

Revitalization and Signification of Kue Apem as an Indonesian Traditional Hors d'Oeuvre

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Abstract: For generations, kue apem has been widely known as part of Indonesian hors d'oeuvre tradition, particularly for the Javanese. In the earlier times, the famous snack was often served in receptions or for ritual ceremonies. Today, kue apem has slowly been replaced by the more trending and modern cakes and bakeries coming from different countries that leads to the rarity and unfamiliarity of the snack for newer generation. This phenomenon is believed to be caused by the rapid movement of global cultures that has alternated the paradigm and dietary habit of Indonesian people including the out-of-date perception of serving and having traditional meals. Kue apem as a cultural heritage carries local genius meanings that should be preserved. This research is an analysis in cultural problems that involve humans, activities and objects in naturalistic condition, approached with qualitative descriptive method. Results show that in general the younger generation of the Javanese are not familiar with kue apem neither are they aware of the meaning. On the other hand, the older generation still serves the cake as part of the rituals. The efforts for revitalizing kue apem are resorted by varying the choice of fillings and toppings decorated in assorted colors and attractive presentations in order to catch more attention from the young generation. Preserving kue apem eventually becomes an important action to prevent the national culture and identity from declining due to the abundance of foreign culinary coming to the country that may endanger the existence of local tradition.

Key words: Meaning and revitalization, Indonesia tradition kue apem, younger, eventually, modern

INTRODUCTION

Cake apem has been widely known as part of Indonesian hors d'oeuvre tradition in several parts of Java, particularly Central Java (Nurani and Subekti, 2016). The rice-flour-based cake is usually presented for religious and spiritual rituals and tradition such as welcoming the Holy month of Ramadan or other sacred activities practiced for generations. One of the effects of globalization is competition between the local and foreign culture including in culinary world; this affects the existence of kue apem in today's generation (Nurani and Subekti, 2016). Researches, Priskila and Rizky young people have perception, if Traditional food seems to not have a good appeal and is not as good as modern food. Although, the traditional food is being offered a unique and good visual but they do not to choose the traditional food (Astuti *et al.*, 2000).

Young generation barely knows kue apem as seen in the rare availability of cake shop selling kue apem as it is only favored by the older generation (Nurani and Subekti, 2016). It is an alarming condition for the preservation of cultural heritage in culinary that in the future may endanger the local culture and identity, particularly the local wisdom and local genius due to the more dominant

global cultures (Wijaya *et al.*, 2016). Researches Hariyanto (2015) said, every year at palace kasepuhan's palace perform a ritual called "Panjang Jimat" to commemorate of prophet Muhammad's birth, one of the menu which is cooked "nasi jimat" as a symbol that had the significance of local wisdom as local identity at kasepuhan's palace.

As part of tradition, kue apem has been widely served as a medium of communication to deliver messages and intentions and ethics and moral teaching in human relation with the divine and other people (Hasibuan, 2015). It then becomes national culinary rich that is worth preserving for longer existence from generation to generation. Bessiere (1998) speaks food as a symbol: some foodstuffs are the basis of fantasy and concentrate symbolic virtues (bread, wine, cereals, the dark blood in game for hunters). Food as a sign of communion, food as a class marker and the finally food as an emblem: this is the case with culinary heritage of a given geographical area or community; a kind of a banner beneath which the inhabitants of a given area recognize themselves.

Literature review

Culture and kue apem: Culture is the product of civilization that includes idea, reason and mind

(Hariyanto, 2015). Koentjaraningrat (1985) humans as the cultural agent have the ability to create and invent works and innovations to be used for good intentions and social wealth. Defines culture as the manifestation of human's idea and attainment derived from learning process. The products of the idea is in material or tangible forms experienced by the senses and in non-material or intangible forms (Lenzerini, 2011). Culture is formed by a community that create a society in a certain place or area (Ahlstrom *et al.*, 2014).

Culture manifests in 3 forms; the first one is the abstract manifestations of the culture such as ideas, concepts, values, norms and traditions, the second form is human activities and social systems and the last one is all the concrete human creations.

Cake apem as part of the Indonesian culture carries all the 3 cultural mani-festations (Nurani and Subekti, 2016). Traditional hors d'oeuvre in every community has its own identical idea, concept, activity and result even though they are made from the same ingredient. Different treatments on groceries are shown when they are being prepared, processed and cooked with the addition of certain formulas, presentations and packaging's. Eventually, the distinctive treatments provide each own's identity of ethnic tribes in Indonesia as national treasures (Hasibuan, 2015). Bessiere (1998) eating habits are the foundation of a collective identity and consequently of alterity. Kue apem is prepared based on idea and concept developed by Indonesian people, passed down to generations in certain areas, particularly those in the island of Java and preserved as cultural heritage. Each community develops their own traditional hors d'oeuvre depending on the potential and geographical condition of the area that include the type of food resource cultivated and grown in the community; the food processing, added formula, presentation and finishing and packaging and social conduct and perspective of the community on traditional hors d'oeuvre.

Today, kue apem has to compete with a variety of food and cakes from different countries as the effect of globalization (Hasibuan, 2015). Such phenomenon may change the lifestyle, dietary habit and perception of younger generation on traditional hors d'oeuvre.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Revitalization of kue apem: Today kue apem is mostly served as part of rituals or traditions and sold in limited availability due to its declining popularity among younger generation who considers it out-of-date (Herryani *et al.*, 2016). To preserve the culinary treasure, it is suggested that kue apem to be presented in various international events to introduce it to wide range of foreign people along with other traditional hors d'oeuvre from different

regions in Indonesia (Hasibuan, 2015). It may also be presented in various kinds of events such as family gathering, regular social gathering or arisan, office events and as welcoming snack in star hotels.

Introducing and serving kue apem to the younger generation is highly recommended in order to get their involvement in preserving the culinary heritage. Revitalization may also be resorted by inventing updated and more interesting presentations (Sutton, 2000). Rausch (2004) said the process of identity creation and revitalizing rural towards local food is very important in responding to globalization. The process identified include representations of community involvement with cultural markers, the re-creation of cultural commodities (Joosse and Hrac, 2015). Revitalization is an act of restoring in order to become the main and important one (Sutton, 2000). In the case of kue apem the effort is to secure its popularity and existence in every generation. The effort must not only by updating it but also by preserving its original meanings to pass down from generation to generation.

Semiotics: Culture is both semiotics and contextual which means that humans are the creators of complicated meanings (Geertz, 1973). Fundamentally, the meanings are derived from relations with human intentions in creating a cultural object. They carry implicit social expression, so that they should be interpreted and understood in order to explain the messages behind them (Arnould, 2006; Valsiner, 2007). Masinambow also states the similar idea that culture is a sign system functioning as social conduct that regulates the behaviors and actions of the members of a society. The term "semiotics" is derived from Greek "semeion" which means "sign" or "same" that indicates interpreting signs (Kaelan, 2009) and semiotics is an analytical method to examine signs and it also focuses more on the meanings of a message and how they are delivered through signs. Meanwhile, Peirce explains that sign is something that represent something which may be a concrete object: color, signal, wink, mathematical formula including food. Sign is a cognitive process derived from anything that the senses may capture. The first something is concrete as the representamen (ground) and the second something is cognitive which is called object. The relational process from representamen to the object is called semiosis and the next process is interpretant (Valsiner, 2007). Interpreting a sign occurs in the semiosis from the concrete to the human cognition living in a society which connects 3 sides, representamen, object and interpretant in a process of semiosis (Peirce, 2005).

In contradictory, sign is a reference or mark to represent somebody or something else in certain perspective. A sign consists of three dimensions:

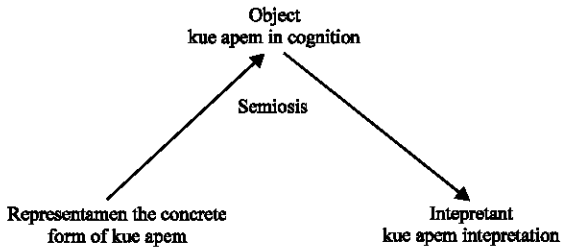


Fig. 1: Triadic semiosis of kue apem; representamen: something caught by the senses (cake apem); object: something in human mind (cognition) based on observation; interpretant: process of interpretation on kue apem, Peirce (2005)'s reproduced

physical dimension such as sound a-p-e-m, conceptual dimension where kue apem is a Javanese traditional hors d'oeuvre and conditioned form such as round, white and soft-textured. The whole concept of kue apem is a sign system conventionally related to each other by understanding the meanings (Arnould, 2006). To analyze and interpret the meanings in kue apem, semiosis theory of triadic or trichotomy is used for this research. The semiosis process of kue apem is explained in Fig. 1. In its relation between sign and Peirce's theory, there are 3 parts.

Icon: The relation between the sign and the reference is likeness caught by the senses and icons in human's representation include the following:

- Icons designed or created closely to the reference: photos, pictures, maps, Roman numerals
- Onomatopoeic words: vocal icons simulating the sounds based on the perception or movements: clink
- Smell icons imitating natural Ikon scent such as perfume
- Taste icons simulating natural food taste, additional ingredients
- Icons in arts encouraging imagination on a Fig. 1 or religious event
- Icons believed to be sacred that may lead the people to have a contact with the represented being

Index: The relation between the sign and its reference is derived from:

- The correspondence, for example a picture of an arrow shows direction
- Cause and effect: smoke signifies fire

Symbol: The relation between the sign to the object is formed conventionally (Danesi, 2006) for example, it is generally perceived in Indonesia that a yellow flag in front of a house shows a funeral (Arnould, 2005). On the other hand, Barthes explains that there are 2 levels in semiotics: denotation which describes the relation between the signifier and the signified or to the object resulting in explicit meanings and connotation which produces implicit meanings. Connotative meanings allow everyone to give their own interpretation to the object based on their observation and imagination (Barthes, 1988).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

History of kue apem: There have been many versions of the origin of kue apem (Woodward, 2010) one of which comes from Kelaten where a wise man named Ki Ageng Kribig visited Mecca for pilgrimage. As he returned home, he brought three pieces of white round cake. Initially, he wanted to share them with his family and friends but they were not enough, so he and his wife made the similar version of the cakes that looked like the ones from Mecca. They later shared the bunch to express their gratitude for those who had prayed for and welcomed him home after the pilgrimage. It is common from the Indonesian people to give food or souvenirs after a trip to family and friends (Nurani and Subekti, 2016). Today, such tradition is only reserved to family members

Cake apem recipe: Kue apem is mainly made from rice flour and coconut milk (Herryani *et al.*, 2016). Sugar may be added for sweetener and tapai or coconut water may serve as baking agent. The mix is kept for an hour or overnight and later cooked on charcoal or wood stove using a small wok made out of clay that looks like that used for cooking surabi (Nurani and Subekti, 2016). The mix is poured spoon by spoon into the wok and closed until it is cooked (Fig. 2).

Meanings in kue apem: Etymologically-speaking, the word "apem" is derived from Arabic "affan" which means "mercy" as a denotational meaning (Islami and Ikhsanudin, 2014). The term mercy is used to remind human beings to always seek for God's forgiveness. From several sources, the apeman tradition is common in Javanese communities as a medium for prayers to the Almighty to bless their good intentions. The apeman tradition carries four meanings a signs and symbols (Herryani *et al.*, 2016): to ask for God's forgiveness and to clean the soul from all the sins and to seek for his mercy upon the deceased family members (denotative); to ask for God's blessings upon their intentions (connotative);



Fig. 2: Kue apem

to welcome the Holy month of Ramadan, clean the soul and to get closer to God (connotative) and to show compassion and attention to others as a form of silaturahmi (hospitality) (connotative). The apeman tradition in Javanese communities to welcome Ramadan is called ruwahan apeman (Nurhayati, 2013). For the majority of Javanese people in Central Java, it has become an annual ritual to visit the late family member's grave to clean the tombstone and to pray for their sinful soul to be forgiven. After the visit, the family would bake kue apem and share them to other members and neighbors. As a mother told to her daughter in Javanese language, Nduk, apem kuwi jare wong Jowo dijupuk soko kata 'ampun'. Jaman ndisik lek kape poso mesti kudu gawe apem pertondo awak dewe iki njaluk ampunan nang Gusti Allah which means that the word "apem" comes from the word "ampun" or "mercy" (denotative meaning) as a medium and symbol to seek for God's (Gusti Allah) and other people's forgiveness (denotative).

In Jepara, the apeman tradition is held every year in the month of Dzulqodah, Jumat (Friday) Wage in Javanese calendar to pray for protection and to prevent themselves from misfortune (connotative) (Masudi, 2013). In Keraton (monarch) Kanoman (new) Cirebon, the apeman tradition is held every 25 in the month of Safar where people would gather to pray together and the palace's servants would serve kue apem to them as a symbol of purity and the monarch's intention to get closer to the people (connotative) (Hariyanto, 2015). Apeman in keraton kasepuhan (old) Cirebon is a series of events celebrating the birthday of Prophet Muhammad SAW (Muludan) held every 15 of the month of Sapar (Hariyanto, 2015). The tradition is a pre-ritual activity as the beginning of a series of Ritual Panjang Jimat (Endless Fortune Ritual) which also marks the opening of people's fair in the palace's square (alun-alun). The semiotical explanation on the apeman tradition in Keraton Kasepuhan Cirebon is as follows:

- In a concrete sense, kue apem is round, white and soft-textured (representamen)

- In semiosis as a cognitive process, kue apem as an object is observed
- In interpreting kue apem, the cake is analyzed from the shape, color and texture by relating the representamen and the object. The signification process prevails through a convention and supported by the community and human imagination

From the shape, color and texture of kue apem, the apeman tradition in keraton kasepuhan Cirebon may be interpreted as follows:

- The round shape symbolizes unity or integrity (as a sign with connotative meaning)
- The white color represents pure soul and good intention (as a sign with denotative meaning)
- The soft texture represents kindness and devotion to the Almighty (as a sign with connotative meaning)

On the whole, kue apem may be interpreted that first in doing a work or an activity, we need a solid cooperation; second, before we start to work or hold a big event, we must introspect and ask for God's forgiveness with pure and forgiving soul and third, we must express our prayer for blessing and protection in doing the work or event. In semiosis process, kue apem is a sign and symbol carrying both denotative and connotative meanings. In philosophical sense, kue apem at the pre-ritual of Ritual panjang jimat means that essentially, humans as God's creation, may only try but it is God's willing that decides.

Preserving and revitalizing kue apem: It is suggested that kue apem is enhanced and processed with various kinds of flavor and color such as the original white, green or pink with toppings such as banana, chocolate or quail eggs and some even pour brown sugar sauce as the dressing. It also can be in large or small size, therefore kue apem would have more interesting presentations that would attract more attention (Chen *et al.*, 2016). The production and sale would increase and the traditional hors d'oeuvre would invent its new audience. Today, many traditional foods are on the verge of extinction, knowledge of how to utilize and prepare them has been severely diminished (Bray and Nelson, 2015). Indigenous people around the world are finding unique and innovative ways to adapt and revitalize their foodways on reservations.

CONCLUSION

Indonesia is rich in extensive range of traditional hors d'oeuvre developed by each tribe. Kue apem is a culinary

treasure from Java. In semiosis process, kue apem carries both denotative and connotative meanings as a form of local genius owned by the Javanese. The snack is served in rituals and as part of tradition as a sign and symbol and philosophically it means the essence of human being as God's creation.

The expansion of global culture from different countries has changed the lifestyle and perception of young generation on the traditional hors d'oeuvre. They perceive kue apem as out-of date; they even never see kue apem and it can be said that the local genius of kue apem would gradually cease to exist. To preserve the cultural heritage, attention from all groups of people such as the government, communities and family is required. Efforts of revitalizing may also be resorted by doing a wide range of culinary experiments in flavor, color and presentation. Traditional hors d'oeuvre must be presented both in formal and informal events.

Parents should also take part in introducing kue apem at the earlier stage to their children, so that they would grow up loving traditional snacks from their own region. This may lead to growing popularity of kue apem that eventually will preserve the snack to be inherited from generation to generation as an identity and treasure from Indonesia.

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