


# Manten Tebu Ritual: Semiotic Interpretation of Sugarcane Harvest Tradition

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## A B S T R A C T

The Manten Tebu (Sugarcane Bride) ritual in Rejoso village is an annual event before sugarcane milling. This tradition, preserved since the Dutch colonial era, carries deep symbolic meaning for the agrarian community. This study, based on a Detik jatim article from May 26, 2025, employs the Riffaterre semiotic method to analyze the tradition's symbols. Using descriptive qualitative analysis, the research finds that Manten Tebu expresses respect for sugarcane as a source of livelihood and fertility, and reflects the relationship between the sugar factory and farmers. Symbolic elements – such as sugarcane pairs as bride and groom, offerings, processions, and prayers – form a system of signs embodying community hopes for a successful milling season.

**Keywords:** *Manten Tebu, Semiotic Riffaterre, Javanese Tradition, Blitar*

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## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is known as a country rich in local traditions and cultures, most of which grew and developed within an agrarian society. Despite modernisation, rural communities still uphold cultural practices passed down through generations. These traditions are not only spiritual but also reflect the relationship between humans, nature, and the hope for survival. Koentjaraningrat (2009) states that culture is the entire system of ideas, actions, and human works that are socially inherited. Therefore, agrarian traditions serve as a collective expression of society's relationship with nature.

One such tradition that persists is the Manten Tebu Tradition, particularly in the sugarcane-producing regions of East Java. This tradition emerged among sugarcane farmers as a form of respect and collective prayer before the milling season. Two sugarcane stalks, decorated as a bride and groom, symbolise the man and woman, and are then paraded in a sacred procession. Geertz (1973) emphasised that symbols in traditional ceremonies connect social actions with cosmological understanding. Therefore, this tradition reflects the farmers' perspective on nature and the harvest.

A semiotic approach allows for a deeper understanding of the symbols within traditions. For example, sugar cane as a bride, offerings as sacrifices, and a procession as a form of collective spirituality all contain meanings that cannot be grasped literally. This research uses Michael Riffaterre's semiotic approach, which offers two stages of textual reading: heuristic and hermeneutic. Heuristic reading unravels surface meaning, while hermeneutic reading uncovers hidden meanings within the text. Riffaterre (1978) also introduced the concepts of matrix, model, and variance to systematically understand symbolism in texts. This approach is relevant for analyzing the structure of news narratives as cultural representations.

The Manten Tebu tradition, as depicted in a Detik.com article, demonstrates the community's strong spiritual connection to nature and agriculture. The values of mutual cooperation, respect for nature, and the hope for blessings underlie this procession. Clifford

(1986) argues that culture is not a static inheritance, but a living practice continually negotiated within the community. Therefore, the involvement of all elements of society in this tradition demonstrates a dynamic and deeply rooted collective consciousness.

According to Rahmawati et al. (2023) in the journal "Mantra Tolak Bala Komunitas Dayak Kalimantan Barat: Kajian Semiotic Riffaterre", a semiotic analysis of the mantra tolak bala reveals that heuristically and hermeneutically, the meaning of the mantra tolak bala contains a request to God to protect the community from COVID-19, disasters, calamities, and bad things that disrupt human life. The matrix is not present directly in the mantra text; the model appears as an actualisation of the matrix, and the meaning of the mantra is focused through the determination of the model.

As also explained by Abdullah & Firman (2022) in their study "The Semiotic Meaning of Prayer Recitations in the Mattaro Ase Baru Tradition of the Mattampa Walie Village Community." Through Riffaterre's analysis, the mantra text not only contains literal requests for rice safety, but also contains: Local wisdom values regarding the relationship between humans and nature, cultural codes related to agrarian belief systems, and symbolic language structures that reflect the community's cosmology.

Wulandari & Prasetyo (2021) in their study "Symbolic Meanings in the Sugarcane Manten Tradition Ritual at the Semboro Sugar Factory in Jember Regency" identified unique symbols, where the study revealed the function of rituals as a social mechanism to mitigate agrarian conflicts in industrial environments. The symbolic meaning of the Slametan, offerings, ubarampe, and ujub procedures. The symbols in the ritual have messages aimed at smoothing the milling process, so that the message has a positive value.

Based on this description, this study examines symbolism in the Manten Tebu Tradition as represented in the Detik.com article. The main objective is to uncover the collective and spiritual meanings implied behind traditional symbols using Riffaterre's semiotic approach. Storey (2003) states that cultural studies is tasked with understanding how meaning is produced and maintained in a social context. Thus, this study positions local traditions as an important source of cultural meaning in the currents of modernity.

## METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research approach, often referred to as the "descriptive approach in qualitative research." This method systematically involves collecting and presenting data in a coherent manner to capture the nuances of the studied phenomena. According to Moleong (2005:4), this approach focuses on gathering data in the form of words and images rather than numerical information.

Data for this study can be obtained through diverse methods, including interviews, field notes, photographs, video recordings, personal documentation, notes, and memos. Once collected, the data is presented descriptively and analyzed using the pragmatic theory of politeness, offering insights into the underlying patterns and principles of communication observed.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following is an explanation of the results of research on the symbolism of the Temu Manten Tebu tradition held at the Rejoso Manis Indo Sugar Factory (PG RMI) in Blitar, based on a Detik.com news article entitled "Temu Manten Tebu Accompanies the Start of the Sugar Factory Milling Season in Blitar."



Figure 1

Researchers identified two sugarcane stalks personified as a bride and groom, three elements of the *dodotan* costume symbolizing sacredness, one *cucuk lampah* dance symbolizing the opening of a spiritual path, one shadow puppet performance symbolizing moral values, two decorative elements: *gagar mayang* and *janur* (young coconut leaves) as symbols of fertility and purification, and one element: air *kembang* (flower water) as a symbol of bonding relationships and purity before milling. Furthermore, a red and white flag presented during the procession symbolizes the integration of local and national cultures.


Each of these symbols carries a collective meaning that reflects the close relationship between humans, nature, and spirituality in East Java's agrarian society. This ritual also represents the synergy between tradition and modern socioeconomic dynamics within the sugar factory environment, with the active participation of farmers, factory workers, and regional officials.

### Heuristic Stage

In semiotic analysis, according to Michael Riffaterre, the heuristic stage is the initial literal and denotative reading, namely examining what is explicitly presented in the text before moving on to interpreting deeper meanings (Riffaterre, 1978). In this study, the text analyzed was an online news report titled "Temu Marten Tebu Iringe Awal Musim Giling Pabrik Gula di Blitar" published by Detik Jatim on May 26, 2025.

Based on observations of the news report's content, several symbolic representations emerged explicitly in the text:

Table 1

Data	Form of Data	Text or Picture	Explanation and Analysis
1	Ritual Time and Place	"This tradition is held in the yard of the Rejoso Manis Indonesia Sugar Factory (PG RMI) in Rejoso Village, Binangun District, Blitar Regency"	The news explained that the procession was carried out on Monday, May 26, 2025 in the PG RMI area, Blitar.
2	Procession Series	 "dressed up like the bride and groom." "the <i>cucuk lampah</i> dance and the washing of the <i>lanang</i> sugarcane by the <i>wadon</i> sugarcane."	The news reported that the sugarcane stalks were personified as the bride and groom. The male sugarcane wore attire such as a <i>blangkon</i> (headscarf) and <i>jarik</i> (a traditional sarong), while the female sugarcane wore a <i>kemben</i> (a traditional sarong) and a shawl. Before being paraded, the two underwent a symbolic procession.
3	Symbolism of Movement and Direction	"Initially, the sugar cane bride tradition began with the <i>cucuk lampah</i> dance."	The Cuk Lampah dance, part of the ritual, is a traditional Javanese art form that serves as a bride's escort to the wedding altar, signifying the direction and blessing of the journey. While the report doesn't explain its meaning directly, culturally, this dance symbolizes readiness and protection in embarking on something sacred.
4	Procession to the Milling Machine	"Next, the sugarcane stalks that became the bride and groom were milled for the first time as a sign of the start of the 2025 milling season."	After the symbolic procession, the sugarcane stalks are paraded to the milling machine. This stage demonstrates that the procession is not only a cultural ceremony, but also marks the transition to the factory's economic-industrial activities.
5	Target Produksi	"Target musim ini adalah 1,4 juta ton tebu dan rendemen sebesar 9,05 persen," ungkap Iwantoro.	Reports indicate that the 2025 milling season is targeted to mill 1.4 million tons of sugarcane with a yield of 9.05 percent.

Source: <https://www.detik.com/jatim/berita/d-7933452/temu-manten-tebu-iringi-awal-musim-giling-pabrik-gula-di-blitar>

From these literal facts, it can be concluded that at the heuristic stage, the Temu Manten Tebu ritual is a superficial symbol of the beginning of the milling season, packaged in a Javanese cultural format. Processions such as sugarcane dressing, washing, and processions demonstrate

symbolic intentionally rooted in traditional values. However, at this stage, the deeper meaning of the symbol has not been interpreted, which will be discussed further in the hermeneutic stage.

### Hermeneutic Stage

The hermeneutic stage is a further, implicit reading stage in Riffaterre's semiotic analysis, aimed at interpreting the symbolic meaning of the signs that emerged in the heuristic stage. At this stage, the reading is no longer literal, but rather seeks to uncover hidden meanings, intertextuality, and the conversion of meanings that emerge from the symbolic structure of the text (Riffaterre, 1978).

In the context of the news story about the Temu Manten Tebu tradition at PG RMI Blitar, a number of symbols and cultural actions demonstrate the existence of a sign system that holds collective, spiritual, and social meaning.

### Tebu Lanang and Wadon (Sugar Cane Bride)



Figure 2

Source : <https://www.detik.com/jatim/berita/d-7933452/temu-manten-tebu-iringi-awal-musim-giling-pabrik-gula-di-blitar>

At the heuristic level, a man and woman are seen dressed in traditional Javanese attire, complete with a dodotan (traditional Javanese robe), a kemben (traditional Javanese kemben), and a headdress. However, hermeneutically, this appearance not only makes them "cultural actors," but also represents the personification of male and female sugarcane stalks. The implied meaning: this bride and groom symbolize the union between the produce of the earth (sugarcane) and the prayers of humanity (farmers, workers, and the community). They symbolize the fruits of collective labor that will begin a new journey: the milling season. Within Riffaterre's semiotic framework, this becomes a form of agrarian cultural hypogram reactivated through human and customary means. The original text (sugarcane as a plant) has been reinterpreted within the symbol system of the bride and groom, forming a social meta text.

### Dodotan clothing, jasmine necklace and crown

Table 2

#### Sentences in the News

The bride and groom appear elegant in Javanese wedding attire (dodotan)

Source: <https://www.detik.com/jatim/berita/d-7933452/temu-manten-tebu-iringi-awal-musim-giling-pabrik-gula-di-blitar>

### Symbol of Sacredness

The sacredness of traditional attire elevates sugarcane, a primarily agricultural crop, into a sacred human figure. In Javanese culture, a bride and groom are not merely lovers, but symbols of the union of the cosmos and humanity, nature and culture. Therefore, this traditional attire carries the following meaning: "Sugarcane is not merely an economic object, but a cultural subject that is given the same respect as a bride and groom."

This traditional bridal attire signifies the sacredness of the procession and places the sugarcane in a symbolic position as a sacred entity. The jasmine necklace and crown reflect hopes for purity, blessings, and a fertile harvest (Koentjaraningrat, 1984).

### Collective Metaphor

In Riffaterre's interpretation, traditional attire is part of a Javanese cultural hypo-gram that continues to reappear in modern cultural texts (industrialist rituals). Traditional attire represents the collective identity of the Javanese people. When worn in this ritual, it becomes a collective

metaphor: that the sugar production process involves not only machines and land, but also culture, beliefs, and human cooperation.

#### Cultural Intertextuality

This clothing implies the hope that the harvest or production will be as great as the prosperity of the kingdom in the past. Traditional bridal attire is absorbed from the narratives of the cultural elite, an inter-textual reading of the people, the kingdom, and the factory.

#### Latent Critique of Modernity

Placing traditional clothing in an industrial space (a sugar factory) is a symbolic way for society to: Remind that progress must not forget cultural roots. Balancing production (function) and respect (value). In a hermeneutic interpretation, this is a subtle form of resistance to industrial dehumanization, where humans and nature are given back their sacred space through cultural symbols.

#### Cucuk Lampah Dancer

Table 3

#### Sentences in the News

Initially, the sugar cane bride tradition began with the cucuk lampah dance.

Source: <https://www.detik.com/jatim/berita/d-7933452/temu-manten-tebu-iringi-awal-musim-giling-pabrik-gula-di-blitar>

The Cucuk Lampah dancers, kneeling and handing the red and white flag to the bride and groom, are not merely an aesthetic performance. In a hermeneutic context, this dance is a "spiritual path opener." It doesn't simply point the physical direction, but symbolizes the path of hope, prayer, and honor for successful production.

The kneeling position demonstrates respect for natural processes and local culture. The handing over of the flag implies that the crop (sugarcane) is recognized as a sacred national treasure. This is a meeting point between cultural and national identities.

#### Flower Water

There is a ritual procession where the bride, carrying the female sugar cane, washes the base of the male sugar cane with flower water.

Source: <https://www.detik.com/jatim/berita/d-7933452/temu-manten-tebu-iringi-awal-musim-giling-pabrik-gula-di-blitar>. This process serves as a symbol of bonding and purity before milling, but it also has several other meanings, such as:

#### *Purity and Spiritual Cleansing*

Flower water in Javanese tradition is often associated with freshness, purity, and blessings. In this ritual, washing the male sugar cane with flower water marks the stage of the "cleansing" ritual before the symbolic wedding.

#### *Fertility & Harvest Safety*

Flower water also carries a symbol of fertility. By washing the sugar cane stalks – which will be processed – culture conveys the hope that the milling season will run smoothly, the harvest will be abundant, and humanity and nature will remain in harmony.

#### *Unification of Two Elements*

This procession symbolizes the unification of sugarcane from the factory (tebu lanang) and the farmers (tebu wadon). Flower water is a transformative medium that spiritually connects these two elements.

#### Shadow Puppets

From the author's observations, the shadow puppets on stage during this procession are not merely decoration. They also have a meaning:

Narrative meaning: that this process is rooted in Javanese ethics, cosmology, and philosophy.

Hermeneutics: Wayang is the repository of morals in society. Its presence behind the bride and groom demonstrates that the "production path" should not only pursue profit, but also maintain harmony and social responsibility.

#### Gagar Mayang and Janur

From the author's observations, the *Gagar Mayang* standing upright in the ceremony's backdrop is made of young coconut leaves and flowers. On the surface, it is merely

decorative. However, in a hermeneutic interpretation, it symbolizes the verticalization of the hope of connecting the earth (sugarcane plants) and the sky (spiritual power).

In Javanese tradition, young coconut leaves (janur) are used in all sacred processions, as they are believed to contain purifying powers. The presence of Gagar Mayang (a leaf of young coconut) in this procession demonstrates that the production process (sugarcane milling) is sacred, not merely mechanical work.

### **The Red and White Flag**

From the author's observations, a flag wrapped around sugarcane has a meaning. When the flag is handed over in a traditional procession, there is a transformation of meaning from a national object to a sacred symbol. In a hermeneutic interpretation, the flag affirms that agricultural produce and traditions are the nation's strength.

It also symbolizes the intertextuality between local cultural texts (the wedding ritual) and national texts (the Indonesian nation), creating a collective narrative about food as heritage, not simply a commodity.

### **Matrix, Model, and Variance**

#### *Matrix: Production as a Sacred Collective Ritual*

In Javanese culture, crops are not merely the result of physical labor, but also the consequence of the spiritual relationship between humans and nature" (Koentjaraningrat, *Javanese Culture*, 1984). Basic Meaning: The Matrix hidden in the *Manten Tebu* tradition is: "Production (in this case, the sugarcane milling season) must begin as a form of respect for nature, ancestors, and the collective work of the community." In other words, harvesting is not merely economic, but also a symbolic ritual and shared hope. This Matrix is created from a combination of agrarian belief systems, Javanese spirituality, and the community's desire to preserve local wisdom.

#### *Model: Javanese Traditional Wedding as a Representational Structure*

The wedding tradition in Javanese culture is not merely a ceremony, but a form of communication between humans and the cosmos" (Endraswara, *Javanese Philosophy of Life*, 2006). The Matrix-Representing Form: The matrix model is present in the symbolism of Javanese traditional weddings, where sugar cane stalks are treated as:

Tebu lanang (male sugar cane) and sugar cane wadon (female sugar cane) → symbols of masculine-feminine balance, universal balance.

*Traditional bridal attire* → purifying the crops.

*The siraman (pourrial bathing ceremony) and cucuk lampah dance* → opening the sacred path.

Collective community participation → symbolizing collective work.

Therefore, it can be understood that this model cohesively structures visual and cultural texts so that the basic meaning (matrix) can be conveyed to the public through a familiar form: marriage.

#### *Variance: A Variety of Derivative Symbols that Strengthen Meaning*

Variance is part of semiotic reading that enriches texts, as it demonstrates the flexibility of symbols in various contexts" (Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, 1978). The following are symbolic derivatives (variants) of this model, along with interpretations of their meanings:

Table 4

Varian	Deskripsi	Makna dan Konteks
Dodotan Clothing, Sumping, Jasmine Necklace	Worn by sugarcane brides	A symbol of respect and purification of agricultural products
Cucuk Lampah dance	The dancers symbolically open the way	Collective prayer for smooth production and blessings
Gagar Mayang and Janur	Janur and flower decoration	sign of fertility, request for blessings of the harvest
Wayang Kulit	Wayang characters on stage	A reminder of Javanese moral values and ethical philosophy
Red and white flag	Held by dancers and bride	Integration between local culture and national

		symbols
Location in Front of Sugar Factory	Traditional stage in the middle of an industrial area	Convergence between modernity (industry) and tradition (spirituality)

## CONCLUSIONS

The Sugarcane *Manten* tradition held at the RMI Blitar Sugar Mill is a form of agrarian cultural heritage that remains preserved to this day. This tradition is not only part of the opening ceremony of the milling season, but also represents the community's collective awareness of the importance of a harmonious relationship between humans, nature, and spiritual forces. Using Michael Riffaterre's semiotic approach, the symbolic meaning of this procession can be more deeply understood through three stages of analysis: heuristic, hermeneutic, and matrix, model, and variance. The heuristic stage highlights various literal elements in the procession, such as the sugarcane stalks treated as brides, traditional Javanese attire, the *cucuk lampah* dance, and the presence of community leaders and factory officials. These elements represent a superficial representation of a meaningful ritual. At the hermeneutic stage, these symbols are read as social and spiritual metaphors: the sugarcane bride as a symbol of fertility and a prayer for the harvest, the traditional attire as a symbol of the sacralization of agricultural produce, and the *cucuk lampah* as a spiritual path to the blessings of production. Even elements such as the red and white flag convey a transformation of meaning: from a national symbol to a sacred symbol within the local cultural context. Analysis of the matrix, model, and variance reveals that the primary meaning (matrix) of this tradition is production as a sacred collective rite. The model is present in the symbolically structured Javanese traditional wedding, while the variances include ornamentation, social participation, and media representations that enrich this symbolic structure. Each symbol in this procession works to form a complex yet purposeful network of meanings, demonstrating that society does not separate production from spiritual and cultural values. Thus, *Manten Tebu* is not merely a tradition, but also a cultural text rich in social, economic, spiritual, and symbolic meaning. It serves as evidence that amidst modernity and industrialization, society still finds room to honor its cultural roots through vibrant and meaningful forms of symbolic expression. Riffaterre's semiotic approach has proven effective in uncovering hidden structures of meaning, not only revealing the ritual content but also strengthening understanding of the relationship between text, context, and the collective consciousness of Indonesian agrarian society.

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