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The Meaning and Symbols of Offerings in the Karo Ritual Ceremony of the Tengger Tribe in Baledono Village

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Submitted: September 3, 2025

Revised: November 1, 2025

Accepted: November 3, 2025

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the symbolic meanings of offerings in the Karo Ceremony ritual of the Tengger Tribe in Baledono Village as a system of ritual communication reflecting spiritual, cultural, and social relationships. Using qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through semi-participant observation full one week, in-depth interviews with four key informants are traditional leaders, village head, Hindu priest, and youth representative, and documentation are hotographs, videos, audio recording of interview, research journals of tengger, and traditional manuscripts like lontar keropak . Thematic analysis was conducted using F.W. Dillistone's six-dimensional symbol theory. The results reveal that offerings function as multi-dimensional communicative symbols: tampah represents cosmic order; tumpeng symbolizes vertical divine connection; colored tumpeng stimulates imagination about cardinal deities; tanalayu flower represents God's eternity; tumpeng pras connects human apologies with divine forgiveness; juwadah serves as proof of collective identity; takir salawe commemorates ancestral lineage; banana leaves reflect nature connection; putihan flower manifests spiritual purity; and rooster embodies leadership responsibilities. These findings demonstrate that Karo offerings constitute a sophisticated symbolic language encoding cosmological understanding, maintaining social bonds, and transmitting cultural knowledge. Understanding this symbolic meaning is crucial for preserving Tengger culture amidst contemporary social change.

Keywords: meaning and symbols; offering; Dillistone Theory; Karo Ceremony; Tengger Tribe

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's diverse cultural heritage is invaluable and reflects the identity of its people. Culture is the totality of human creations, tastes, and creations, encompassing all complex ways of life, including knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, customary laws, and various other abilities and habits acquired by humans as part of society (Syakhrani & Kamil, 2022). Technology influences society in terms of thinking and behavior, especially among the younger generation. They tend to adopt foreign cultures that are often not in line with local cultural values. One tribe that still values and preserves cultural values through ancestral traditions and local wisdom is the Tengger tribe.

The Tengger tribe is a group of people who live in the Bromo-Semeru mountain region of East Java. The name "Tengger" itself is believed to come from the combination of the names Roro Anteng and Joko Seger, who are the ancestral couple of the Tengger people. The uniqueness of this tribe is evident in their traditional practices and various other cultural activities that reflect the balance between humans, nature, and spirituality. (Bahrudin & Zurohman, 2022) state that the values of multiculturalism in the Tengger community show how traditional customs can coexist with modernization, providing lessons about cultural harmony amid social change.

On the other hand, the traditional customs of the Tengger community are a unique attraction and a form of local wisdom that is very important for sustainable development from generation to generation in the Bromo-Tengger region. Traditions function as ritual communication a symbolic process through which communities transmit values, beliefs, and collective identity across generations (Haris & Amalia, 2018). Traditions not only serve as cultural heritage, but also as a means of social communication and a reinforcement of community identity (Koentjaraningrat, 2009). From a communication studies perspective, rituals are understood as performative acts that create and maintain shared meaning within a community through the systematic use of symbols, gestures, and material objects. The Tengger community practices many traditions. These include, communal traditions are intended for the entire Tengger community and

consist of the Karo Ceremony, Kasada, and Unan-Unan or Mayu Desa (Interview with Johan). However, one of the traditions that is rich in meaning and symbolism is the Karo ceremony.

The Karo Ceremony is one of the traditions that enriches the diversity of customs among the Tengger tribe. The Karo Ceremony is often referred to as Karo Day, an annual ritual celebrated for a full week every 15th day of the month of Karo according to the Saka calendar. The origin of the Karo Ceremony comes from the story of Ajisaka. Ajisaka was a leader who created the Javanese script. He had two followers named Setyo and Setuhu. Setyo and Setuhu were loyal followers of Ajisaka who were honest and faithful. One day, Ajisaka entrusted a heirloom keris to his followers, Setyo and Setuhu. Then one day, Setuhu was assigned to retrieve the heirloom from Setyo. Because they were honest and loyal to their leader, Setuhu insisted on taking the keris because he had received a message from Ajisaka, while Setyo insisted on not giving the keris unless Ajisaka himself came to retrieve it. Thus, a fierce battle ensued between Ajisaka's two servants because of their loyalty to their king. However, in the battle, both Setyo and Setuhu were defeated and stabbed by the keris. Setyo fell facing south, and Setuhu fell facing north (interview with Romo Subur).

So the word “Karo” comes from the Javanese language, namely “Loro Karo,” which means two, namely Setyo and Setuhu. The one who fell southward was called “Selamatan Karo” and the one who fell northward was called “Selamatan Telasan,” which was carried out by the Madurese people. So, the origin of “Selamatan Karo” commemorates the death of Setyo and Setuhu (interview with Mr. Supriyadi). It is carried out as a form of respect for the ancestors and to express gratitude to God Almighty, who plays an important role in protecting and blessing the entire Tengger tribe (interview with Romo Subur). This mythological narrative is not merely a historical account but serves as the foundational symbolic framework that gives meaning to the ritual's material elements the offerings themselves become communicative acts that materialize the values of loyalty, sacrifice, and devotion embodied by Setyo and Setuhu. In addition, Karo also serves to strengthen the bonds of brotherhood among residents through togetherness in the practice of rituals and traditional celebrations (interview with Mr. Supriyadi).

The implementation of Karo traditional ceremonies is also inseparable from the rituals involved. Karo ceremonies include various ritual activities, such as offerings, prayers, dances or sodoran, and communal meals. These ritual activities constitute a complex system of cultural communication wherein symbols function as a shared language that bridges the visible and invisible worlds. Traditional rituals are a manifestation of culture that not only reflect the beliefs and values of the community, but also hold deep symbolic meaning (Rohman et al., 2024). During the ritual, offerings play a very important role. From a communication perspective, offerings are not passive objects but active communicative agents that encode and transmit spiritual messages, social norms, and cosmological understandings. Offerings consist of various foods, flowers, or certain items that are arranged in a special way as a symbol of respect and gratitude to the ancestors and the power of God as the creator (Adam et al., 2019). All of these things contain symbols that serve to preserve cultural identity, especially amid the challenges of globalization that threaten the continuity of local cultural heritage (Putri et al., 2022).

This study is based on several previous studies that emphasize the importance of understanding the symbolic meaning in the Tengger tribe tradition. The first study was conducted by Laksono (2020), who analyzed the process of preserving local values in the Kasada Ceremony in Ngadisari Village, Probolinggo. The results of this study show how the Tengger people interpret this ritual as a form of respect for their ancestors as well as an effort to maintain harmony. However, Laksono's work focuses primarily on social construction and cultural preservation without systematically analyzing the communicative function of individual symbolic elements within the offerings. Another study by Nur Azizah (2022) emphasized the symbolic meaning contained in the Sodoran Dance, a tradition that describes the origins of humans according to the beliefs of the Tengger community. This dance is rich in philosophy related to the interaction between humans and Sang Hyang Widhi as well as the surrounding environment. While Nur Azizah provides valuable insights into embodied ritual communication through dance, the material symbols of offerings remain underexplored.

Nia Hariwiyanti (2022) also analyzed the Karo Traditional Ceremony of the Tengger Tribe in Ngadisari Village, Probolinggo Regency. She focused on analyzing the social construction and

meaning of the symbols contained in the Karo traditional ceremony. The results of the study show that the ceremony not only serves as a cultural heritage but also functions to strengthen social relationships among the community through traditional values. Nevertheless, Hariwiyanti's analysis remains at the level of social function without delving into the multi-layered symbolic meanings embedded within each offering element and their role as communicative artifacts. In addition, research conducted by (Abdullah and Syafe 2022) discusses the symbolic meaning of offerings in the traditional rituals of the Javanese people, which are culturally similar to the traditions of the Tengger people. This study emphasizes the importance of offerings as a symbol of communication between humans and supernatural forces. However, their study does not employ a systematic theoretical framework to decode the layers of meaning nor does it address the specific context of Tengger cosmology. The last study conducted by Simanhadi (2013) examined the transformation of the local Hindu traditions of the Tengger community, which have maintained their unique identity despite modernization. This study is very relevant because it shows how local cultural values are integrated with religious beliefs. Yet, Simanhadi's work emphasizes transformation processes rather than the intrinsic communicative properties of the symbolic system itself.

Despite these valuable contributions, a significant gap remains: no study has systematically examined the offerings of the Karo ceremony as a comprehensive system of ritual communication using a robust symbolic theory that can account for multiple dimensions of meaning-making. So the research addresses three critical gaps: First, it applies F.W. Dillistone's comprehensive six-dimensional symbolic framework specifically to the Karo ceremony offerings, providing a structured analytical lens that previous studies lacked. Second, it examines the unique context of Baledono Village, where local variations of the Karo ceremony may exhibit distinct symbolic patterns not documented in studies from Ngadisari or other Tengger villages. Third, it explicitly positions offerings as communicative acts within the broader field of communication studies, analyzing how these material symbols function as a cultural language that encodes and transmits complex spiritual, social, and cosmological messages across generations.

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The Karo ceremony in the Tengger tribe is a form of tradition passed down from ancestors that has survived despite the challenges of cultural shifts in the current era of modernization. Not only that, the role of offerings in the Karo ritual is not limited to being a ritual medium, but also has philosophical, religious, and social meanings and symbols. As ritual communication artifacts, offerings serve as tangible expressions of intangible beliefs they are the material vocabulary through which the Tengger community articulates their relationship with ancestors, deities, nature, and one another. Therefore, it is hoped that this study can teach the community about the meaning and symbols of the Karo ceremony in the Tengger Brang Kulon tribe so that they can continue to preserve their culture as times change. The symbols used in Karo ceremonies, such as offerings and traditional clothing, reflect the beliefs and values of the Tengger community, including mutual cooperation, gratitude, and togetherness (Ratih & Juwariyah, 2020).

This study uses F.W. Dillistone's theory of symbols, which is divided into six indicators that focus on understanding symbols as tools that have the power to convey meanings that transcend their literal forms. According to Dillistone in his work *The Power of Symbols* (2002), symbols are things (words, objects, actions, or events) that connect concrete reality with something greater, such as concepts, values, or transcendental beliefs. Symbols serve as a bridge between the real world and deeper or more abstract meanings. Dillistone's framework is particularly well-suited for analyzing ritual offerings because it acknowledges both the material and transcendent dimensions of symbolic communication a crucial consideration when studying objects that simultaneously function as physical artifacts and spiritual messengers.

The choice of Dillistone's theory over alternative frameworks is deliberate and strategic. While semiotic approaches (such as Peirce's or Saussure's) excel at analyzing the structure of sign systems, they tend to emphasize cognitive and linguistic dimensions at the expense of the affective, imaginative, and transcendent qualities of religious symbols. Similarly, while symbolic interactionism (Mead, Blumer) provides powerful tools for understanding how meanings emerge through social interaction, it focuses primarily on interpersonal communication and may undertheorize the vertical dimension of human-divine communication that is central to ritual practice. Dillistone's theory, by contrast, was developed specifically to analyze religious and ritual

symbols, making it uniquely capable of capturing the multi-dimensional nature of offerings as communicative acts that operate simultaneously on material, social, imaginative, and spiritual planes. His six-dimensional framework allows for a holistic analysis that encompasses both the concrete properties of offerings and their capacity to evoke transcendent realities—precisely what is needed to understand how a simple palm leaf container (takir) can simultaneously be a functional object, a cosmological symbol, and a vehicle for spiritual communication.

In his theory, F.W. Dillistone divides symbols into several important indicators, namely:

- 1) Expanding meaning: symbols help humans understand things that are not immediately visible or experienced through association and interpretation. In communication terms, this refers to the polysemic nature of ritual symbols that allows them to carry multiple layers of encoded meaning.
- 2) Stimulating imagination: symbols also trigger creative thinking and imagination in individuals to understand a broader reality. This highlights the participatory dimension of symbolic communication wherein recipients actively co-create meaning through imaginative engagement.
- 3) Connecting reality: symbols bridge the gap between concrete things (such as objects or actions) and abstract things (such as values or ideals). This mediating function is essential to ritual communication, which seeks to make the invisible visible and the intangible tangible.

4) The power of symbols: symbols can influence human emotions, thoughts, and actions. Demonstrating the performative efficacy of symbolic communication in shaping individual and collective behavior. 5) Social and cultural context: Symbols do not stand alone; their meaning is influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are used. Understanding symbols requires interpretation that takes into account cultural and historical backgrounds. This emphasizes that symbolic communication is always situated within specific interpretive communities. 6) The relationship between symbols and substance: Dillistone distinguishes symbols into two categories: “representation” and “substance” as the core of what the symbol represents. This relationship is dynamic and complementary in forming meaning-this final dimension acknowledges that effective symbolic communication requires alignment between the material form of the symbol and the essence it seeks to convey. Thus, F.W. Dillistone's theory of symbols provides a framework for understanding the role of symbols in human life as a powerful communication tool for bridging

concrete reality with transcendental meaning. By applying this framework to the offerings of the Karo ceremony, this study seeks to reveal how the Tengger community uses material objects as a sophisticated language for communicating with the sacred, maintaining social bonds, transmitting cultural knowledge, and constructing collective identity in an era of rapid social change.

Considering the background described above, the researcher was interested in conducting a study entitled The Meaning and Symbolism of Offerings in Karo Ceremonies among the Tengger Tribe in Baledono Village and analyzing it using F.W. Dillistone's symbolic theory framework to demonstrate how ritual offerings function as a complex system of cultural communication that encodes spiritual beliefs, social values, and cosmological understandings within the material world.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research used a qualitative descriptive method, which is a form of research that involves collecting data for study and presenting the analysis in words (Saputra; et al., 2023). The location of this research was in Baledono Village, Tosari District, Pasuruan Regency. The main object of the study was the ritual offerings used in the Karo ceremony as a cultural phenomenon, while the research subjects, selected through purposive sampling, were key informants who are authoritative holders of ritual knowledge. These included Romo Subur as traditional leaders, who holds the spiritual authority to lead ritual with over 15 years of experience in Baledono Village, Mr. Dimas as the village head in two period for overseeing communal practices and mediates between traditional customs and government policies, Mr. Supriyadi Hindu as priests with theological expertise and cosmological meaning of offerings since 2010, and Johan as head of Karang Taruna who is active as youth representatives involved in ritual implementation from junior high school.

This study employed triangulation of data collection methods is observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Data collection occurred over one full week. There are three phases: pre-ritual preparation (2 days before ceremony), ritual implementation (3 full day during Karo ceremony in Santi phase), and post-ritual activities (2 days after ceremony). In-depth

interviews were designed to elicit both emic perspectives and systematic coverage of all six Dillistone indicators. The interview guide consisted of 24 core questions organized into seven thematic sections covering biographical information, ceremony context, offering elements inventory, and symbolic meanings across all theoretical dimensions. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes, with some informants interviewed in multiple sessions (2-3 times). Documentation included multiple forms over photographs and video documenting offering elements, ritual arrangements, and ceremonial sequences, complete audio recordings of interviews, complemented by relevant Tengger related academic journals and traditional manuscripts such as lontar keropak, which provided historical and textual context.

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis informed by Dillistone's theoretical framework. Transcripts and observation notes were first transcribed and repeatedly reviewed for familiarization. Using a hybrid inductive-deductive coding process, data were reduced and categorized according to Dillistone's six indicators. Emerging themes were clustered into symbolic profiles for each offering element and refined through member checking with key informants for validity. These synthesized findings were then organized into Table 1, providing a structured presentation of symbol, meaning, and empirical evidence. This rigorous process ensured trustworthiness through triangulation, prolonged engagement, and thick description.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The Karo ceremony unfolds in a fixed sequence: it typically opens with a sodoran dance and communal prayers, followed by a central santi (blessing/offering) session, then more traditional dances, and finally a communal feast. During the santi phase, all pre-prepared offerings are placed before the shrine as symbolic gifts of respect and gratitude to Sang Hyang Widhi (God) and the ancestors. Field documentation shows that key offerings are arranged with great care: for example, a central tumpeng pras among (a multi-tiered cone of rice) is set on a large round tampah (bamboo winnowing tray) and often decorated with banana leaves and flowers.

The tumpeng itself is colorfully layered typically white, yellow, red, and black concentric rings reflecting the four cardinal directions. Beside it, twenty-five banana leaf takir baskets (the Takir Selawe) are laid out in a neat grid (commonly five rows of five), each holding small portions of offerings. The juwadah (glutinous rice cake) traditionally made of white and red sticky rice is presented on a low tray or woven basket so that its red and white grains form a balanced two-tone pattern. These deliberate color contrasts, symmetries, and natural containers (tampah trays and leaf takir plates) emphasize the ritual order and cosmological symbolism of the offerings. In sum, the ceremony's structure and the placement of each offering provide the context for the symbolic analyses presented in Table 1 below.

The symbolic meanings embedded in Karo offerings were systematically analyzed through F.W. Dillistone's six-dimensional theoretical framework, which provides a comprehensive lens for understanding how material objects function as multi-layered communication media. Table 1 presents the empirical findings organized according to these theoretical indicators, with each offering element mapped to its symbolic meanings and supported by direct testimony from key informants. As presented in the following data:

Table 1 Offering Analysis Results Based on F.W Dillistone's Theory

Dillistone Indicators	Offering Symbol	Symbolic Meaning	Interview Result
Expanding Meaning	Tampah	The universe	The wide, open circle is considered a large space where life takes place (interview with Mr. Dimas). This tool is not only seen as an object that functions in everyday life, but also as a symbol of order and unity in the universe (interview with Mr. Supriyadi).
	Tumpeng (cone-shaped rice)	The vertical relationship between humans and God	The cone shape pointing upwards symbolizes the vertical relationship between humans and God (interview with Mr. Supriyadi). The top of the

	Takir Janur (a tray made from palm leaves)	Life in the world (Ja = universe, Nur = life)	tumpeng represents the highest point where God resides. Meanwhile, the bottom symbolizes life on earth (interview with Romo Subur). In the village of Baledono, the origin of the word "takir," which comes from "Ja" (Universe) and "Nur" (Life), gives it the meaning of a symbol of life in the world (interview with Romo Subur).
	King Banana	The One God (Hyang Widi Wasa)	This fruit is considered to represent the majesty and power of God Almighty, who in Balinese Hinduism is called Hyang Widi Wasa (interview with Mr. Supriyadi). The use of this fruit in various rituals is not only based on its shape or taste, but also symbolizes great respect for the Creator (interview with Johan).
Stimulating Imaginations	Roast chicken with the position reversed	The dynamics of life (joy and sorrow)	In some rituals or traditions, it is not only a method of presentation, but also provokes thoughts about the journey of human life, which is always cyclical and can be filled with joy or sorrow (interview with Johan).
	Five colors of tumpeng (white, yellow, red, black)	The four cardinal directions (Dewata)	These symbols can stimulate the imagination of the existence of gods in various cardinal directions (interview with Romo Subur). "Tumpeng comes in various colors. Each color symbolizes a cardinal direction, namely white for the god Iswara in the east, yellow for the god Mahadewa in the west, red for the god Brahma in the south, and

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 MetaCommunication: Journal of Communication Studies
 Vol. 10 No. 2 September 2025

P-ISSN: 2356-4490
 E-ISSN :2549-693X

Connecting Reality	Tanalayu Flower	The eternity of God	<p>black for the god Wisnu in the north" (interview with Mr. Supriyadi).</p> <p>The tanalayu flower is believed to be a flower that never wilts. In the Tengger tradition called entas-entas, this flower is placed on top of a petra doll (interview with Johan).</p> <p>The human soul is eternal. So even after death, death ceremonies are still held as a form of prayer, because those who have died are still around us (interview with Mr. Supriyadi).</p> <p>In the Tengger tradition, it is not just food, but a symbol of offering, apology, gratitude, and a spiritual connection between humans, nature, ancestors, and God, which is usually used in various types of sacred traditions such as the Karo Ceremony in the 2nd month of the Tengger calendar (July-August), Unan-unan (village cleansing), Kasada, Entas-entas, Weddings/Births during sacred family celebrations (interview with Johan).</p>
	Tumpeng Pras	Apologies to God	<p>It symbolizes the divine protective element that surrounds humans and is the center of their lives. This symbol is believed to maintain physical and spiritual balance. (interview with Mr. Supriyadi).</p>
	Jambe, suruh, gambir, Bako ampenna, klobot cigarettes	A variety of life experiences, including difficult, sad, and happy ones	<p>Jambe, suruh, gambir, bako ampenan, klobot cigarettes, which taste sweet and bitter, symbolize human life in this world, where we will inevitably</p>

	(bitter and sweet taste)		experience difficulties and ease, sadness and joy (interview with Romo Subur).
	Black and White Hot Drink	The duality of men and women	Black indicates that men must be strong and decisive, while white reflects that women must be gentle and caring. So both must be balanced (interview with Mr. Supriyadi).
Power of Symbol	Juwadah (red and white sticky rice)	Proof of Karo Holiday celebration (such as a stamp)	Meanwhile, in the Karo ceremony, juwadah (red and white sticky rice) is interpreted as proof to the ancestors that the Tengger tribe has commemorated Karo Day, which in modern times is manifested in the form of a stamp (interview with Mr. Supriyadi).
	Satak (old money)	Economic necessities in life	The Tengger community refers to satak as part of their ancestral heritage, which includes sacred objects, mantras, and lontar keropak as the foundation of the community's spiritual values (interview with Pak Dimas). Satak is also a symbol of sustainable livelihood, which means that humans should seek a pure livelihood while living in this world (interview with Romo Subur).
	Takir Selawe (25 pieces)	The number of children from Joko Seger and Roro Anteng	The offering that must be present in the Karo ceremony is Takir Selawe. Takir Selawe consists of 25 takir (offering containers). The number 25 represents the number of children that Joko Seger and Roro Anteng had in Bromo. (interview with Mr. Supriyadi).

Socio - Cultural Context

Banana leaves Openness and happiness

In every Karo ceremony, there is a series of lemek godhong gedang and preparations for tumpeng among, as well as unan-unan. These are not merely food wrappings, but also symbols of purity, sincerity, and humanity's connection with nature, reflecting simplicity and respect for natural resources (interview with Romo Subur). Sego Rowan, rice that is often used in Tengger community rituals, especially the Karo and Kasada ceremonies, is a symbol of prosperity (interview with Romo Subur). It is believed to represent the community's relationship with nature, the harvest cycle, and hopes for a prosperous life (interview with Mr. Dimas).

Sego Rowan Prosperity and survival of life

Symbol- Substance Relation

Putihan Flower Kesucian pikiran dan kejernihan hati

Putihan flowers are a physical symbol representing spiritual purity and clarity of heart. The meaning here is that people should always think positively and not be filled with negative thoughts (interview with Father Subur). Their use in offerings or religious ceremonies is a manifestation of prayers for the heart to remain free from envy and jealousy and for the mind to remain clear in facing life (interview with Mr. Dimas).

Rooster Responsibilities of the head of the family

The use of roosters in Tengger tradition, especially in the Karo ceremony, is as follows: The rooster crows in the morning, protecting its hen and chicks, which are considered to

represent the social role of the head of the family who is responsible, protective, and a guide (interview with Johan).

Source: Interview (2024-2025)



Figure 1 Complete Karo Offering Arrangement at a domestic Altar (sanggah) in Johan's House

This photograph captures the full spatial configuration of offerings positioned at a domestic Altar (sanggah) during the Karo ceremony. Key components visible in the arrangement include: (1) Tampah (circular base, approximately 60cm diameter) the large round winnowing tray serving as the cosmic container; (2) Central Tumpeng (cone-shaped rice, center, approximately 30cm height) - the yellow cone symbolizing the vertical divine axis; (3) Tumpeng Pras Among (four colored cones at cardinal points) representing directional deities providing protection; (4) Takir Janur (multiple palm leaf containers, foreground and distributed throughout) 25 containers commemorating ancestral lineage; (5) Roasted Chicken (left side, inverted position) symbolizing life's cyclical dynamics; (6) Putihin Flowers (white flowers scattered throughout) representing spiritual purity and clarity of heart; (7) Banana Leaf Wrappings (green leaves, base layer) is symbolizing simplicity and connection to nature. The entire arrangement is oriented toward the northeast, directing spiritual communication toward Mount Semeru. The spatial organization materializes the papat kalimo pancer cosmological principle, transforming the domestic space into a miniature universe where human offerings can reach divine recipients.



Figure 2 Moment of Santi Ritual of the Karo Ceremony in Johan's House

This photograph captures the intimate moment of the santi ritual the house-to-house prayer and offering presentation ceremony that constitutes a crucial communicative phase of the Karo ceremony. The image shows Romo Subur leading the ritual procession as he conducts prayers to ancestors and family spirits at a household altar. Visible in the scene are: (1) Romo Subur (center/foreground) in his role as ritual mediator, facilitating communication between the living community and ancestral realm through prayer recitation and blessing gestures; (2) Household offerings (arranged before him) prepared by the family according to traditional prescriptions, including tumpeng, takir arrangements, flowers, and other sacred elements; (3) Community participants (surrounding/background) like family members and neighbors gathered in respectful posture, creating the collective witness necessary for ritual efficacy; (4) Domestic ritual space the household setting emphasizing that Karo is not only a communal village ceremony but also an intimate family practice connecting each household directly with their ancestral lineage.

Discussion

The empirical findings presented in Table 1 and the ethnographic descriptions above reveal that Karo offerings constitute far more than decorative ritual objects they function as a sophisticated symbolic communication infrastructure through which the Tengger community continuously produces and maintains its cosmological understanding, social cohesion, and cultural identity. The following analysis examines the deeper communicative mechanisms and

sociocultural implications of how these symbols actually function within contemporary Tengger society based of six indicators proposed by F.W. Dillistons.

1) Expanding Meaning of Offerings Teach Complex Ideas

In Tengger culture, everyday objects used in rituals become powerful symbols that teach deep spiritual ideas. For example, the tampah a rice winnowing tray used daily by villagers during ceremonies is understood as symbolizing the entire universe. This transforms simple tools into visual lessons, making complex beliefs about cosmic order and divine hierarchy understandable to everyone, including children, through direct experience rather than needing formal schooling or religious texts. Similarly, the cone-shaped tumpeng visually expresses the vertical connection between humans and the divine. Research by Ridzki and Achmadi (2023) supports that geometric shapes in traditional cultures often carry cosmological meanings. Their work focused on tumpeng as a marker of cultural identity, but this study highlights how its shape itself acts as an effective teaching tool, accessible to all community members regardless of education.

This approach acts as a symbolic communication system that makes Tengger cosmology visually and experientially accessible. It democratizes knowledge and supports cultural transmission without needing literacy or specialists. This is vital because formal Hindu-Javanese theology is seldom available in rural Tengger areas. Johan, a youth representative, stressed that this system depends on young people actively participating in preparing offerings. Learning happens through hands-on involvement, as meanings emerge from doing, not just verbal explanation. Importantly, this system allows for interpretive flexibility: while core meanings are generally shared, individual understandings of symbols like the tampah vary. This shows symbols produce a semantic range, not fixed definitions. Therefore, safeguarding Tengger culture requires more than preserving ritual objects. It demands active transmission of symbolic interpretation skills to sustain correct meaning-making amid social changes.

2) Stimulating Imagination from the Invisible to Visible

In Santi rituals of Karo Ceremonies, offerings like the upside-down roasted chicken and the multi-colored tumpeng act as cognitive puzzles that engage people's imagination actively. The unusual position of the chicken is striking because it is not seen in everyday life, triggering people to interpret its meaning. This effect, known as "conceptual blending" in cognitive science, happens when people mix what they see with cultural knowledge here, about life's ups and downs to understand the symbol. This kind of symbol requires active participation, meaning people are drawn into making meaning rather than just passively receiving information. Such engagement encourages deeper emotional and intellectual connections to the ritual's messages. The four-colored tumpeng, arranged at the four cardinal points, invites imagination of invisible protective deities believed to guard the community. Each color corresponds to a specific god Iswara in the east, Mahadewa in the west, Brahma in the south, and Wisnu in the north. This helps people mentally experience a sacred geography around them. Similar findings appear in Indrawati's (2017) study of the Mappanre'tasi ritual in Makassar, which uses multicolored foods to represent cosmic guardians.

While Indrawati emphasized cultural continuity, this study shows how multiple imagination-stimulating symbols together create a powerful and shared way to imagine and understand reality, a concept aligned with Clifford Geertz's "model of and for reality." However, interviews show that younger Tengger participants often need explicit explanations of these symbols, unlike older generations who understand them intuitively. Johan, a youth representative, noted that young people ask why the chicken is upside-down rather than instantly grasping its meaning. This signals a shift from automatic symbol processing where meanings arise naturally to a need for conscious interpretation, possibly influenced by education and media exposure outside the village. Firdaus et al. (2022) similarly found that younger generations in Tengger know the intellectual meanings of symbols like the tanalayu flower but lack the emotional, lived experience that gives these symbols their full power. This gap presents a challenge for preserving the imaginative strength of Tengger symbols, reminding the community that cultural contexts which nurture intuitive understanding are essential to keep these symbols meaningful and powerful.

3) Connecting Reality of Bridging the Material and Spiritual Worlds

Offerings like tumpeng pras, jambe-suruh-gambir, and wedang ireng-putih(black and white drinks) function as communication tools solving a key religious challenge: making invisible spiritual realities tangible and actionable. These material offerings do not just symbolize abstract ideas such as forgiveness, life's duality, and gender balance; they actively enable spiritual interactions. For example, when a family presents tumpeng pras with prayers for forgiveness, the offering is a mediator that transforms and realizes the communication with the divine, as Bruno Latour's theory of mediation suggests. Without these physical symbols, spiritual transactions cannot be fully enacted by humans not because deities need food, but because humans rely on tangible means to express intangible intentions.

The jambe-suruh-gambir combination (betel nut, leaf, catechu, and tobacco) offers sophisticated embodied symbolism. Consuming these together provides a sweet-bitter taste that somatically inscribes the meaning of life's contrasts directly into bodily experience. This sensory channel bypasses intellectual doubt; one cannot "disbelieve" the bitter-sweet sensation even when questioning theological ideas. Nurullita and Agustina (2024) documented this symbolic taste transmission in Banyuwangi's ritual tradition, though mainly descriptively. This study extends that by showing how multiple sensory inputs visual, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory work together to reinforce symbolic meanings and ensure they register strongly even without verbal explanation.

However, material mediation poses a paradox. If offerings become too powerful, people might mistake them for divine beings themselves, a phenomenon called fetishization. Interview data show Tengger ritual experts carefully avoid this Romo Subur emphasized offerings as sarana(means/tools), not tujuan (ends/goals). Ritual consumption of prasad (blessed offerings) educates participants that these are temporary vehicles for spiritual truths, not sacred substances. This ongoing meta-communication helps maintain the right balance between symbol and substance.

Facing pluralism, younger Tengger influenced by Islam or Protestant Christianity sometimes question the necessity of offerings. This challenges the "plausibility structures" shared cultural assumptions about spiritual communication that sustain offering practices. Maintaining

these cultural frameworks is key to preserving the connecting function of Tengger offerings. This discussion aligns with broader theories of symbolic communication that emphasize the active, mediating role of ritual objects (Dillistone, Latour) and resonates with anthropological insights into Tengger cosmology and ritual practice documented by prior research. It highlights the vital role of material-spiritual bridges in sustaining religious life and cultural identity.

4) The Power of Symbols is Building Community Through Shared Work

Offerings like juwadah (red and white sticky rice) and takir selawe (exactly 25 palm leaf containers) show that symbolic power arises mainly from social cooperation in their creation, not just from their meanings. The long, communal process of cooking juwadah involving multiple people staying up all night sharing tasks gives the offering its strength. This collective effort is physically present in the offering, manifesting the community's unity. When presented to ancestors, juwadah is more than a gift; it is proof of social bonding. Communication scholar James Carey calls this the "ritual view of communication," where communication builds shared reality through joint symbolic action. Pangestu and Sukarman's (2022) study on Karo traditions recognized the sacredness of juwadah but focused on its final meaning. This research adds that making the offering itself produces social bonds ritual making is community building.

Takir selawe's power comes from the precise number 25, representing the 25 children of the ancestral couple Joko Seger and Roro Anteng. Repeatedly counting and arranging these containers creates what anthropologist Paul Connerton calls "bodily memory," preserving history through embodied ritual, even if stories are forgotten. However, this power depends on continued communal participation. Interviews show concern as youth move away for work, making it harder to gather enough people for the demanding juwadah preparation. This reveals that symbolic power relies on social practice, not just intellectual knowledge; losing the practice means losing symbolic strength. Rahmawati and Suseno (2021) noted the tourism value of Tengger traditions, but this study highlights that intellectual knowledge alone cannot replace the communal ritual that creates social solidarity. Interviewees showed mixed feelings about younger people's participation; youth may still engage but less intensively, driven more by cultural pride than faith. This suggests

symbolic power is evolving, raising questions about whether reduced participation still effectively sustains communal cohesion. This reflects a broader challenge of how ritual communication adapts in modern society without losing its social force.

5) Socio-Cultural Context Strengthening Agrarian Identity

Offerings like banana leaves and sego rowan (local rice varieties) are more than just reflections of the Tengger community's farming lifestyle, they actively shape and communicate their identity as moral and spiritual beings connected to the land. The choice of simple, natural materials such as banana leaves instead of plastic and local rice instead of commercial brands serves as an identity assertion through material culture. In a modern Indonesia where development often devalues traditional agriculture, Tengger rituals act as counter-hegemonic communication, emphasizing values like spiritual authenticity, simplicity, and sincerity over material wealth. As Romo Subur highlights, these offerings symbolize "kesederhanaan" (simplicity) and "keikhlasan" (sincerity), actively constructing a moral worldview that values natural connection with the environment. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls this "symbolic capital," where these ritual objects elevate simple, locally-produced materials into signs of cultural and spiritual worth.

Research by Lestari (2023) supports this view, showing how offerings like bamboo weaving and natural materials reflect ecological and cultural unity. In Tengger, these practices transform livelihood into cultural performance, where specific relationships with rice, banana plants, and trees are both economic and spiritual. When offerings are linked to cosmic prosperity and agricultural cycles particularly during harvest time, they depict the community's life as part of a larger divine plan, an idea that anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls religion's "ontological function," making social arrangements seem inevitable and natural.

However, this identity-building faces challenges as younger Tengger generations move to cities for education and work. Although they may understand the symbolic meaning intellectually, they often lack the embodied experience actual planting, harvesting, and caring for the plants that makes these symbols meaningful. Without shared practical engagement, these symbols risk becoming mere relics of the past, maintained for cultural preservation or tourism rather than as

active expressions of current identity. This situation shows that meaningful symbolic communication depends on ongoing material and practical participation; otherwise, the symbols become only referential, pointing to a traditional way of life rather than actively creating a living identity.

This issue underscores a global challenge faced by many traditional communities how to preserve core cultural meanings when material practices decline. As actual farming practices diminish, the symbols' power to construct and sustain authentic community identity also weakens unless they are continually grounded in lived experience and practice. Maintaining this vibrant relationship between material and spiritual worlds is crucial for preserving Tengger's rich cultural identity amid rapid social and economic changes.

6) Symbols and Substance is the Importance Material Properties

In Tengger offerings, symbols like the white putihan flowers and roosters are examples of motivated symbols where the material form naturally resembles or embodies the values they express. The white color of putihan flowers physically suggests purity because of its brightness and clarity, while the rooster's protective behavior towards hens and chicks mirrors the leadership qualities it symbolizes. This kind of motivated symbolism creates redundancy across multiple sensory channels visual form, behavior, and cultural interpretation so even people unfamiliar with the culture can grasp some meaning simply through observation. For example, seeing white flowers often intuitively conveys purity, and rooster behavior is commonly associated with leadership because it is observable in real life. Wibowo (2020) found that rooster symbolism in Tengger rituals carries moral lessons on leadership passed through generations in this way. The meaning exists in a continuous loop where daily observation of roosters reinforces ritual leadership symbolism and vice versa.

Similarly, research by Febrianti and Yusfarani (2024) notes how the Pisang Raja (King Banana) fruit's name, ritual prominence, and taste converge to symbolize divine majesty. This symbol works because its multiple material qualities align with the intended spiritual meaning. However, these motivated symbols are vulnerable. For example, the tanalayu flower's symbolism

of eternity depends on its never-wilting property, which ecological changes could threaten. Also, modernization may disrupt embodied experience if families no longer keep roosters but buy meat instead, younger people lose daily behavioral reference points that make symbolism resonate emotionally. They may know the rooster as a symbol intellectually but lack the lived, intuitive understanding that gives it power.

This shift from prereflective, intuitive meaning to conscious, cognitive interpretation can reduce emotional connection and memorability of symbols. Thus, even “natural” motivated symbols require specific socio-ecological and cultural contexts to retain their full communicative power. If those contexts change, greater cultural explanation is needed to maintain symbol comprehension, transforming ritual meaning from immediate intuition to mediated understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the offerings in the Karo Ceremony of the Tengger tribe function as a complex system of symbolic communication deeply embedded in their cosmology, social relations, and cultural identity. Using F.W. Dillistone’s six-dimensional symbolic framework, the research reveals how these ritual artifacts expand meaning by embodying cosmic order and spiritual hierarchies, stimulate imagination to connect the visible and invisible worlds, and mediate the relationship between humans, ancestors, and deities.

The symbolic power of key offerings such as juwadah and satak impacts daily life by reinforcing social cohesion, cultural values, and spiritual commitments. However, this power faces evolving challenges as younger generations participate differently amid modernization and external cultural influences. Moreover, the socio-cultural context of these offerings actively constructs and maintains Tengger agrarian identity through symbols like sego rowan and banana leaves, which communicate values of sustainability, simplicity, and respect for nature. Together, These interconnected symbolic dimensions function collectively to maintain cultural continuity, transmit ancestral knowledge, and reinforce social cohesion even amid modern challenges.

Therefore, it is essential for community leaders to actively engage younger generations in ritual practices, facilitating hands-on involvement and intergenerational dialogue to deepen their understanding and attachment to Tengger symbols. Educational programs that link intellectual and experiential knowledge of symbolism should be promoted to counter potential cultural erosion. Then the future research should focus on youth engagement with ritual symbolism in changing socio-religious contexts and explore adaptive strategies for sustainable cultural preservation facing environmental changes. The younger generation is encouraged to participate fully in traditional rituals and to uphold the agricultural practices linked to the symbolic offerings, fostering pride and resilience in their cultural heritage. By implementing these recommendations rooted in the study's findings, the continuity of Tengger symbolic communication and cultural identity can be more effectively preserved and revitalized in changing social contexts.

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 E-ISSN :2549-693X

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