values. For instance, the dominant red color of *uis gara* is associated with courage, strength, and enthusiasm for life. Meanwhile, traditional fabric motifs and accessories reflect values of togetherness, harmony, and balance in family life. Therefore, Karo traditional wedding attire serves not merely as ceremonial clothing but also as a medium for communicating cultural messages and conveying meanings recognized within the community.

The symbolic meanings embedded in traditional wedding attire can be examined through a semiotic approach. Peirce (1931–1958, Vol. 2, para. 228) explains that a sign or representation stands for something to someone in some respect or capacity. This concept indicates that signs are not limited to their observable physical forms but are also connected to the objects they represent and the meanings produced through interpretation. In the context of Karo traditional wedding attire, its forms, colors, motifs, and accessories can be understood as signs that represent the cultural values and worldview of Karo society. Consequently, this traditional attire can be examined as a system of signs that conveys cultural messages.

Karo traditional wedding ceremonies consist of various stages rich in cultural values and symbolism, including the use of traditional attire by the bride and groom. Such attire functions as a medium of cultural communication that represents traditional values, social status, the roles of the bride and groom, and expectations regarding married life. Various elements, including *uis gara*, *bulang*, *tudung*, and other traditional accessories, possess distinctive forms, colors, motifs, and methods of use associated with customary regulations and transmitted across generations. Each element can be examined to understand how cultural messages are represented and interpreted within the community.

In semiotics courses, students are introduced to the fundamental concept of signs as entities that represent other things and generate meaning through interpretation. Signs cannot be understood in isolation because they are connected to their forms, the objects to which they refer, and the interpretations they produce. This concept provides a foundation for understanding how cultural meanings are constructed and transmitted in social life. Accordingly, Karo traditional wedding attire constitutes a relevant object of study in semiotics

because its elements represent the values, norms, social structures, and worldview of Karo society.

This study employs the triadic model proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce. According to this model, a sign consists of three principal elements: the representamen, the object, and the interpretant. The representamen refers to the form of the sign that can be observed, the object refers to the entity represented by the sign, and the interpretant refers to the meaning or understanding generated through the process of interpretation. These three elements are interconnected in the production of meaning. Applying Peirce's triadic model to this study is expected to demonstrate the relationship between theoretical concepts introduced in semiotics courses and their practical application in the scientific analysis of cultural objects.

In addition to explaining the triadic relationship among the representamen, object, and interpretant, Peirce classifies signs into three categories: icons, indexes, and symbols. An icon represents its object through resemblance, an index indicates a factual or direct connection with its object, and a symbol derives its meaning from social conventions or shared agreements. This classification provides an analytical framework for examining how the elements of Karo traditional wedding attire convey meaning through visual resemblance, factual relationships, and cultural conventions. Through this approach, the interpretation of traditional attire extends beyond its visual appearance to include the cultural context and the interpretive processes of the community.

However, changes over time, globalization, and the influence of modern culture may affect how society understands the symbolic meanings of Karo traditional wedding attire. During wedding ceremonies, traditional clothing is sometimes regarded primarily as a ceremonial accessory or an aesthetic element rather than as a representation of cultural values. Some younger generations also wear traditional attire without fully understanding the philosophy and cultural values embedded in it. This situation may reduce the understanding of its symbolic significance and weaken its role as a medium for transmitting cultural values to subsequent generations.

The preservation of cultural heritage is also related to the appropriate use of traditional clothing and accessories. Choerunnisa (2019) argues that the loss of a region's cultural heritage may diminish the region's cultural existence and increase the risk of its cultural heritage being claimed by others. Meanwhile, Juliyanti (2023) points out that the use of accessories in Karo traditional weddings does not always conform to customary guidelines. Examples include the use of *sortali layang-layang* in a manner that obstructs the bride's vision, the selection or arrangement of *uis nipes* fabrics that does not follow customary conventions, and the

positioning of *tudung* and *bulang-bulang* in ways that cover the eyebrows. Incorrect placement of *tudung mayang* is also identified as a concern. According to this account, *sortali* should be worn without obstructing the wearer's vision, *tudung* and *bulang-bulang* should be positioned above the eyebrows, and *tudung mayang* should be placed on the right side and tucked into the bride's *bulang-bulang*. These inconsistencies highlight the importance of understanding the customary rules and meanings associated with traditional attire in Karo wedding ceremonies.

The need to understand the symbolic meanings of Karo traditional wedding attire more comprehensively provides an important rationale for conducting a scientific study using a semiotic approach. This approach enables each component of the attire to be analyzed in terms of its sign form, the object it represents, and the interpretation formed within the cultural context of Karo society. Consequently, the analysis does not focus solely on the visual description of the clothing but also examines the relationship between its physical elements and the cultural meanings they convey. Peirce's theory further provides an analytical foundation for identifying and classifying signs into icons, indexes, and symbols.

The rationale for this study is supported not only by theoretical considerations but also by preliminary empirical data. Initial observations conducted among students of the German Literature Study Program who were enrolled in the Semiotics course indicated that some students primarily understood signs in the form of verbal language and had not fully connected them with cultural symbols. To obtain a more measurable preliminary overview, the researcher distributed an initial questionnaire to 30 students. The questionnaire results indicated that 70% of respondents were unfamiliar with the symbolic meanings of colors in Karo traditional wedding attire, while 60% did not understand the distinctions among icons, indexes, and symbols within the context of local culture.

These preliminary findings suggest a need to strengthen students' understanding of how semiotic concepts can be applied to cultural analysis. Within Peirce's theoretical framework, understanding a sign involves more than recognizing its visible form; it also requires examining the relationship between the sign, its object, and the interpretation it generates. For example, the red color of *uis gara* can be examined as a symbol because its meaning is associated with the cultural conventions of Karo society rather than arising solely from the physical characteristics of the color itself. This example demonstrates how semiotic theory can explain the relationship between the visual elements of traditional attire and the meanings constructed through the community's social and cultural practices.

Based on these considerations, this study is relevant to the teaching of semiotics because it connects theoretical concepts of signs with a concrete example of local cultural heritage. This

study aims to identify and analyze the symbolic meanings embedded in Karo traditional wedding attire using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory. Furthermore, it seeks to demonstrate how the concepts of representamen, object, interpretant, icon, index, and symbol can be applied to cultural analysis supported by empirical data. Accordingly, this study is expected not only to contribute to a deeper understanding of the meanings embedded in Karo traditional wedding attire but also to provide an example of the systematic application of semiotic theory in the study and interpretation of local cultural heritage.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design. A qualitative approach was used to collect, organize, and analyze the research data descriptively. The research was conducted in Dokan Village, Tiga Panah District, Karo Regency, and in the Computer Laboratory of the German Literature Study Program, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Medan State University. The data consisted of elements of Karo traditional wedding ceremonies obtained through interviews, particularly those representing symbols associated with Karo traditional weddings. The primary data source was Karo traditional wedding attire, which was examined as a system of signs using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Traditional Karo attire serves as a distinctive marker of ethnic identity, indicating that the wearer belongs to the Karo community. Beyond its function as clothing, it also represents a cultural symbol that conveys specific messages during traditional ceremonies, including those associated with kinship relationships, such as *kalimbubu* (the bride's family) or *hula-hula*.

Research Design and Data Collection

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach, employing qualitative methods to identify, collect, and analyze the research data. The analysis was based on Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic semiotic model, which consists of three elements: the representamen, the object, and the interpretant.

The data comprised various elements of traditional Karo wedding attire and were collected through questionnaires, internet-based research, and interviews. The data focused on the symbols incorporated into traditional Karo wedding clothing and the meanings associated with these cultural elements.

To establish data credibility, the researcher applied methodological triangulation following the data collection process. Several sources were consulted to support the

interpretation of the findings, including Mr. Lukas Tarigan, S.Pd., M.Sn., a cultural practitioner who has participated in traditional Karo wedding ceremonies for more than 16 years and has published a book describing various types of traditional Karo attire. Another source was Ms. Eliana Sembiring, a cultural practitioner, *kulcapi* musical instrument maker, and Karo tour guide in the Dokan Village area, Merek District, Karo Regency. The researcher also consulted Mr. Umar Manik, a member of the Karo community residing in Kabanjahe, Karo Regency.

The Symbolic Meanings of Traditional Karo Wedding Attire

Wedding attire is regarded as sacred and holds considerable significance in people's lives. It refers to the special clothing worn by the bride and groom during a wedding ceremony or celebration. Its design and use are closely associated with the customs and cultural traditions of the community. In Karo society, traditional wedding attire serves to express cultural identity, represent social status, and convey the sacredness of relationships within the extended family.

Traditional Karo wedding attire worn during customary wedding ceremonies carries distinctive cultural meanings. The symbols incorporated into these garments serve purposes beyond enhancing the visual appearance of the ceremony; they also communicate values, beliefs, and social relationships within Karo society. The following elements illustrate the symbolic significance of traditional Karo wedding attire.

Uis Nipes

Uis nipes is a traditional woven textile of the Karo people. It symbolizes affection, protection, and parents' blessings for their children. In addition, this textile functions as a marker of cultural identity and social status during traditional ceremonies.

Beka Buluh

Beka buluh symbolizes the groom's responsibility, both within the family and in his relationships beyond the family environment. Its presence in traditional wedding attire represents the responsibilities associated with the groom's position in family and social life.

Uis Kelam-Kelam

Uis kelam-kelam is regarded as a sacred textile used in traditional ceremonies. It may serve as a head covering or veil for women during customary celebrations. The textile is also used as a sign of respect when visiting parents in situations involving mourning.

Uis Julu

Uis julu is a traditional textile associated with motherhood and modesty. In sacred or customary occasions, it may also signify luxury or an esteemed social position for women.

Tudung

The *tudung* is a traditional head covering whose elevated shape and forward-projecting form resemble a crown. It symbolizes protection, wisdom, honor, cultural identity, and social status within Karo society.

Sertali

Sertali is identified as one of the principal distinguishing elements of traditional Karo attire. Its presence contributes to the distinctive appearance of Karo traditional clothing.

Kampil

Kampil is a woven bag traditionally made from pandan leaves or rattan. Within Karo customary practices, it plays an important role as a symbol of respect and local wisdom, reflecting the cultural values embedded in the traditional social structure of Karo society.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings of this study, traditional Karo wedding attire contains seven principal symbolic elements, namely *uis nipes*, *beka buluh*, *tudung*, *uis julu*, *uis kelam-kelam*, *sertali*, and *kampil*. These elements convey various cultural and social meanings, including social status, honor, authority, communication, cultural identity, mourning, luxury, openness, responsibility, hospitality, thriftiness, gracefulness, politeness, gentleness, wisdom, and protection. Specifically, *uis nipes* and *sertali* represent social status; *beka buluh*, *uis kelam-kelam*, *uis julu*, *tudung*, and *bulang-bulang* symbolize honor; *beka buluh* and *bulang-bulang* represent authority and responsibility; *kampil* symbolizes communication, openness, and hospitality; and the elements of *uis nipes*, *beka buluh*, *sertali*, *uis julu*, *uis kelam-kelam*, *kampil*, *tudung*, and *bulang-bulang* reflect Karo cultural identity. Furthermore, *uis kelam-kelam* and *uis nipes* are associated with mourning, while *uis julu* and *sertali* signify luxury. *Sertali* is also associated with thriftiness, *tudung* represents gracefulness, *uis nipes* conveys politeness and gentleness, *tudung* and *bulang-bulang* symbolize wisdom, and *uis julu* represents protection. Based on these findings, younger generations are encouraged to learn about Karo cultural heritage and customary practices through traditional wedding attire to strengthen their cultural knowledge and appreciation. In addition, the findings of this study are expected to serve as a source of information for understanding the symbolic meanings of traditional Karo wedding attire and to support efforts to preserve the cultural heritage of the Karo community.

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