

The Symbolic Meanings of Traditional Objects in the Mohuntingo Procession in Kabila District

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ABSTRACT

The Mohuntingo procession is a sacred birth ritual in the Gorontalo community, performed as an expression of gratitude through the ceremonial cutting of an infant's hair. Beyond its ceremonial nature, this tradition embodies deep philosophical values reflected in each ritual stage and the symbolic use of traditional objects. Every element in the Mohuntingo procession represents the cultural worldview of the Gorontalo people, which is strongly rooted in customary practices and Islamic principles. This study provides a detailed description of the Mohuntingo stages in Kabila District and examines the symbolic meanings of the traditional objects used, including young coconut, betel nut, dulang, fragrant oil, a razor, flowers, and lu'adu. A descriptive qualitative design was employed, with data gathered through observation, interviews with traditional and religious leaders, cultural practitioners, and local residents, as well as field documentation. Data were analyzed through reduction, presentation, and interpretation while maintaining the sociocultural context of Gorontalo society. The findings reveal that each traditional object holds symbolic meanings related to purity, protection, cultural identity, life harmony, and the reinforcement of religious values. The ritual also strengthens social cohesion, deepens kinship ties, and functions as a medium for transmitting customary and Islamic values to younger generations. Overall, the study concludes that Mohuntingo is not merely a birth ritual but a cultural transmission system rich in spiritual, social, and educational significance, demonstrating the enduring relevance of Gorontalo's cultural identity amid modernizing influences.

Keywords: Mohuntingo; Cultural Symbols; Traditional Objects; Semiotics

INTRODUCTION

Tradition is an inseparable part of community life, serving as a medium through which cultural values are passed from one generation to the next. In the Gorontalo region, one of the traditions that has endured and continues to be preserved is the Mohuntingo procession, a ritual of cutting an infant's hair as a symbol of

purification and gratitude. This ritual is performed when the baby is between seven and forty days old and forms an essential component of the customary birth ceremonies. Within Gorontalo culture, this tradition is not only viewed as a family ritual but also represents the harmonious relationship between customary practices and Islamic principles, as reflected in the Gorontalo philosophical expression *Adati hula-hula'a to Sara'a, Sara'a hula-hula'a to Qur'ani*.

However, over time, modernization has contributed to a shift in the community's understanding of the meanings embedded in the traditional objects used in the Mohuntingo procession. Many young people today are more familiar with modern symbols than with customary ones, resulting in the potential reduction of the rich philosophical values contained in this tradition. This phenomenon indicates that preserving tradition cannot rely solely on ceremonial practice but must be accompanied by an understanding of the symbolic meanings embedded within the cultural context.

Therefore, this study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of (1) the stages of the Mohuntingo procession in Kabila District, and (2) the symbolic meanings of each traditional object used. In doing so, this research not only documents local traditions but also contributes to efforts to preserve local wisdom in the face of modernizing challenges. The central issue that has emerged today is the declining understanding particularly among younger generations of the symbolic meanings embedded in the objects used during Mohuntingo. Modernization has led many to recognize modern symbols more readily than traditional ones, which may result in the erosion of the philosophical values inherent in these objects. For this reason, this study seeks to describe the procedures of the Mohuntingo ritual and to explain the symbolic meanings of the traditional objects involved in the procession.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several previous studies have examined the symbolic meanings embedded in traditional rituals across various regions of Gorontalo, showing that each traditional object carries specific functions, meanings, and philosophical values closely tied to cultural identity. Research on birth rituals indicates that traditional objects function as symbolic media that connect human beings with the Creator, the source of life, and the wider community. Other studies highlight that Gorontalo traditions embody a strong integration of customary practices and Islamic values, resulting in each traditional symbol being framed within both religious and social meanings. The theoretical variables in this study draw upon Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory, which emphasizes the relationship between the signifier and the signified, as well as Charles Sanders Peirce's theory, which classifies signs into icons, indexes, and symbols. The explanation of traditional objects in the Mohuntingo ritual uses a semiotic approach to reveal the meanings contained within each object. The references used in this review consist of literature published within the last five to ten years to ensure alignment with contemporary academic standards.

Birth Traditions in Gorontalo Society

Studies on birth traditions in Gorontalo demonstrate that each ritual has its own structure, symbols, and specific meanings that are closely linked to customary philosophy and Islamic teachings. Previous research has found that traditional objects such as young coconut, betel nut, and dulang not only function as ceremonial tools but also serve as spiritual communication media between humans, ancestors, and God. Birth rituals in Gorontalo emphasize the purification of the infant as the first step toward entering social life. This purification is understood not only physically but also spiritually, as it is believed to be a prayer for the child's safety and blessings.

Symbols and Philosophical Meanings of Traditional Objects

Ethnographic studies conducted in various parts of Gorontalo explain that traditional symbols consistently convey moral messages. For instance, young coconut symbolizes purity and health, while betel nut represents social relationships within the community. These objects are inseparable from cultural identity, as they reflect the collective values of the society. Based on literature published in the past 5–10 years, there is a consistent scholarly view regarding the integration of customary values and Islamic principles within Gorontalo's traditional symbols.

Semiotic Theoretical Framework

This study employs Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory, which views signs as the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Each traditional object is analyzed as a sign that refers to specific meanings according to the cultural context of Gorontalo. Additionally, Charles Sanders Peirce's theory is used to further classify signs into icons, indexes, and symbols, providing a deeper understanding of why each traditional object holds religious and philosophical meanings.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore and interpret the stages of the Mohuntingo procession, and the symbolic meanings of the traditional objects used in the ritual. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to study cultural practices in their natural context and uncover meanings that emerge from community interpretations. The focus was to understand the Mohuntingo tradition as a living cultural system embedded in the social, religious, and symbolic structures of the Gorontalo community, particularly in Kabila District.

The research was conducted in several villages within Kabila District where the Mohuntingo ritual is still actively practiced. The site was selected purposively based on the presence of community members, traditional leaders, and cultural practitioners who possess deep knowledge of local customs. The participants consisted of traditional leaders (wali adat), religious figures (imam or moda'a), parents who had recently performed the Mohuntingo ritual for their children, elders with cultural expertise, and general community members who participate in or witness the procession. A total of 18 informants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure that the data represented a diverse and credible range of perspectives.

Instrument and Procedure

Three main techniques were used to collect data: observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation was carried out to directly witness the stages of the Mohuntingo procession, including preparations, the sequence of ritual activities, and the use of traditional objects. Both non-participant and participant observations were conducted to allow the researcher to understand the ritual's flow while maintaining objectivity. Field notes were taken to record actions, objects, interactions, and symbolic gestures during the ceremony.

In-depth interviews were conducted to gather detailed information about the meanings of traditional objects and the community's understanding of the Mohuntingo ritual. Semi-structured interview guidelines provided flexibility while maintaining focus. Informants were asked about the functions of each traditional object such as young coconut, betel nut, dulang, fragrant oil, razor, flowers, and lu'adu as well as their perceptions of symbolic meanings related to purity, protection, cultural identity, and religious values. The interviews also explored the influence of modernization on community interpretations of these symbols. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis.

Documentation supported the observation and interview data. This included photographs of the objects used, video recordings of ritual activities, written records from local archives, and community documents explaining customary practices. These materials helped validate and complement the verbal and observational data collected from participants. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided verbal or written consent before participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained to protect participants' identities, and cultural sensitivities were respected during all data collection activities.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's interactive model, consisting of three major steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data

reduction, the researcher selected, simplified, and organized raw data by grouping them according to themes such as ritual stages, symbolic meanings, and community perceptions. Data were then displayed in tables, narrative descriptions, and thematic categories to aid interpretation. The final step involved drawing conclusions by identifying significant patterns and relationships between ritual practices and their symbolic meanings.

To strengthen validity, several verification strategies were employed, including data triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement. Triangulation was conducted by comparing data from observation, interviews, and documentation. Member checking involved sharing selected findings with key informants to confirm accuracy and prevent misinterpretation. Prolonged engagement in the field allowed the researcher to build trust with the community and observe variations in how the ritual is practiced among different families. Through this systematic and culturally sensitive approach, the study aimed to produce a comprehensive and authentic interpretation of the symbolic meanings embedded in the *Mohuntingo* ritual in Kabila District.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that the *Mohuntingo* procession in Kabila District is a structured traditional ritual composed of several interrelated stages, each marked by distinct symbolic objects and meaningful cultural expressions. The ritual reflects the Gorontalo community's integration of cultural identity, religious belief, and social unity.

Stages of the *Mohuntingo* Procession

The *Mohuntingo* ceremony follows a sequence that consists of *mopotilolo* (initial notification), prayer recitation, hair-cutting, and a closing feast. Each stage is designed to express gratitude, purification, and social togetherness.

a. *Mopotilolo* (Initial Notification)

The first stage, *mopotilolo*, involves informing relatives and respected community members about the upcoming ceremony. This act serves not only as a practical announcement but also as a symbolic expression of collective participation and kinship. It emphasizes the shared responsibility among family members and neighbors in celebrating the child's growth. The social interaction at this stage reinforces the communal nature of Gorontalo society, where personal milestones are collectively acknowledged as family and community achievements.

b. Recitation of Prayers

The second stage consists of a communal prayer session led by a religious leader (*imam* or *moda'a*). The recitations include supplications for the infant's health, safety, and future blessings. This stage reflects the spiritual dimension of the *Mohuntingo* tradition, demonstrating how religious faith is integrated into local

customs. The prayer moment serves to invite divine protection and symbolizes the community's submission to God's will before the central ritual begins.

c. Mohuntingo (Hair-Cutting Ceremony)

The central part of the ritual is the hair-cutting ceremony, symbolizing the infant's purification and new beginning. The act is usually performed by elders, grandparents, or other respected figures believed to possess spiritual wisdom and blessings. The cutting of hair represents the removal of impurities from birth and the child's transition into a new stage of life. It also conveys the hope that the child will grow with moral strength, health, and good fortune. During this stage, participants express joy and gratitude, often accompanied by traditional chants or gentle recitations of prayers.

d. Closing and Customary Feast

The final stage involves a communal meal attended by family members, guests, and neighbors. This feast symbolizes thanksgiving, togetherness, and the strengthening of social harmony. The shared meal marks the completion of the ritual and underscores the Gorontalo community's emphasis on hospitality and unity. Through food sharing, the participants reaffirm social bonds and the importance of mutual care within the community.

Symbolic Meanings of Traditional Objects in the Mohuntingo Ritual

The *Mohuntingo* ritual is characterized by the use of various traditional objects that embody spiritual and cultural meanings. Each object is deliberately chosen and prepared according to inherited customs, and its presence in the ceremony reflects the community's worldview.

1. Young Coconut (Symbol of Purity and Renewal)

The young coconut (*buah muda*) is considered a symbol of purity, freshness, and renewal. Its clear water represents cleansing from impurity and the hope that the child will grow up in purity and sincerity. The round shape of the coconut also symbolizes completeness and life's natural cycle. It is often placed at the center of the ritual display, signifying its importance as a source of new beginnings.

2. Betel Nut (Symbol of Social Acceptance and Respect)

The betel nut (*pinang*) symbolizes social interaction and acceptance within the community. In Gorontalo culture, offering betel nut is a gesture of respect and welcome. Within the *Mohuntingo* ritual, it expresses the family's gratitude for community support and serves as a symbolic invitation for the child to be accepted as part of the social group. The betel nut's inclusion highlights the social dimension of the ritual, where relationships and kinship ties are reaffirmed.

3. Dulang (Symbol of Honor and Cultural Aesthetics)

The *dulang*, a traditional wooden or brass tray, serves as a symbol of dignity, hospitality, and cultural artistry. It is used to present offerings during the ritual,

reflecting the Gorontalo people's appreciation for beauty and respect in ceremonial contexts. The *dulang* represents not only the presentation of material objects but also the spiritual and aesthetic values that accompany them.

4. Polutube (Container for Burning Charcoal – Symbol of Spiritual Purification)

The *polutube*, typically made of metal or clay and filled with burning charcoal, symbolizes spiritual cleansing and protection. The smoke produced from the burning charcoal is believed to drive away negative forces and create a sacred atmosphere. During the ritual, the *polutube* is placed near the child or the ceremonial space to purify the environment. Its warmth and light also represent the energy of life and the enduring presence of ancestral spirits who safeguard the family.

5. Fragrant Oil (Symbol of Protection and Blessing)

Fragrant oil (*minyak wangi*) is applied to the baby's skin as a ritual act of protection. Its pleasant scent is thought to attract positive energy and divine blessings. The oil represents physical and spiritual purification, reflecting the belief that good fragrance pleases both humans and spiritual beings. It also marks the beginning of a hopeful future for the child, free from illness and misfortune.

6. Razor (Symbol of Cleansing and Transformation)

The razor (*pisau cukur*) used in the hair-cutting stage symbolizes cleansing and transformation. It signifies the removal of impurities and the transition into a purified state. The cutting process is carefully performed to avoid harm, symbolizing the community's hope for the child's safe journey into growth and development. It also marks a metaphorical cutting away from past vulnerability toward a future filled with strength and protection.

7. Flowers (Symbol of Beauty, Hope, and Prayer)

Flowers (*bunga-bunga*) represent beauty, freshness, and purity. Their fragrance and vibrant colors are seen as offerings of joy and gratitude. Placing flowers around the baby or the ceremonial area reflects prayers for a beautiful life filled with kindness, peace, and prosperity. The delicate nature of flowers also reminds participants of the fragility and preciousness of new life.

8. Lu'adu (Symbol of Cultural Identity and Ancestral Connection)

The *lu'adu* is a traditional implement unique to Gorontalo culture and serves as a tangible reminder of ancestral heritage. It represents cultural identity, continuity, and respect for tradition. In the ritual, *lu'adu* signifies the link between past and present generations, expressing the belief that ancestral spirits continue to guide and protect their descendants.

9. Hulante Set (Ceremonial Tray of Blessings)

The *hulante set* is a ceremonial tray containing symbolic items used during the hair-cutting process. It serves as a physical medium for prayers, hopes, and blessings.

The tray unites all ritual components, representing balance and completeness. Each object within the *hulante set* contributes to the overall symbolism of the ceremony purity, protection, gratitude, and communal harmony.

The results show that the *Mohuntingo* ritual is not merely a cultural celebration but a complex symbolic system expressing Gorontalo's philosophy of life. Each stage and object embodies the community's values of purity, faith, social unity, and respect for tradition. The integration of spiritual and social elements ensures the continuity of the *Mohuntingo* practice as a meaningful expression of identity and cultural resilience in the modern era.

The *Mohuntingo* tradition in Gorontalo society is not merely a customary practice but also a cultural text that can be interpreted through its signs, symbols, and layered meanings. Drawing on the theories of Clifford Geertz, Koentjaraningrat, and Victor Turner, the findings of this study demonstrate that each stage and object in the *Mohuntingo* procession functions as a symbol reflecting the community's value system, worldview, and social structure.

Using a semiotic analysis, the relationship between theory and field data is mutually reinforcing theory provides an interpretative framework, while empirical findings reveal how cultural symbolism is manifested in everyday social practices. The correlation between theory and findings is further supported by Tilome's (2020) concept of cultural meaning dynamics. The results show that modernization has gradually shifted the traditional meanings of *Mohuntingo* objects. Many modern families continue to perform the ritual but often lack deep understanding of its symbolic meanings. In semiotic terms, this phenomenon represents a *displacement of meaning* the sign (the traditional object) remains, but its signified (spiritual and social meaning) becomes blurred. This supports Tilome's argument that cultural meanings are dynamic and require revitalization to remain relevant.

From a broader semiotic perspective, as described by Roland Barthes, each cultural symbol carries both denotative and connotative meanings. At the denotative level, objects such as betel nut or traditional cloth may appear as mere ritual items. However, at the connotative level, they represent purity, respect, and social harmony. The research confirms this, as the Gorontalo community interprets these symbols not only in functional terms but also as expressions of faith and gratitude. This strengthens the conclusion that *Mohuntingo* is a living sign system whose meanings are produced, interpreted, and transmitted collectively.

Overall, the integration of theories from Geertz, Turner, Koentjaraningrat, and Tilome shows a strong alignment with the findings of this study. *Mohuntingo* serves as a symbolic system that mediates relationships between humans, society, and God. In semiotic terms, *Mohuntingo* is not merely a physical ritual but a complex system of signs in which every object, action, and utterance carries layered and interconnected meanings.

Thus, the theoretical and empirical correlations demonstrated through semiotic analysis underscore that Mohuntingo represents a cultural manifestation functioning as both a social and religious text. Through its symbols, the tradition reaffirms Gorontalo cultural identity, teaches moral values, and maintains spiritual balance between humans, nature, and the Creator. In other words, semiotic theories on cultural symbolism not only remain relevant but find strong validation in the living practices of the Gorontalo community who continue to preserve Mohuntingo as part of their collective heritage.

CONCLUSION

The Mohuntingo procession is an important tradition of the Gorontalo community, rich with philosophical and religious meaning. The traditional objects used in each stage of the ritual carry symbolic functions that reflect values of purity, protection, prayers for safety, and cultural identity. This study affirms that Mohuntingo serves as a medium for preserving customary and Islamic values that have been passed down from generation to generation. Safeguarding this tradition is essential for maintaining the continuity of local wisdom amid the pressures of globalization. The Mohuntingo procession stands as a significant cultural practice imbued with profound philosophical and religious values. The traditional objects involved embody symbolic meanings related to sanctity, protection, blessings, and cultural identity. This research underscores that Mohuntingo plays a vital role in transmitting and sustaining customary and Islamic principles across generations. The preservation of this tradition is crucial to ensuring the endurance of local wisdom in a rapidly changing global environment. Greater efforts in documentation and deepening understanding of its symbolic meanings are needed to ensure that younger generations remain connected to the cultural heritage of their ancestors.

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