

Between Taste and Order: An Ethnomethodological Study of Semar Mendem in Javanese Culinary Culture

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ABSTRACT

This study examines *Semar Mendem* as an epistemic arena that links *taste, eating practices, and Javanese cultural values*. Using an *ethnomethodological approach combined with multisensory ethnography*, the research explores how *bodily experience through texture, aroma, small portioning, and modes of consumption produces knowledge about sufficiency and self-restraint*. The ancestral proverb “*siji kurang, loro kakehan*” is interpreted as a *social practice that regulates behavior through an awareness of limits*. A *symbolic analysis of the dish's name and form shows that Semar, as a threshold figure, and mendem, as a liminal condition, merge to construct a distinctive boundary epistemology in Javanese culture*. The findings affirm that *Semar Mendem is not merely a market snack but a moral cosmogram that teaches moderation, self-reflection, and the wisdom of taste*. Amid today's fast and excessive consumption culture, *Semar Mendem opens a new discourse on “wisdom through taste” and offers an ethical model of consumption that remains highly relevant to contemporary society*.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji *Semar Mendem* sebagai arena epistemik yang menghubungkan rasa, tindakan makan, dan nilai budaya Jawa. Dengan pendekatan etnometodologi dan etnografi multisensorik, penelitian ini menelaah bagaimana pengalaman tubuh, melalui tekstur, aroma, porsi kecil, dan cara konsumsi, menghasilkan pengetahuan tentang kecukupan dan pengendalian diri. Pepatah turun-temurun “*siji kurang, loro kakehan*” diinterpretasikan sebagai praktik sosial yang menata perilaku melalui kesadaran terhadap batas. Analisis simbolik terhadap nama dan bentuk makanan menunjukkan bahwa *Semar*, sebagai figur ambang, dan *mendem*, sebagai kondisi liminal, berpadu membentuk epistemologi batas yang khas dalam budaya Jawa. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa *Semar Mendem* bukan hanya jajanan pasar, tetapi kosmogram moral yang mengajarkan moderasi, refleksi diri, dan kebijaksanaan rasa. Di tengah budaya konsumsi cepat dan berlebih, *Semar Mendem* membuka wacana baru tentang “kebijaksanaan melalui rasa” dan menawarkan model etika konsumsi yang relevan bagi masyarakat kontemporer.

1. INTRODUCTION

Food helps people negotiate identity and meaning in everyday life. It is not only about nutrition. It carries signs, feelings, and social ties. Across the world, communities create shared systems to classify what they eat. One common pattern is the distinction between a meal and a snack. This pattern grows from daily habits, not from nutrition science. People eat at certain times. They choose certain portions. They choose certain companions. They choose certain moods when they eat (Douglas, 1972).

In many cultures, a meal is the main food of the day. It provides energy and supports routine. A snack has a lighter role. It is small. It is flexible. It can be symbolic. People enjoy it in relaxed or informal situations (Fischler, 1988). These categories are never fixed. Many cultures blend them. The blend creates richer meanings. Yet some communities still guard the symbolic line between the two. A meal feels serious. A snack feels gentle.

In Javanese and Indonesian culture, the word “snack” has many local counterparts. People use *kudapan*. They use *camilan*. They use *nyamikan*. They even use *pacitan*. All of these point to light foods eaten outside the main mealtime. Beneath this rich vocabulary lies a cultural and linguistic pattern. Foods made from glutinous

rice or sticky rice almost always fall into the snack category. They rarely appear as main dishes. This happens even though sticky rice has high carbohydrate and calorie content. It is not weaker than regular rice.

This pattern shows that food taxonomies are never neutral. They carry the politics of taste. They reflect the social status of ingredients. A kind of symbolic inequality takes shape. Regular rice can become a meal or a snack. Sticky rice is allowed to be only a snack.

Sticky rice is not exclusive to Southeast Asia. The long history of rice domestication shows that glutinous varieties appeared in many regions. They grew in East Asia and Southeast Asia. Later they traveled through trade and diaspora. Each region treats sticky rice in its own way. In Laos, sticky rice or *khao niao* is a staple food and a marker of national and spiritual identity (High, 2014). People eat it every day. They bring it to temples. They offer it to monks. They believe it strengthens family bonds.

In Vietnam, sticky rice appears in many forms. One example is *xôi*. Another is colorful sticky rice cakes served during Lunar New Year and ancestor rites (Nguyen, 2022). In Chinese tradition, *zongzi* is central to the Dragon Boat Festival. Sticky rice wrapped in bamboo leaves becomes an offering for ancestral spirits (Zhao and Wang, 2020). In Japan, sticky rice becomes *mochi*. It symbolizes purity and long life during the New Year season (Sato, 2021). In the Philippines, *suman* appears in almost every communal feast (Marquez, 2020). Even in Latin America and the Caribbean, sticky rice is adapted into sweets and puddings. One example is *arroz con leche pegajoso*. It emerges from the meeting of Asian and Hispanic worlds (Torres, 2019).

Sticky rice is therefore more than a widely distributed ingredient. It is a cultural messenger (Fuller and Castillo, 2015). Each culture shapes a special relationship between sticky rice, the body, and the social world. The Indonesian case is unique. In Indonesia, especially in Java, sticky rice holds an ambiguous position. People consume it in large quantities. Yet they rarely see it as a true meal. It appears as market snacks. It appears as ritual offerings. It appears as desserts. It almost never becomes the core of a main meal in the same way that regular rice does.

This difference carries deep social meaning. Regular rice marks physical sustenance. It signals agrarian identity. It forms part of daily life. Sticky rice enters a symbolic space. It comes with celebrations. It comes with offerings. It comes in neat and sweet forms. It feels as if society wants to place sticky rice in a space of gentle sacredness. It does not aim to fill the stomach. It aims to honor.

In many rituals, sticky rice becomes the main ingredient for offerings, porridges, or *jadah*. These foods symbolize unity and inner connection within the community (Suparwa, 2023). In Javanese mythology, the bond between humans, rice, and fertility appears through the figure of Dewi Sri. She is the giver of life and prosperity. Wati and colleagues (2025) show that the myth of Dewi Sri reveals how food, especially rice, becomes a cosmological axis that links humans, nature, and the divine.

In practice, rituals such as *wiwitan*, *mapag Sri*, and *sedekah bumi* show this connection. Eating rice together is not only an act of consumption. It is commensality. It is a collective act that sustains social balance (Krisnawati, 2024). Within this context, sticky rice stands beside regular rice as a noble ingredient, even though their social roles differ.

One striking culinary form of sticky rice is *Semar Mendem*. It is a traditional snack that people can still find in Pasar Gede Surakarta. *Semar Mendem* is made from steamed sticky rice cooked with coconut milk. It is filled with savory shredded chicken. It is wrapped in a thin egg crepe. Its appearance is simple yet elegant. The yellow of the egg and the glossy white of the rice blend in a quiet harmony.

In this study, *Semar Mendem* is not treated only as food. It is treated as cultural agency. It has a life. It interacts with people. It carries social values. The main informant of this study is Pak Toni. He is the third generation of *Semar Mendem* makers in Surakarta. He shares a proverb passed down in his family. He says that eating *Semar Mendem* follows this rule. One is not enough. Two are too much.

This proverb looks simple. Yet it carries a deep philosophy of balance. It speaks of sufficiency. Not less. Not more. This idea is central to Javanese ethics. Garfinkel (1967) argues that every conversation and every daily act helps organize the social world. From an ethnomethodological view, a proverb like this functions as an accounting practice. It keeps cultural order through language and action.

With this background, this research places *Semar Mendem* as a form of noble sticky rice. It is food that is eaten. It is also food that is interpreted. Through sensory ethnography and ethnomethodology, this study seeks to understand how eating, tasting, cutting, and sharing *Semar Mendem* form a social discourse about bodily and spiritual balance. In this context, sticky rice is no longer a mere ingredient. It becomes a symbol of harmony that binds the senses, the palate, and moral awareness.

This phenomenon shows that food carries layered meanings. The layers move from the biological to the aesthetic. They move further to the ethical and the spiritual. *Semar Mendem* is a snack on the surface. It is eaten in a small portion. It does not aim to fill the stomach. Yet it teaches self control. It teaches the feeling of enough.

Mardiana (2025) notes that sticky rice foods in Indonesia often appear in communal settings. They appear in *slametan*. They appear in thanksgiving rituals. These settings highlight collective values. *Semar Mendem*

therefore stands at a point of meeting. It sits between snack and meal. It sits between body and soul. It sits between pleasure and awareness.

Globally, the link between food, tradition, and identity is being read in new ways. The reading grows within cultural sustainability studies. Fuller and Castillo (2015) show that sticky rice practices reflect agricultural adaptation. They reflect ritual systems. These practices shape the social ecology of Asian communities. In modern life, recent research shows rising consumption of sticky rice across Asia and in its diasporic contexts. The rise follows renewed interest in traditional and local foods (Cabral and colleagues, 2024). A similar trend appears in Indonesia. Market snacks gain new attention among younger generations. The interest does not come only from taste. It also comes from identity. It also comes from nostalgia (Wibowo and colleagues, 2023).

Building on these ideas, this study highlights Semar Mendem as a concrete form of the relationship between sticky rice, the value of balance, and the Javanese social order. The study uses multisensory observation. It attends to shape, aroma, texture, and ways of consumption. It also includes interviews with tradition bearers. Through these steps, the study seeks to uncover the social logic behind the family proverb. The main goal is not only to describe taste. The goal is to understand how taste is regulated and interpreted in shared life.

The study offers contributions in two areas. The first area is food anthropology. Here, the study provides a reflective analysis of taxonomy. It shows how a simple ingredient like sticky rice gains high social meaning through the act of eating. The second area is methodology. The study uses ethnomethodology in culinary research. This approach is still rare in Indonesia. Psathas (1995) explains that ethnomethodology is the art of reading order in everyday habits. It helps us understand how a small act such as eating one and a half pieces of Semar Mendem becomes a reflection of values and ethics.

In the end, Semar Mendem carries a message that goes beyond the kitchen and the dining table. It reminds us that every small snack holds a large social and spiritual logic. Eating is not only about filling the stomach. It is also about arranging the self. Between one and two there is a space of balance. In that space, Javanese culture nurtures the feeling of enough as a form of completeness.

Behind the simple proverb “*kalau satu kurang, kalau dua kebanyakan*” lies a deeper reflection. It shows how Javanese people arrange their way of eating. It shows how they arrange their bodies. It shows how they arrange daily life through unwritten rules.

This phenomenon invites us to ask a question. How can a small act such as cutting and eating one and a half pieces of Semar Mendem reflect complex values, norms, and social order. This question becomes the main current of this study. It guides the search for how a simple food can express a wide and layered cultural awareness.

Based on this discussion, the study is framed by one main question. The question asks how the practice of eating Semar Mendem, especially the proverb “*kalau satu kurang, kalau dua kebanyakan*,” represents social order and the ethics of balance in Javanese culture through an ethnomethodological lens. This question is urgent. The flow of modernization and global culinary trends often erases local meanings from collective memory. Eating traditions that once supported reflection now shift into practical and unreflective consumption. By tracing Semar Mendem, this study seeks to preserve subtle knowledge. The knowledge lives in daily acts. It lives in language. It lives in taste. It is unwritten yet present.

The scientific urgency lies in understanding how local social order works behind simple actions. Culinary knowledge is not only documented. It is revived as an intellectual and cultural discourse. The main aim of this study is to reveal the social, cultural, and ethnomethodological meanings of eating Semar Mendem as a representation of balance in Javanese life. The study uses multisensory observation and reflective reading of eating experiences. It seeks to show how small actions such as biting, sharing, and choosing a portion become mirrors of a worldview built on simplicity and harmony.

The study also aims to expand the horizon of food anthropology in Indonesia. Traditional food is placed as a social text. It can be read. It can be interpreted. It carries a cultural narrative. The use of ethnomethodology is not only to explain how people interact with food. It is also to show that every conversation and every eating habit contains a social logic. The logic maintains balance between the individual, the community, and nature.

In this sense, the study is not only about Semar Mendem as a culinary object. It is about how Javanese communities maintain harmony through food. It affirms that in the midst of change, a simple act such as eating one and a half pieces of Semar Mendem becomes a small form of a larger wisdom. The wisdom is the practice of living in balance.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative ethnomethodological approach combined with multisensory ethnography. This approach is chosen because Semar Mendem is not only an ingredient. It is a social phenomenon that lives in daily actions and conversations. Following Garfinkel (1967), ethnomethodology seeks to understand how people “do their social world” through small and ordinary practices. In this context, eating Semar Mendem is treated as a social event. It is organized. It is accounted for. It is given meaning by the actors themselves.

Ethnomethodology sees that every community has its own member's methods. These methods shape order. They appear in language. They appear in gestures. They appear in eating rules. They even appear in proverbs such as "kalau satu kurang, kalau dua kebanyakan." For this reason, the study does not begin with a grand theory that aims to test society. It begins with the belief that Javanese people already have their own methodology for understanding action. The task of the researcher is to interpret their methods so they can be read scientifically.

This approach allows the study to capture more than the outcome of eating. It opens the social logic behind daily acts of food practice. It reveals how ordinary eating becomes meaningful order in everyday life (Psathas, 1995). In addition to ethnomethodology, this study uses multisensory ethnography (Pink, 2015). Eating is never a visual act alone. It engages all the senses. Each sense adds to social meaning. Sight captures shape and color. Smell recalls memories through aroma. Touch reads texture and warmth. Taste and hearing work together. They bring the affective and social dimension of eating through flavor and conversation. The process of data collection therefore includes more than interviews and observation. It includes the physical experience of seeing, smelling, touching, and tasting.

Data collection takes place in Pasar Gede Surakarta. This market is known as a center of classical Javanese food. The site is chosen because Semar Mendem is still sold here by the family who makes it. The main informant is Pak Toni. He is the third generation of Semar Mendem makers in the city. Interviews follow a natural style. There is no rigid guideline. This allows subtle meanings to appear in a spontaneous way.

Observation is done by buying Semar Mendem directly. The researcher photographs it. The researcher then studies it through six stages of experience. The stages are seeing, smelling, touching, biting, dividing, and chewing. These steps follow the multisensory models of Pink (2015) and Howes (2021). The models highlight embodied engagement. The body of the researcher becomes part of the way the world is understood.

In this study, the stages unfold through a continuous sensory flow. The researcher begins by seeing the Semar Mendem and describing its shape, size, and color while noting how it stands in relation to other snacks around it. The next moment comes through smelling. The aroma of pandan leaves and old coconut milk rises softly and brings up the first layer of memory and impression. Touch follows as the researcher presses the surface with gentle fingers to sense warmth, elasticity, and the degree of doneness. The act then moves to biting and chewing. Small bites reveal subtle flavors. Slightly larger bites deepen the sensation and make the texture more present. After that comes the dividing stage. The snack is cut into two equal halves to grasp the cultural logic of the proverb "kalau satu kurang, kalau dua kebanyakan." The process ends with a moment of reflecting. The researcher pauses and thinks about the experience of eating one and a half pieces and how such a simple act carries meaning beyond taste.

The entire process is then rewritten as a reflective narrative rather than as statistics. Narrative form is chosen because it allows sensory experience to unfold into social meaning. Through this approach, the study follows the principle of reflexivity in ethnomethodology, where the researcher does more than observe. The researcher becomes part of the social action being observed (Aribowo, 2025). The data are analyzed through ethnomethodological thematic reading. The reading attends to conversations, actions, and eating experiences to find the member's logic, the way a community explains its own actions. The proverb "kalau satu kurang, kalau dua kebanyakan" is treated as a social text. It speaks of limits, modesty, and balance. The analysis does not seek right or wrong. It seeks to understand how an act makes sense to cultural actors.

To maintain validity, the study uses experiential triangulation (Clifford, 1988). The findings from interviews are compared with multisensory observation and the researcher's own reflections. The study does not test the objective truth of food. It examines the intersubjective truth of how eating is understood. All field notes, interview excerpts, and observation results are coded manually. Three themes guide the process. They include the feeling of enough, the balance between the movement of the mouth and the filling of the stomach, and the shadow of social order that appears through eating. The method is exploratory, descriptive, and reflective at the same time. It aims not only to document the tradition of eating Semar Mendem. It aims to enliven Javanese wisdom on moderation and simplicity in a modern context.

Psathas (1995) reminds us that ethnomethodology is more than a tool of analysis. It is a way of being with the social world through the language of the people themselves. In this sense, the study treats the act of eating Semar Mendem not as a dead object viewed from the outside. It becomes a living conversation between the researcher, the community, and the food itself. All three hold meaning.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Research Findings

The observation of Semar Mendem is based on samples purchased at Pasar Gede Surakarta on 3 November 2025. The choice to buy the samples is intentional. It is a gesture of support for the local culinary economy and a form of respect for the work of traditional food sellers. The amount purchased is small. It is only for direct

observation and photographic documentation. One serving of Semar Mendem consists of one piece of sticky rice wrapped in an egg crepe and one small pack of areh made from young coconut, as shown in Figure 1.

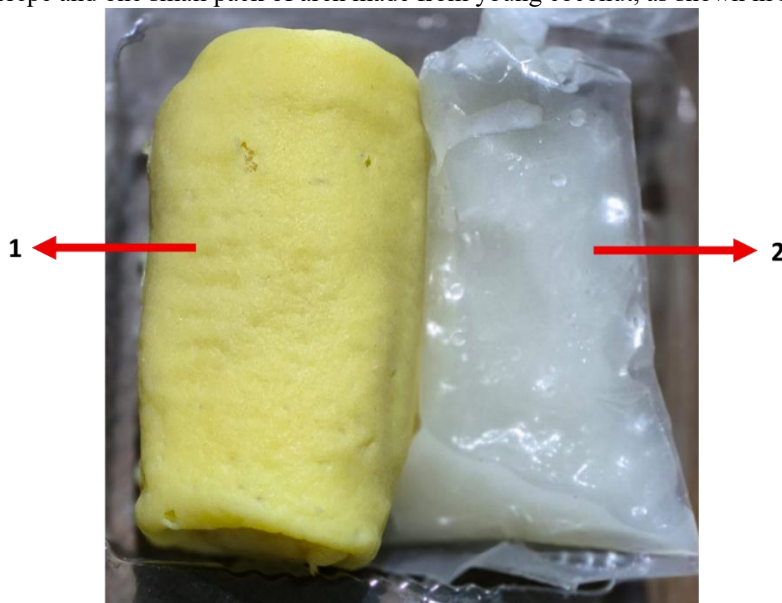


Figure 1. Snack set of Semar Mendem

Description

1. Sticky rice with shredded chicken wrapped in a thin egg and flour crepe.
2. Areh made from thick young coconut milk.

Multisensory ethnographic observations

1. Visual analysis

Semar Mendem appears in a neat rectangular form. It is wrapped in a thin light yellow egg crepe. The surface shines softly. The size matches the length of an adult palm. The shape suggests practicality and a portion suitable for one eating moment.

2. Olfactory impression

The first scent comes from pandan leaves. The second comes from old coconut milk. Both aromas blend without overpowering each other. The fragrance feels warm. It reflects the communal atmosphere of a traditional Javanese kitchen.

3. Tactile experience

The texture feels elastic and soft when pressed. The egg crepe is smooth and flexible. The sticky rice gives light resistance. The balance between softness and chewiness reflects the Javanese sensibility of *sedheng*. It signals moderation in taste.

4. Gustatory exploration

A small bite reveals gentle flavors. There is the savoriness of the egg crepe. There is the creamy sweetness of coconut milk. There is the mild salty sweetness of shredded chicken. A larger bite brings these elements into a fuller harmony. Texture, aroma, and taste respond to one another.

5. Act of division

The snack is cut into two equal halves. One piece feels not enough. Two pieces feel too much. The ideal portion becomes one and a half pieces. This portion expresses a symbolic space between sufficiency and pleasure.

6. Culinary balance

After eating one and a half pieces, the body feels satisfied without heaviness. The mouth moves comfortably. The stomach feels calm. This balance suggests a local wisdom in portioning. Pleasure, restraint, and respect for food appear together in one simple act.

All preliminary findings related to the structure, flavor, and visual character of Semar Mendem are presented in full in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of Semar Mendem Based on Observational Findings

Aspect	Component	Description
Physical	Weight of crepe	65 grams
	Weight of areh	65 grams
	Length	6 cm
	Width	6 cm
	Height	1.5 cm
Texture	Crepe	Soft and elastic
	Areh	Thick
	Sticky rice	Sticky and tender
	Shredded beef	Fibrous
Taste	Crepe	Savory
	Areh	Savory with a sweet aftertaste
	Sticky rice	Slightly salty
	Shredded beef	Savory
Aroma	Crepe	Wheat flour aroma
	Areh	Pandan aroma
	Sticky rice	Coconut milk aroma
	Shredded beef	Meaty savory aroma
Color	Crepe	Yellow
	Areh	White
	Sticky rice	White
	Shredded beef	Brown

During the observation, our informant, Pak Toni, emphasized that the value of Semar Mendem does not lie in taste alone. Its value also comes from a tradition passed across generations. Pak Toni is the third generation of Semar Mendem makers in Surakarta. He still holds firmly to a family proverb. The proverb says that eating Semar Mendem follows this pattern. One piece feels lacking. Two pieces feel excessive. The proverb is more than a guide for portion size. It is a form of local wisdom that reflects the Javanese idea of balance. This idea appears in many studies on traditional Javanese ethics of eating (Sedyawati, 2014; Magnis Suseno, 1997).

We used this insight as a guide during the observation. One piece of Semar Mendem was cut into two equal parts. We then ate one and a half parts as suggested by the proverb. The result aligns with the collective experience described by Pak Toni. The mouth moves actively. The stomach remains light. This suggests that Semar Mendem is not designed to fill the body. It is designed to move the mouth and create a gentle and pleasant oral sensation.

In cultural gastronomy, this idea relates to the concept of small bites or ritual nibbles. These are small foods that keep the body in rhythm without excess. The practice echoes the principle of moderation in Javanese culture. The principle appears in many classic studies on Javanese life and restraint (Geertz, 1960; Bruner, 2019).

The philosophical value of the proverb will be explored further in the discussion. The focus will be on balance or *tata titi*, simplicity, and the ethics of eating in the Javanese worldview. In Javanese tradition, eating often moves beyond biological needs. It enters an ethical and spiritual space. A simple act such as choosing an ideal portion becomes a mirror of inner sensitivity or *rasa* and harmony with the self and the environment (Mulder, 2001).

The statement “*kalau satu kurang, kalau dua kebanyakan*” appears simple. Yet it reflects an indicative form of conversation known in ethnomethodological studies. Ethnomethodology views everyday conversation as a mechanism through which people maintain social order. It is a way to articulate cultural meaning through actions that look ordinary (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984). The proverb therefore functions as more than a guide to eating. It becomes a cultural communication strategy. It shapes norms of consumption. It sets boundaries of propriety. It defines what feels appropriate in Javanese culinary life. The next section will examine this through an ethnomethodological lens to reveal how small talk can reflect a larger social structure.

Ethnomethodology, introduced by Harold Garfinkel (1967), is a sociological approach that studies how members of a community actively create, interpret, and maintain social order through everyday interactions. The approach does not begin with macro structures such as institutions or social classes. It begins with micro actions. These include ordinary conversations, gestures, and spontaneous responses. These actions form the base of shared meaning. Coulon (1995) and Heritage (1984) deepen this view. They explain that daily actions are methodical. They have an internal order that allows the social world to be understood and negotiated. Lynch

(1993) adds that ethnomethodology exposes local forms of order. These forms help individuals produce coherent social experiences.

According to George Psathas (1995), ethnomethodology uncovers the internal logic of human action. It shows how individuals organize their social experience through language, conversation, and routines that look ordinary. Within this frame, social reality is not something that people simply find. It is something that people produce again and again through daily practices. This idea aligns with the notion of accountability developed by Garfinkel and Sacks (1970). They explain that human action can always be described, evaluated, and understood within a specific social context. Heritage (1984) calls this indexicality. It refers to the way meaning in language and action always depends on the surrounding social situation.

Through this lens, the proverb shared by Pak Toni is more than a guide for eating. It works as a symbolic mechanism that keeps balance between the body, *rasa*, and Javanese cultural values. The expression “*kalau satu kurang, kalau dua kebanyakan*” can be read as a form of cultural accountability. It is a way for people to explain and evaluate their actions so they remain in social harmony. In Javanese ethics, as described by Suseno (1997) and Mulder (2001), choosing a portion of food reflects an effort to maintain harmony between the self, others, and the inner feeling. Geertz (1960) notes that daily expressions in Javanese life often act as tools to uphold norms of modesty, restraint, and proper conduct. The proverb therefore becomes more than advice about portion size. It becomes an entry point to understand how Javanese people create and maintain social order through short, gentle, and meaningful language.

Harold Garfinkel (1967) explains that ethnomethodology studies how people produce and maintain social order through everyday actions that appear simple. The approach focuses on micro practices. These include conversations, gestures, and spontaneous responses. These practices form shared meaning within social interaction. Psathas (1995) offers a more operational view of its use in the field. He emphasizes that ethnomethodology is not an abstract theory. It is a methodological frame for understanding social action from within the actor’s own logic. For Psathas, daily conversation, unwritten rules, and routine expressions are primary social data. They reveal how individuals organize their lived world in a continuous and coherent way.

Both thinkers agree that everyday action is reflexive. People always have the ability to explain, evaluate, and rationalize their own behavior. Garfinkel and Sacks (1970) call this process accountability. Heritage (1984) highlights the indexicality of language. He explains that the meaning of an utterance always depends on the social situation around it. Through this frame, the expression “*kalau satu kurang, kalau dua kebanyakan*” cannot be understood as a simple culinary comment. It works as a social mechanism that regulates balanced behavior. It shapes propriety. It reinforces moderation. It nurtures harmony between the body, *rasa*, and cultural norms.

In the context of Semar Mendem, the proverb passed down by Pak Toni functions as an ethnomethodological practice. It becomes a small scale system of social organization. It works through language, taste, and the act of eating. The simple expression operates what Lynch (1993) calls local rationality. It is the way a community creates meaningful order through local practices that look small but carry deep value. The proverb is therefore more than a guide to portion size. It represents how Javanese people maintain harmony of behavior through unwritten rules that are shared and lived together.

3.2. DISCUSSION

3.2.1. Food as Knowledge

In contemporary food studies, the focus has shifted from “what we eat” to “what we know through eating.” Scholarship across anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies shows that food is a medium of identity, politics, economy, and symbolism (Fischler, 1988; Wilk, 2006). Yet only a few studies place eating itself as an epistemic act. Eating becomes a way of knowing. A dish becomes a vessel that absorbs knowledge and shapes awareness. This article treats Semar Mendem not only as a Javanese culinary object. It treats it as a field of knowledge where people articulate their boundaries between desire and awareness, between quantity and meaning.

The idea of an epistemology of boundaries introduced here suggests that cultural knowledge emerges not in excess or in emptiness. It emerges in the threshold. It grows in the middle point that knows its own limits. The Javanese expression “*siji kurang, loro kakehan*” becomes both an ontological and epistemological principle. The phrase “one is lacking” signals a conscious space of potential. The phrase “two is too much” signals the risk of losing direction in unconscious abundance. In Javanese culture, value is not measured by “more.” It is measured by “the right measure.” The right measure can only be read by a mature sense of *rasa*.

In relation to Semar Mendem, eating becomes an act of knowing. The first bite does not enter the mouth alone. It enters awareness. The taste of sticky rice, the aroma of chicken or *serundeng*, the texture of the egg crepe, and the scent of old coconut milk are all signals that eating is a meditation of *rasa*. Visual observation captures the golden color of the crepe and the pattern of the banana leaf wrapping. Gustatory experience brings sweet savory notes and soft elastic textures. Olfactory sensing brings the scent of coconut and pandan leaves.

Tactile sensing brings warmth and elasticity. All of these become primary data. They show that the act of eating is a cognitive and sensory process.

3.2.2. Food Sustenance in the Frame of the Sticky Rice Tradition

In Javanese food culture, regular rice holds the dominant place as the food staple. Sticky rice or *Oryza glutinosa* occupies a different space. It is not used as an everyday staple. It appears mainly in ritual and symbolic contexts. It is sweet. It is sticky. It wraps social value. Sticky rice becomes ritual food rather than daily food (Milton, 1996). It becomes a non staple staple. It shows that sustenance is not only about calories or volume. It is also about cultural continuity and social relations.

The making of Semar Mendem strengthens this idea. The sticky rice must be soaked for at least six hours. In court traditions, the soaking can last overnight. The grains absorb water slowly. They soften. They prepare themselves to bind the coconut milk. The waiting becomes a sign of patience and preparation. It is not an act of quick consumption. The coconut milk is mixed with salam leaves and a little salt. It is steamed at low heat so the texture stays elastic and does not turn into porridge or a hard block. Old coconut is cooked into areh. The process brings out oil and the fragrance of mature coconut. Young coconut meat is chopped for the filling along with shredded chicken or serundeng. The crepe is made from a mixture of wheat flour, corn flour, and sticky rice flour. It is mixed with coconut milk and egg, then cooked into thin layers. All ingredients are arranged through a technique that is not simple. The whole process reminds us that sustenance is not fast food. It is sustenance guarded by process, time, and intention.

In the palace tradition, the chicken filling becomes a requirement. The chicken walks on the earth. It sleeps in higher places. It has wings. It lives in two or even three realms (Cirlot, 2002). The chicken adds a cosmological layer. It connects the lower world of the soil, the middle world of humans, and the upper world of the sky. Semar Mendem in its palace form becomes more than a snack. It becomes a symbol of cosmic connection. The non palace version may use shredded beef or serundeng. These are acceptable local substitutes. They still show that the filling signals social class and ritual context.

From the perspective of food sustenance, Semar Mendem becomes an agent of preservation. It keeps tradition alive. It ties the community together. It creates a space of eating that stays connected to meaning. It is not a food that pulls people away from the social atmosphere. It is a food that calls them back into awareness of that atmosphere.

In Javanese agrarian philosophy, sticky rice grows only in calm water. It becomes a symbol of a peaceful inner state or *batin sing meneng*. It represents a soul that does not rush. Sticky rice reminds people that they must prepare themselves before receiving the coconut milk of life. The soaking water becomes a process of softening the ego. It removes rigidity.

Through this lens, the food carries an ecological and spiritual view. Humans, nature, and time must be soaked in patience. Only then can life become elastic and not dry. Only then can it be warm and not brittle.

A comparison with its two sticky rice relatives helps clarify this meaning. *Jadah* symbolizes social attachment. It is served with *tempe bacem* and represents horizontal relations among people. *Wajik* symbolizes lasting sweetness. It represents love and blessing. Semar Mendem stands between the two. It is sweet and adhesive, yet wrapped in awareness. It is not made for two people. It is made for the self. It becomes a space where desire meets wisdom.

3.2.3. Act of Eating. Eating as a Practice of Moderation

If sustenance answers “for what purpose do we eat,” then the act of eating answers “how do we eat.” In an epistemology of boundaries, eating is a conscious act. When a person chooses to stop after one piece of Semar Mendem, even when the temptation is strong, the choice is not restraint. It is wisdom. The phrase “*siji kurang, loro kakehan*” becomes an experiential mantra. One piece is not enough to show that attachment does not need excess in length. Two pieces are too much to show that fullness can blur awareness.

The texture itself requires patience. The sticky rice is soft yet elastic. The filling comes in layers. The egg crepe dissolves slowly in the mouth. This is not a food meant to be finished in one wild bite. Its consumption asks for awareness. The aroma of old coconut. The scent of salam leaves. The sweet savory taste of chicken. The warmth of banana leaves on the fingers. All must be felt. None should be ignored. The eating experience shifts from indulgence to understanding.

In modern life, a contradiction appears. The market prefers “budget packs of ten Semar Mendem” or “fifty piece mini boxes.” This is the logic of quantity. Yet in an epistemology of boundaries, mass production and unconscious consumption risk erasing meaning. Eating Semar Mendem with awareness becomes a moral and cultural action. We eat not because the package is cheap. We eat because the taste invites us to slow down, to absorb, and then to stop.

This analogy can be compared with eating rituals in other cultures. These include fasting, communal eating, or ceremonial meals. All show that eating is not only filling. It is remembering. In other words, modern humans are not only homo sapiens who eat to live. They are also homo cibiens who eat to know (Lawrence, 2016).

Within the frame of embodied cognition (Varela et al., 1991; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999), knowledge does not happen in the brain alone. It also happens in the body. When someone bites a piece of Semar Mendem, the person does not simply enjoy the taste. The person experiences it through texture and sensation. The chew and swallow become a negotiation between biological desire and moral awareness. The body becomes the teacher. The act of eating becomes an act of knowing.

Eating rituals in the pendopo reinforce this idea. People sit cross legged. They bow slightly. They hold the food with the right hand. They avoid speaking while swallowing. These gestures show that eating is a small form of devotion. Women in the market even say, “nek mangan semar mendem kudu alon alon, ben krasa legané.” The sentence is simple. Yet it carries an epistemology. Relief comes from slowness, not from quantity.

3.2.4. “Siji Kurang, Loro Kakehan.” Boundary as Epistemic

This phenomenon becomes the heart of the discussion. The expression “siji kurang, loro kakehan” is often read in an ethical or practical sense. One is enough. Two is too much. Yet if we read it as an epistemic phenomenon, the expression means that knowledge emerges when we stand on the threshold between lack and excess. In many Western traditions, knowledge is believed to grow through addition. More data. Wider exploration. Larger production. Javanese epistemology in this context suggests something different. “More” can close the flow of rasa. It can lead to blind consumption.

Semar Mendem therefore offers a space of reading. When a person eats one piece with awareness, the person becomes aware of taste, context, and boundary. When the person eats two or more without awareness, the meaning begins to fade. Eating becomes only consumption. The act behind the numbers becomes the critical point. Not too little so that something can be felt. Not too much so that knowing can still happen.

This phenomenon is also important when we face the logic of the modern economy. Mass production, market expansion, and sales volume become the measure of success. From the market view, more sold is always better. From the view of an epistemology of boundaries, more consumed without awareness takes us further from true knowledge. This creates a dialectic between sustenance and consumption. In this article, the dialectic becomes a cultural critique. Guarding boundaries is not a sign of backwardness. It is a form of freedom and awareness.

In the logic of the global economy, success is measured through production volume. In the logic of Javanese rasa, value decreases when quantity grows without awareness. The principle “siji kurang, loro kakehan” becomes a critique of the regime of truth (Foucault, 1977) that measures everything through numbers. It affirms a truth of feeling, a truth that only rasa can measure.

In the rhythm of Javanese daily life, there is a pause called blangkemen. It comes around nine in the morning, between breakfast and lunch. At this moment, the hunger comes not from the stomach but from the mouth. The need is not to fill the body, but to move rasa. Haryono (2005) explains that blangkemen keeps the balance of agrarian rhythm. It becomes a small space for the body to remember life. Sutton (2010) writes that eating in this way activates sensory knowledge, where taste becomes a tool for reflection rather than consumption. In the ritual perspective, Bell (1997) calls this a micro ritual, a simple act that reorders human awareness of time.

Semar Mendem appears within this in between space. It is not staple food. It is a reminder of the boundary between hunger and fullness, between work and pause. Turner (1969) calls such a space a liminal space. It is a threshold that opens a moment for self reflection. The act of eating Semar Mendem during blangkemen becomes a practice of knowledge. It becomes eating to remember, not only eating to live.

3.2.5. Semar Mendem as an Agent of Boundaries

The uniqueness of Semar Mendem lies in the symbolic figure held in its name and form. Semar refers to the pamomong figure in Javanese wayang. He is a wise guardian who lives in two realms at the same time. He lives in the world of humans and the world of the divine. He becomes a threshold figure. He guards the boundary that connects the profane and the sacred (Mulyono, 1979; Hadi, 2016).

The word “mendem” points to a state of liminality between awareness and non awareness. It refers to a transitional condition. Turner (1969) describes such a condition as an in between space where transformation takes place. Semar Mendem can therefore be read as a symbolic statement. “I am a boundary. I am a threshold event.” When we wrap sticky rice with a thin egg crepe, we are not only wrapping food. We are also wrapping awareness of movement from one state to another.

This idea of liminality resonates with the teaching in the *Serat Dewa Ruci*. Bima finds true knowledge not at the height of battle but when he sinks into himself and enters the body of Dewa Ruci. In that narrative, sinking is not destruction. It becomes the pathway to enlightenment (Zoetmulder, 1995). Within this frame, *mendem* can be understood as a form of conscious sinking, a pause that opens a reflective space. Semar Mendem becomes a

gastronomic metaphor for this knowledge. Humans are allowed to sink into taste, yet only to rediscover themselves. It becomes a Javanese kenosis, an emptying of the self so that deeper meaning can enter.

In the palace tradition, the use of chicken as filling shows ritual status and cosmic marking. Animal based ingredients often relate to social hierarchy and purification (Magnis Suseno, 1997). Outside the palace, the filling may shift to serundeng or shredded beef. Yet the structure and process of making remain the same. The ingredients may change with social class, but the logic of boundaries and thresholds stays intact. Semar Mendem becomes not only a snack. It becomes an epistemic marker that joins body, rasa, social status, and Javanese cosmology within a consistent symbolic structure.

Within an epistemology of boundaries, Semar Mendem becomes two things. First, it is an object of sustenance. It provides social, cosmic, and symbolic connection. Second, it is an epistemic activity. Eating becomes a practice of knowing. When we eat one Semar Mendem with awareness, we repeat the ritual of the boundary. We receive. We feel. We stop. We become people who know that a boundary is not a barrier. It is a medium of knowledge.

3.2.6. *Ontology of Semar Mendem in the Index of World Culinary Wisdom*

The epistemology of boundaries found in Semar Mendem has echoes in many world traditions. Each major culture creates small foods that function not only as sources of pleasure but as carriers of knowledge. When placed side by side, Semar Mendem stands with foods that have long become philosophical texts of the human body.

i. Wagashi (Japan). Beauty in Impermanence

Wagashi, a small sweet made from rice and red beans, reflects the principle of wabi sabi, beauty in imperfection. It is eaten slowly during certain seasons to taste time. Like Semar Mendem, which teaches the boundary of quantity, Wagashi teaches the boundary of time. It is delicious only in its season. Both emphasize awareness of impermanence. Taste appears and then disappears. It leaves knowledge behind.

ii. Mooncake (China). Unity and Cosmos

Mooncake has a round and complete form. It symbolizes the full moon and cosmic order. The salted egg yolk in the center becomes the sun inside the moon. Semar Mendem has a similar structure. The filling of chicken is hidden inside the sticky rice and crepe. It becomes the sun within the earth. Both express cosmic harmony through controlled sweetness and roundness. Mooncakes are eaten only once a year. Semar Mendem is made only at certain moments. Both teach the cyclical rhythm of time.

iii. Madeleine (France). Memory and Self Awareness

Proust's madeleine is a symbol of memory. A small bite opens the past. Its soft sweetness becomes a bridge between body and recollection. Semar Mendem carries a similar power. One bite can make a Javanese person *eling*. The taste recalls childhood kitchens and the hands that wrapped sticky rice. Both foods show that knowledge can come from sensory nostalgia. It grows from awareness rather than logic.

iv. Laddu (India). Offering and Sublimation

Laddu is a sweet round offering for Ganesha. It represents desire that has been purified. It is eaten with prayer and not with hunger. Semar Mendem occupies a comparable position. It is tempting yet must be controlled. Laddu teaches sublimation through ritual. Semar Mendem teaches sublimation through conscious boundaries. Both purify the body through sweetness.

v. Empanada (Iberia and Latin America). Filling and Wrapper

The word empanada comes from *empanar*, to wrap. It is a people's food that teaches balance between filling and wrapper. Too thin and it breaks. Too thick and it loses flavor. Semar Mendem teaches the same principle but in a deeper way. The wrapper does not only protect the filling. It unites it. Both show that knowledge can arise from a form that guards the essence.

vi. The Ontological Position of Semar Mendem

From these comparisons, Semar Mendem takes a unique place in the global map of taste epistemology. A comparative map of culinary epistemologies from different cultural traditions is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparative Epistemologies of Taste in World Cuisines

Tradition	Food	Boundary Focus	Core Value
Javanese	Semar Mendem	Quantity and self awareness	Moderation
Japanese	Wagashi	Seasonal impermanence	Subtlety
Chinese	Mooncake	Cosmic cycle	Unity
French	Madeleine	Sensory memory	Self awareness
Indian	Laddu	Desire and offering	Sublimation
Latin American	Empanada	Balance of filling and form	Integration

From an ontological view, Semar Mendem can be read as an edible philosophy of moderation. It becomes a philosophy of propriety expressed through food. In cultural gastronomy, food does more than meet biological needs. It becomes a medium for moral and cosmological values (Montanari, 2006). In this context, Semar Mendem brings a message specific to Southeast Asia. True freedom is possible only through awareness of boundaries. It reminds us that pleasure without control is not freedom. It is attachment. Pleasure with control becomes a path to wisdom.

If Wagashi in Japan is a meditation on seasons and impermanence, if Mooncake in China is a meditation on the cosmos and the lunar cycle, if the French Madeleine opens a meditation on memory and nostalgia, and if Laddu in India becomes a meditation on offering and abundance, then Semar Mendem plays a different yet parallel role. It is a meditation on self awareness in the face of worldly temptation. Its simplicity leads to reflection on self mastery, bodily harmony, and the feeling of enough.

Semar Mendem therefore becomes more than a Javanese food. It becomes a moral cosmogram of Southeast Asia. It becomes a small map that teaches how humans should manage boundaries, desire, and balance in a world full of temptations.

a. Contemporary Implications and Contributions

From a theoretical angle, this article offers a new way to view Indonesian traditional food. Food is not seen only as a cultural object, ancestral heritage, or tourism commodity. It becomes an epistemic arena that brings together taste, knowledge, and action. Through an epistemology of boundaries, we show that traditional communities uphold individual freedom not through external pressure but through awareness of limits as an ethical principle. This awareness shapes daily practice. Food becomes a medium for reading how moral values and reflective capacities are carried out in everyday life.

From a methodological angle, this study highlights the significance of visual and sensory data. Gustatory, olfactory, and tactile experiences often appear as light data in social research. Yet when sensory experience is understood as embodied knowledge, these data become rich primary sources. This approach opens new possibilities for the growth of “culinary as sensory inquiry” in the Indonesian context. The body becomes more than a tool. It becomes an epistemologist and an archive of experience.

From a practical angle, the findings contribute to consumption ethics in an age of mass production. The world pushes endless consumption. The principle of enough, as an active stance, becomes relevant. Semar Mendem offers a small yet meaningful example. It teaches consumption that leaves meaning, not consumption that leaves numbers. It reminds us that the choice to stop is a form of moral skill, not a sign of weakness.

An important addition is that Semar Mendem opens space for cross cultural studies on wisdom through taste. In a globalized culinary world that becomes fast and uniform, this food shows that the most modern way is not to consume the most. It is to know how to stop at the center of pleasure. It reminds us that taste, when understood as knowledge, can teach humans about limits, sufficiency, and wisdom.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that Semar Mendem works as an epistemic arena that unites sensory experience, the act of eating, and the formation of social meaning. The multisensory experience, through the texture of sticky rice, the aroma of areh, the softness of the crepe, and the intentional small portion, reveals that this food is not designed to fill the stomach. It is designed to activate awareness. The body becomes an entry point for knowledge about rhythm, sufficiency, and self control.

The proverb “siji kurang, loro kakehan” shows that daily eating practices contain a reflective social logic. This simple expression works as a mechanism to guide behavior, maintain harmony, and frame consumption within proper boundaries. Semar Mendem becomes a concrete example of how Javanese communities sustain moral order through small conversations and meaningful eating practices.

The symbolic structure of Semar Mendem strengthens this reading. The figure of Semar as a guardian of the threshold and the idea of *mendem* as a liminal condition meet in one culinary form that teaches an epistemology of boundaries. This food suggests that freedom does not come from crossing limits. It appears through the awareness that the boundaries themselves keep humans clear. In its simple form, Semar Mendem becomes a small cosmogram of moderation, balance, and maturity of rasa.

These findings carry important contemporary implications. In a world shaped by fast and excessive consumption, Semar Mendem reminds us that choosing enough is an active act, not a passive stance. Taste can become a teacher. Eating can become a practice of self formation. The principle of *modali* within it opens space for a more conscious ethics of consumption and expands the possibility of cross cultural studies on how wisdom can be learned through taste.

Semar Mendem is therefore not only a traditional market snack. It is knowledge that can be eaten. Through its structure, taste, name, and manner of eating, this food connects body, mind, and cultural values into one whole. It teaches that awareness of boundaries is the most subtle form of wisdom.

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