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Tumpeng Nusantara: Exploring Potential as an Instrument of Indonesian Gastrodiplomacy

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative conceptual paper employs literature study and document analysis to explore Tumpeng Nusantara as a gastronomic symbol and to examine its potential as an instrument of Indonesian gastrodiplomacy. Drawing on academic literature on gastronomy, food symbolism, and gastrodiplomacy, alongside the analysis of texts, visual materials, and publicly available documents such as government publications and online promotional content, the study investigates how the meanings attached to tumpeng are articulated and can be mobilized in cultural diplomacy agendas. The analysis shows that tumpeng functions not only as ritual food but also as a communicative medium that embodies values of harmony, gratitude, cosmology, and togetherness, which resonate with Indonesia's image as a diverse and inclusive nation. When strategically framed in narratives, culinary events, and symbolic representations in international forums, tumpeng-based gastronomic experiences have the potential to enhance Indonesia's cultural visibility, support soft power projection, and strengthen people-to-people engagement. Nevertheless, the use of tumpeng in gastrodiplomacy also faces challenges, including fragmentation of messages, risks of oversimplifying local meanings, and limited synergy among state and non-state stakeholders involved in promoting Indonesian food heritage. At the same time, there are significant opportunities to integrate tumpeng into structured nation-branding programs, creative industries, and collaborative chef–diplomat initiatives that remain sensitive to local knowledge and authenticity. The paper concludes that positioning Tumpeng Nusantara as a flagship element of Indonesian gastrodiplomacy requires a communication framework that balances global appeal and cultural depth, and calls for future empirical research to capture foreign audiences' responses to tumpeng-centered diplomatic initiatives.

Keywords: *Tumpeng Nusantara, gastronomy, literature study, document analysis, Indonesian gastrodiplomacy, soft power*

1. INTRODUCTION

Gastrodiplomacy has emerged over the past two decades as an important dimension of contemporary public diplomacy, in which states strategically use food and culinary traditions to build favorable national images and cultivate emotional proximity with foreign publics. [1],[2]. Rather than relying solely on high politics and official negotiations, gastrodiplomacy emphasizes cultural experiences and everyday practices of eating as a means to "win hearts and minds through the stomach" and to project soft power in subtle yet potentially effective ways. [1],[4] Rockower conceptualizes gastrodiplomacy as an intersection of cultural diplomacy, culinary diplomacy, and nation branding, where carefully designed campaigns make a nation's cuisine more visible, tangible, and approachable to international audiences. [1],[3] In this perspective, food is not only a commodity but also a communicative medium through which stories of identity, memory, and values are narrated and negotiated across borders. [2],[4].

Several Asian countries are frequently cited as pioneers in the use of cuisine within cultural diplomacy, including Thailand with its "Global Thai" program, South Korea with the global promotion of Korean food aligned with the Korean Wave, and Japan with the internationalization of Washoku as both UNESCO intangible cultural heritage and a national culinary icon. [5],[6] These initiatives generally possess clear objectives, dedicated budgets, and integrated communication strategies so that food is positioned not merely as an event ornament but as a core instrument of public diplomacy. [5],[7] When culinary campaigns are supported by coherent narratives, strong visual identities, and experiential formats that engage multiple senses,

cuisine can function as a powerful "language" of diplomacy that is easily accessed and enjoyed by diverse social groups abroad. [4],[6],[7] Such experiences do not only generate economic benefits through tourism and creative industries, but also contribute to long-term reputation building and mutual understanding between societies. [6],[7]

In Indonesia, the extraordinary diversity of culinary traditions across the archipelago constitutes a significant cultural resource for gastrodiplomacy and culinary tourism development. [8],[9] Recent governmental initiatives, such as the "Indonesia Spice Up the World" program, explicitly aim to expand networks of Indonesian restaurants overseas, increase exports of spices and seasoning products, and strengthen Indonesia's position in the global culinary map. [8],[9],[10] Studies on these initiatives indicate that Indonesian gastronomy can raise international awareness of the country's flavors and plural cultural roots, while simultaneously opening opportunities for trade and investment in the food sector. [8],[9] However, existing literature also suggests that the culinary icons promoted abroad tend to concentrate on a limited set of popular dishes such as rendang, satay, and fried rice so that other gastronomic symbols rich in ritual and philosophical meanings remain underutilized in strategic communication efforts. [10],[11] This situation raises questions about how Indonesia might diversify its culinary icons in ways that better reflect the depth of its cultural heritage and support nation branding objectives. [10],[11]

One culinary symbol that occupies a distinctive position within Indonesian cultural life is tumpeng. [13],[14] Tumpeng is commonly described as a cone-shaped rice dish surrounded by assorted side dishes and garnishes, prepared and served on special occasions ranging from life-cycle rituals and village ceremonies to institutional celebrations and state-related events. [13],[14],[16] The conical form of tumpeng is often interpreted as a representation of a mountain or cosmic axis symbolizing the relationship between humans and the Divine, while the composition of side dishes around it is associated with ideas of natural abundance, diversity of living beings, and social harmony within the community. [13],[14],[15] Ethnographic,ethnolinguistic, and semiotic studies highlight that tumpeng encapsulates layers of philosophical meanings related to gratitude, hope, leadership, and mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*), thereby functioning not only as food but also as a cultural text through which values are taught and remembered. [14]-[16]

In contemporary contexts, tumpeng has been recontextualized and increasingly appears in urban institutional, corporate, and governmental settings, such as independence day ceremonies, organizational anniversaries, official launches, and receptions for distinguished guests. [13],[16] The ritual of cutting the top of the tumpeng and presenting it to specific persons is widely understood as an act of honor, blessing, and collective hope for prosperity, while also reinforcing notions of hierarchy, responsibility, and social solidarity. [15],[16] Through these practices, tumpeng operates as a performative medium that bridges traditional cosmological worldviews with modern forms of celebration and public representation, implicitly articulating Indonesia's identity as a religious, communal, and harmony-oriented nation. [13],[15],[16] From a communication perspective, the visual distinctiveness, narrative richness, and participatory character of tumpeng especially the shared act of eating offer promising resources for the design of gastrodiplomatic experiences. [11],[14],[16]

Despite its strong symbolic position in domestic cultural life, tumpeng has received limited attention in the literature on Indonesian culinary diplomacy and is rarely foregrounded as a primary icon in official gastrodiplomacy initiatives. [8],[10],[11] Most studies on Indonesian gastrodiplomacy focus on macro-level programs, restaurant promotion, and the international circulation of certain popular dishes, while research on tumpeng tends to remain within the domains of anthropology, ritual studies, and local cultural history. [9],[13],[15] As a result, the potential of Tumpeng Nusantara to be strategically framed and communicated as an instrument of gastrodiplomacy has not yet been examined in a systematic way. [9],[11] This article responds to that gap by conceptually exploring the gastronomic meanings of Tumpeng Nusantara and analyzing its potential roles within Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy. Specifically, the study aims (1) to interpret the cultural and symbolic dimensions of tumpeng, (2) to examine how these meanings could be articulated in diplomatic narratives and practices, and (3) to identify key challenges and opportunities for positioning tumpeng as a gastrodiplomatic icon aligned with Indonesia's nation branding and soft power strategies. The analysis is based on qualitative literature study and document analysis of academic works, policy documents, and public communication materials related to tumpeng, Indonesian cuisine, and culinary diplomacy. [1],[3],[8],[13]

1.1 Background and Conceptual Focus

The growing prominence of gastrodiplomacy reflects a broader shift in public diplomacy, where states increasingly rely on culture, lifestyle, and everyday practices such as eating and cooking as strategic resources to shape their international image and build emotional connections with foreign publics. [1],[2] In this context, food is not only a material product but also a carrier of narratives about history, identity, and values that can be communicated across borders in accessible and affective ways. [1],[4 For Indonesia, with its vast archipelagic geography and extraordinary culinary diversity, gastronomy offers a rich repertoire of symbols and experiences that can be mobilised to support nation branding and soft power projection. [8],[9] However, existing initiatives such as "Indonesia Spice Up the

World" have tended to foreground a small set of popular dishes, leaving other culturally dense gastronomic symbols relatively unexplored in formal gastrodiplomacy agendas. [8]-[11]

Tumpeng Nusantara occupies a distinctive position within this landscape. As a cone-shaped rice dish surrounded by assorted side dishes and ritualised through specific preparation and serving practices, tumpeng embodies layered meanings related to cosmology, gratitude, abundance, social hierarchy, and communal solidarity. [13]-[15] It appears in various ritual, social, and institutional settings from life-cycle ceremonies and village celebrations to organisational anniversaries and state-related events thus bridging local traditions and national representation. [13],[14],[16]The visual distinctiveness of tumpeng, its performative elements (such as the cutting and sharing of the cone), and its narrative richness make it a promising yet under-examined candidate for Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy toolkit. [14]-[16]

Despite this potential, current scholarship tends to discuss tumpeng mainly within anthropological, ethnographic, or cultural-studies perspectives, with limited engagement with public diplomacy and communication theory. [13]-[16] At the same time, the literature on Indonesian gastrodiplomacy and culinary diplomacy often concentrates on macro-programmes, restaurant promotion, and the international circulation of popular dishes without systematically considering how ritual foods like tumpeng might function as communicative icons in international cultural encounters. [8]-[11] This conceptual gap motivates the present study, which adopts a qualitative, conceptual approach based on literature study and document analysis to bring the gastronomic meanings of Tumpeng Nusantara into dialogue with frameworks of gastrodiplomacy, nation branding, and soft power. [1],[3],[8],[13] By doing so, the paper aims to provide a more nuanced foundation for understanding how tumpeng could be framed, narrated, and strategically utilised as an instrument of Indonesian gastrodiplomacy, while remaining attentive to issues of authenticity, local knowledge, and the risks of cultural simplification. [10],[11],[14]

1.1.1 Research Questions

In line with the background and conceptual focus, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How are the cultural, symbolic, and philosophical meanings of Tumpeng Nusantara interpreted in existing academic literature, policy documents, and public communication materials related to Indonesian gastronomy and cultural heritage?
2. How is Tumpeng Nusantara currently represented and articulated visually, narratively, and performativelyin contexts that are relevant to Indonesian gastrodiplomacy, such as state ceremonies, cultural events, and international promotional activities?
3. What challenges and opportunities can be identified for positioning Tumpeng Nusantara as a strategic gastronomic icon within Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy and nation branding efforts?

1.1.2 Research Objectives

Corresponding to the research questions, this study aims:

1. To understand and describe the cultural, symbolic, and philosophical meanings of Tumpeng Nusantara as reflected in literature and documented practices.
2. To explore and interpret how Tumpeng Nusantara is represented and articulated in ceremonial, institutional, and promotional contexts that are potentially linked to Indonesian gastrodiplomacy.
3. To identify and interpret key challenges and opportunities in developing Tumpeng Nusantara as a strategic instrument of Indonesian gastrodiplomacy, and to formulate conceptual directions for a culturally sensitive and coherent communication framework.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Gastrodiplomacy and Public Diplomacy

Gastrodiplomacy is widely discussed as a contemporary form of public diplomacy in which states strategically use food and culinary traditions to communicate national identity, values, and stories to foreign publics. [1],[3] Rockower conceptualises gastrodiplomacy as an intersection of cultural diplomacy, culinary diplomacy, and nation branding, where carefully designed campaigns make a nation's cuisine more visible, tangible, and approachable to international audiences. [1],[3] In this perspective, food becomes a communicative medium that can "win hearts and minds through the stomach" by providing sensorial experiences that are often more accessible than conventional diplomatic messages. [1],[4] Subsequent works emphasise that gastrodiplomacy can support positive image building, trust, and mutual understanding when integrated with tourism and creative-industry initiatives. [4]-[7]

2.2 Asian Pioneers in Gastrodiplomacy

A number of Asian countries are often cited as pioneers in the use of cuisine within cultural diplomacy, such as Thailand with the "Global Thai" programme, South Korea with the globalisation of Korean food aligned with the Korean Wave, and Japan with the international recognition of washoku. [5],[6] These initiatives typically possess clear objectives, dedicated

budgets, and integrated communication strategies so that food is positioned as a core instrument of public diplomacy rather than a mere event accessory. [5],[7] Studies on these cases demonstrate that when culinary campaigns are supported by coherent narratives, strong visual identities, and multisensory experiences, cuisine can function as a powerful "language" of diplomacy that enhances tourism flows, stimulates demand for food products, and strengthens the symbolic capital of the nation. [6],[7] At the same time, scholars warn of the risks of over-nationalising food and simplifying complex culinary traditions into easily marketable icons. [6]

2.3 Indonesian Gastrodiplomacy and "Indonesia Spice Up the World"

In Indonesia, the richness of culinary traditions across the archipelago has increasingly been recognised as a strategic asset for gastrodiplomacy and culinary tourism. [8],[9] The "Indonesia Spice Up the World" (ISUTW) programme is a key policy initiative that aims to expand networks of Indonesian restaurants abroad, increase exports of spice and seasoning products, and strengthen Indonesia's position in global culinary markets. [8,10] Mahardika et al. highlight how ISUTW seeks to link cultural promotion with economic objectives, although they note ongoing challenges related to coordination, branding, and monitoring. [8] Putri and Hidayat show that Indonesian food promotion in the United States can contribute to people-to-people relations and support formal diplomatic agendas, but they also underline the need for clearer icon selection and standardised narratives. [9}Systematic reviews of gastrodiplomacy and culinary tourism further indicate that Indonesian scholarship remains fragmented and tends to focus on specific destinations or campaigns rather than on a coherent conceptualisation of Indonesian culinary icons. [10],[11]

2.4 Food as Cultural Text and Symbolic System

Parallel to the gastrodiplomacy literature, a substantial body of anthropological, ethnographic, and semiotic work conceptualises food as a cultural text and symbolic system. [2],[4],[14] From this perspective, ingredients, cooking techniques, and presentation forms are not neutral but carry layered meanings that encode cosmologies, social structures, and moral orders. [14],[15] In the Indonesian context, many traditional dishes are embedded in ritual practices and local belief systems, linking notions of sacredness, hierarchy, and community to specific foods and modes of eating. [13],[14] Such symbolic richness offers significant resources for gastrodiplomacy, yet it also raises the problem of how to translate complex local meanings into narratives that are understandable and appealing to international audiences without erasing their depth. [11],[14]

2.5 Tumpeng Nusantara in Cultural and Symbolic Studies

Within this symbolic framework, tumpeng has been analysed as one of Indonesia's most meaningful ritual foods. [13],[14] Popular and academic sources describe tumpeng as a cone-shaped rice dish surrounded by assorted side dishes, closely associated with Javanese and broader Indonesian ritual life. [13],[14],[16] The conical shape is commonly interpreted as representing a mountain or cosmic axis, echoing cosmologies that place mountains at the centre of the universe and as sites of divine presence. [13],[14],[16] The arrangement of side dishes around the cone is linked to ideas of natural abundance, diversity of living beings, and the interconnectedness of humans and their environment. [13],[15] Lestari's ethnolinguistic work on ritual food meanings in Javanese traditions shows how particular ingredients, colours, and spatial arrangements encode moral and social messages transmitted across generations. [14] Zahra, using Roland Barthes's semiology, further demonstrates that tumpeng functions as a mythic sign that condenses narratives of leadership, unity, and gratitude in contemporary Indonesian settings. [15]

2.6 Dynamics and Adaptations of Tumpeng

Recent studies also highlight the historical evolution and contemporary adaptations of tumpeng. Kurniawan's analysis shows how tumpeng has developed from agrarian ritual contexts into a versatile ceremonial dish present in both rural and urban celebrations, while retaining core symbolic features. [13] He notes that modern variations including different types of rice, side dishes, and presentation styles reflect changing lifestyles, health concerns, and aesthetic preferences among Indonesian consumers. [13] Other works discuss the use of tumpeng in coastal thanksgiving ceremonies and local communal rites, illustrating its flexibility across regions and socio-cultural contexts. [16] Taken together, these studies portray tumpeng as an evolving gastronomic form that negotiates between continuity and innovation rather than a static, unchanging tradition. [13],[16]

2.7 Gap in Linking Tumpeng and Gastrodiplomacy

Despite the richness of symbolic and cultural analyses, the connection between tumpeng and Indonesian gastrodiplomacy remains underdeveloped. Most research on tumpeng focuses on ritual, philosophical, or local sociocultural dimensions without explicitly situating it within frameworks of public diplomacy, nation branding, or strategic communication. [13]-[16] Conversely, studies on Indonesian gastrodiplomacy and the ISUTW programme tend to highlight other dishes and macro-level policy initiatives, with little attention to how ritual foods such as tumpeng could be transformed into communicative icons in international cultural encounters. [8]-[11]This disconnect suggests a conceptual and practical gap: although tumpeng clearly holds potential as a distinctive visual and narrative symbol of Indonesian culture, its role in external communication and international promotion has not been systematically explored. [10],[11],[14]

Addressing this gap, the present study positions Tumpeng Nusantara at the intersection of gastronomic symbolism and gastrodiplomacy, using literature study and document analysis to map how its meanings might be articulated and mobilised within Indonesia's broader efforts to project soft power through food. [1],[3],[8],[13]

3. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative conceptual approach based on literature study and document analysis. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the research aims to interpret meanings, symbols, and narratives related to Tumpeng Nusantara and to situate them within broader frameworks of gastrodiplomacy, nation branding, and soft power, rather than to measure statistical relationships between variables. The conceptual orientation allows the researcher to synthesise insights from multiple sources, including academic literature, policy documents, media texts, and public communication materials, in order to construct an interpretive understanding of how Tumpeng Nusantara may function as a potential instrument of Indonesian gastrodiplomacy. Accordingly, the emphasis of this study is placed on depth of interpretation and theoretical elaboration rather than empirical generalisation.

The study draws on two main categories of data. The first category consists of academic literature on gastrodiplomacy, public diplomacy, food and culture, and studies of tumpeng and Indonesian ritual foods. This category includes journal articles, theses, and conference papers that discuss gastrodiplomacy and culinary diplomacy in general, Indonesian culinary diplomacy in particular, as well as anthropological, ethnolinguistic, and semiotic studies examining tumpeng and related ritual practices [1]–[3], [8], [12]–[15]. The second category comprises publicly available documents and materials that portray Tumpeng Nusantara in cultural, institutional, and promotional contexts. These materials include policy documents and programme descriptions related to "Indonesia Spice Up the World" and other culinary diplomacy initiatives, news articles and feature stories on tumpeng, visual and textual content from official government and embassy websites or social media, as well as documentation of ceremonial events in which tumpeng appears as a symbolic centrepiece [8]–[13], [16]. Taken together, these sources provide a contextualised perspective on how Tumpeng Nusantara is understood, represented, and potentially linked to Indonesia's external cultural communication.

Data collection was conducted in three iterative stages. First, a literature search was performed using relevant keywords such as "gastrodiplomacy," "culinary diplomacy," "Indonesian culinary diplomacy," "tumpeng," and "ritual food" to identify key academic works and policy-related documents. The inclusion criteria focused on publications that explicitly address gastrodiplomacy, Indonesian culinary promotion, or the symbolic meanings of tumpeng and related ritual foods [1], [2], [8], [12]. Second, a corpus of policy and promotional documents was compiled, including official descriptions of gastrodiplomacy programmes, online articles, and digital materials depicting tumpeng in ceremonial or representational settings [8]–[13], [16]. Third, all selected texts were organised into thematic groupings, including gastrodiplomacy theory, Indonesian culinary programmes, tumpeng symbolism, and representations of tumpeng in public communication. This organisation facilitated systematic comparison across sources and supported the identification of recurring patterns in both academic and non-academic materials.

The collected data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis adapted for conceptual research. The analytical process began with repeated reading of the selected literature and documents to familiarise the researcher with the range of meanings and representations associated with Tumpeng Nusantara and Indonesian gastrodiplomacy [1], [3], [8], [12]. Initial codes were then generated to capture recurring ideas, such as the symbolic meanings of tumpeng, its ritual and performative aspects, the role of culinary icons in gastrodiplomacy, policy narratives, and visual representations of tumpeng. These codes were subsequently clustered into broader interpretive themes, including the gastronomic and symbolic dimensions of tumpeng, existing patterns of Indonesian gastrodiplomacy and icon selection, and the challenges and opportunities associated with positioning tumpeng as a gastrodiplomacy icon. The resulting themes were refined through constant comparison across different sources and interpreted in relation to theoretical discussions on public diplomacy, nation branding, and food as cultural text [2], [4], [14].

Although this study is conceptual and does not involve primary fieldwork, efforts were made to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. Triangulation was applied by comparing insights derived from different types of sources, including academic works, policy documents, media texts, and visual materials, and by examining how similar concepts are articulated across diverse contexts [1], [3], [8]. The researcher also engaged in reflexivity by acknowledging their positionality as a communication scholar with prior engagement in research on Indonesian cultural heritage and tourism communication. This positionality may influence the selection and interpretation of sources, particularly in viewing tumpeng as a promising cultural icon. To address this, analytical decisions were made explicit, alternative interpretations were considered, and attention was given to potential tensions between local cultural meanings and the demands of international promotion [2], [4], [14].

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Gastronomic and Symbolic Meanings of Tumpeng Nusantara

The literature indicates that Tumpeng Nusantara embodies layered gastronomic and symbolic meanings

rooted in Indonesian, particularly Javanese, cosmology and ritual practices [12]–[14]. The cone-shaped rice structure is widely interpreted as a representation of a mountain or cosmic axis, reflecting traditional conceptions of mountains as sacred spaces that connect the human world with the divine realm [12], [13], [16], [17]. Surrounding side dishes, typically arranged in a circular pattern, symbolise ideas of natural abundance, ecological balance, and the interconnectedness of humans, nature, and other living beings [12], [14].

From a semiotic perspective, tumpeng can be interpreted as a symbolic system in which culinary elements function as cultural signs that convey social and moral meanings. Ethnolinguistic and semiotic studies show that the colours, ingredients, and spatial arrangement of the dish communicate messages about harmony, gratitude, and collective responsibility within the community [14], [15]. Zahra's semiological analysis, for instance, interprets tumpeng as a mythic sign that condenses narratives of leadership, unity, and collective aspiration within contemporary Indonesian social contexts [15]. These interpretations suggest that tumpeng operates not merely as a traditional dish but as a gastronomic text through which cultural values are materially expressed and socially transmitted.

From the perspective of gastrodiplomacy, such symbolic richness is significant because food that carries layered cultural narratives can function as a powerful communicative medium in international cultural encounters. Culinary symbols that embody historical memory, philosophical values, and social practices tend to be more effective in generating emotional engagement among foreign audiences, thereby enhancing the cultural resonance of diplomatic initiatives [1], [4]. In this sense, the symbolic complexity of tumpeng provides a strong cultural foundation for its potential use in gastrodiplomatic communication.

Tumpeng has a deeply rooted "cultural DNA" that has grown and evolved alongside Indonesian communities since ancient times. Historically, tumpeng has carried tones and nuances closely associated with the Indonesian nation because of its historical dimension. People have constructed meanings from the tumpeng's form and its accompanying dishes, meanings that remain inseparable from ritual aspects.

Referring to the book *Tumpeng Indonesia*, written by gastronomy experts from the Indonesian cuisine enthusiast community, the Indonesia Gastronomy Community (IGC), it is noted that tumpeng already existed even before the influence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam reached the Far East. [12] Tumpeng is an original food that has existed and grown alongside the people of the archipelago. This iconic dish has undergone transformations that began with local spirituality, moved into Hindu cosmology, passed through Javanese syncretism and Islamisation, continued into social traditions, and ultimately became part of Indonesia's national identity. [12]

A further point that warrants attention concerns the semiotics of tumpeng. The cone-shaped form is commonly understood as a directional symbol of life, suggesting that humans should orient themselves toward God. The rice used for tumpeng may be either white rice or yellow rice; however, yellow rice is more commonly used and is widely interpreted as an expression of gratitude. In addition, tumpeng is typically accompanied by side dishes and vegetables arranged around the cone, often comprising seven accompanying dishes. In Javanese cultural symbolism, the number seven (*pitu*) signifies hope and supplication (*pitulungan*), and it also reflects an ideal balance of life through seven elements associated with land, sea, and plants. This symbolism is further connected to cosmological values, such as the notion of seven layers of the sky, as well as ethical guidelines that are expected to be maintained in everyday life. [12]

1	A Cone shaped rice	Direction of life (towards the god)
2	Yellow rice	gratitude and prosperity
3	Side dishes	harmony of nature
4	7 side dishes	prayer and hope

Figure 1. Semiotics of Tumpeng

4.2 Tumpeng in Ritual, Social, and Institutional Contexts

Existing studies and cultural documentation demonstrate that tumpeng is present in a wide range of ritual and social contexts, including life-cycle ceremonies, village celebrations, thanksgiving rituals, and institutional events [12], [13], [16]. Historically, tumpeng was closely associated with agrarian rituals and communal thanksgiving practices, reflecting the relationship between human communities and natural cycles [13]. Over time, however, its function has expanded beyond ritual contexts into urban institutional settings such as organisational anniversaries, governmental ceremonies, and formal receptions.

This transformation illustrates how traditional culinary practices can adapt to changing social environments while maintaining their symbolic core. In contemporary settings, the ritual of cutting the tip of the tumpeng and presenting it to a respected individual often a leader or honoured guest serves as a symbolic gesture of respect, blessing, and collective hope for prosperity [15], [16]. Such performative elements reinforce hierarchical relationships while simultaneously affirming communal solidarity through the shared act of eating.

From a communication perspective, these practices highlight the performative dimension of food in social interaction. The preparation, presentation, and communal consumption of tumpeng constitute a form of cultural performance through which social values are enacted and reaffirmed. This performative quality is particularly relevant to gastrodiplomacy, where culinary events often function as cultural performances designed to communicate national identity and cultural narratives to international audiences.

4.3 Tumpeng and Indonesian Gastrodiplomacy Narratives

When examined through the lens of gastrodiplomacy, the visual and narrative qualities of tumpeng suggest considerable potential for international cultural communication. Gastrodiplomacy scholarship emphasises that successful culinary icons typically possess distinctive visual forms, compelling narratives, and experiential elements that allow foreign publics to engage emotionally with a nation's culture [1], [4]. Tumpeng fulfils many of these characteristics through its striking cone-shaped form, colourful composition, and ritualised practices of cutting and sharing.

Despite these qualities, existing Indonesian gastrodiplomacy initiatives tend to prioritise other culinary icons, such as rendang, satay, and fried rice, in international promotional campaigns [8]–[11]. Programmes such as "Indonesia Spice Up the World" focus primarily on expanding Indonesian restaurant networks abroad and promoting spice-based culinary products, while the symbolic dimension of ritual foods receives relatively limited attention [8], [9]. As a result, tumpeng remains largely absent from formal gastrodiplomacy narratives, even though it represents one of the most culturally meaningful culinary symbols in Indonesian society.

This observation reveals a disconnect between Indonesia's domestic culinary symbolism and its external culinary diplomacy strategies. While popular dishes may be more easily commercialised and globally recognisable, ritual foods like tumpeng possess deeper cultural narratives that could enrich the symbolic repertoire of Indonesian gastrodiplomacy. Incorporating such culturally dense symbols could help diversify Indonesia's culinary diplomacy narratives and present a more nuanced representation of the country's cultural heritage.

4.4 Challenges in Positioning Tumpeng as a Gastrodiplomatic Icon

Although tumpeng possesses strong symbolic and visual potential, several challenges may arise when positioning it as a gastrodiplomacy icon. One challenge concerns the translation of complex cultural meanings into narratives that are accessible to international audiences. The cosmological and ritual dimensions embedded in tumpeng traditions may be difficult to communicate in simplified promotional formats without losing cultural depth or authenticity [11], [14].

Another challenge relates to institutional coordination within Indonesian gastrodiplomacy programmes. Previous studies highlight fragmentation in the organisation of culinary diplomacy initiatives, including limited coordination between government institutions, embassies, culinary actors, and cultural practitioners [8]–[10]. In such contexts, introducing a new culinary icon requires not only narrative development but also strategic alignment among stakeholders involved in international cultural promotion.

Furthermore, there is a potential risk of cultural commodification. If tumpeng is promoted primarily as an exotic cultural object for display or consumption, detached from the communities and traditions that sustain it, its deeper cultural meanings may be diluted or misrepresented [6], [13], [14]. Therefore, the integration of tumpeng into gastrodiplomacy strategies must carefully balance global visibility with respect for local cultural knowledge and practices.

4.5 Opportunities for Developing Tumpeng in Indonesian Gastrodiplomacy

Despite these challenges, significant opportunities exist for incorporating Tumpeng Nusantara into Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy strategies. One promising approach involves integrating tumpeng into curated diplomatic events such as national day receptions, cultural festivals, and culinary demonstrations, where the preparation and symbolic explanation of the dish can become part of the diplomatic narrative [1], [4], [12], [17]. In such contexts, tumpeng may function as a narrative anchor through which themes of gratitude, harmony, diversity, and communal solidarity are communicated to international audiences.

Another opportunity lies in linking tumpeng with existing programmes such as "Indonesia Spice Up the World" and broader culinary tourism initiatives. Including ritual foods alongside popular commercial dishes could broaden the representation of Indonesian gastronomy and highlight the cultural depth of the nation's culinary heritage [8]–[10]. Collaborative initiatives involving diplomats, chefs, cultural practitioners, and local communities could further support the development of culturally sensitive narratives that translate the symbolic meanings of tumpeng into accessible forms for global audiences.

Finally, tumpeng also offers potential for deeper cultural exchange through educational and academic programmes. Workshops, exhibitions, and collaborative research projects could introduce international audiences to the cultural philosophies embedded in Indonesian culinary traditions, thereby transforming gastrodiplomacy from a purely promotional activity into a platform for intercultural dialogue [2], [4], [14]. Through such initiatives, Tumpeng Nusantara may serve not only as a culinary attraction but also as a medium for communicating Indonesia's cultural values within global cultural diplomacy.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This conceptual study has shown that Tumpeng Nusantara is a ritual food with rich gastronomic and symbolic meanings that reflect Indonesian cosmology, social values, and communal ethics, positioning it as a distinctive cultural text within the country's culinary heritage. [12]-[15] The literature review indicates that while Indonesian gastrodiplomacy initiatives such as the "Indonesia Spice Up the World" programme—have begun to leverage culinary assets for public diplomacy

and nation branding, they tend to foreground a limited set of popular dishes and have yet to systematically integrate ritual foods like tumpeng into their icon portfolios. [8]-[11] At the same time, studies on tumpeng remain largely confined to anthropological and cultural-studies domains, with little engagement with public diplomacy, strategic communication, or policy frameworks, resulting in a conceptual gap between symbolic analysis and external promotional practice.

[12]-[15] By synthesising insights from gastrodiplomacy, food-and-culture studies, and research on tumpeng, this paper argues that Tumpeng Nusantara possesses strong visual, narrative, and performative characteristics that could be mobilised as part of Indonesia's gastrodiplomacy toolkit, provided that issues of narrative simplification, institutional coordination, and cultural ethics are carefully addressed. [1],[3],[10],[13] The study recommends the development of more coherent and participatory communication frameworks that involve diplomats, chefs, cultural practitioners, and local communities in co-creating tumpeng-based gastrodiplomatic experiences, as well as future empirical research on foreign audience perceptions to assess how tumpeng-centred initiatives contribute to Indonesia's soft power and nation branding objectives. [2],[4],[7],[16]

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