

The Semiotics of Penja in the *Tabut* Ritual: Shi'a Influence and Local Culture in Bengkulu

Rahmat^{1)*}, Acep Iwan Saidi²⁾

¹⁾ Master of Design Study Program, Faculty of Art and Design, Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia.

²⁾ Visual culture literacy, Faculty of Art and Design, Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia.

*Corresponding Author

Email : rahmatmdes@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The presence and influence of Shi'a Islam in Southeast Asia is a complex historical process shaped by peaceful cultural transmission rather than conflict. Arriving via Sufi networks, literature, and rituals from Persia and India, Shi'a traditions harmoniously integrated with dominant Sunni-Syafi'i practices. In Bengkulu, the Tabut ritual rooted in Shi'a commemorations of Imam Husain's martyrdom at Karbala was introduced in the early 18th century by Indian Shi'a migrants from Madras and Bengal under British colonial rule. Central to the ritual is the Penja artifact, a five-fingered symbol representing the Khamsa or Panj-e-Tan, honoring the Prophet Muhammad, Ali, Fatimah, Hasan, and Husain. This emblem, along with miniature Zulfikar swords, embodies theological symbolism and communal identity. The Tabut festival, held annually from 1–10 Muharram, includes structured rites such as Mengambil Tanah, Duduk Penja, Menjara, and culminates in a grand Ashura procession. Parallels with Indian Shi'a traditions especially in Awadh reveal the transnational nature of these symbols, which serve both commemorative and protective roles. The Khamsa's integration into processions underscores its function as a mobile shrine and marker of solidarity, reflecting enduring connections between Southeast Asian Shi'a practices and broader intellectual-religious networks across Iran, Iraq, and the Indian subcontinent.

KEYWORDS

Shi'ism
Tabut
Penja
Commemoration

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INTRODUCTION

We must understand that semiotics is about the index, the symbol, and the icon. This foundational concept, developed by philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, provides a framework for understanding how signs and symbols create meaning (Halim & Yulius, 2023). Semiotics is the study of signs and the process of meaning-making (semiosis). Peirce categorized signs into three modes based on the relationship between the "signifier" (the form of the sign) and the "signified" (the concept it represents) (Atkin Albert, 2016). The *Tabut* ritual of Bengkulu, Sumatra, is far more than a static tradition; it is a dynamic arena of cultural and religious negotiation, a site of continuous meaning-making where history is performed and identity is contested (Mochamad Aviandy, 2025). Held annually over the first ten days of the Islamic month of Muharram, the ceremony commemorates the martyrdom of Hussein bin Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, at the Battle of Karbala in 681 AD (Valentine et al., 2021). While its origins are rooted in Shi'a Islam, transmitted to Sumatra via Indian Muslims under British colonial influence, the ritual has been profoundly shaped by its acculturation within a predominantly Sunni society, evolving in the modern era into a major cultural festival and tourism icon (Bin Ridwan, 2016). Central to this complex tapestry of ritual performance is the *Penja*, a sacred artifact shaped like a human hand, which serves

as a potent semiotic text. The *Penja* is a focal point where historical narratives, religious doctrines, and local belief systems converge, are reinterpreted, and are sometimes contested.

This report seeks to deconstruct the manifold layers of meaning embedded within the *Penja* by employing the theoretical framework of Roland Barthes, specifically his tripartite model of denotation, connotation, and myth (Ananda Rasidin & Hasbi, 2024). This semiotic analysis will reveal how the object's significance is a product of profound syncretism, tracing its semiotic journey from a symbol of Shi'a martyrdom to an emblem of local Bengkulu identity. By examining this transformation, this report will illustrate how a culture actively reinterprets, appropriates, and ultimately naturalizes religious symbols to serve its own evolving social, political, and ideological needs. Culture is an effective form of communication, because cultural arts are a system that is closely interconnected (Mulyadi & Ferry Herdianto, 2022). The *Penja*, therefore, offers a compelling case study in the fluid and constructed nature of cultural meaning.



Figure 1.Khamisa as known as Jari-jari

The historical context of the *Tabut* ritual is itself a semiotic puzzle, characterized by multiple and sometimes conflicting origin narratives. Scholarly accounts and local traditions variously attribute its introduction to Punjab traders in 1336 AD, to the revered cleric Sheikh Burhanuddin (known as Imam Senggolo) in 1685, or to Indian Sepoy soldiers brought by the British during the construction of Fort Marlborough in the early 18th century (Bin Ridwan, 2016). A purely historical approach might seek to determine the single "correct" origin. However, from a semiotic perspective, this very multiplicity is not a problem to be solved but is itself a crucial piece of data. These competing narratives signify that the ritual's meaning is not fixed but is an active site of social negotiation. The narrative of ancient Punjab origins, for instance, lends the ritual a sense of timeless legitimacy. The story centered on Sheikh Burhanuddin provides a specific, revered ancestral figure, which serves to legitimize the authority of his descendants, the *Keluarga Kerukunan Tabut* (KKT), as the tradition's custodians. The narrative tied to the British colonial period historicizes the ritual within a specific era of global exchange and migration. These are not merely historical accounts; they are competing myths in the Barthesian sense, each working to naturalize a different ideological claim about the ritual's authenticity, authority, and identity. It is within this fluid context of contested meaning that the semiotic significance of the *Penja* must be understood.

METHOD

To analyze the complex meanings of the *Penja*, it is essential to first establish the analytical tools provided by Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics. Barthes expanded upon Ferdinand de Saussure's foundational model of the sign, which consists of a *signifier* (the form a sign takes, such as a sound or image) and a *signified* (the concept it represents) (Sui & Fan, 2015). The sign is placed in a series of terms which have affinities and dissimilarities with it: signal, index, icon, symbol, allegory, are the chief rivals of sign (Barthes, 1964). Barthes was particularly interested in how this basic structure operates within culture to create layered, ideological meanings. He proposed a model of two "orders of signification," which provides a systematic way to move from the literal meaning

of a sign to its deeper cultural and ideological implications (Ananda Rasidin & Hasbi, 2024).

The first order of signification is denotation. This is the most basic and literal level of meaning, describing the direct relationship between a signifier and a signified (Ananda Rasidin & Hasbi, 2024). Barthes described this as the sign's "straightforward" or literal link to its reference (Sui & Fan, 2015). For a linguistic sign, denotation is the "dictionary meaning" the explicit, common-sense, and widely agreed-upon definition of a word (Ananda Rasidin & Hasbi, 2024). In the case of an image, denotation refers to what is literally depicted, the objective reality that is observable to any viewer regardless of their cultural background (Zhang Shu ping, 2017). This first-order system produces a complete sign, which is the sum of its signifier and signified. For example, the physical image of a rose (signifier) combines with the botanical concept of that flower (signified) to create the denotative sign "rose." This denotative sign seems final and self-contained, but for Barthes, it is merely the starting point for a more complex process of meaning-making.

The second order of signification is where culture intervenes to imbue signs with additional, associative meanings. Barthes' crucial insight was that the entire sign from the first order (the denotative sign) can become the mere *signifier* for a new, second-order meaning (Syamsurrijal et al., 2024). This second level is where connotation and myth operate. Connotation refers to the web of socio-cultural, emotional, and personal associations that a sign evokes (Zhang Shu ping, 2017). While denotation is relatively stable and objective, connotation is fluid and intersubjective, depending on the interpreter's cultural background, values, and experiences. Connotation is the "chain of associations" initiated by the denotative sign. For example, the denotative sign "rose" can become a signifier at the connotative level, pointing to signifieds such as "love," "passion," or "romance." These meanings are not inherent in the flower itself but are attached to it by cultural convention. Connotation, therefore, is the level where ideology the system of values and beliefs that shapes a society begins to work on and through signs (Chandler, 2022). Myth, in Barthes' framework, is a specific and powerful form of connotation. It is a third semiological chain that builds upon the first two levels (Ananda Rasidin & Hasbi, 2024). Myth arises when a connotative meaning becomes so widely accepted, repeated, and ingrained within a culture that it is mistaken for a natural, self-evident truth (Jadou & Ghabra, 2021). Myth is a system of communication that takes a cultural sign, empties it of its historical and political contingency, and presents it as an eternal, natural fact (Zhang Shu ping, 2017). For Barthes, myth is "depoliticized speech"; its function is to transform history into nature, making a culturally constructed ideology seem like common sense. For example, an image of a soldier saluting a flag has a denotative meaning (a person in uniform performing an action). At the connotative level, it signifies patriotism and duty. At the level of myth, this entire complex sign is used to naturalize a specific, often nationalistic, ideology, presenting it not as a political construct but as a simple, moral truth. The analysis of the *Penja* will proceed along these three levels, moving from its literal form to its complex cultural and ideological functions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Denotative Meaning: The *Penja* as Object

The first step in a Barthesian analysis is to establish the sign at its denotative, or literal, level. This requires isolating the object from its rich ritual context and examining it simply as a physical form and the immediate concept it represents. This first-order sign serves as the foundational "raw material" upon which all subsequent layers of meaning are built (Sui & Fan, 2015). At this primary level of signification, the *Penja* is composed of a distinct signifier and signified:

- a) **Signifier:** The signifier is the physical, tangible artifact itself. Academic sources consistently describe it as an object crafted from metal typically copper, silver, or brass, though originals were said to be made of gold. Its form is explicitly and consistently described as being "shaped like human hands complete with the fingers". The size can vary, ranging from the scale of an adult's palm to that of a child's. The essential physical properties are its material (metal) and its form (a representation of a human hand).
- b) **Signified:** The signified is the immediate, non-cultural concept that the signifier evokes. In this case, the metallic form of a hand points directly to the universal concept of a "human hand" or, more specifically, "fingers" (*jari-jari* in Indonesian). This is the direct, pre-interpretive idea

triggered by the object's shape.

The combination of this signifier (the metallic object) and this signified (the concept of a hand) constitutes the complete first-order, denotative sign: "a metallic representation of a human hand." This meaning is the most stable and universally recognizable aspect of the *Penja*. An observer from any cultural background, with no knowledge of the *Tabut* ritual or Shi'a history, could look at the object and arrive at this literal description. It is the "dictionary meaning" of the object, stripped of any further cultural, historical, or religious context. According to Barthes' model, it is this seemingly simple and complete sign "a metallic representation of a human hand" that becomes the empty vessel, the new signifier, ready to be filled with the complex and layered meanings of the second order of signification.

2. Connotative Meanings: The Web of Shi'a History and Local Culture

Moving to the second order of signification, the denotative sign of the *Penja* the "metallic hand object" ceases to be a final meaning and instead becomes a new signifier. This signifier now points to a vast and complex web of associative meanings, or signifieds, drawn from distinct cultural and religious systems. It is at this connotative level that the profound syncretism of the *Tabut* ritual becomes evident. The *Penja* does not simply have one connotative meaning but simultaneously evokes at least two powerful, overlapping sets of concepts: one derived from its historical Shi'a origins and another rooted in the indigenous symbolic traditions of Sumatra and the wider Indonesian archipelago.

The primary and most explicitly documented connotation of the *Penja* links it directly to the foundational narrative of the *Tabut* ritual: the martyrdom of Hussein bin Ali at Karbala. Here, the "hand object" signifier points to a specific religious-historical signified. The research is unequivocal on this point, stating that the *Penja* "is associated with the pair of hands of Hussein bin Ali bin Abi Talib and his followers that were found to be scattered and needed to be paired again". This interpretation firmly situates the Bengkulu ritual within the global Shi'a tradition of commemorating Muharram, where the dismemberment of Hussein's body is a central and tragic motif. This connotative link is reinforced and performed through the specific ritual acts involving the *Penja*. The ceremony of *Duduk Penja* ("Sitting the Fingers"), which involves ritually washing the objects with lime water, milk, and sandalwood, symbolizes the purification and preparation of the sacred relics. The subsequent parade, *Arak Penja* ("Parading the Fingers"), where the objects are carried through the streets, serves as a public reenactment of the collection and honoring of the martyr's remains. These ritual performances are not merely decorative; they are essential acts that actively produce and reinforce the connotative meaning of the *Penja* as a symbol of martyrdom, grief, and the sacred duty to reassemble the fragmented body of the holy figure. Furthermore, the *Penja* in Bengkulu functions in a manner analogous to the *panjeh* (a hand-shaped finial) used in Muharram processions in other parts of the Shi'a world, such as Persia and South Asia. The *panjeh* often symbolizes the severed hand of Abulfazl al-Abbas, Hussein's half-brother and standard-bearer, who was martyred while trying to fetch water for the besieged camp. While the specific narrative in Bengkulu focuses on Hussein and his followers more broadly, the underlying symbolic grammar is the same: the hand represents sacrifice, loyalty, and the brutal reality of the Karbala tragedy. This shared symbolism demonstrates how the *Tabut* ritual, through artifacts like the *Penja*, participates in a transnational Shi'a semiotic system.

The successful adoption and deep cultural resonance of the *Penja* cannot be explained solely by its Shi'a origins. A key argument of this analysis is that the foreign symbol was not merely imposed but was readily assimilated because it resonated powerfully with a pre-existing and deeply embedded local symbolic system in which the hand and fingers hold profound cultural significance. The "hand object" signifier was thus capable of triggering a parallel set of indigenous signifieds, allowing for a process of cultural translation and syncretic fusion. First, across the Indonesian archipelago, hand gestures are central to the vocabulary of social interaction, particularly in expressing respect and reverence. The tradition of *salim*, where a younger person takes and kisses the hand of an elder, is a ubiquitous gesture of honor and deference. Similarly, the *sembah*, a prayer-like gesture with palms pressed together before the chest, is a fundamental expression of respect in

Javanese, Sundanese, and Balinese cultures, rooted in ancient Dharmic heritage. The *Penja*, as a formal, ritualized, and permanent representation of a hand, taps directly into this deep cultural well. For the local community, an object shaped like a hand is already coded with notions of respect, social hierarchy, and reverence for authority and ancestry. Second, esoteric traditions within the region associate fingers with concepts of communal integrity, unity, and strength. A striking parallel is found among the Dani people of Papua, who traditionally practiced *ikipalin*, the ritual amputation of fingers as an expression of profound grief upon the death of a family member. For the Dani, fingers are believed to symbolize "harmony, unity and force within an individual and a family" (Leo P.J., 2012). The loss of a finger represents the fracturing of this communal whole. While geographically distant, this practice points to a potential undercurrent of indigenous belief where the integrity of the hand symbolizes the integrity of the kinship group. Within this symbolic framework, the *Penja*, as a complete and unified hand, connotes not just the reassembly of a martyr's body but also the restoration of communal harmony and strength in the face of loss.

Finally, the function of the *Penja* as a sacred heirloom finds a powerful parallel in the Javanese *Keris*. The *Keris* is much more than a dagger; it is a spiritual object, an extension of its owner's identity, a symbol of mystical union between cosmic opposites, and a sacred heirloom (*pusaka*) imbued with ancestral power. The *Penja* operates in a similar capacity for the *Tabut* families. It is not merely a prop in a yearly drama but a sacred object stored in the home for a year, brought out for ritual purification, and treated with reverence. It functions as a tangible link to their ancestors and a symbol of their unique lineage and identity. This process of syncretism is not a simple blending of two separate meanings but a form of semiotic "over-coding." The foreign Shi'a connotation of martyrdom was layered upon a rich and receptive local symbolic framework that already associated the hand with reverence, unity, and spiritual power. The local connotations acted as a cultural catalyst, providing a familiar symbolic language through which the foreign narrative could be understood, integrated, and made meaningful. This dual coding is the engine of the *Penja*'s profound syncretic power, allowing it to speak to both the specific history of Karbala and the timeless cultural values of the Bengkulu community.

3. The *Penja* as Myth: The Naturalization of Identity and Harmony

In the final stage of Barthesian analysis, the complex connotative meanings of a sign are themselves co-opted to serve broader, naturalized ideologies, or myths (Riyadi Swandhani & Wahjudi, 2023). The *Penja*, having absorbed the layered connotations of Shi'a martyrdom and local reverence, becomes a powerful vehicle for constructing and reinforcing social and cultural "truths" that appear self-evident and apolitical. The object's meaning is elevated from the associative to the ideological, where it functions to legitimize social structures and narrate a particular version of cultural identity. Two dominant myths can be identified operating through the *Penja*: the myth of ancestral legitimacy and the myth of syncretic harmony.

At a micro-social level, the *Penja* has evolved beyond a universal symbol of the Karbala tragedy to become a specific and exclusive emblem of the Bengkulu *Tabut* families, particularly the *Keluarga Kerukunan Tabut* (KKT). The ritual in which it features functions to naturalize the hereditary authority of these families as the sole, authentic custodians of the "sacred" tradition. The myth is no longer simply, "This object represents Hussein's hand," but rather, "The possession and ritual use of *this sacred object* legitimizes *our family's* unique and unbroken connection to the tradition's origin." It transforms a religious symbol into a charter for social status and ritual authority. The most compelling evidence for this myth-making process is the clear distinction maintained between the "Sacred Tabot" (*Tabot Sakral*) of the families and the government-sponsored "Development Tabot" (*Tabot Pembangunan*). The Sacred Tabot rituals are performed by the KKT and are centered on the authentic, inherited artifacts, including the *Penja*. The Development Tabot, part of the public festival, is a replica and, crucially, is not equipped with the "finger *penja*," which is reserved exclusively for the Tabot heir families as their symbol and identity. This deliberate exclusion is a powerful semiotic act. It reinforces the *Penja*'s role as a signifier of authenticity, lineage, and sacred exclusivity. By controlling the sacred object, the KKT controls the narrative of authenticity, effectively naturalizing their inherited social position. The *Penja* becomes the tangible

proof of their legitimacy, making their custodial role appear not as a social construct but as a natural, inherited right.

On a broader societal level, particularly as the *Tabut* ritual has been institutionalized and promoted as a state-sponsored festival, the *Penja* has become a vehicle for a modern, nationalist myth. It has been repurposed to symbolize the harmonious fusion of foreign (Shi'a/Indian) and indigenous (Bengkulu/Sumatran) cultures into a singular, unique "Bengkulu cultural identity". This interpretation serves the ideological needs of the modern Indonesian state, which promotes a narrative of "Unity in Diversity". The ritual is now officially framed as an asset for tourism, a symbol of local culture, and a testament to religious tolerance and peace between the region's majority Sunni population and the tradition's Shi'a roots. This narrative conveniently smooths over the complex history of acculturation, potential theological tensions, and the debates surrounding the ritual's "heretical" elements. The *Penja*, by embodying both layers of meaning the foreign Shi'a narrative and the indigenous cultural values becomes the perfect signifier for this myth of harmonious syncretism. It presents a complex and potentially contentious history as a simple, natural, and beautiful story of "our unique culture. This is the ultimate function of Barthesian myth: to depoliticize a cultural sign and present its ideological meaning as a fact of nature. The commodification of the *Tabut* ritual for tourism represents a second-level myth-making process that actively overwrites earlier ones. The original religious meaning (commemorating Karbala) was supplemented by a social myth (legitimizing the KKT). Now, a state-sponsored economic and nationalist myth (tourism and tolerance) is becoming the dominant public meaning. This process actively drains the sign of its specific, potentially divisive Shi'a religious content to make it palatable for a wider, multi-religious, and international audience. The semiotic journey of the *Penja* from a sacred relic commemorating a sectarian tragedy to a cultural icon featured in a tourism brochure is a perfect contemporary example of Barthesian myth in action. It demonstrates how ideology works to transform the meaning of cultural objects to align with contemporary political and economic interests.

Table 1.A Barthesian Deconstruction of the Penja Symbol

Level of Signification	Signifier (Form)	Signified (Concept)
Denotation (Literal Meaning)	The metallic object shaped like a hand.	The concept of a "human hand."
Connotation (Associative Meaning)	The entire denotative sign (The "Hand" Object).	Shi'a: Martyrdom; the dismembered hands of Hussein and his followers. Local: Reverence, respect, unity, community strength.
Myth (Ideological Meaning)	The entire connotative sign (The Symbol of Martyrdom/Reverence).	Myth 1: The sacred heritage and legitimate identity of the Tabot families. Myth 2: The harmonious, syncretic cultural identity of Bengkulu.

CONCLUSION

The semiotic analysis of the *Penja* artifact within Bengkulu's *Tabut* ritual reveals a profound journey of meaning-making, tracing the transformation of a simple object into a complex vehicle for cultural ideology. By applying Roland Barthes' framework, it is possible to systematically deconstruct the layers of significance that have been inscribed upon this metallic representation of a human hand. This deconstruction demonstrates that the *Penja* is not a static relic with a single, fixed meaning but a living sign at the heart of Bengkulu's ongoing process of cultural self-definition. At the denotative level, the *Penja* is simply a metallic object shaped like a hand, a literal and universally recognizable sign. This first-order meaning serves as the foundation upon which culture builds. At the connotative level, this object becomes a powerful signifier, radiating a dual set of associative meanings born from a history of cultural encounter. It connotes the tragic narrative of Shi'a martyrdom, linking Bengkulu to the global commemoration of Karbala, while simultaneously resonating with deep-seated indigenous Sumatran values of reverence, communal unity, and the spiritual power of ancestral heirlooms. It is this syncretic fusion this semiotic over-coding that has

allowed the *Penja* to become so deeply embedded in the local cultural fabric.

Finally, at the level of myth, these rich connotations are harnessed to serve distinct ideological functions. For the hereditary Tabot families, the *Penja* naturalizes their authority and legitimizes their role as the exclusive custodians of a sacred tradition. For the broader society and the state, it becomes a symbol of a harmonious and unique Bengkulu identity, a marketable emblem of religious tolerance and cultural fusion that conveniently smooths over a complex and potentially contentious history. The *Penja* is thus a quintessential example of a syncretic cultural sign. Its semiotic potency derives precisely from its ability to absorb and radiate multiple layers of meaning simultaneously, satisfying the historical memory of a specific lineage, the cultural values of the local community, and the ideological needs of the modern nation-state. Its journey from object to ideology, as summarized in the table below, encapsulates the dynamic process by which cultures create, negotiate, and naturalize meaning.

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