



The Symbolic Meaning of *Mangulosi* in Batak Toba Traditional Weddings: Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract. This study aims to analyze the symbolic meaning of the *mangulosi* tradition in Toba Batak traditional wedding ceremonies using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. This research employs a descriptive qualitative method, with data collected from visual media such as YouTube and TikTok, supported by informants familiar with Toba Batak culture. The findings reveal that meaning in the *mangulosi* tradition is constructed through three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. At the denotative level, *mangulosi* is understood as the act of giving ulos in a wedding ceremony. At the connotative level, ulos and the ritual process convey symbolic meanings such as blessings, protection, harmony, and the strengthening of social and kinship relationships. At the myth level, the tradition reinforces the cultural ideology that marriage is considered legitimate when it receives recognition and blessings from family and customary authorities. Quantitatively, the findings show that artifacts are dominated by visual connotative meanings (40%), while ritual actions emphasize non-verbal (30%) and verbal (20%) meanings. Therefore, the *mangulosi* tradition is not only a ceremonial practice but also a medium for preserving cultural identity and social values within the Toba Batak community.

Keywords: Batak Toba; *Mangulosi*; Semiotic; Traditional Wedding; Ulos

1. INTRODCUTION

The Batak Toba constitute one of the recognized sub-groups of the Batak ethnic community, primarily inhabiting North Sumatra, with smaller populations found in parts of Aceh and the western coastal region of West Sumatra. The Toba Batak possess a rich and intricate cultural system, encompassing various life-cycle rituals, including birth, marriage, and death ceremonies. Each of these ceremonies carries profound philosophical meaning that requires careful interpretation to be fully understood by those outside the culture. A particularly significant ritual within the Batak Toba wedding ceremony is *Mangulosi*. According to Azzahra et al. (2024), *Mangulosi* is a ceremonial act involving the formal bestowal of Ulos, a traditional woven cloth. Within Batak belief, Ulos is thought to possess protective qualities, shielding recipients from environmental elements and life's adversities. The authority to perform *Mangulosi* is not held by all; it is traditionally conducted by the "Hula Hula" (wife's family) or other respected elders. More than just a textile, the Ulos functions as a vital cultural symbol, embodying the identity of the Batak Toba people. As noted by Sianturi et al. (2023), its creation follows strict rules concerning dimensions and motifs, thereby serving not only a cultural purpose but also as a metaphorical guide for living. From a semiotic perspective, the Ulos functions as a complex sign, wherein its denotative meaning as a woven cloth extends to connotative meanings of protection, social status, and cultural identity, all of which are articulated and reinforced through the ritualized act of *Mangulosi*.

Bouzida (2014) states that semiotics, or semiology, is a field of study originating from the early twentieth-century work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who proposed the concept of the sign as the fundamental unit of meaning. As a discipline concerned with the properties of sign systems and the structures that govern them, semiotics provides a framework for analyzing how meaning is produced and interpreted. It examines signs not only at the denotative level, their literal or explicit meaning, but also at the connotative level, where cultural and ideological associations are embedded. This analytical approach has facilitated the examination of various cultural phenomena by revealing the underlying codes and conventions that shape human communication and social interaction. This aligns with Roland Barthes' development of semiotic theory, which expanded upon Saussure's foundation by introducing the concept of myth a second-order semiological system wherein denotation becomes the signifier for broader cultural connotations.

Agustin et al. (2021), states the semiotic theory developed by Roland Barthes explains that the process of sign interpretation occurs through several levels of significance, namely denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation is the first level of meaning, which is literal or basic meaning that can be understood directly from a sign without involving cultural interpretation. At the second level, signs produce connotative meaning, which is additional meaning influenced by emotions, social values, and cultural experiences of society, so that signs not only have objective meaning but also symbolic meaning (Rahmad et al., 2024). Furthermore, Barthes introduced the concept of myth as an advanced system of meaning formation derived from connotation, which serves to disseminate specific ideologies or cultural beliefs so that the meaning appears natural and is widely accepted in society. Thus, Barthes' semiotic analysis allows researchers to reveal how signs in texts, media, or culture not only convey literal meaning but also construct deeper cultural and ideological meanings (Maulidiyah, 2020).

The research aims to address three key problems. First, it seeks to explore the denotative meanings of traditional Batak Toba wedding symbols and how these symbols are constructed and developed into connotative meanings through semiotic analysis, specifically based on Roland Barthes' theory. Second, the study examines how the connotative meanings of key wedding elements reflect and reinforce the social values and structures within Batak Toba society. Finally, the research investigates the role of mythical meanings in traditional Batak Toba weddings and how they serve to normalize cultural ideology and collective identity within the community.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses descriptive qualitative methodology to analyse the semiotic meaning found in the *mangulosi* tradition in Batak Toba wedding ceremonies. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study focuses on understanding the meaning, symbols, and cultural values embedded in the *mangulosi* ritual, rather than on measuring numerical data. Through this method, the researcher describes and interprets the signs that appear during the ulos giving process, such as gestures, colours, motifs, and traditional speeches accompanying the ritual. The analysis was conducted using the semiotic theory proposed by Roland Barthes, which explains meaning through three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. The data we used was divided into two main types: artefact data and non-verbal data. Our data sources are from video media sourced from YouTube and TikTok, and to validate our primary sources, we require secondary sources, namely informants from areas with a strong Batak Toba culture. Therefore, the descriptive qualitative method allows researchers to explain in depth the symbolic and cultural meanings of the *mangulosi* tradition in Batak Toba wedding ceremonies.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Artefact

In traditional Batak Toba weddings, the presentation of ulos is an important part of the *mangulosi* procession, which symbolises prayers, blessings, and the ratification of kinship between the two families. Some types of ulos that are often used are ulos Ragi Hotang, ulos Sadum, and ulos Ragi idup (Mutia, 2022).

Ulos Ragi Hotang



Figure 1. Ulos Ragi Hotang

Denotative: The image shows a piece of Batak ulos cloth, predominantly red, with stripes and geometric patterns in black and gold. The fabric appears to have a neat and symmetrical arrangement of motifs.

Connotative

- a. Verbal: Not found (ulos as an artifact does not contain direct linguistic elements)
- b. Non-Verbal: Ulos ragi hotang non-verbally signifies a strong and enduring marital bond, symbolizing unity, resilience, social responsibility, kinship structure, and the transmission of blessings through the act of giving.
- c. Visual: Red symbolizes courage and life, black represents strength and authority, white signifies purity, and the geometric lines reflect order, balance, and a strong, unified bond.

Myth: It represents a strong, unbreakable marital bond, legitimized by Batak adat and believed to be protected by ancestral blessings.

Ulos Sadum



Figure 2. Ulos Sadum

Denotative: Ulos Sadum has bright colours such as red, green, yellow and black with distinctive striped or geometric patterns.

Connotative:

- a. Verbal: Not found (ulos as an artifact does not contain direct linguistic elements).
- b. Non-Verbal: Ulos Sadum non-verbally signifies joy, blessings, warmth, and social harmony, as conveyed through its use in celebratory rituals and cultural interactions without spoken words.
- c. Visual: The bright colors and geometric lines of Ulos Sadum visually represent vitality, harmony, prosperity, and strength, while the structured patterns symbolize balance, order, and the continuous journey of life in Batak culture.

Myth: Ulos sadum legitimates the value that an ideal marriage is one that obtains customary blessing, so that happiness is considered to come from cultural recognition.

Ulos Ragi Idup



Figure 3. Ulos Ragi Idup

Denotative: Ulos Ragi Idup is dominated by red, black and white, with complex and interconnected geometric lines, forming a regular yet dynamic pattern.

Connotative

- a. Verbal: Not found (ulos as an artifact does not contain direct linguistic elements).
- b. Non-Verbal: The non-verbal connotative meaning of ulos ragi idup is that this cloth symbolizes life, the continuation of descendants, and hopes for prosperity, which are conveyed through the symbols of color, motifs, and its use in a traditional context without needing to be said directly.
- c. Visual: The colors red, black, and white symbolize life, strength, and purity. The complex, interconnected lines symbolize the dynamic journey of life and the interconnectedness of its aspects.

Myth: Ulos ragi idup naturalizes the ideology that a complete and harmonious marriage is only valid when legitimized through the Batak customary system, while also affirming the authority of hula-hula as a source of blessings and a determinant of the couple's survival.

Process of *Mangulosi*

Generally, there are four stages in the *mangulosi* process, including *Umpasa*, walking around three times, *Mangulosi*, and *Boras Sipir Ni Tondi* while saying *Hematutu* three times.

Umpasa or Poda

*Bintang na rumiris,
ombun na sumorop.
Sai tubu di hamu anak riris,
boru pe antong torop.*

Figure 4. *Umpasa or Poda*

Denotative: *umpasa* or *poda* are words in the form of traditional rhymes or advice spoken by family members to the bride and groom during the ulos-giving ceremony in the wedding.

Connotative

- a. Verbal: “*Bintang na ramiris*” means a shining star, “*ombun na sumorop*” means gentle falling dew, “*sai tubu di hamu anak riris*” means may you be blessed with good children, and “*boru pe antong torop*” means may you have many offspring.
- b. Non-Verbal: The act of saying an *umpasa* (prayer of advice) symbolizes the family's great hope that the bride and groom can run the household smoothly.
- c. Visual: Not found (*Umpasa* is a form of spoken/verbal language)

Myth: This *umpasa* naturalizes the ideology that fertility, harmony, and marital success are only considered legitimate through customary blessings and collective family prayers, thereby reinforcing the Batak kinship structure as the authority over a couple's life.

Walking Around the Bride and Groom Three Times



Figure 5. Walking Around the Bride and Groom Three Times

Denotative: The parents of the bride and groom are seen circling the bride and groom clockwise three times, while circling the bride and groom the parents of the bride and groom open an ulos.

Connotative

- a. Verbal: during the circling of the bride and groom in the *mangulosi* ceremony, it is usually accompanied by *umpasa*, prayers, and words of advice expressing blessings and hopes for their married life.
- b. Non-Verbal: The act of circling the bride clockwise 3 times symbolizes the giving of blessings, protection, and hope for a balanced, harmonious, and sustainable household life according to Batak traditional values.
- c. Visual: The movement of circling the bride and groom three times in a regular manner shows respect, sacredness, and unity, while also depicting the circular and continuous flow of life.

Myth: The act of circling the couple three times naturalizes the ideology that marital harmony and protection are secured through adherence to Batak customary rituals, reinforcing the authority of tradition and kinship as the foundation of a legitimate marriage.

Mangulosi



Figure 6. *Mangulosi*

Denotative: In the picture on the side, the parents of the bride and groom are seen one by one draping the ulos over the bride and groom, followed by several other people who are draping the ulos.

Connotative

- a. Verbal: When draping the ulos over the bride's shoulders, there are usually several prayers said, these prayers usually symbolize hopes for the bride and groom.
- b. Non-Verbal: The act of slinging a ulos to the bride and groom symbolizes giving blessings, affection, protection, as well as formal acceptance of the couple into family ties and Batak traditions.
- c. Visual: Visually, parents slinging a ulos symbolizes the parents' blessing for the bride and groom's married life.

Myth: *Mangulosi* shows that in Batak culture, a marriage is considered valid and will be happy if it has received the blessing of the family, especially the hula-hula, so their role is seen as very important and natural.

Boras Sipir Ni Tondi

Denotative: In the picture on the side, the parents of the bride and groom are seen one by one draping the ulos over the bride and groom, followed by several other people who are draping the ulos.

Connotative

- a. Verbal: When the *Boras Sipir Ni Tondi* takes place, there is usually a greeting called "*Hematutu*" which is said 3 times, which means truly/amen, which is a spiritual strengthening of the prayers given to the bride and groom.

- b. Non-Verbal: The act of sprinkling rice (*Boras Sipir Ni Tondi*) in a Toba Batak wedding has the meaning of giving spiritual strength (*tondi*), blessings, and protection to the bride and groom.
- c. Visual: Visually, sprinkling rice symbolizes the giving of blessings and life, as rice is seen as a symbol of prosperity and a source of life.

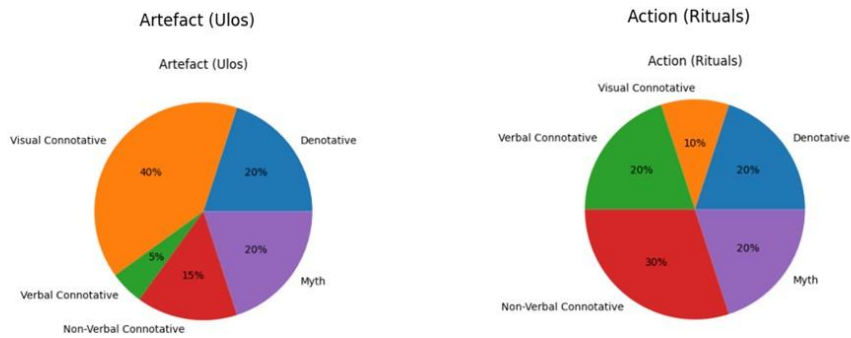
Myth: that the blessings and strength of a couple's life are considered to truly come from traditional rituals and family blessings, so that marital harmony is seen as something natural and must follow tradition.

Table 1. Percentage of Roland Barthes Theory

No	Category	Artefact (Ulos)	Action (Rituals)
1	Denotative	20%	20%
2	Visual Connotative	40%	10%
3	Verbal Connotative	5%	20%
4	Non-Verbal Connotative	15%	30%
5	Myth	20%	20%
	Total	100%	100%

Artefacts are dominated by visual connotative meanings, accounting for approximately 40% of their symbolic representation. This indicates that the physical objects used in cultural practices, such as ceremonial textiles, ornaments, or ritual tools serve primarily as visual carriers of meaning, conveying messages about identity, status, or spiritual beliefs without the need for explicit explanation. In contrast, actions within these cultural contexts are more strongly represented through non-verbal cues (30%) and verbal connotative (20%). This suggests that rituals and social practices construct meaning not merely through the objects involved, but through the performance itself, encompassing gestures, sequences of movement, spoken words, and interactive engagement among participants. Together, these findings highlight a complementary dynamic: while artefacts encapsulate symbolic value in a tangible, visual form, actions translate cultural norms, moral lessons, and communal values into lived experience, demonstrating that meaning in traditional practices emerges both from the material and performative dimensions.

Discussion



The findings of this study reveal that artifacts, particularly ulos, are largely characterized by visual connotative meanings (40%). This suggests that the symbolic value of ulos is primarily communicated through its visual elements, such as color, pattern, and texture, which embody cultural meanings related to life, kinship, and social harmony. In contrast, the actions in the *mangulosi* ritual exhibit a stronger presence of non-verbal (30%) and verbal (20%) meanings, suggesting that meaning is constructed through interaction, gestures, and verbal expressions. This pattern supports Roland Barthes's semiotic perspective, which emphasizes that cultural meaning is not only embedded in objects but also generated through social practices. In this context, ulos functions as a visual symbol that conveys connotative meanings without relying on language, while the act of *mangulosi* reinforces and activates these meanings through embodied actions and verbal elements such as *umpasa*. Therefore, both artifacts and actions play a crucial role in the formation of meaning: artifacts provide symbolic representations, while actions create dynamic and contextual interpretations.

Furthermore, a comparison between artifacts and actions highlights clear differences in how meaning is expressed. Artifacts tend to be predominantly visual and symbolic, while actions are more interactive and relational, involving both non-verbal and verbal dimensions. This suggests that Toba Batak cultural practices integrate multiple modes of communication, where visual symbolism and social interaction work together to convey complex cultural values. However, this study is limited by the distribution of the data, particularly the lower percentage of verbal elements, which may indicate that not all verbal expressions in the rituals were fully captured.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

In conclusion, the *mangulosi* ritual in a traditional Toba Batak wedding is more than just a ceremonial tradition; it is a meaningful cultural practice filled with layers of meaning. Using Roland Barthes's semiotic framework, this study shows that the ritual operates on three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. At the surface level (denotation), *mangulosi* involves visible elements such as ulos, ritual actions, and oral expressions. However, beyond what is visible, these elements carry deeper meanings (connotation), such as blessings, protection, harmony, and the strengthening of social relationships. At a deeper level, the ritual also reflects cultural beliefs (myth), particularly the idea that marriage is not just a personal union but must be recognized and validated through custom and family authority. This suggests that *mangulosi* is not simply an act performed during a wedding, but a way for the Toba Batak community to express and pass on their values and identity. In this sense, tradition becomes a powerful tool for maintaining cultural continuity and strengthening shared beliefs across generations.

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