

## The Semiotics of Pamali: Indigenous Character Education in the Makassar-Gowa Community

Sulastri<sup>1</sup>, Ratnawati<sup>1</sup>, Abdollah<sup>2</sup>, Luthfiah Nurhuda Watri<sup>2</sup>, Hakan Syukur<sup>2</sup>  
<sup>1</sup>Universitas Negeri Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, <sup>2</sup>Universitas Muslim  
Indonesia, South Sulawesi, Indonesia

Corresponding author e-mail: [sulastri.sulastri@umi.ac.id](mailto:sulastri.sulastri@umi.ac.id)

Article History: Received on 8 September 2025, Revised on 6 October 2025,  
Published on 3 December 2025

**Abstract:** This study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to analyze the types and layered meanings of *Pamali* (cultural taboos) within the Makassar-Gowa community of Indonesia. Using a case study with a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected through interviews, field observations, and document analysis. The findings revealed five categories of *Pamali*: Bad-Luck/Fortune, Sacred-Place, Manners & Social-Ethics, Attitudinal, and Religious/Time-Bound. Barthesian analysis demonstrates that these prohibitions operate at denotative (literal prohibition), connotative (moral/cultural value), and mythic (ideological) levels, functioning as an indigenous system of character education. The study concludes that *Pamali* was a dynamic semiotic pedagogy, transmitting values of respect, responsibility, and social harmony. This research offers a model for integrating local wisdom into culturally responsive education curricula.

**Keywords:** Barthesian Semiotics, Cultural Taboos (Pamali), Local Moral Wisdom, Makassar Indigenous Culture

### A. Introduction

Pamali is a term that originates from Indonesian culture and refers to various taboos, superstitions, and cultural beliefs surrounding certain objects, actions, or places that are considered to bring bad luck or misfortune. The concept of pamali is deeply rooted in the beliefs and practices of Indonesian folklore and traditional customs. In society, "Pamali" refers to certain expressions that are used to prohibit or avoid certain actions. These expressions are part of the community's traditions and help control behavior by setting rules for what people should or shouldn't do. Furthermore, pamali is a social bond that leads to sustainability customs community harmony conservation of residents' health and preservations of the environment (Ani Rostiyati, 2023).

In society, one of the expressions that is meant by "PAMALI". Pamali are expressions that contain a kind of prohibition or taboo to do where in the pamali

community has a position as well as functions as social control for someone in saying, acting, or doing an activity. On the other hand, *pamali* is also an indicator in assessing someone whether he obeys and obeys the rules made by society both in the context of religious teachings and social norms.

Indonesia is a country with abundant natural resources and a great diversity of ethnic groups and cultures. The indigenous communities keep their traditions and heritage from their ancestors alive as part of cultural sustainability. These traditions are not only valuable for preserving identity but also represent rich local knowledge that can be integrated into education (Silva, Pereira, & Amorim, 2023). In addition, the values embedded in indigenous beliefs often contain ecological wisdom that shapes people's relationship with nature and social harmony. Such understanding provides the foundation for studying *Pamali* as a local moral code and symbolic system that guides everyday life among the Makassar people. In this regard, (Syahrubany, 2021) explains that *Pamali* not only carries a literal meaning, which we understand directly when we hear it, but also has implicit meanings that provide many life lessons, guidance, and teachings for society. Therefore, the community still strives to preserve and pass on *Pamali*, as approximately 70% of its teachings have positive effects. This cultural practice is also vital for safeguarding Indonesia's heritage of courtesy and moral prosperity. However, although *Pamali* is widely practiced and verbally transmitted, the research points out that there is limited academic explanation regarding its deeper semiotic meaning, especially through the lens of Roland Barthes. While people know *Pamali* as prohibition and taboo, most members of Makassar society do not fully understand the *meaning behind the signs and myths* embedded within these cultural sayings. This gap *not yet knowing the connotative semiotic interpretation of Pamali* is clearly implied in the middle section of this research.

The review of previous research showed that earlier studies only focused on *Pamali* as a cultural belief, myth, or as part of moral education, such as the research conducted by (Anggraini & al, 2022) examined *Pamali* in the context of the Indonesian horror game *Pamali: Indonesian Folklore Horror*, analyzing expressive speech acts and translation techniques used to convey cultural meanings. Their study revealed that *Pamali* contains deep layers of moral and emotional expression even when translated into digital media. However, this previous research has not yet explored *Pamali* through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, leaving a gap in understanding how its signs, connotations, and myths function as a system of indigenous moral education. These studies mostly described *Pamali* as a tradition or social norm but did not position *Pamali* within a structured semiotic analysis, particularly using Barthes' denotation-connotation-myth framework. Therefore, this research current scholarship has not yet provided a semiotic dissection of *Pamali* in Makassar Tribe, especially in relation to meaning production and cultural ideology.

This study becomes unique because it does not treat Pamali merely as folklore or superstition, but repositions it as a system of signs that can be decoded through modern semiotic theory. The novelty lies in analyzing Pamali not only as cultural narrative but as *semiotic text*, exploring how meaning is produced at the denotative and connotative levels and how myth shapes the ideology of Makassar society. In particular and society in general. This myth was generally passed down from one generation to another in their environment (Hafid, AR, bagus, & Rachman, 2022). This fresh perspective is not present in the previous literature and gives this study a distinctive theoretical contribution. Therefore, this research contributes academically by deepening the cultural understanding of Pamali through semiotics and practically by helping Makassar youth reinterpret traditional wisdom in a more rational and educational manner.

Roland Barthes, a French philosopher, is considered one of the most important figures in the study of semiotics. He worked as a philosopher, literary critic, structuralist, and semiologist. Barthes built upon the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, focusing on structuralism within the field of semiotics. A key part of Barthes' approach to semiotics is the idea of denotation and connotation. Similar to (Chen & Hur's, 2025). Barthesian analysis of Indigenous semiotic practices in Taiwan, this study interprets Pamali as a system of cultural signs that construct moral values and collective identity. Beyond Barthes' structural interpretation, (Barreto, 2019) emphasize that learning and knowing themselves are forms of semiosis continuous meaning-making processes through which individuals interpret signs and construct knowledge. This broader view of semiotics supports the present study's perspective that Pamali functions not only as cultural symbolism but also as a pedagogical mechanism of indigenous character formation. Barthes' model showed that the first stage of meaning involves the relationship between the signifier, which is the expression or form of a sign, and the signified, which is the meaning or content it represents in relation to the real world. Barthes refers to denotation as the most direct and clear meaning of a sign. On the other hand, connotation refers to a more subjective or shared meaning that goes beyond the literal. In simple terms, denotation is what a sign literally represents, while connotation is how that representation is understood or interpreted. Based on the explanation above, the research questions are 1) what kinds of Pamali are practiced among the Makassar people? 2) how do these Pamali expressions construct cultural meaning and moral ideology through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework (denotation, connotation, and myth)?

## **B. Methods**

This study used a case study that focuses on Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to analyze the meaning behind Pamali expressions among the Makassar Tribe. The semiotic analysis followed three analytical stages: (1) identifying Pamali expressions, (2) interpreting their denotative and connotative meanings, and (3) classifying

underlying myths or ideological narratives. A qualitative method was selected because the goal was to understand and explain the cultural symbols rather than to count or measure things statistically. Barthes' theory looks at meaning in two ways: what something literally means (denotation) and what it suggests or represents culturally (connotation). It also explores how myths function as cultural ideas, which helps in interpreting the deeper meanings of these expressions.

The main instruments were semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, interview and documentation. Interviews were conducted in both Makassar language and Indonesian, data was recorded then translated into English for analysis. The interview process allowed informants to narrate Pamali expressions naturally, while observation provided contextual understanding of how Pamali was practiced in real social interaction. Documentation was used to validate oral data and ensure authenticity and accuracy. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, this study employed triangulation of sources and techniques. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from a manual thematic analysis process and different participants such as community elders, religious leaders, and younger members of the Makassar-Gowa community. Technique triangulation was applied by cross-verifying interview data, field observations, and documentation of Pamali expressions. The data were then rechecked and interpreted collaboratively among the researchers to maintain consistency and credibility. This process ensured that the findings accurately represented the authentic cultural meanings embedded in Pamali practices.

### **C. Results and Discussion**

The researchers reported the findings from observation and interviews on Pamali among the Makassar tribe in Gowa, drawing information from local community members and elders knowledgeable about the topic.

#### **Kinds of Pamali Practiced by the Makassar People**

This study investigated *Pamali* traditional taboos practiced by the Makassar-Gowa community through the lens of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. The findings are based on qualitative data gathered from some native informants through interviews and field observation. The analysis demonstrated that *Pamali* is not merely a set of prohibitions but a living semiotic system through which indigenous wisdom is encoded, transmitted, and preserved. It functions simultaneously as a social regulator, a moral guide, and an instrument of character education.

The first research question sought to identify the existing forms and categories of *Pamali* still practiced by the Makassar Tribe. The data revealed five major categories: (1) Bad-Luck or Fortune Pamali, (2) Sacred Place Pamali, (3) Manners and Social Ethics

Pamali, (4) Attitudinal Pamali, and (5) Religious and Time-Bound Pamali. Each category represented a unique moral dimension that collectively sustains the moral, spiritual, and social integrity of the Makassar people. These categories operate both as behavioral codes and as semiotic expressions of the community's worldview.

The first category, *Bad Luck or Fortune Pamali*, includes expressions such as "do not sit in front of the door," "finish your rice," and "do not eat in front of the door." Although these prohibitions were framed as warnings against misfortune or blocked fortune, their denotative meaning often relates to practical behavior, such as maintaining order and discipline. Connotatively, they taught gratitude, politeness, and awareness of communal space, while mythically, they affirmed the ideological belief that good fortune is a result of moral conduct and respectful living. The second category, *Sacred Place Pamali*, concerns sites considered spiritually powerful arge banyan trees, graves, or abandoned houses. Common taboos include making loud noises, wearing improper clothing, or entering forbidden areas. Denotatively, such prohibitions aim to prevent harm; connotatively, they represented reverence for nature and spiritual harmony; and mythically, they sustained the worldview that humans coexist with both visible and invisible realms. This reinforces Makassar cosmology, where respect for sacred spaces signifies moral and ecological balance. The third category, *Manners & Social Ethics Pamali*. These are prescriptions regulating everyday interpersonal conduct. For example, "don't interrupt elders," "don't laugh too loudly," "don't talk while eating," or "don't urinate in random places." In the interviews these items repeatedly appeared as moral directives packaged as prohibitions, making them memorable and enforceable across generations. Similar to modern representations of taboo in social and visual discourse, *Pamali* also serves as a semiotic mechanism that communicates moral boundaries and social norms (Roux, 2024). The fourth category, *Attitudinal Pamali*, extends the meaning of taboo to emotional and psychological conduct. Acts such as arrogance, shouting, or disrespecting others are prohibited, as they symbolize moral imbalance. Denotatively, this category restrains inappropriate emotional expression; connotatively, it promotes humility and emotional discipline; and mythically, it reaffirms the ideology that moral virtue arises from restraint and self-respect. Thus, *Pamali* not only governs physical behavior but also regulates internal attitudes, guiding individuals toward moral maturity. The fifth category, *Religious and Time Bound Pamali*, consists of rules linked to ritual or temporal contexts "do not go out during Maghrib," "do not bath at night," and "wait until the Adzan finishes before leaving the house." These prohibitions merge religious devotion with ancestral wisdom. Denotatively, they specify proper timing; connotatively, they encouraged prayer discipline and safety; and mythically, they harmonize Islamic piety with indigenous spirituality. This category demonstrated how Makassar culture integrates religion, morality, and daily life through symbolic expression.

The semiotic analysis presented in the table revealed that *Pamali* among the Makassar people functions as a living moral system that encodes indigenous wisdom through

layered meanings. Drawing upon interview data and field observations, the findings confirmed that *Pamali* is not merely a set of prohibitions but a dynamic mechanism of moral communication, an unwritten code that guides behaviour and preserves social harmony.

### ***Pamali* Expressions Construct Connotative Meaning and Cultural Ideology Using Barthes' Semiotic Model**

The second research question, which explores how *Pamali* expressions constructed cultural meaning and moral ideology through Barthes' semiotic framework, is answered through the following interpretation of denotative, connotative, and mythic layers of meaning. At the connotative level, these prohibitions acquired moral, emotional, and cultural significance that reflect shared values discipline, politeness, gratitude, and spiritual awareness. Finally, at the mythic level, *Pamali* evolved into ideology, transforming these cultural values into collective truths that define moral order in Makassar society. Table 1 presents the categories of *Pamali* identified in this study along with their denotative, connotative, and mythic meanings. This table addresses both research question 1 (the kinds of *Pamali*) and research question 2 (how these expressions construct cultural and moral meanings through Barthes' semiotic framework).

**Table 1. Categories of *Pamali* and Their Denotative, Connotative, and Mythic Meanings**

No	Category of <i>Pamali</i>	Typical Expressions	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning	Mythic Meaning (Ideological Level)
1	Bad-Luck Fortune	" <i>Jangan duduk di depan pintu</i> ".	Avoid actions that block fortune	Teacher's discipline, gratitude, and respect for communal space	Moral virtue and good fortune are rewards for obedience and social harmony
2		" <i>jangan makan di depan pintu</i> "	Avoid eating in improper places	Emphasizes manners and awareness of others	Disorders invites misfortune respect brings prosperity
3		" <i>jangan buang nasi nanti rezekimu seret</i> "	Do not waste food	Encourage s gratitude or humility	Respecting sustenance ensures divine blessing
4	Sacred- Place	" <i>jangan berisik di bawah pohon besar</i> "	Avoid noise near sacred trees	Instils reverence toward nature	Nature spirits must be respected harmony sustains safety
5		" <i>jangan masuk ke rumah kosong sendirian</i> "	Avoid entering abandoned houses	Encourages caution and spiritual awareness	Invisible beings guard certain places: balance must be maintained

6		<i>"jangan buang air kecil di tempat angker"</i>	Avoid urinating in haunted areas	Promotes cleanliness and respect for sacred sites	Offending spirits brings illness or bad luck
7	Manners & Social-Ethics	<i>"jangan bicara waktu makan"</i>	Avoid talking while eating	Promotes disciplines and hygiene	Respectful eating reflects moral refinement
8		<i>"jangan memotong pembicaraan orang tua"</i>	Avoid interrupting elders	Teachers respect and patience	Elders symbolize wisdom, obedience sustains order
9		<i>"jangan tertawa keras di malam hari"</i>	Avoid loud laughter at night	Encourages modesty and self-control	Night-time is sacred, restraint shows maturity
10		<i>"jangan duduk di meja"</i>	Avoid sitting on the table	Reinforces boundaries between tools and behaviour	Cleanliness equals respect mixing spaces invites impurity
11	Attitudinal	<i>"jangan sombong nanti jatuh"</i>	Do not act arrogantly	Promotes humility, self-awareness	Moral pride leads to downfall; virtue is modesty
12		<i>"jangan iris ama teman nanti nasibmu jelek"</i>	Avoid jealously	Teachers' empathy and gratitude	Envy corrupt fortune contentment maintains harmony
13		<i>"jangan berteriak pada orang tua"</i>	Avoid shouting at parents or elders	Emphasizes filial piety	Disrespect brings spiritual imbalance and social shame
14	Religious/ Time-Bound	<i>"Jangan keluar rumah saat maghrib".</i>	Avoid leaving home at twilight	Encourages family unity and prayer disciplines	Dusck is scared time; obedience shows faith and safety
15		<i>"jangan mandi malam-malam"</i>	Avoid bathing late at night	Prevent illness and fatigue	Respect for time equals respect for life rhythm
16		<i>"jangan bersiul di malam hari"</i>	Avoid whistling at night	Maintains quietness and respect	Whistling attracts spirit; silence keeps peace
17		<i>"jangan menjahit malam jumat"</i>	Avoid sewing on Friday night	Observes scared time	Friday night is for worships and rest work disrupts sanctity
18		<i>"jangan menyapu malam hari"</i>	Avoid sweeping at night	Prevent accidents or loss	Symbolic of sweeping away fortune
19		<i>"jangan tidur habis maghrib"</i>	Avoid Sleeping after dusk payer	Encourages productivity and prayer	Laziness invites bad luck alertness ensure blessing

Barthes (1972) argues that myths transform cultural values into "naturalized truths." In this sense, the belief that breaking *Pamali* invites misfortune is not mere superstition but an ideological mechanism that reinforces ethical conduct. *Pamali* thus naturalizes moral values – turning respect, modesty, and gratitude into unquestioned elements of

daily behavior. The Makassar community perceives adherence to *Pamali* as part of one's moral duty, ensuring that social and spiritual harmony are maintained. Based on the interview results, the functions of *Pamali* identified by the informants can be categorized into several aspects, namely:

- a. Moral education, Moral values and behaviours, such as placing one's feet on chairs or table are considered improper and disrespectful, often associated with arrogance or pride. For example, failing to bow slightly or neglecting to say "excuse me" when passing an elder is viewed as impolite. Such taboos function as a means of teaching moral.
- b. Ensuring safety and well-being, Informants explained that taboos like not leaving clothes outside overnight are intended to protect individuals and families from harm. The Makassar people believe that clothes left out after dark may attract supernatural beings. From a health perspective, this also prevents illness caused by exposure to the night air.
- c. Respect for living beings, another function of *Pamali* is to cultivate compassion toward animals and all living creatures. For instance, when someone accidentally hits a cat or dog, they are advised to move the animal respectfully instead of performing ritualistic acts believed to ward off misfortune. This belief emphasizes respect for all of God's creations and the interdependence of life.
- d. Faith strengthening, The *Pamali* prohibiting children from playing outside at dusk is believed to have a religious basis, aligning with a Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). This rule teaches children discipline and encourages them to engage in evening prayers and remembrance of God.

These findings indicated that *Pamali* serves as a traditional moral system that promotes ethical behavior, safety, empathy, and spiritual awareness in daily life. These findings were derived from in-depth interviews conducted with the informants in Makassar-Gowa. The analysis of *Pamali* expressions was based on Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics, which consists of three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a sign, while connotation refers to cultural and emotional associations. Myth, in Barthes' framework, represents the ideological meaning shared within a community. This framework aligns with recent developments in social semiotics, emphasizing that meaning is always constructed through social and cultural contexts (O'Hagan, 2023).

The semiotic construction of *Pamali* also functions as an informal model of character education. Elders transmit these teachings orally, embedding moral lessons within everyday communication. The symbolic nature of *Pamali* allows individuals to internalize values subconsciously through fear, respect, or admiration. For instance, when a child learns not to disturb sacred trees, the message is both environmental and spiritual. Thus, *Pamali* embodies a semiotic pedagogy that cultivates ethical awareness through cultural symbolism rather than formal instruction. This aligns with contemporary educational perspectives emphasizing that integrating Indigenous

knowledge into teacher and school practices strengthens students' moral development and cultural awareness (Manns, Heiss, & Loupis, 2024). Moreover, the mythic structure of *Pamali* provided a mechanism for moral continuity in a changing society. While modernization and rational religion have reinterpreted certain taboos, the moral ideology behind them remains intact. Young generations may no longer fear supernatural punishment, but they continued to respect *Pamali* as cultural wisdom. This adaptability ensured that indigenous values coexist with modern ethics and religious understanding, illustrating the resilience of Makassar cultural semiotics.

#### **D. Conclusions**

This study successfully addressed the two research questions. First, it identified five main categories of Pamali practiced by the Makassar Tribe: Bad-Luck or Fortune, Sacred-Place, Manners and Social-Ethics, Attitudinal, and Religious/Time-Bound, each serving as a moral code guiding behavior in everyday life. Second, it demonstrated how these Pamali expressions construct connotative meaning and cultural ideology through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework: at the denotative level, Pamali appears as explicit prohibitions; at the connotative level, these rules convey ethical lessons promoting humility, respect, and social harmony; and at the mythic level, they sustain the community's ideological worldview, linking moral virtue with social and spiritual balance. By connecting the forms of Pamali with their layered semiotic meanings, this study illustrates the dual role of Pamali as both a cultural sign system and an indigenous pedagogical tool. Theoretically, this research extends Barthesian semiotics by situating it within an indigenous Southeast Asian context, highlighting those semiotic systems like Pamali serve both communicative and pedagogical functions. Practically, the findings suggest that indigenous semiotic knowledge can be integrated into character education curricula, enabling educators to nurture culturally grounded ethical behavior among students and strengthen moral development while preserving local wisdom. However, this study has limitations, including its small samples size from interviews and observations within a single ethnic group (Makassar-Gowa community), which restricts generalizability to broader Indonesian or global contexts. For future research, scholars may compare Pamali with other indigenous moral systems across Indonesia to explore cross-cultural patterns in semiotic pedagogy. Additionally, studies could investigate the practical integration of Pamali into formal school curricula, assessing its impact on students' ethical reasoning, social responsibility, and cultural awareness.

#### **E. Acknowledgement**

We would like to express sincere gratitude to the elders and community members of the Makassar-Gowa region, who generously shared their knowledge and experiences regarding Pamali practices.

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