

## **Semiotic Analysis of Batak Onion in Typical Batak Toba Foods, Arsik Ikan Mas and Dali Ni Horbo**

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### **Abstract**

*This study aims to analyze the semiotic meaning of the Batak onion (*Allium chinense*) as a cultural sign in two traditional Batak Toba dishes, namely carp arsik and dali ni horbo. This study begins from the perspective that traditional food is not merely a biological necessity, but a sign system that reflects the social, spiritual, and philosophical values of a society. By using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory, this study describes the relationship between the signifier (signifiant) in the form of the physical form and function of the Batak onion, and the signified (signifié) in the form of social, spiritual, and philosophical meanings attached by the Batak Toba people to the ingredient. The method employed is a descriptive, qualitative approach that incorporates literature review techniques from various anthropological, ethnographic, and semiotic sources. The results of the study show that denotatively, the Batak onion functions as a flavor balancer and natural flavoring in two traditional dishes, while connotatively, it represents purity, balance, and harmony between humans, nature, and their ancestors. In a social context, the Batak onion becomes a symbol of solidarity and togetherness in the dalihan na tolu system; Spiritually, it symbolizes purification and ancestral blessings; and philosophically, it symbolizes the moral balance of life. Thus, Batak onions are not simply a culinary ingredient, but a*

*multidimensional cultural symbol that connects the culinary, social, and spiritual aspects of Toba Batak culture.*

*Keywords: semiotics, Batak onions, carp arsik, dali ni horbo, Toba Batak culture*

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## 1. Introduction

In the study of cultural anthropology, food is seen not only as fulfilling human biological needs but also as a sign system imbued with cultural values, meanings, and symbolism. Food is a form of nonverbal communication that reflects a society's perspective on life, the environment, and interpersonal relationships. Clifford Geertz (1973) calls culture a "web of meaning" woven by humans themselves, where every action and symbol, including food, is an expression of a shared value system. Thus, traditional cuisine can be understood as a cultural text that marks the identity, social structure, and spirituality of a community.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) asserted that every social phenomenon can be analyzed through a semiotic framework, namely a sign system (*système de signes*) consisting of two main elements: the signifier (*signifiant*) and the signified (*signifié*). The signifier refers to the physical or material form of an object, while the signified refers to the concept, idea, or meaning attached to it through cultural conventions. The relationship between the two is arbitrary, but in social practice, it becomes conventional and meaningful within a specific cultural context. In this perspective, food is no longer just an object of consumption, but a cultural sign that carries social and spiritual messages.

This context is particularly relevant when linked to the culture of the Toba Batak, one of the major ethnic groups in North Sumatra with a rich culinary value system and symbolism. The Toba Batak people place traditional foods as an integral part of their social system and religious rituals. Traditional cuisine serves not only as a means of consumption or aesthetic appeal, but also as a medium for communicating moral and spiritual values passed down through generations. Each ingredient, spice, and cooking technique has its own meaning, reflecting the Toba Batak people's philosophy of life, such as *dali ni horbo* (three pillars of social relations) and the principle of *habonaron do bona* (truth is the foundation of life).

One culinary ingredient with profound symbolic meaning is the Batak onion (*Allium chinense*), also known as chives. This plant, native to the Tapanuli highlands, is often found in various traditional Batak Toba dishes, such as *carp arsik* and *dali ni horbo*. Batak onions are small, purplish-white in color, and have a distinctive, pungent aroma, making them an essential element that not only enriches the flavor but also holds symbolic value in the social and spiritual life of the Batak people. In two main traditional

dishes, carp arsik and dali ni horbo, Batak onions hold a special place. Carp arsik is a sacred dish served in various traditional ceremonies such as mangupa, unjuk (showing) parties, and mangalahat horbo, where each spice has a spiritual meaning. The Batak onion symbolizes balance of taste and purity of heart, reflecting the Batak philosophy of life that emphasizes harmony between humans, nature, and ancestors. Meanwhile, dali ni horbo, a dish made from boiled buffalo milk, is interpreted as a symbol of purity, prosperity, and renewal of life. The use of Batak onions in this dish serves not only to balance the flavors but also to mark the process of purification and ancestral blessings in the new life.

Several previous studies have touched on the symbolic role of Toba Batak culinary ingredients. Hadawiyah et al. (2023), in their study of the culinary semiotics of carp arsik, found that each spice and seasoning has a cultural meaning that emphasizes the balance and sanctity of tradition. Sinulingga et al. (2024) also emphasized that local ingredients such as Batak onions and andaliman serve as symbols of social interaction and solidarity in the dalihan na tolu system. Meanwhile, Siallagan et al. (2023) demonstrated that symbolic elements in Batak culture, both in textiles and culinary arts, play a significant role in strengthening ethnic identity.

However, scientific studies specifically addressing the semiotic significance of Batak onions as a cultural symbol in Toba Batak cuisine are still very limited. Therefore, this research is significant because it seeks to understand Batak onions as a sign system that establishes a relationship between the culinary, social, spiritual, and cultural identity aspects of the Toba Batak people.

This study uses Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory as the main analytical framework to interpret the relationship between the signifier (Batak onion as a concrete culinary ingredient) and the signified (the cultural values attached to it) in two traditional dishes: carp arsik and dali ni horbo. Through this approach, the study is expected to reveal that each element of Batak Toba traditional culinary is a cultural sign that represents the community's outlook on life, namely a sacred, balanced, and harmonious life with nature and ancestors. Thus, this study not only broadens the understanding of Batak Toba culinary but also enriches the treasury of cultural semiotic studies in Indonesia. This study confirms that the Batak onion, as a small element in traditional cuisine, actually holds a big meaning about identity, social values, and spirituality that shape the identity of the Batak Toba people.

## **2. Method**

This study uses a qualitative approach. Moleong (2019) emphasizes that qualitative research aims to understand phenomena in depth through descriptions in natural language, emphasizing the context and meaning behind human actions. Meanwhile, Sugiyono (2018) explains that a qualitative approach is used to examine the natural conditions of objects, where the researcher acts as the primary instrument in interpreting data from the perspective of the research subjects.

This approach is relevant because the semiotic meaning of Batak onions in typical Batak Toba cuisine cannot be measured numerically, but must be interpreted through the accompanying social, cultural, and symbolic contexts. In Ferdinand de Saussure's (1916) semiotic framework, every sign consists of two elements, namely the signifiant (signifier (which is in the form of a physical or material form, and the signifié (signified (which refers to a socially agreed-upon conceptual meaning. Through this approach, the study seeks to uncover how Batak onions as culinary markers in carp arsik and dali ni horbo form a system of meaning that represents the social, spiritual, and philosophical values of the Batak Toba community.

The data collection technique was carried out through library research by examining various scientific sources, such as Batak culinary ethnography journals, cultural anthropology literature, semiotic reference books, and previous research articles discussing the symbolism of Toba Batak food. The analysis was carried out through three main stages: first, identifying the forms of signs or signifiers (signifiant) in the form of ingredients, functions, and uses of Batak onions in two traditional dishes, namely carp arsik and dali ni horbo; second, interpreting the signifiers (signifié) which include social, spiritual, and philosophical meanings attached by the Toba Batak people to Batak onions; third, analyzing the relationship between signifiers and signifieds to find the connotative meanings that form the Toba Batak cultural symbol system.

### **3. Results And Discussion**

#### **Identification of Significant: Batak Onion as an Ingredient, Function, and Physical Symbol in Traditional Cuisine**

Within Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework, a signifier is a material aspect or physical form that can be perceived sensorily and serves as a means of conveying meaning. In the context of this research, the signifier refers to the Batak onion (*Allium chinense*), which is concretely present in the structure of traditional Batak Toba cuisine, particularly carp arsik and dali ni horbo. Empirically, the Batak onion, known as lokio, is small, purplish-white, and has a distinctive, sharp aroma. This plant grows abundantly in the mountainous regions of North Tapanuli, Humbang Hasundutan, and Dairi. According to Saragih (2020), lokio is a plant that adapts well to acidic soil and functions as a natural spice to balance the flavors in Batak cuisine. Its small size but strong aroma is a signifying character that describes the ecological uniqueness as well as the personality of the Toba Batak people, who are strong, resilient, and simple.

In carp arsik, Batak onion is one of the main spices, along with andaliman, torch ginger, and turmeric. It neutralizes the fishy aroma of the fish while creating a balance of spicy, sour, and fresh flavors. Hadawiyah et al. (2023) state that each ingredient in arsik has a symbolic meaning: carp symbolizes prosperity, andaliman symbolizes spirit and strength, and Batak onion symbolizes purity and balance in life.

Meanwhile, in dali ni horbo (boiled buffalo milk until solid), Batak onion also plays a crucial role in the preparation. It functions as a natural flavoring that reduces the milk's rancid aroma and enhances its distinctive flavor. Its use at the final stage of boiling indicates that Batak onion is not only a flavor enhancer but also a symbol that completes a representation that a good life requires a balance between the elements of body, spirit, and taste. Thus, as a signifier, the Batak onion represents both a physical form and a culinary function that carries ecological and cultural value. Its presence is not simply a cooking ingredient, but a material symbol that opens the way to interpreting spiritual and social meanings in Toba Batak culture.

### **Interpretation of Signifiers (Significance): The Social, Spiritual, and Philosophical Meaning of Bawang Batak in Arsik and Dali ni Horbo**

In Saussure's theory, a signifier (*signifié*) is a mental concept or meaning associated with a signifier. In the context of Toba Batak culture, Batak onions as a culinary signifier are not only interpreted gastronomically but also as a symbol of life, purity, and balance.

#### *a. Social Meaning:*

Socially, Batak onions serve as a symbol of togetherness and cooperation. The cooking of carp arsik and dali ni horbo is usually done collectively in the activity of *marsiadapari* (inter-family cooperation). The presence of Batak onions in both dishes reinforces the values of solidarity and a sense of belonging in the *dalihan na tolu* social system, a Toba Batak way of life that regulates relationships between groups: *hula-hula* (givers of blessings), *dongan tubu* (relatives of the same clan), and *boru* (recipients of social duties). Thus, Batak onions symbolize social ties and harmony between roles within the community.

#### *b. Spiritual Meaning:*

In the spiritual dimension, Batak onions are considered an ingredient that carries an element of purification. In carp arsik (a kind of traditional Javanese food), the sharp and fresh aroma of Batak onions is interpreted as a repellent to negative energy and a symbol of purity of heart. It is used in the *mangupa* ceremony, which is a blessing and blessing for someone starting a new phase in their life. Meanwhile, in Dali ni horbo, buffalo milk combined with Batak onions symbolizes purity and renewal of life, reflecting the union of the worldly element (milk) with the spiritual element (Batak onions). In line with Hutagalung's (2019) findings, traditional Batak food often serves as a medium of communication between humans and ancestral spirits; the aroma of Batak onions is believed to carry prayers to the presence of the ancestors.

*c. Philosophical Meaning:*

Philosophically, the Batak onion reflects the Toba Batak people's outlook on life, rooted in the principles of *habonaron do bona* (truth is the foundation of life) and *marsantabi* (living with balance and good manners). The onion's multi-layered shape is considered to symbolize the depth of life's meaning, with each layer depicting moral, social, and spiritual values that blend in harmony. In *arsik*, each flavor that emerges from the Batak onion mixture emphasizes the philosophy that life must be lived with a balance between heat (spirit), sourness (trials), and freshness (hope). Meanwhile, in *Dali ni horbo*, the Batak onion signifies a process of moral purification: humans must undergo "warming up" or life's trials to become pure and spiritually mature. Thus, the Batak onion as a sign contains social, spiritual, and philosophical meanings that reflect the Toba Batak people's perspective on life. It is not simply a cooking spice, but an existential metaphor that emphasizes humans' relationship with nature, ancestors, and moral values.

**The Relationship between Signifier and Signified: The Formation of Connotative Meaning in the Symbolic System of Toba Batak Culture**

In Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic analysis, the relationship between the signifier (signifiant) and the signified (signifié) forms a sign. However, cultural signs not only have denotative meaning but also connotative layers, namely, additional meanings that arise from the social and ideological context. In this case, the Batak onion is a sign that operates on two levels of meaning: literal (denotative) and symbolic (connotative).

Denotatively, Batak onions are simply a culinary ingredient that adds flavor to traditional dishes. However, connotatively, they represent the noble values of the Toba Batak people, such as purity, balance, and respect for ancestors. This relationship is arbitrary but has been culturally constructed and passed down across generations. The Batak people understand that the pungent aroma of Batak onions is a "symbolic language" that connects humans with the guardian spirits of the tradition.

In *carp arsik*, the relationship between signifier and signified forms a cultural symbol that signifies "social and spiritual harmony." The collective cooking process, balanced flavors, and refreshing aroma of onions reflect the values of cooperation and moral balance upheld in *dalihan na tolu*. Meanwhile, in *Dali ni horbo*, the relationship between signifier and signified produces a symbol of "purity and renewal of life." Batak onions serve as a purifying element that unites the material world (meat, milk) and the spiritual world (ancestral blessings).

This connotative meaning shows that Batak Toba cuisine is a complex sign system, where each ingredient has a complementary symbolic value. According to Koentjaraningrat (2009), symbols in culture function as a means of communicating values that strengthen collective identity. Therefore, Batak onions can be understood as a cultural sign that not only enriches taste but also binds moral, social, and spiritual values in the life of the Batak Toba people. Thus, the relationship between the signifier and

signified of Batak onions creates a broad connotative meaning: it becomes a symbol of purity, harmony, and cultural nobility. This meaning emphasizes that traditional Batak cuisine is not merely a gastronomic heritage, but a living sign system that continues to function in shaping the cultural identity and spirituality of the Batak Toba people.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Based on the results of Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic analysis, it can be concluded that Batak onions (*Allium chinense*) in typical Batak Toba cuisine are not just culinary ingredients, but rather a cultural sign system that represents the social, spiritual, and philosophical values of the Batak Toba people. Through the structure of signifiers and signifieds, Batak onions contain deep meanings that reflect the relationship between humans and nature, ancestors, and moral values upheld in the philosophies of *dalihan na tolu* and *habonaron do bona*.

As a signifier, the Batak onion is present in tangible physical form, a small, purplish-white bulb with a pungent aroma that is used in two main traditional dishes: *carp arsik* and *dali ni horbo*. It serves culinary purposes as a flavor balancer and aroma neutralizer, but it also plays a crucial role in the symbolic structure of Batak traditional cuisine.

Meanwhile, as a signifier (*signifié*), Batak onions convey deeper meaning. In *carp arsik*, they symbolize balance of taste, purity of heart, and social harmony. In *Dali ni horbo*, Batak onions signify purity, self-purification, and ancestral blessings. These two dishes not only combine flavors but also articulate life values rooted in the spirituality and togetherness of the Toba Batak people.

The relationship between the signifier and the signified then produces a connotative meaning that describes the Batak onion as a symbol of a holy, harmonious, and meaningful life. At the connotative level, the Batak onion functions as a cultural language that conveys moral and spiritual messages through culinary media. It becomes an existential metaphor that a good life must be lived with a balance between body, spirit, and moral sense. Thus, this study confirms that the Batak onion is a complete semiotic representation: ecologically it symbolizes the bond of the Batak people with the nature of the Tapanuli mountains; socially it emphasizes the values of cooperation, solidarity, and balance in *dalihan na tolu*; spiritually it is a symbol of purity and respect for ancestors; and philosophically it represents the Toba Batak outlook on life that is oriented towards truth and moral balance.

Therefore, Batak onions can be understood as a multidimensional cultural symbol that serves to connect the culinary world with the social and spiritual meaning systems of the Toba Batak people. Through traditional foods such as *arsik* and *dali ni horbo*, Batak onions not only preserve the region's distinctive flavors but also serve as a medium of cultural communication that affirms the identity, values, and continuity of Toba Batak cultural heritage amidst the tides of culinary modernization and globalization.

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