Jenang: Food Production System Based on Myths in Java, Indonesia

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Abstract: Traditional foods made from local ingredients remain in the limelight, based on superiority or uniqueness. This study therefore describes the preparation of Jenang as a traditional food, based on mythical concept, thus, becoming Indonesia's favorite food. The study was conducted in a natural environment (natural setting), using a qualitative method, with an ethnographic approach. In ethnographic research, researchers visit a place where people or groups 'being studied' live to 'experience together' the daily routines and habits, and consequently, understand social life and culture from the people's point of view. Researchers' collect data through the senses of sight, hearing, and taste, as well as interviews and observations, in order to formulate problems and discover solutions. According to the results, Jenang is indeed Indonesia's favorite food because myths play an important role in building the production systems. These roles include, source of inspiration, communication strategy in maintaining Jenang authenticity and quality, and a strategy in increasing popularity. This is affiliated with philosophical myths and symbols believed by the Javanese, as a communication strategy for building vertical relationships with the Creator, and for building horizontal relationships with fellow creatures. These vertical relations are in the sense of gratitude to God Almighty, while the horizontal counterpart are a symbol of unity among fellow humans, to foster a spirit of togetherness in the Javanese society, and as an apology to nature, for negative actions.

1. Introduction

Indonesia is a country inhabited by various tribes and home to diverse cultures. In these cultures, different rituals or ceremonies are carried out, and each ritual is inseparable from the respective atmosphere. This explains why Javanese people use various symbols to enhance and consequently, make the ritual an incarnation of a phenomenon. People often act without reason, necessitating more rituals, and because of these beliefs, rituals are inherited from generation to generation [1].

The existence of myths is culturally controlled and often a reflection of history. Myths contain connotative meanings represented by an object, or according to Roland Barthes, are a connotative discourse [2]. Furthermore, myths are interpreted as a social delusion and collective ideals, influencing a set of people [3], as well as a story of early events and transformations including God, gods and goddesses, with sacred qualities, transmitted in symbolic form [4]. Molinowski also describes myths as not symbolic, but a real and direct description of the subject matter [5]. Therefore, these are profound and philosophical perspectives on the world and must be studied in a simplified form for human general understanding [6].
Religion is a symbolic system acting to strengthen feelings (moods) and motivations in a strong, comprehensive, and long-lasting way among humans, by formulating conceptions of law (order), and these generally apply to human existence. These conceptions are invariably covered with a certain reality-reflecting aura, thus, the feelings and motivations seem unique and real [7].

According to Catherine Bell, ritual serves as an idea to express religious beliefs symbolically, with a sustainable goal [6]. In the Javanese society, these symbols are in form of offerings, sacrifices and trinkets (ubarampe) related to the community, as the people unconsciously use symbols, including language and gestures. These are also closely related to social cohesion and transformation [8]. Every ritual activity in Java, Surakarta or Indonesia in general, is inseparable from Jenang’s existence, as this is not just food prepared to meet physical needs of humans, but also has a high philosophy in Javanese culture, and is therefore always present in traditions related to history.

The Javanese people interpret the ritual involving lots of myths as a religious symbol, therefore this dish is sacred, and must not be regarded as a mere complementary dish in a slametan (Javanese ritual). Jenang first existed in the Javanese society during Hindu era, and has long existed in the Walisongo era until present day. Thus, the dish is always present as a symbol of gratitude to the Creator. Generally, Jenang is produced from rice flour or glutinous rice flour with coconut milk, as well as brown sugar or white powder, and has many variants. Therefore, this study therefore aims to describe how the popular myths contribute to the local food’s preparation, thus, popularizing Jenang as one of Indonesia’s favorite foods.

2. Research Methods
This study adheres to a constructivism paradigm, stating reality exists in various forms of mental construction based on social phenomena, both general and specific, depending on the party involved. Accordingly, the relationship between the observer and object relationship is mutual, subjective and a combination of interactions [9]. This study’s informants were the village government, community leaders, cultural figures, elders, farmer group administrators, women's arisan groups, and farmers. The research elaborates in more detail, the existence of food (Jenang) based on myth, and consequently, present in every Javanese ritual activity and develops into a favorite food for Indonesians. This study is qualitative, and involves descriptive analysis by conducting an objective reinterpretation of social phenomena related to the research’s scope. [10]. In this case, the phenomena is the process of deciphering meanings in myths about the food. Therefore, the study is not only limited to data collection and compilation, but also includes analysis and interpretation of existing cultural symbols [11].

This study was conducted in Ngargoyoso Sub district, Karanganyar Regency, Central Java Province and in Poncol District, Magetan Regency, East Java Province. The basic considerations for selecting the locations were whether the area currently performs rituals laden with myths on a daily basis, and whether the area attracts the attention of many visitors by presenting local culture (Festival of 1000 Tumpengs and Sabuk Janur Colossal dance), full of rituals and myths. Furthermore, the study used a qualitative method, with an ethnographic approach. According to [12], this method is associated with social reality’s subjective nature, evident in the existence of rituals based on myths, within Javanese society, especially Jenang. This is therefore a case study, as stated in [13], involving an empirical inquiry, investigating the mythical phenomenon with an important role in the food production system.

Data collection was performed through in-depth interviews, observation, and analysis of relevant documents [14]; [15]; [16], with ceremonial-related information. This study uses three triangulation, data, methodological/researcher, and theoretical, as presented in [17]. Meanwhile, the unit of analysis focused on the community’s collective actions in adapting to climate change, and a single case analytical technique was applied. A study by [18] stated this form of analysis is conducted with an interactive model, consisting of three components, data reduction, data presentation and drawing conclusions or verification.

3. Results and Discussion
Jenang’s existence in the Javanese community is timeless, and was first recorded during the Hindu-Buddhist kingdom period, around 5-7 century AD, until present. Based on the results, Jenang is one of Indonesia’s favorites because the food is based on myths with philosophical values and symbols believed
by Javanese people, as a communication strategy for building a vertical relationship with the Creator, and horizontal relationships with fellow creatures, to achieve happiness in life. Vertical relationship involves a sense of gratitude to God Almighty, while the horizontal represents a symbol of unity among human beings, to build a spirit of togetherness in the Javanese society, and consequently, foster a spirit of togetherness in the Javanese society, and as an apology from humans to nature for negative actions. Figure 1 is a schematic of how myths play a significant role in building the Jenang production system.

![Figure 1: The role of myth in building Jenang's traditional food production system.](image)

According to Figure 1, there are several important roles regarding the existence of myths, including serving as a source of inspiration in building Jenang production systems, a communication strategy in maintaining the authenticity and quality, and a popularization strategy.

### 3.1 Myth as a source of inspiration in building the Jenang production system

The production system is a series of several interconnected elements, supporting each other to achieve certain goals, or an integral system, containing both structural and functional components. These structural components include materials, equipment, machinery, labor, information, while the functional counterparts include planning, controlling, monitoring, and other management-related matters. However, this study focused on the local food production system, of Jenang, a Javanese food made from white rice or glutinous rice and the like, often presented as a complementary food at various events, including weddings, traditional and religious events, to loved ones of the deceased, pregnant women, as well as newborn babies. No events take place without this food, emerging from the local community’s creativity. The existence of Jenang in every Javanese ritual eventually made the food one of the Indonesian society’s favorites. Table 1 shows the existence of myths capable of building Jenang’s production system.

### 3.2 Myth as a strategy to maintain the authenticity and quality of Jenang

Several Jenang types are bound to maintain authenticity and quality for a long time. Myth was built to maintain routine and continuity, with a series of ritual events throughout human life cycle, from birth to death. However, several indicators show myths are strategies for maintaining the food’s quality and originality. Firstly, the event or ritual as a manifestation of myth, is possibly technically carried out by all groups, thus, the community does not feel burdened in organizing the event. Secondly, local communities have accepted the event or ritual performed. Furthermore, Javanese people are known to have mutual assistance and a very strong cooperative spirit. Togetherness is highly effective for collectively motivating the entire community to carry out all activities or rituals, and social sanctions are usually implemented for individuals taking part in other activities, instead of the rituals. Thirdly, the
ritual performed does not conflict with big and small traditions, as reported by [19], stating the small tradition tends to accept things without complaints and does not expect many creative works to be conducted, consequently, being unable to develop.

Fourth, these rituals are subject to change, as confirmed by [20], stating a previous shift from 'naturalistic conception of tradition' to the 'symbolic' conception, has occurred. Based on Handler and Linnekin's statements, Wood reported "naturalistic concepts about tradition assume a tradition is an objective entity, a core of inherited cultural traits, with continuity and limitations analogous to a natural object". According to [21], Handler and Linnekin emphasized "tradition is always built symbolically in the present and not ‘something’ derived from the past". In addition, [21] reiterates traditional concept’s definition in culture, the specification of links between present circumstances and the imagined past, are continually being reproduced and compared symbolically. Thus, there is nothing objective and limited, identifiable as "traditional culture", and people are therefore able to measure and assess change. This means things defined as traditional culture both for the past and present are constantly reformulated.

Table 1: Myths behind rituals from the various types of Jenang, widely practiced by Javanese people.

| Jenang type | Jenang Description | Ritual Name | Myth |
|-------------|--------------------|-------------|------|
| Jenang Sumsum | This Jenang is made from white rice flour, mixed with a little sticky rice and sprinkled with brown or crystallized white sugar. | Weddings | The food is believed to be a symbol of heart cleanliness and welfare. It is also believed to bring health, blessings, and strength for the couple and other celebrants. |
| Jenang procotan | This Jenang is made from rice flour, served in a banana leaf measure which is then poured with coconut milk sauce and mixed with coconut sugar containing plantains. | Salvation of pregnant women in the seventh month Sepasaran (Salvation 5 days newborn) | This Jenang is believed to be a symbol of safety and smoothness for pregnant women who will give birth. |
| Jenang abang | This Jenang is glimpsed like Jenang sumsum, which is mixed with brown sugar and sometimes with grated coconut on top of it. | Welcoming month of the Javanese calendar "suro" | It is believed to be a symbol of prayer for children. |
| Jenang ireng | This Jenang is made from black glutinous rice combined with fresh coconut milk and fragrant pandan leaves. | Religious rituals and salvation for pregnant women. | This Jenang is a symbol representing gratitude to God for the coming of the new moon and also an expression of 'surrender' prayer request to God for salvation and blessings. |
| Jenang grendul | Grendul Jenang is made from cassava flour, coconut milk and sugar cane. Cassava flour (starch telo) is made round or round which is then filled with sugar and is called grendul. It is made from glutinous rice flour mixed with brown sugar therefore it has a brownish red color. This Jenang has a chewy texture, is shaped like small balls and mixed with coconut milk before it is served. | Formal events or family culinary | It is believed to bring blessings, and is a good complementary food for pregnant women. |

Data source: Analysis of primary data from in-depth interviews and document analysis 2020.
3.3 Myth as a communication strategy to popularize Jenang

Traditional ceremonies or rituals laden with myths are possibly interpreted as social activities involving citizens, in an effort to achieve common safety goals. During these activities, there is collaboration between citizens as social creatures. The ceremony in question is a characteristic of several values at once, and a measurement of norms, including norms publishing and regulating social systems. In the developing national culture, traditional ceremonies with various symbols, manners and values of an Indonesian tribe, also determine the tribe’s identity and color, through the development of traditional food.

Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, in their book titled "The Social Construction of Reality, A Treatise in Sociological Knowledge" (1996), assumed social reality is self-existent and the social world’s structure depends on the human subject [22]. Furthermore, Thomas Luckmann and Berger discovered the idea of "social construction", and this explains a person develops a repetitive behavior known as habit in life, helping the individual to automatically cope with a situation.

Ceremonial or ritual traditions performed by the community are not spontaneous, but are customary acts or traditions for members, therefore, the community works together for the implementation. In addition, myths are foundations of rituals, serving as communication strategies, and this is shown in the following components. First, the communicator component, and elders in the local area were the figures conveying the message, and usually lead ritual events. Second, the message conveyed is related to efforts in preserving tradition and building harmonious relations between fellow creatures created by God. The third is media, and this conveys messages through Javanese traditional rituals, celebrations of religious holidays, as well as Independence Day. Meanwhile, the fourth is the communicant, and the messages’ target audience is the general public, regardless of age, religion, gender, education level or social status. Fifth, the impact of delivering messages, and this is associated with the growth and development of local wisdom as well as social capital values in the community, including trust, reciprocity, norms, values, togetherness, mutual cooperation, help, solidarity, and participation in a network.

4. Conclusion

Jenang is one of Indonesia’s favorite foods, due to the basis on myths with philosophical values and symbols. The Javanese believe this is a communication strategy to build a vertical relationship with the Creator and horizontal relationships with fellow creatures of God, to achieve happiness in life. Vertical relationship is the sense of gratitude to God Almighty, while the horizontal counterpart is a symbol of unity among human beings to build a spirit of togetherness in Javanese society, and as an apology from humans to nature for negative actions. Furthermore, myths play an important role in building Jenang production systems, including being a source of inspiration, a communication strategy in maintaining Jenang’s authenticity and quality and a popularization strategy for the food.

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