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## The Symbolic Meaning of Mbaba Belo Selambar in the Cultural Communication Activities of the Karo Tribe: A Comparative Study Among Muslims and Christians

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning of Mbaba belo selambar in the cultural communication activities of the Karo tribe through a comparative study among Muslims and Christians. This study focuses on the meaning of Mbaba belo selambar among Muslims and Christians. The theory used is symbolic interactionism. The research method involved 4 (four) informants, consisting of a khatib, a village head, and community members, selected through purposive sampling. Data collection techniques included observation, interviews, and documentation. The results of this study indicate that Mbaba belo selambar functions as a form of cultural communication intended to convey the purpose and intent of a traditional marriage proposal. Among Muslims and Christians, Mbaba belo selambar is interpreted similarly as a form of social bonding and interaction that strengthens ties between families

## INTRODUCTION

The Karo people of North Sumatra are known for numerous traditions, many of which are still practiced today. Their merger of silima social systems (Ginting, Karokaro, Perangingin, Sembiring, Tarigan) forms the foundation for kinship and cultural life. Key traditions include kerja tahun, erpangir ku lau, ngantik manuk, and especially mbaba belo selambar, which is still frequently practiced.

Historically, the Mbaba belo selambar ceremony has been passed down from generation to generation and is still used today for marriage proposals. According to observations by researchers, the Mbaba belo selambar ceremony was originally held by the Sankep Ngeluh (a group of 15 to 30 people from both families) (Ginting et al., 2026).

However, over time, the number of guests has increased to between 100 and 200. This ceremony is usually held in the Jambur (house) or at the home of the bride's family. Traditional symbols used include the Belo Ras Kuhna (a ceremony of marriage), Kampil Persitabin (a ceremony of marriage), and Amak Mbentar (a ceremony of marriage).

Karo society, particularly among Muslims and Christians, exhibits diverse interpretations of these traditional symbols. Comparing these interpretations, the aim of this study is to understand the symbolic meaning of Mbaba belo selambar among Karo Muslims and Christians. The system of meaning formed by cultural symbols guides people's actions and thoughts. Therefore, the interpretation of environmental symbols always influences social action (Sinukaban et al., 2023).

Based on observations conducted with a priest named Pian Sembiring, the mbaba belo selambar ceremony is considered the initial stage in planning a wedding ceremony. Pian explained that in the Karo Christian community, this ceremony is usually performed as a form of customary recognition before the couple gets married. Pian also stated that the implementation of mbaba belo selambar among Christians is not different. One of the most striking differences is how it is conducted. Before the church blessing is carried out, customs are used as an initial recognition. The prospective bride and groom usually spend two weeks to three months before the pasu-pasu or wedding blessing after the mbaba belo selambar ceremony.

From the background above, where the process of mbaba belo selambar activity has been explained, this study attempts to explain using symbolic communication how meaning is formed through social interactions that occur in these traditional practices. The results of this study are expected to increase understanding of symbolic meaning as a medium of cultural communication and show that custom and religion can work together to strengthen the values of brotherhood and Karo ethnic identity. Thus, this study not only helps the development of the field of cultural communication but also helps keep local traditional values relevant and alive amidst the modernist current. Based on the description above, the researcher is interested in conducting research on "The Symbolic Meaning of Mbaba belo selambar in the Cultural Communication Activities of the Karo Tribe: A Comparative Study Among Muslims and Christians".

## METHODS

In this study, the researcher used a descriptive qualitative approach. Qualitative research is an approach to conducting research that is oriented towards natural phenomena or symptoms. Qualitative research is fundamental and naturalistic in nature, and cannot be conducted in a laboratory, but rather in the field (Sarosa, 2021).

The purpose of qualitative research is to gain a deeper understanding of phenomena through understanding the meaning contained within them, investigating a cultural group in a natural environment (Zuchri, 2021).

The symbolic meaning of mbaba belo selambambar in the cultural communication of the Karo people, both among Muslims and Christians, is described using a descriptive approach, the data collected are in the form of words, images, and not numbers. To gain a better understanding of symbolic meaning in a cultural context, the researcher attempted to directly describe field data.

This research was conducted in Gurukinayan Village, located in Payung District, Karo Regency, North Sumatra. The researchers chose this location because the community still practices the Mbaba Belo Selambar tradition and has both Muslim and Christian religious beliefs, making the research possible.

The subjects of this study were taken using the Purposive Sampling method, namely the selection of

participants based on certain criteria that are relevant to the focus of the research. Based on the purposive sampling method, the researchers determined the following criteria for this study:

- a) Religious and community leaders aged 40 and over.
- b) Members of the Gesa Gurukinayan community who understand the Mbaba Belo Selambar tradition.
- c) Male and female leaders with direct experience in Mbaba Belo Selambar cultural activities.
- d) Religious leaders (ustadz or Muslim leaders, as well as Christian priests/elders).
- e) Willingness to participate in in-depth interviews using a qualitative approach.

The data collection techniques used in this study were observation, interviews, and documentation.

- a) Observation is a data collection technique that involves directly or indirectly observing the observed events and recording them using an observation tool. In this study, the researcher participated in the informant's activities. According to Spradley, the object of qualitative research observed is called a social situation, which consists of three components: place, actor, and activity. The researcher directly visited the field to analyze social conditions and interactions during conversations, focusing on understanding and responding.
- b) Interviews are a research technique conducted through dialogue, either directly or through specific media channels, between the interviewer and the information source. They are often used when qualitative data is needed. An interview is a face-to-face conversation between the interviewer and the information source, where the interviewer asks questions directly about the research object in a pre-planned manner. In this study, the researcher will choose between face-to-face interviews and online interviews using social media platforms such as Zoom, WhatsApp, and others. Online interviews are interviews conducted by the interviewer to obtain data or information directly from the data source.

- c) The data collection technique, which uses documentation, complements the use of interview and observation methods in qualitative research. Documentary studies involve the qualitative collection of large amounts of facts and data stored in documented materials. Most of the data comes in the form of letters, diaries, photo archives, meeting minutes, journals, and so on.

The data analysis techniques available in qualitative research, the author has selected only a few to present, namely the Miles & Huberman model analysis (Miles, M.B, Huberman, A.M, & Saldana, 2014):

1. Data Reduction. Data reduction is the process by which a researcher conducts an initial review of the data generated by examining the data in relation to the research aspects or focus. The term "reduction" means "reducing" or "redetermining."

2. Data Presentation. Through a series of data analysis activities, the first stage of data codification and reduction, using the Miles & Huberman interactive model, qualitative data, which is usually scattered and overlapping, can be simplified and made easier to understand. In the first stage of data analysis, the process of systematically tracking and organizing interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials or documents is outlined so that the researcher can understand the data findings and then move on to the data presentation stage.

3. Data Verification. This verification stage is a continuation of the first stage of data reduction and the second stage of data presentation. In this stage, the researcher verifies the data. This is the researcher's interpretation of the findings from an interview, observation, or document. After conclusions are drawn, the researcher then re-checks the validity of the interpretations through triangulation, or double-checking the coding and data presentation process to ensure that no further errors have been made. After this third stage, the researcher has research findings based on the data analysis conducted on in-depth interviews, field observations, or documentation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to informants' understanding of the history of the mbaba belo selambar tradition in Gurukinayan Village, Payung District, Karo Regency, this tradition is a cultural heritage passed down from generation to generation. Informants are unsure of the exact origins of this tradition or when it first emerged, but they believe that mbaba belo selambar has been a part of Karo life for a long time.

From a symbolic interaction perspective, this condition indicates that the meaning of a tradition is not always based on specific historical facts; rather, it is shaped by a consistent process of social interaction. Therefore, mbaba belo selambar is considered a culture inherited and interpreted by the community simultaneously.

Furthermore, the informants' understanding of the conversation and equipment used in mbaba belo selambar demonstrates that it not only conveys information but also helps both parties reach an agreement. The use of traditional equipment such as kampil and cimpa, which have symbolic meaning, reinforces this (Ramadhani et al., 2024).

The researcher's analysis concluded that the presence of equipment such as kampil, cigarettes, and cimpa indicates that the Karo people use objects as tools to communicate meaning. Traditional equipment is considered not only a physical object but also a symbol of a person's intention, respect, and seriousness. This demonstrates its crucial importance to the human thought process from a mental perspective. Traditional equipment carries meaning shaped by social interactions and understood by the community.

Furthermore, informants' explanations of the central discussion in mbaba belo selambar indicate that the discussion focuses on the timing of the wedding, the dowry, and the customary stages, indicating systematic communication. Researchers observe that the existence of these discussion stages demonstrates the community's ability to organize social interactions logically and systematically. Every decision made is the result of simultaneous discussion. This demonstrates that, when linked to the concept of mind, individual social actions are based on thought processes formed through symbolic interaction. In mbaba belo, communication selambar becomes a directed activity.

Informants' understanding of the most important part of the mbaba belo selambar process

emphasizes fulfilling customary requirements and agreeing on a dowry, demonstrating awareness of the applicable rules. Traditions are carried out by those who are aware of the social consequences if these steps are not met. Researchers observed that customary values have been instilled in everyone's minds. Attitudinal awareness now includes adherence to customary rules. This condition indicates that the meaning generated from social interactions guides one's actions.

Furthermore, researchers found that the division of roles, such as anak beru, kalimbubu, and sembanyak, is not only structural but also shapes individual identity within society. Each individual has an understanding of their position and responsibilities in carrying out customary practices. This suggests that a person's identity does not emerge individually, but through interaction with the existing social system. From a self-perspective, this condition indicates that the self is formed through the process of social roles played in traditional interactions.

Regarding religious identity, researchers observed that both Muslim and Christian communities view mbaba belo selambar as part of a custom that does not conflict with religious beliefs. However, there are differences in how Muslim communities incorporate this tradition into the wedding process. Muslim communities are more flexible in determining the first step of mbaba belo selambar, or Islamic marriage, while Christians are required to perform mbaba belo selambar before the blessing in church. From a self-perspective, this demonstrates that religious and cultural values combine to shape one's identity. These differences do not cause conflict; instead, they demonstrate effective action within their differences.

Furthermore, in examining the personal interpretations of mbaba belo selambar, the researchers found that informants generally interpreted mbaba belo selambar as a process of strengthening family relationships and acquaintances. The researchers observed differences in the emphasis of the meaning: some informants viewed it as a customary obligation, while others viewed it as a social necessity to maintain balance. This demonstrates, in the context of the self, that a person's meaning is their own feeling and is influenced by their experiences and social

background. Self-identity is formed through the process of experiential impressions.

Furthermore, the implementation of the mbaba belo selambar ceremony has changed over time. Previously, it had to be performed at night; now, due to the busy schedules of both parties, it was usually performed on a different day than the marriage contract and blessing. Now, to minimize expenses, it is permitted to be performed on the same day. Researchers understand that, although the basic meaning of mbaba belo selambar remains the same, there have been changes in how it is performed (Tarigan, 2020). This demonstrates that people can maintain important values while adapting to changing times. From a self-perspective, this demonstrates that self-identity is always changing and evolving through social interactions.

Regarding its implementation, there are differences between Muslim and Christian communities, primarily related to technical aspects and religious rituals. Muslims may perform mbaba belo selambar before or after the marriage contract, while Christians must perform mbaba belo selambar before the blessing. Mbaba belo selambar remains the same.

Researchers concluded that this demonstrates that the Karo people have a strong social system that allows them to maintain cultural unity despite their differing religious beliefs (Permatasari, 2021). This demonstrates that social interaction can create order and understanding despite societal diversity.

In the mbaba belo selambar, the involvement of rakut sitelu (Kalimbubu, Anak beru, Sembuyak/Monina) demonstrates a clear social structure within Karo society. Each party has a complementary function in carrying out customs. According to researchers, this reflects the community's strong and integrated social organization. From a societal perspective, the interaction between these roles forms a stable and sustainable pattern of social relations.

Informants' understanding indicates that customary deliberation is a means of resolving differences. Through mutual agreement, decisions are not made unilaterally. Anak beru function as transmitters and channelers of messages in conversations, and during the series of events, anak beru speak up if there is a conflict in reaching an agreement. Researchers see this as demonstrating the crucial role of communication in maintaining social

harmony. In a societal context, this demonstrates that good social interaction can foster stability.

According to informants' understanding of the agreement reached during the mbaba belo selambar process, the pudun barrier signifies the legalization of the relationship agreed upon by both parties, not simply the conclusion of a series of events. This agreement has binding moral consequences in addition to its formal nature. If the man fails to fulfill the promised time, his money and the uis are forfeited, even if it is only one day late. Researchers found that the existence of the pudun barrier signifies that the community has a mutually recognized social decision. Both Muslim and Christian informants agreed that this stage is a valid affirmation of commitment. This suggests that the pudun barrier serves as a meaningful symbol in society from a symbolic interaction perspective. This symbol serves as a tool to strengthen social agreements and maintain stability in family relationships.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results of a study entitled "The Symbolic Meaning of Mbaba Belo Selambar in Karo Tribe Cultural Communication Activities: A Comparative Study Among Muslims and Christians," it was concluded that Mbaba Belo Selambar is still widely used in Gurukinayan Village, Karo Regency, as a legacy from ancestors preserved as a traditional custom.

Mbaba Belo Selambar is interpreted as a series of wedding customs and a form of cultural communication that occurs directly through individual and group interactions. The Mbaba Belo Selambar process involves communicating intentions, negotiating, and forming agreements openly through the use of the Runggu (traditional Karo symbols). In this situation, communication occurs through traditional Karo symbols, each of which has a meaning and is understood by the community.

Symbols used in this process include the kampil persentabin (a gift containing betel, lime, gambier, areca nut, and mangrove), and the cigarette, which serves as a conversation starter and a sign of respect for the woman's family. Values of politeness and respect for tradition have been passed down through generations through the use of these symbols. In addition, there are stages such as the delivery of the luh cimpa, which is intended to ensure harmony in

the future life of the bride and groom, and the penindih pudun, which signifies the seriousness, responsibility, and commitment of both parties to proceed to marriage.

Rakut sitelu plays a role in the traditional process of mbaba belo selambar, which consists of Kalimbubu, Anak beru, and sembuyak. Anak beru serves as the speaker, Kalimbubu is respected and plays a role in decision-making, and sembuyak provides advice on what to do. Rakut sitelu is an integral part of any traditional process; the Runggu ceremony only begins when the rakut sitelu is present.

Observations indicate that mbaba belo selambar is still practiced by the Karo people, despite changes in its implementation. Although these changes are technical, such as the timing and number of participants, they maintain the basic meaning of the traditional. This demonstrates the Karo people's ability to maintain a balance between preserving cultural values and adapting to social change.

Interviews indicate that both Muslim and Christian Karo people share a similar understanding of the meaning of mbaba belo selambar. This tradition is viewed by Muslims as a way to strengthen ties and bring two families together. Meanwhile, among Christians, mbaba belo selambar is considered the first step before a church blessing. The tradition is a sacred part of social life, even within a different religious context.

Symbolically, there are no significant differences between Muslims and Christians. They view mbaba belo selambar as a traditional means of communication aimed at understanding each other, strengthening social relationships, and fulfilling customary requirements. Both groups still uphold values such as togetherness, respect, deliberation, and responsibility as the foundation of tradition.

The differences that emerge are more related to the timing of mbaba belo selambar. Karo Muslims can decide when mbaba belo selambar is performed, before or after the marriage contract, depending on family agreement. This indicates a balance between custom and religion. However, in the Christian community, mbaba belo selambar is performed before the church blessing, as custom is considered a necessary prelude to entering the next religious stage.

This difference does not indicate conflict; rather, it demonstrates differences in practice that

remain consistent. This demonstrates that Karo Muslims and Christians can maintain their cultural values without sacrificing their religious beliefs. In other words, religion and custom can coexist and adapt to everyday life.

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