

The Symbolic Meaning of The Spitting Tradition in Maasai Weddings

Nini Mutmainnah¹, Husnul Mujaddidah², Sitti Hasmah Agus³

¹Universitas Muslim Indonesia; mutmainnah29944@gmail.com

² Universitas Muslim Indonesia; husnul.mujaddidah@umi.ac.id

³ Universitas Muslim Indonesia; sittihasmah.agus@umi.ac.id

Abstract

Article information

This research examines the symbolic meaning of the spitting tradition in Maasai wedding ceremonies. The aim of this study is to understand how the ritual demonstrates cultural values such as the symbolic meanings contained in this tradition. The method used is qualitative descriptive with a symbolism approach by Victor Turner, which means describing the symbolic meaning contained in cultural traditions in the context of rituals, in this case the symbolic meaning contained in the tradition of spitting at Maasai weddings. Based on the results of the analysis, the writer shows that the act of spitting carried out at weddings by the Maasai people functions as a strong ritual symbol, which symbolizes a form of blessing, protection, expression of love and goodbye, as well as a form of hope and prayer from the family that marks the bride's transition to a new life in her marriage. This research helps to provide information as a broad understanding regarding the role of symbolic meaning in the ritual tradition.

Received:
15 – 1 – 2026

Revised:
21 – 3 - 2026

Accepted:
29 – 4 – 2026

Keywords: Maasai weddings; spitting tradition; symbolic meaning; symbolism

Introduction

Culture exists as a result of human endeavor which includes traditions, values, language, art, and belief systems. Culture provides identity, regulates behavior, inherits life, provides guidelines for life and accommodates the expression of human creativity. According to Selo Soemardjan and Soelaman Soemardi (1964: 113). Culture is all the results of the work, feelings, and creations of society. The work of society produces technology and material culture that are needed by humans to control the surrounding nature, so that its strength and results can be devoted to the needs of society. Tradition is a part of culture in the form of customs, rituals, celebrations, ways of dressing, food, or even art.

The Maasai people are a semi nomadic people who inhabit parts of Kenya and Tanzania in East Africa and are widely known for their rich, unique and well preserved culture and traditions. One of the interesting traditions in Maasai culture is the custom of spitting which is performed during wedding ceremonies. For outsiders, this tradition may sound unusual, even considered impolite. However, for the Maasai tribe, this act of spitting has a deep symbolic meaning, such as a form of blessing, grace, or spiritual bond. As stated by Ajayi (2024), the Maasai tribe believes that a father's saliva brings blessings, wisdom and good luck and believes that saliva can symbolize fertility and abundance in Maasai culture.

In this research, the writer uses the theory of symbolism by Victor Turner. Turner sees symbols as multivocal (having many meanings), reflecting physical aspects and social values and unifying the life of society. Turner also adopted the

concept of Arnold van Gennep (1973-1957) who discussed the ritual process in his work *The Ritual Passage* (1959). Van Gennep argues that ritual involves an individual's journey from one social order to another, which requires three stages, namely the separation stage, the transition stage, and the integration or reintegration stage. This stage was later named by Turner as reparation, namely the release of individuals or groups either from a fixed state in the social structure or from a series of structural states. In this study, the theory is used to reveal the symbolic meaning of the act of spitting at Maasai weddings. This research aims to find out and understand the symbolic meaning behind the tradition of spitting at Maasai weddings, as well as a source of information about the symbolic meaning of this tradition, and to encourage public appreciation of each existing cultural tradition and strengthen cross-cultural understanding.

Method

This research uses a descriptive qualitative method with a symbolism approach. Data collection using library methods obtained from various secondary sources and previous articles that are relevant by reading, identifying and recording information related to the symbolic meaning of the spitting tradition in Maasai tribal weddings.

Results and Discussion

The tradition of spitting in Maasai tribal weddings is one of the unique traditions in Africa with their long preserved culture. According to Taylor (2018), spitting on someone in most cultures around the world is considered rude or uncivilized, but not for the Maasai people who live in Kenya and northern Tanzania, it actually makes them feel happy. For these people, spitting is a sign of respect.

Victor Turner's Theory of Symbolism, which is part of his broader anthropological framework of ritual and rites of passage. He proposed that rituals represent social dramas that mark major transitions in human life, and that the symbols used in rituals carry layered meanings that reflect the beliefs, values, and social structures of a community. Turner also emphasized three main characteristics of symbols, one of which is multivocality (one symbol contains many meanings). Spitting here for the Maasai tribe has multiple meanings, namely as a form of blessing and approval from the father, as a prayer and good luck in the bride's new life, and also as an act of respect and affection towards the bride.

Wahiba (2025), explains that when a woman marries, it is customary for the father to spit on his daughter's head and chest at the time of separation as a symbolic sign of blessing. Rather than being an act of disrespect, this gesture is meant to wish her well-being, happiness, good fortune and hopes for fertility and healthy offspring, and a successful transition to her new life. In Maasai tradition, spitting is seen as a channel of positive energy, ensuring the bride carries the goodwill of her family into her wedding.

According to Republica (2022), "Fathers bless their daughters on the wedding day by spitting on the daughter's forehead".

The bride in her traditional dress stands in front of her father. Before parting with his daughter, instead of hugging her with sadness or delivering a touching speech, the

father of the bride spat on his daughter's forehead and breasts, and that was a gesture of ultimate hope that his daughter would be fertile and happy in her marriage (Commonplace Fun Facts, 2024). Spitting on the bride is considered a gesture of congratulations and good wishes for her fertility.

Why spitting?. According to Ajayi (2024), there is a deep meaning behind the tradition of spitting carried out by fathers on their daughters in the Maasai wedding culture, namely:

1. Transfer of blessings: The Maasai believe that a father's spit carries his blessings, wisdom, and good fortune. By spitting on his daughter, the father transfers these blessings to her, ensuring a happy and prosperous marriage.
2. Protection from evil: Spitting can also be seen as a way to ward off evil spirits and misfortune. The Maasai believe that by spitting on their daughter, they protect her from harm and negativity on her wedding day and throughout her married life.
3. Fertility and prosperity: Saliva can also symbolize fertility and abundance in Maasai culture. Spitting on the bride can be seen as a wish for her to have a healthy and happy marriage and be blessed with many children.

These meanings are consistent with Turner's theory that ritual symbols acquire special meaning during liminal phases, that is, symbols that emerge at moments of important transition. That in this tradition, the transition stage where a person moves from one social status to another (from child to wife). For Maasai brides, spitting marks their transition to married life, serving as a symbolic bridge between their previous and future identities.

Reditya (2024), also adds that in such a situation, while giving some kind of blessing ritual, the other elders of the house also spit on the bride's head and chest. In Maasai tradition, this is the only way to say goodbye to a loved one. It is also meant to express love, symbolizing support and blessings. This further supports Turner's claim that these ritual symbols strengthen social bonds and reaffirm community structures.

Based on the results of the research conducted, the writer found that the tradition of spitting in Maasai tribal weddings has a very strong symbolic meaning. For the Maasai people, this act is not seen as disgusting or impolite, but rather as a form of respect, blessing, prayer and blessing. Spitting is done by the bride's father as a symbol of giving blessings, protection from evil spirits, and the hope of fertility and a happy life.

This finding is in line with the article written by Dr. Neelam Himthanii (2025), which discusses that the tradition of spitting in Maasai tribal weddings has a deep meaning that is well received by the bride. In this

culture, the act of spitting is not a form of insult, but rather a symbol of love and approval from parents.

In addition, an article by Anna Ajayi (2024) also supports the results of this study. In her article, Ajayi states that spitting is a form of transferring luck and protection to the bride and groom. This shows that the symbolic meaning of this action is closely related to the hopes and prayers of the family for a better life for the bride and groom.

The symbolic meaning of spitting becomes clearer when the tradition is examined through Turner's concept of multivocality. A symbol is multivocal because it can communicate several meanings at the same time, rather than representing only one idea. In the Maasai wedding ceremony, spitting therefore cannot be reduced to a simple physical act. The same action simultaneously communicates blessing, protection, affection, respect, and hope for the bride's future. The meaning is produced by the cultural context in which the act takes place and by the social relationship between the person who performs it and the bride. In this sense, the act becomes meaningful because the Maasai community collectively understands and accepts its symbolic value.

The multivocal character of the symbol can also be seen in the different forms of goodwill contained in the ritual. First, the father's spitting represents parental blessing and approval. Second, it expresses a protective intention because the act is associated with the rejection of misfortune and evil. Third, it communicates expectations concerning fertility, prosperity, and a successful married life. Finally, the gesture functions as an emotional expression of love and farewell. These meanings do not contradict one another; instead, they are condensed into a single ritual action. This supports Turner's view that ritual symbols are capable of bringing together several layers of social and cultural meaning within one observable act.

The ritual can further be interpreted through the concept of liminality in the process of rites of passage. As explained through Van Gennep and developed by Turner, a ritual transition involves movement from an established social position toward a new one. The bride is situated at an important point of transition because she is leaving her previous position within her family and entering the social status of a married woman. The moment of spitting is therefore not an isolated action but part of a wider process of separation and transition. The bride remains connected to her family through the blessing, while at the same time being symbolically prepared for her new role. The ritual consequently functions as a bridge between two social conditions.

This liminal dimension also explains why the meaning of spitting should not be judged according to values outside the Maasai cultural system. From an external perspective, saliva may be associated with dirtiness, disrespect, or inappropriate behavior. Within the Maasai ritual context, however, the same physical substance becomes a medium through which social and spiritual intentions are communicated. The contrast demonstrates that the meaning of a symbol is culturally constructed. Turner's approach is useful here because it directs attention

away from the literal appearance of an action and toward the cultural meanings attached to that action during a ritual process. Thus, understanding the spitting tradition requires understanding the symbolic system of the community rather than evaluating the practice through an external standard.

The role of the father is also significant in understanding the social dimension of the symbol. When the father performs the ritual, the blessing does not represent only an individual feeling; it expresses the family's hopes for the bride's future. The presence of other elders, as described by Reditya (2024), expands this meaning from a private father-daughter relationship into a communal act. The participation of elders demonstrates that the ritual is embedded in the wider social structure of the Maasai community. In Turner's framework, ritual symbols can reinforce social relationships because participants share and reproduce meanings through ceremonial practices. The spitting tradition therefore contributes to maintaining continuity between generations while recognizing the bride's changing social position.

The tradition also demonstrates how ritual can transform an ordinary bodily action into a culturally meaningful performance. Spitting itself is a simple physical behavior, but within the wedding ceremony it becomes a formalized act surrounded by expectations, participants, and a specific social purpose. Its placement at the moment of separation gives it additional significance. The action becomes a visible representation of intangible hopes such as happiness, protection, fertility, and prosperity. This relationship between the physical form of a symbol and the social meanings attached to it reflects Turner's understanding that ritual symbols connect observable actions with broader values and beliefs. Consequently, the significance of the tradition lies not in the physical act alone but in what the community communicates through it.

Furthermore, the tradition illustrates the relationship between individual transition and collective continuity. Although the bride is the direct recipient of the ritual, the meanings expressed through the ceremony concern the wellbeing of the family and community as well. The hopes for fertility and healthy offspring, for example, extend beyond the bride's personal happiness because they are connected to the continuity of family life. Likewise, the expression of parental blessing demonstrates that the transition into marriage is recognized collectively. The ritual therefore links the bride's new identity with the expectations and values of the community. Through this process, the wedding ceremony becomes a means of transmitting cultural knowledge from one generation to another.

Taken together, these interpretations show that the spitting tradition functions as a complex ritual symbol rather than a single act with a single meaning. Its multivocality is evident in the coexistence of blessing, protection, affection, farewell, fertility, prosperity, and social approval. Its liminal significance appears in the bride's movement from one social status to another, while its communal dimension is reflected in the participation of the father and elders. The findings therefore strengthen the application

of Turner's theory in explaining why the same physical action can be interpreted differently across cultures. In the Maasai wedding context, spitting becomes a culturally accepted symbolic language through which the community expresses its values and accompanies the bride during an important transition in her life.

Conclusion

Based on the results of research related to the topic, namely the tradition of spitting in Maasai tribal weddings. The writer found that the tradition of spitting, which is considered a rude and uncivilized act, even disgusting, actually has several deep symbolic meanings for the Maasai people. For the Maasai people, spitting is considered a form of blessing, congratulations and a sign of respect. This act of spitting is done to pray for prosperity, happiness, good luck, and also protection from evil spirits. The father of the bride also spits on his daughter in hopes of fertility for her and healthy offspring for his child. They do it with the aim of expressing love.

References

- Ajayi, A. (2024). The tribe where father spits on daughter for good luck and prosperity. African Vibes. <https://www.pulse.ng/articles/lifestyle/the-maasai-tribe-and-their-spitting-tradition-2024072704251678137>
- Cohen, B. J. (1992). Sociology. Rineka Cipta. <https://jurnal.uin-antasari.ac.id/index.php/ittihad/article/view/1930/1448#:~:text=Koentjaraningrat%20mengklasifikasikan%2C%20kebudayaan%20dalam%20tiga,berpola%20dari%20manusia%20dalam%20masyarakat>
- Commonplace Fun Facts. (2024, July 26). The Maasai: Warriors, spitters, and fashion icons extraordinaire. Commonplace Fun Facts. <https://commonplacefacts.com/2024/07/26/the-maasai-warriors-spitters-and-fashion-icons-extraordinaire/>
- Himthanii, N. (2025). Did you know... The surprising tradition of spitting on the bride in Kenya. African Culture Magazine. <https://medium.com/did-you-know-short-fun-facts/did-you-know-the-surprising-tradition-of-spitting-on-the-bride-in-kenya-6e600673995c>
- Reditya. (2024). Spitting tradition of Maasai tribe in Kenya. Reditya Culture. <https://www.reityaculture.com>
- Soemardjan, S., & Soemardi, S. (1964). Setangkai bunga sosiologi. Yayasan Penerbitan Fakultas Ekonomi Universitas Indonesia. <https://jurnal.uin-antasari.ac.id/index.php/ittihad/article/view/1930/1448#:~:text=Koentjaraningrat%20mengklasifikasikan%2C%20kebudayaan%20dalam%20tiga,berpola%20dari%20manusia%20dalam%20masyarakat>
- Taylor, S. (2018). A look at the Maasai tribe's tradition of spitting at each other for blessing and respect. Face2Face Africa. <https://face2faceafrica.com/article/a-look-at-the-maasai-tribes-tradition-of-spitting-at-each-other-for-blessing-and-respect>

Turner, V. (1967). *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual*. Cornell University Press. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/327171651.pdf>

Wahiba, B. (2025). Maasai wedding culture and symbolic acts. East Africa Heritage. <https://www.eastafricaheritage.org>

WHWorld. (2024). Maasai tribe traditions in modern times. World Heritage. <https://www.worldheritage.com>