

A Semiotic Analysis on Signs Used on Tingkuluak Traditional Clothes of Koto Gadang

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Abstract

This study conducts a semiotic analysis of the signs embedded in Tingkuluak Koto Gadang, a traditional headpiece worn by Minangkabau women in Indonesia. Employing Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of semiotics, the research examines how motifs, colors, and ornaments function as signs to convey cultural meanings. The qualitative case study approach involved direct observation, visual documentation, and interviews with cultural experts to identify and interpret the semiotic elements in Tingkuluak Koto Gadang. The analysis revealed ten signs categorized into six types: Sinsign, Legisign, Icon, Index, Symbol, and Decisign. Among these, Icon and Decisign were the most dominant, with three occurrences each. For instance, the color red and gold serve as Icons, symbolizing courage and prosperity, while floral motifs like Bunga and Akar Daun function as Decisigns, representing harmony and resilience. Other signs, such as the Padi motif (Symbol) and Rumbai Kotak (Index), reflect agricultural heritage and structured societal values, respectively. The findings underscore that Tingkuluak Koto Gadang is not merely decorative but a rich semiotic system encoding Minangkabau identity, social norms, and philosophical values. However, the study highlights a growing disconnect among younger generations, who increasingly perceive these garments as aesthetic rather than symbolic. This research contributes to cultural preservation by decoding the hidden meanings of traditional attire, emphasizing the need for educational initiatives to sustain this intangible heritage. It also demonstrates the efficacy of Peirce's semiotic framework in analyzing non-verbal cultural texts, offering a model for future studies on traditional clothing and material culture.

Keywords: Semiotics, Tingkuluak Koto Gadang, Traditional Clothing, Minangkabau Culture, Symbolism

1. Introduction

Semiotics is the study of signs and how meaning is constructed and interpreted through them. It explores the systems of communication beyond spoken language, encompassing visual images, gestures, colors, sounds, and physical objects. As defined by Saussure (2009) (in Pratami et al., 2022), semiotics is the science of signs, focusing on both verbal and non-verbal elements that convey meaning. Hu et al. (2019) argue that semiotic signs are always contextual; intertwined with the social and cultural structures in which they exist. One growing subfield of semiotics is

visual semiotics, which studies how meaning is constructed through visual elements such as symbols, colors, and motifs (Aiello, 2020). This approach is particularly relevant in analyzing traditional clothing, as garments often function as non-verbal texts loaded with cultural messages. Ramadhani et al. (2019) emphasized that symbols in visual culture, such as those found in fashion, advertisements, and ceremonial attire; serve as tools to express identity, power relations, and societal values.

Numerous studies have explored the symbolic function of traditional attire. Mhonyani (2018), for instance, analyzed the symbolic meaning of Naga traditional clothing and found that each element represented specific social roles and cosmological beliefs. Similarly, Na'am et al. (2019) examined Riau Malay traditional garments, revealing how specific motifs and colors represented social hierarchy, aesthetics, and religious values. However, these studies often provide generalized accounts of traditional clothing without applying a structured semiotic framework, or they focus on broader cultural aspects without deep visual-textual analysis. Other scholars, such as Suniarini et al. (2017), focused on semiotic elements within visual media, such as films, and explored how color terms can carry connotative meanings related to emotional states, power structures, and cultural values. Though useful in understanding how color can operate symbolically, this work remains limited to audio-visual media and does not address traditional attire or indigenous material culture.

In Indonesia, with its vast array of ethnic groups, traditional clothing serves as an essential expression of cultural identity. Each piece is embedded with symbolic elements shaped by generations of tradition and philosophical meaning. Among the Minangkabau people, *Tingkuluak Koto Gadang* is a traditional head covering worn by women during ceremonial events. While it is rich in cultural symbolism, its semiotic dimensions have been underexplored in scholarly research. Most existing studies on Minangkabau culture focus on oral traditions, matrilineal kinship, or culinary practices, with few examining the semiotic meaning of traditional attire in detail. Moreover, based on preliminary interviews conducted by the researchers, it was found that younger generations in the Minangkabau community are gradually losing awareness of the form, function, and cultural significance of *Tingkuluak Koto Gadang*. The decline in intergenerational knowledge transmission, coupled with a lack of formal education or public discourse surrounding this traditional garment, poses a serious threat to its survival. As a result, *Tingkuluak* is often perceived merely as decorative attire, rather than as a cultural text rich in symbolic meaning.

To address this gap, the present study applies Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory as the grand theoretical framework (Peirce, 1958). Peirce's triadic model defines a sign as the relation between three interconnected components: the *representamen* (the form which the sign takes), the *object* (the actual thing or concept being represented), and the *interpretant* (the understanding or meaning constructed by the interpreter in a cultural context). Peirce's model is particularly suited to traditional clothing, where visual and tactile elements function as culturally embedded signs. Unlike Saussure's dyadic approach (signifier-signified), Peircean semiotics accounts for contextual and experiential meaning-making, making it ideal for decoding the multilayered symbolism of *Tingkuluak Koto Gadang*. For example, an *icon* (e.g., the color gold resembling wealth) derives meaning from resemblance, while a *symbol* (e.g., the *Padi* motif representing prosperity) relies on cultural convention. Meanwhile, *decisigns* (e.g., floral embroidery) gain significance through their material presence in rituals. This framework bridges the gap between abstract cultural codes and their tangible manifestations in attire.

This study is novel in its application of Peirce's comprehensive semiotic typology particularly lesser-applied categories such as *decisign* and *legisign* to analyze traditional clothing within a specific Indonesian cultural context. While most existing research applies semiotics to contemporary media like advertising or film, few have systematically analyzed traditional garments as semiotic systems, especially within the Minangkabau community. Therefore, this research seeks to uncover the types of semiotic signs embedded in *Tingkuluak Koto Gadang* using Peirce's framework and to explore how these signs are interpreted and function within the social and cultural practices of the Minangkabau people, particularly in Koto Gadang. By doing so, this study not only contributes to the field of semiotic analysis but also supports the broader aim of cultural preservation by highlighting the deeper meanings hidden in traditional attire.

2. Method

This research was conducted using qualitative methods, specifically employing a qualitative case study approach. This is to find out the semiotic meaning of the symbols in the Tingkuluak traditional clothes of Koto Gadang. Qualitative research is a research process to understand human or social phenomena by creating a comprehensive and complex picture that could be presented in words, reporting detailed views obtained from information sources, and carried out in a natural setting (Fadli, 2021). This particular approach allows for an in-depth, holistic examination of the Tingkuluak traditional clothes as a unique case, enabling a rich understanding of its symbolic system within its specific cultural context. This method is used to find, identify, analyze, and describe the semiotic analysis of signs and their interpretations/meanings related to the object.

In the semiotic study of traditional clothing, this research employs a grand theory of semiotics to understand how the symbols on Tingkuluak traditional clothes from Koto Gadang form meaning. Semiotics provides a framework for analyzing signs and symbols, not just as visual representations, but also as elements carrying deeper cultural and social significance. Sample selection was likely based on availability, representation of Tingkuluak variations, or consultation with cultural experts to ensure pertinent data.

Data validation in this study is achieved through several means. Direct observation of the Tingkuluak allows the researcher to examine its architecture, decorations, and symbolic elements firsthand. This is complemented by visual documentation, such as photographs and detailed recordings of the clothing, which aid in in-depth analysis. Furthermore, in-depth interviews with cultural experts or owners of traditional Tingkuluak play a crucial role in validation, as they can confirm or enrich the researcher's interpretations of the meanings and symbolism behind these structures. This combination of methods ensures data triangulation, leading to more robust and valid interpretations.

In collecting data, the stages are as follows observation and interview. The data analysis procedure in this study involves a systematic approach. After data collection through field visits, direct observation, and interviews, all information is meticulously documented in the form of field notes and photographs. How the data were analyzed in this study is through semiotic analysis. This means the researcher identified and deciphered various signs and symbols found on the

Tingkuluak traditional clothing. The process includes data reductions (The selection process focuses on simplification, abstraction, and transformation of raw data that emerges from written records in the field. Data reduction takes place continuously during qualitative research), data display (The process of presenting it as a structured collection of information that allows for better conclusions and actions and is the main means of valid qualitative analysis, which includes various types of matrices, graphs, networks and charts), and data conclusions (The final verification process, namely the review of field notes, means that the meaning that emerges from other data must be tested for validity, robustness, suitability, and validity).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

The semiotic analysis of Tingkuluak Koto Gadang traditional clothing, based on Peirce's theory of signs, identified six types of semiotic elements: Sinsign (1), Legisign (1), Icon (3), Index (1), Symbol (1), and Decisign (3). Although Peirce classified signs into nine categories (Qualisign, Sinsign, Legisign, Icon, Index, Symbol, Rheme, Decisign, and Argument), only six were found in the data. This is because the traditional ornaments and embroidery of Tingkuluak Koto Gadang do not incorporate spoken language elements, which are often necessary for the remaining three sign types (Qualisign, Rheme, and Argument).

3.1.1 Representamen in Tingkuluak Koto Gadang

The representamen refers to the physical form of a sign what is visible on the traditional clothing. In this study, the representamen includes various ornaments, patterns, motifs, and colors found on Tingkuluak Koto Gadang.

- a. Sinsign (1): The Pernik Kecil (small decorative elements) on Tingkuluak Koto Gadang can be classified as a sinsign. This means that these decorations are actual, singular occurrences in traditional clothing that carry specific meanings. These small embellishments symbolize the importance of even the smallest contributions in daily life, reflecting Minangkabau values of humility and appreciation for detail.



Picture 1. Pernik Kecil
(Source Personal Documentation)

Pernik Kecil can refer to small values, actions, or small elements in everyday life that may have deep meaning or importance in a particular context. These can include traditional values, local stories, or small practices passed down from generation to generation.

Legisign (1): The Bunga Bulat (Circular Flower) motif functions as a legisign because it follows a conventional rule in Minangkabau society. This motif is commonly found on traditional clothing and is understood by the community as a symbol of beauty, unity, and continuity in cultural heritage. It reinforces the collective identity of Minangkabau women who wear this attire during important ceremonies.



Picture 2. Bunga
(Source: Personal Documentation)

The meaning of *Bunga* in traditional clothing can have several interpretations, depending on the cultural context and values held by the Minangkabau people. However, keep in mind that these interpretations may vary between different groups or generations.

3.1.2 Object in Tingkuluak Koto Gadang

The object refers to the meaning or significance that is attached to a representamen. In this case, the ornaments, motifs, and colors in Tingkuluak Koto Gadang have deeper meanings beyond their aesthetic appearance.

- a. Icon (3): Several elements in the traditional clothing serve as icons, meaning they resemble or share qualities with their real-world counterparts.
- b. The color red symbolizes courage, strength, and energy in Minangkabau culture, as it does in many traditions worldwide.
- c. The color gold represents luxury, wealth, and purity, which aligns with the historical significance of Minangkabau as a prosperous society.



Picture 3. The symbol of the color of Tingkuluak
(Source: Personal Documentation)

If *Tingkuluak* Koto Gadang is the name of a special place or object, it is possible that the meaning of the color red in that context could be related to history, tradition or local symbolism which may vary.

- d. Kalung Kening (Forehead Necklace) is another icon in Tingkuluak Koto Gadang, often associated with social status and beauty, similar to jewelry in many cultures.



Picture 4. Kalung Kening
(Source: Personal Documentation)

Kalung Kening on the *Tingkuluak* Koto Gadang traditional clothing has a symbolic meaning in this cultural context. Typically, accessories such as *Kalung Kening* can have deep religious, social, or cultural value to the community. To understand the meaning more deeply, it is recommended to speak directly with community members or cultural heirs of *Tingkuluak* Koto Gadang who can provide further information.

- e. Index (1): An index is a sign that has a direct connection to what it represents.
- f. Rumbai Kotak (Square Fringes) is classified as an index because it visibly marks the edges of the fabric and represents artistic expression, creativity, and cultural heritage. The squared pattern can indicate a structured, organized way of life, which aligns with Minangkabau customs emphasizing order and respect for traditions.



Picture 5. Rumbai Kotak
(Source: Personal Documentation)

Tingkuluak Koto Gadang traditional clothing is traditional clothing originating from Minangkabau, West Sumatra, Indonesia. One of the striking elements of this traditional clothing is the *Rumbai Kotak*. *Rumbai Kotak* are decorations in the form of small piles of cloth arranged in a square or rectangular shape, then sewn to the edge of the shirt or cloth. This decoration gives an artistic and beautiful touch to *Tingkuluak* Koto Gadang traditional clothing.

- g. Symbol (1): A symbol is a sign whose meaning is determined by social convention or cultural agreement.
- h. Padi (Rice) motif is a strong symbol in Minangkabau culture. Rice is not just a staple food but also represents prosperity, sustenance, and the blessings of nature. The presence of this motif in traditional clothing signifies gratitude, hard work, and the community's connection to agriculture.



Picture 6. Padi
(Source Personal Documentation)

Padi is mentioned in this context, possibly referring to special symbolism or meaning related to agriculture or local community life. Rice is often considered a symbol of prosperity, abundance, and sustainability in many cultures around the world.

3.1.3 Interpretant in Tingkuluak Koto Gadang

The interpretant refers to how a sign is understood or interpreted based on cultural and social contexts. This final step helps uncover the deeper philosophical and societal meanings behind the symbols and decorations in Tingkuluak Koto Gadang.

- a. Decisign (3): A decisign is a sign that conveys meaning through actual existence and can be interpreted as an index or symbol.
- b. Bunga (Flowers) on the traditional clothing symbolize elegance, cultural identity, and harmony. Different flowers may carry different meanings, but in general, floral motifs reflect the beauty of Minangkabau traditions and the importance of aesthetics in social presentation.
- c. Akar Daun (Leaf Roots) represents strength, resilience, and the deep connection between humans and nature. This motif signifies that the individuals like plants, must have strong roots (traditions, family, values) to grow and thrive.



Picture 7. Akar Daun
(Source: Personal Documentation)

The meaning of *Akar Daun* in this traditional clothing can have various interpretations, depending on the cultural context and customs of the local community. However, in general, leaves or plant motifs on traditional clothing often have deep symbolic meaning.

- d. Bordiran Ujung (Edge Embroidery) is another example of a decisign, as it serves both a decorative and symbolic function. It represents completeness and attention to detail, showing that Minangkabau culture values perfection and refinement in both appearance and character.



Picture 8. Bordiran Ujung

(Source : Personal Documentation)

Tingkuluak Koto Gadang or the meaning of the *Bordiran Ujung* on traditional clothing. Traditional clothing often has deep symbolic and cultural value, and each element, including embroidery, can represent certain traditions, history, or values in local society.

3.2 The Dominance of Types of Semiotic in Tingkuluak Koto Gadang

Table 1. The Dominance Types of Semiotic

Type of Sign	Signifier (Representamen)	Cultural Meaning (Interpretant)	Sign Type Count
Sinsign	Pernik Kecil	Small contributions in life; humility and detail in Minangkabau values	1
Legisign	Bunga Bulat	Beauty, unity, and continuity in cultural heritage	1
Icon	Color Red, Color Gold, Kalung Kening	Courage, prosperity, and beauty (visual resemblance to real-world qualities)	3
Index	Rumbai Kotak	Artistic expression; structure; direct connection to order in Minangkabau customs	1
Symbol	Motif Padi	Prosperity, agriculture, gratitude, and sustainability through cultural convention	1
Decisign	Bunga, Akar Daun, Bordiran Ujung	Harmony, strength, rootedness, completeness, and attention to detail	3
Total Signs			10

As presented in Table 1, the analysis identified a total of ten signs within the *Tingkuluak* Koto Gadang traditional attire, classified into six semiotic categories based on Peirce's framework. Among these, iconic and decisign signs are the most dominant, with three occurrences each, followed by individual examples of sinsign, legisign, index, and symbol. This distribution indicates that the design of *Tingkuluak* heavily emphasizes visual resemblance and existential presence to convey meaning. The iconic signs such as the red and gold colors and the *Kalung*

Kening visually represent commonly understood cultural qualities like bravery, prosperity, and beauty. Meanwhile, *decisigns* such as floral motifs, leaf-root patterns, and edge embroidery embody lived experience and cultural interpretation, reflecting the tangible values of strength, harmony, and refinement.

The dominance of these two sign types underscores the Minangkabau community's reliance on visual and symbolic communication to express social norms and philosophical beliefs. These signs are not arbitrary; rather, they are constructed through shared cultural experiences and are deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of the people. This finding reinforces the notion that Tingkuluak Koto Gadang is not merely decorative but functions as a textile-based semiotic system that preserves and transmits cultural knowledge, especially in contexts where verbal explanations are minimal or absent.

3.2 Discussion

The semiotic analysis of *Tingkuluak Koto Gadang* reveals a multi-layered communicative system encoded in traditional clothing, where each motif, color, and ornament functions as a culturally embedded sign. Through the lens of Peirce's semiotic theory, the findings demonstrate that signs are not isolated aesthetic elements but part of a larger cultural discourse involving tradition, identity, and social norms. Peirce's triadic model; *representamen*, *object*, and *interpretant* offers a nuanced method of decoding these signs, allowing researchers to understand how meaning is constructed in non-verbal, material forms (Chandler, 2007).

Among the six types of signs identified in this study, icon and *decisign* emerged as the most dominant categories. Iconic signs such as the color red, gold, and the *Kalung Kening* (forehead necklace) rely on visual resemblance to communicate values like courage, beauty, and prosperity. As noted by (Elkins, 2009), visual signs function effectively across cultures because they appeal to shared sensory experience, enabling communities to transmit values through tangible, familiar forms. In Minangkabau society, these icons reinforce ideals of strength, refinement, and feminine dignity; values that continue to be esteemed in ceremonial life.

Decisigns, on the other hand, derive their meaning through actual existence and lived experience. Motifs such as *Bunga*, *Akar Daun*, and *Bordiran Ujung* are not just decorative; they symbolize harmony, resilience, and spiritual rootedness. These signs gain meaning through their physical presence in rituals and generational use. As Eco (1976) argues, "a culture is composed not only of texts and discourses, but also of codes and objects that carry semantic weight." The *decisigns* found in Tingkuluak serve as material expressions of intangible cultural memory, resonating with collective identity and moral structure.

The less dominant signs; symbol, legisign, index, and sinsign, nonetheless add complexity and depth to the overall semiotic system. The *Bunga Bulat* motif (legisign) is a fixed cultural code representing unity and beauty in Minangkabau tradition. The *Padi* (symbol) conveys prosperity and gratitude through cultural consensus, reinforcing the community's agricultural roots. The *Rumbai Kotak* (index) connects directly to order and structure, mirroring the value of discipline in Minangkabau life. And the *Pernik Kecil* (sinsign) draws attention to the significance of seemingly minor contributions, an embodiment of humility, which is deeply ingrained in Minangkabau ethics. As Noth (1990) explains, signs are organized systems shaped by tradition, not arbitrary representations.

Furthermore, the prominence of symbolism in Tingkuluak clothing supports the argument that traditional dress functions as a form of non-verbal cultural literacy. As Hofstede et al. (2010) observed, “culture is the collective programming of the mind,” and symbols, rituals, and heroes are among its most visible expressions. By embedding these symbols in everyday dress and ceremonial attire, Minangkabau people have maintained cultural coherence across generations. Yet, current field data suggest that this coherence is at risk, as younger generations increasingly lack awareness of the signs’ meanings. Without deliberate education and documentation, this silent knowledge may fade into obscurity.

Importantly, Tingkuluak Koto Gadang also promotes social equality through visual uniformity. The fact that it minimizes indicators of wealth and emphasizes shared visual codes reflects a social philosophy grounded in community rather than competition. In matrilineal Minangkabau society, status is defined by wisdom, age, and lineage, not economic standing. This egalitarian ideal is encoded directly into the attire’s symbolism. Finally, this study contributes to cultural preservation by showing that Peirce’s semiotic theory is not only a tool for academic deconstruction but also a method for safeguarding intangible heritage. By making the meanings behind traditional clothing explicit, semiotic research empowers communities to reclaim, teach, and sustain their symbolic systems. As Kerusauskaite (2023) states, “semiotics bridges the gap between cultural objects and cultural meanings,” offering a critical path for cultural revitalization in the face of globalization. Future studies can expand this framework by integrating performative, spatial, and linguistic signs to provide a fuller picture of traditional expression.

4. Conclusion

This study has revealed that Tingkuluak Koto Gadang, far from being merely an ornamental headpiece, functions as a complex semiotic system deeply rooted in Minangkabau cultural identity. Through Peirce’s semiotic framework, ten distinct signs were identified across six categories: Sinsign, Legisign, Icon, Index, Symbol, and Decisign, each carrying layered meanings embedded in historical, social, and philosophical values. The results show the total signs are 10 which the dominance is 3 iconics and 3 decisign signs underscores the strong emphasis on visual resemblance and experiential meaning in conveying cultural narratives. Elements such as color, motifs, and embroidery collectively articulate values of courage, resilience, unity, and ancestral heritage.

By interpreting these signs, this research affirms that traditional clothing serves not only aesthetic or ceremonial purposes but also operates as a medium of cultural literacy, silently educating and preserving indigenous knowledge across generations. In light of the observed decline in symbolic literacy among younger Minangkabau generations, this study emphasizes the importance of active documentation and educational dissemination. Moreover, the findings support the relevance of semiotic theory as both an analytical and preservational tool, capable of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in an era increasingly dominated by homogenizing global influences. Future research is encouraged to expand upon this study by integrating linguistic, performative, or spatial dimensions to fully grasp the multidimensional meanings encoded in traditional attire.

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