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A discursive media analysis of dumbeg platformization in contemporary food discovery on TikTok

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Research Article

Keywords: dumbeg, platform discourse, platformization, algorithmic visibility, TikTok, Indonesian heritage food

Posted Date: August 14th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10441847/v1

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

Traditional ethnic foods increasingly circulate through digital platforms, yet critical scholarship on how platform logics restructure their cultural visibility remains scarce in Indonesian food studies. This article examines dumbeg, a steamed rice cake from Rembang, Central Java, as a discursive site where the four institutional logics of the platform society, datafication, commodification, selection, and programmability, intersect with five centuries of ritual, ceremonial, and oral discourse. Drawing on a TikTok corpus of 62 videos (14,243,440 views, collected March 2026), the analysis treats engagement metrics not as marketing performance but as traces of algorithmic curation. A 12.8-fold visibility asymmetry between dumbek (Tuban) and dumbeg (Rembang) cannot be explained by historical depth or cultural significance; it is a constitutive effect of algorithmic selection privileging content that aligns with TikTok's platform vernacular. Three discursive registers, commercial-promotional, identity-curiosity, and nostalgia-heritage, reorganise heritage knowledge into platform-legible formats, while the embodied, gendered ritual knowledge of predominantly female artisan producers is systematically absent across all three, an absence we theorise as a domain of unplatformizable epistemics. The article argues that what appears as a digital promotion gap is better understood as algorithmic recognition asymmetry, with implications for how heritage food scholarship conceptualises preservation in the platform era.

1. Introduction

In Indonesia, an archipelagic nation of more than 17,508 islands and over 600 ethnic groups, rice is far more than a staple cereal. It is at once a sacred substance, a ritual centrepiece, and a defining medium of regional culinary identity. The Indonesian Ministry of Tourism estimates that the country has around 5,350 traditional recipes documented across the archipelago, with more than 30 considered nationally significant [37]. Among these, rice forms the foundation of countless variations of cooked rice dishes (nasi), wrapped or steamed cakes (kue and jajanan pasar), porridges (bubur), fermented preparations (tape, brem, tuak), and ceremonial offerings whose forms encode cosmological meaning. The cone-shaped nasi tumpeng, for example, is a national symbol whose form is read as the mythical Hindu mountain Meru and which still anchors thanksgiving rituals across Java and beyond [37]. Within this vast culinary landscape, three steamed rice cakes are particularly instructive for understanding the relationship between food, place, and cultural memory: lemper, a glutinous-rice roll widely circulated nationally as a marker of Javanese culinary identity; klepon, a pandan-coloured sweet that has become a standard reference point for Javanese ceremonial sweetness; and dumbeg, a conical steamed cake from Rembang on the Pantura coastal corridor, whose five-century history of ceremonial continuity has not, until recently, translated into national or digital visibility comparable to the first two.

The platformization of cultural production has emerged as a central concern in contemporary media studies, reshaping how cultural artefacts circulate, gain visibility, and enter public discourse [34, 23]. Where earlier scholarship on traditional foods foregrounded questions of authenticity, recipe transmission, and ritual continuity, the rapid migration of food discovery onto platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube demands a different analytical vocabulary, one capable of accounting for how

algorithmic infrastructures, commercial dataflows, and platform-specific genres reorganise cultural heritage as data, content, and engagement [21]. Indonesian ethnic food scholarship has so far engaged this transformation only descriptively, treating social media largely as a promotional channel rather than as a discursive infrastructure that reconstitutes the very objects it makes visible [8, 36]. This article addresses that gap by reframing the analysis of a single traditional food, dumbeg, a conical steamed rice cake from Rembang, Central Java, through the lens of platform discourse theory.

Dumbeg presents an unusually clear case for such reframing. Originating along the Pantura coastal corridor of northern Java between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries CE, dumbeg has retained a continuous ceremonial presence in sedekah bumi rituals, wedding seserahan, and communal thanksgiving gatherings, embedded within the syncretic Islam Kejawen tradition that fused Hindu-Javanese cosmology with Islamic devotional practice [26, 29]. Its conical wurung mould, handcrafted from lontar palm (Borassus flabellifer Linn.) leaf, anchors a dense web of symbolic meaning, including its widely recognised pairing with jadah genduk as a lingga-yoni representation of fertility and harmonious union [3, 28]. For five centuries, this discursive formation circulated through embodied, oral, and ritual channels [18, 24]. In the past three years, it has begun to circulate through TikTok, and what enters TikTok is not the same object.

Recent scholarship has begun to analyse how short-form video platforms reorganise the visibility and value of heritage foods in rural Asia [35], with particular attention to how rural creators transform agricultural traditions into digital narratives that mobilise tourism, livelihoods, and community identity. Wang et al.'s [35] study of the Xinhua Ziquejie Terraces in China demonstrates how a single committed rural influencer can curate dialect, seasonal labour, and locally specific food imagery into a coherent platform vernacular that anchors a value network connecting farmers, audiences, and tourism operators. The dumbeg case extends this emerging conversation in a complementary direction: rather than analysing the affordances activated by a present rural influencer, it examines what happens when a heritage community has not yet produced the creator-influencer hybrid through which place-based digital visibility becomes possible. The visibility asymmetry that follows is not a deficit of marketing effort but a structural feature of how platform logics distribute legibility across heritage sites with different digital actor configurations.

This article argues that the encounter between dumbeg's ritual discourse and TikTok's platform logic produces a new discursive configuration that cannot be adequately read as either preservation or commercialisation. Drawing on van Dijck et al.'s [34] articulation of the platform society and Poell et al.'s [23] concept of platformization, we examine how four institutional logics, datafication, commodification, selection, and programmability, restructure the visibility, meaning, and producer-consumer relations of a geographically confined ethnic food. Three questions guide the analysis. First, how do platform logics translate ritual and ceremonial discourse into algorithmically tractable content? Second, what discursive registers emerge as dumbeg enters TikTok's content economy, and how does each register negotiate the tension between heritage and platform vernacular? Third, what is rendered invisible in the process, and what are the implications for heritage scholarship?

The analysis draws on an original TikTok dataset of 62 food-related videos accumulating 14,243,440 views, collected in March 2026 [4]. Engagement metrics are read here not as marketing performance indicators but as traces of algorithmic curation, evidence of how platform logic selects, amplifies, and silences particular discursive modes. The most striking finding, a 12.8-fold visibility asymmetry between dumbek from Tuban and dumbeg from its historically documented Rembang origin, is reframed accordingly: not as a digital promotion gap requiring corrective marketing intervention, but as a constitutive effect of algorithmic recognition [1, 2], with implications that extend well beyond the case of a single conical cake.

The stakes of this reframing extend beyond food studies. Platform infrastructures now mediate a growing share of how localised cultural production reaches markets, publics, and policy attention, and they do so through selection mechanisms that are privately governed, commercially motivated, and largely opaque to the communities whose livelihoods they affect. Where recognition is a precondition for market access, the distribution of algorithmic visibility becomes a distributive question: it allocates economic opportunity across regions and producer groups according to criteria that no public institution has authorised and that affected communities cannot contest. Read this way, the dumbeg case is an instance of a broader problem in the governance of globalised digital infrastructure, connecting questions of cultural heritage to questions of rural livelihood, gendered economic inequality, and the institutional capacity of states to protect place-based producers. These are the terms in which we understand the analysis to bear on debates about inequality and institutional protection in platform-mediated economies.

2. Background

2.1 The Four Institutional Logics of the Platform Society

Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal [34] propose that contemporary online platforms operate through four interlocking institutional logics that together constitute what they term the platform society. Datafication refers to the rendering of social and cultural practices into machine-readable data points, transforming acts of meaning-making (a comment, a share, a watch-through) into metrics that drive subsequent algorithmic decisions. Commodification describes the conversion of these dataflows into economic value, organising user attention as a tradable resource and reorienting cultural producers toward content optimised for monetisation. Selection captures the algorithmic curation through which platforms determine visibility: what is recommended, what is suppressed, what becomes a trend. Programmability refers to the architectural openness through which platforms shape and reshape user behaviour, prescribing genres (the 30-second clip, the duet, the trend audio) that users adopt to gain algorithmic favour.

These four logics are not external constraints imposed on cultural content; they are constitutive of the discursive forms that emerge within platform environments. Poell et al. [23] (see also [21]) develop this insight through the concept of platformization, defined as the penetration of platform infrastructures,

economic processes, and governmental frameworks into cultural industries, alongside the reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginations around platforms. For traditional foods entering TikTok, platformization implies that the food itself, its preparation, presentation, narration, and audience, is progressively reorganised around what circulates well within the platform's affordances [5, 7].

2.2 Algorithmic Visibility and the Threat of Invisibility

Bucher's [1, 2] concept of the threat of invisibility offers a critical complement to the platformization framework. On algorithmic platforms, visibility is not a neutral outcome of content quality; it is a precarious achievement, conditional on continuous alignment with shifting algorithmic preferences. Cultural producers who fail to perform within the genres the algorithm rewards are subject to a kind of structural disappearance, regardless of the cultural depth or historical significance of their content. This is particularly consequential for geographically confined heritage foods, whose claim to recognition rests precisely on the qualities, long-form ritual context, embodied artisanal labour, intergenerational oral transmission, that resist the short-form, visually arresting, audio-driven format favoured by TikTok's algorithmic logic.

Gibbs et al.'s [10] notion of platform vernacular further sharpens this point. Each platform develops its own communicative grammar, conventions of editing, framing, soundtrack, captioning, and hashtagging, that competent users internalise as the price of visibility. To enter TikTok's vernacular is to translate one's content into forms the platform recognises as native, a translation that inevitably reshapes what is being communicated [5].

Mears's [20] field-theoretic analysis of viral content creators sharpens this point further. Mears argues that attention itself functions as a field-specific form of capital, with patterned variation in how it is accessed and converted into economic, social, and symbolic gain. Creators who are "algorithmically recognisable" accumulate attention capital that is disproportionate to the cultural depth or status of their content, while those who fail to perform within platform-rewarded genres remain structurally invisible regardless of the cultural depth of their content. Mears extends Bourdieu's field theory by treating online audiences themselves as hierarchically valued, such that attention drawn from mass audiences yields different symbolic returns than attention drawn from niche communities. For dumbeg, this means that the registers through which the food becomes visible on TikTok are not the registers through which it has historically been meaningful [13].

2.3 Connective Memory and the Mediation of Heritage

Finally, van Dijck's [33] concept of connective memory provides a framework for understanding the heritage register specifically. Memory in platform environments is no longer the stable inheritance of community oral tradition; it is performatively constructed through acts of sharing, tagging, and commenting that connect dispersed individuals through mediated artefacts. When a TikTok video invokes childhood memories of dumbeg, it does not simply reflect pre-existing memory but actively produces a particular memorial formation, one whose contours are shaped by what the platform allows

to circulate. Heritage on TikTok is therefore best understood as connective heritage, a category whose continuity with non-platform heritage cannot be assumed and must instead be analysed.

This re-mediation logic has been developed empirically by Onorati and Giardullo [22], whose analysis of TripAdvisor restaurant reviews shows how social media do not merely circulate pre-existing food meanings but actively reorganise the categories through which food becomes legible. In their analysis, the meaning of “authentic” detaches from its historical association with “typical” or ethnic faithfulness and reattaches to platform-legible cues such as transparency, label information, geographic provenance, and the visual immediacy of user-posted photographs. What emerges is what Johnston and Baumann [15] term a metamorphosis of distinction: platform-mediated food retains symbolic stratification but reorganises its currency from inherited cultural authority toward performative mastery of platform-native discursive forms. The dumbeg case extends this insight from restaurant reviewing to the domain of heritage food itself: as the food enters TikTok, the categories through which it becomes meaningful are not those of its pre-platform discursive formation but those the platform recognises as legible content.

Together, these conceptual resources provide the analytical vocabulary for the empirical sections that follow. They direct attention away from questions of marketing effectiveness and toward questions of how platform logics reorganise the discursive field within which dumbeg becomes legible at all.

2.4 The Pre-Platform Discursive Formation of Dumbeg

Before examining how platform logics reshape dumbeg, it is necessary to characterise the discursive formation through which the food has historically been made meaningful. This is not a comprehensive ethnography but a strategic reconstruction of what enters the TikTok encounter from the heritage side, organised around three discursive registers: ritual, etymological, and cosmological.

The ritual register positions dumbeg as a ceremonial object embedded in collective social practice. The food appears in sedekah bumi (communal thanksgiving for the harvest), wedding seserahan, and funerary commemorations, where its function is not primarily nutritional but performative, it materialises social bonds, ratifies kinship, and marks temporal-spiritual thresholds [29, 30]. Within Islam Kejawen, the syncretic form of Islam historically practiced in Java, dumbeg is associated with the wali (the Wali Songo missionaries), whose role in the food's historical diffusion along the Pantura coastal corridor between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries CE links culinary practice directly to religious-cultural integration [26]. The discourse of the ritual register is collective, embodied, and time-bound: meaning is produced through co-presence at ceremonial events, not through circulation of representations.

The etymological register encodes the food's identity in the very act of naming. Local oral knowledge recorded by Prayitno et al. [24] describes the food as rice batter "put in wurung then 'dang'/steamed," suggesting that the name dumbeg derives from the Javanese coastal verb dang (to steam), nominalised as "that which is steamed in a conical mould." This contemporary oral knowledge rests on a deep historical foundation: the root ḍaṅ is attested in Old Javanese texts from at least the ninth century CE, where it denoted a copper steaming pot and where the derived verb madāṅ described the steaming of

rice, a practice established in Java well before dumbeg's emergence along the Pantura corridor [14]. Cognate names appear across the corridor: dumbek in Tuban, jumbrek in Lamongan, dumbleg in Nganjuk [13]. The etymological register thus constitutes dumbeg as a locally inflected member of a broader culinary family rooted in shared coastal heritage, one whose lexical anchor predates the food by five centuries or more. Crucially, this register is sustained through inter-generational oral transmission and is not, in its native form, written; it survives in the speech practices of producer communities and the local market interactions that sustain them [18].

The cosmological register layers Hindu-Javanese symbolism onto Islamic devotional meaning. The conical form of dumbeg is widely interpreted as a representation of the lingga, the Hindu-Javanese symbol of masculine fertility and creative force, traditionally served alongside jadah genduk, a flattened sticky rice cake whose disc-like form is read as the yoni, the feminine counterpart [3, 29]. Together the two foods constitute a complementary pair embodying the union of masculine and feminine principles, a pairing most visible in wedding ceremonies (sekar temanten). The cosmological register operates through symbolic association sustained by interpretive communities; its meanings are not self-evident from the visual form but require initiation into the cultural codes through which form becomes symbol.

The cosmological register of dumbeg participates in a wider Asian complex of beliefs in which rice is not merely sustenance but a vehicle of cosmological order, divine presence, and gendered fertility. Across South, Southeast, and East Asia, rice deities anchor cycles of ritual labour, household provisioning, and agricultural calendar [12]. Within Indonesia specifically, the figure of the rice goddess Dewi Sri appears across the archipelago under multiple names, including Sang Hyang Pohaci and Nyi Pohaci Sangiang Sri in West Java, Si Beru Dayang among the Karo Batak of North Sumatra, Sangiang Serri' among the Bugis of South Sulawesi, and Luing Ayang among the Ngaju Dayak of Central Borneo, suggesting that beliefs surrounding rice as feminine principle of life-giving fertility constitute a pan-Indonesian rather than narrowly Javanese formation [31]. The Sanskrit etymology of Sri itself, denoting fertility, wealth, health, and beauty, situates this complex within the wider Hindu-Buddhist semantic field that shaped pre-Islamic Java. Read in this register, dumbeg's conical form mediates between Meru as cosmological mountain and the rice grain as locus of divine presence; it is not simply a regional sweet but a small material instance of a much older cosmology that long predates both its Pantura locality and the Wali Songo missionary period through which it acquired its specifically Islamic-Javanese ritual associations.

These three registers share three properties that prove consequential when we turn to platform analysis. They are slow (their meanings unfold over the duration of ceremony, conversation, and transmission rather than in the seconds of a video clip); they are situated (they require co-presence, local knowledge, or ritual context to become meaningful); and they are non-extractive (their value does not detach from the contexts of their production). All three properties stand in tension with platform logic, which favours speed, decontextualised circulation, and metric-extractable content [6].

3. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a critical platform analysis approach, integrating digital methods [27] with discourse-analytic interpretation grounded in platform society theory [34]. The empirical corpus was generated through a TikTok hashtag scraping procedure conducted on 19 March 2026, targeting the hashtags #dumbeg, #grebegdumbeg, and #dumbek using the Clockworks TikTok Hashtag Scraper available through the Apify platform [4]. The initial scrape returned 200 raw video records spanning January 2021 to March 2026. Manual filtering excluded phonetically similar content concerning the darbuka and doumbek percussion instruments, yielding a final corpus of 62 food-related videos. All engagement figures reported below are fixed to the 19 March 2026 collection date and will have continued to accrue subsequently.

Each video was coded along three analytical dimensions. First, quantitative engagement metrics (views, likes, shares, comments, video duration, posting date, geographic attribution where indicated) were extracted to enable temporal and comparative analysis. Second, caption text and hashtag clusters were subjected to thematic coding through inductive analysis, producing three discursive registers: commercial-promotional, identity-curiosity, and nostalgia-heritage. Each video was assigned to the single register that best characterised its dominant address. Videos whose captions carried no discernible discursive framing beyond the depiction of the food itself, chiefly unlabelled preparation clips and reposted footage without original caption text, were coded as unmarked and retained in the corpus for aggregate metric analysis but excluded from register-level comparison. Of the 62 videos, 38 were assigned to one of the three registers and 24 were coded as unmarked; register-level figures reported in Section 4.4 therefore refer to this coded subset rather than to the full corpus. Intercoder agreement was not formally assessed, as coding was conducted by a single analyst; this limitation is discussed in Section 3.1. Third, a smaller subset of high-engagement videos (defined as those exceeding 100,000 views) was examined for their multimodal composition, attending to the interplay of visual framing, captioning, and audio in producing platform-legible content.

Two methodological commitments inform this design. The first is the recognition that engagement metrics are not transparent reflections of audience interest but artefacts of algorithmic curation [2]. A video with four million views has not simply earned four million viewers' attention; it has been algorithmically selected for distribution to feeds where its content was predicted to perform. Reading metrics as discursive traces, rather than as performance indicators, is the central interpretive move of platform discourse analysis. The second commitment is reflexivity about the limits of scraped data. The corpus reflects only what TikTok's API surfaces under specific hashtag queries; videos that engage dumbeg without these tags, and content circulating through other platforms, are not represented. The findings therefore concern dumbeg's discursive formation on hashtag-tagged TikTok specifically, not its total digital presence.

All data were publicly available at the time of collection and no personally identifiable information was retained, in line with established ethical guidelines for the analysis of public social media data [32].

3.1 Limitations

Five limitations bound the claims made here. First, the corpus is single-platform and hashtag-dependent. It reflects only what TikTok surfaced under three hashtag queries on a single collection date; videos discussing dumbeg without these tags, content on Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, and material circulating in closed or algorithmically unsurfaced contexts are absent. The findings concern dumbeg's discursive formation on hashtag-tagged TikTok specifically, not its total digital presence.

Second, engagement metrics are a snapshot. The corpus was collected on 19 March 2026, and view, like, and share counts continue to accrue after collection. Ratios reported here describe relative standing at a single moment and should not be treated as stable properties of the videos.

Third, geographic attribution is inferred rather than verified. Videos were assigned to Tuban or Rembang on the basis of caption text, hashtags, and on-screen location cues supplied by posters. These self-reported markers may be inaccurate, absent, or applied for reach rather than provenance, and no independent verification of creator location was possible. The Tuban–Rembang comparison should therefore be read as a comparison between attribution categories rather than between verified places of origin.

Fourth, coding was performed by a single analyst without formal intercoder reliability assessment, and register assignment involved interpretive judgement, particularly at the boundary between commercial-promotional and nostalgia-heritage framings where captions frequently combined both. The register distribution should be treated as an analytically motivated reading rather than a reproducible classification.

Fifth, and most consequentially for the argument developed in Section 4.5, this study includes no primary data from dumbeg producers. Claims regarding embodied artisanal knowledge, its intergenerational transmission, and the gendered structure of producer labour rest on published ethnographic and educational research [18, 24, 29] rather than on interviews or observation conducted for this study. The argument that such knowledge constitutes a domain of unplatformizable epistemics is accordingly a theoretical inference drawn from its systematic absence in the corpus, not an empirical demonstration of what producers know or how they experience platform visibility. Establishing the latter would require producer interviews and workshop observation, which the present design cannot substitute for and which we identify as the priority direction for subsequent research.

4. Results

The TikTok corpus reveals how each of the four platform logics, datafication, commodification, selection, programmability, operates on dumbeg, and how each reshapes the discursive field through which the food becomes legible.

4.1 Datafication: From Ceremony to Metric

The most fundamental transformation is the rendering of ritual practice into metric. The 62 videos in the corpus accumulated 14,243,440 views, 373,136 likes, 13,249 shares, and 14,832 comments, yielding an aggregate engagement rate (likes per view) of 2.62%. These figures are routinely cited as evidence of growing consumer interest in traditional foods. From a platform-discourse perspective, however, they are better understood as the operational outputs of a system that converts the ceremonial encounter (a guest accepting dumbeg at a sedekah bumi) into a unit (a watched second, a tapped heart, a forwarded URL) that can enter algorithmic computation [34]. What is preserved in this translation is anything quantifiable; what is lost is anything that resists quantification.

These metrics, which show a pattern characteristic of platformized cultural objects (see Table 1): long latency followed by abrupt amplification [5]. From 2021 through 2023, the food generated negligible measurable activity. In 2024, views increased to 678,660. In 2025, views reached 13,344,343, a 1,866% increase over the preceding year and a 143-fold increase over 2023 levels. This trajectory is not the trajectory of growing public interest in dumbeg; it is the trajectory of a platform algorithm having identified a content niche and amplified it. The food itself was equally meaningful in 2021, 2022, and 2023; the platform was simply not yet ready to make it visible.

Table 1
Temporal distribution of TikTok engagement for dumbeg/dumbek content (2021–2025)

Year	Videos (n)	Total views	Total likes	Growth (YoY)
2021	2	69,934	—	baseline
2022	5	35,528	—	−49%
2023	8	93,228	—	+ 163%
2024	6	678,660	—	+ 628%
2025	32	13,344,343	—	+ 1,866%
Total	**62***	**14,243,440**	**373,136**	**—**

**2026 partial data (n = 9 videos, 21,747 views) excluded from temporal analysis.*

Alt Text: Five-row table showing year-by-year TikTok engagement for dumbeg/dumbek content. Columns are year, number of videos, total views, total likes, and year-on-year growth. 2021: 2 videos, 69,934 views (baseline). 2022: 5 videos, 35,528 views (−49%). 2023: 8 videos, 93,228 views (+163%). 2024: 6 videos, 678,660 views (+628%). 2025: 32 videos, 13,344,343 views (+1,866%). Total across the period: 62 videos, 14,243,440 views, 373,136 likes. Partial 2026 data (9 videos, 21,747 views) excluded from temporal analysis.

Datafication operates as a translation device: the multidimensional ceremonial object is reduced to scalar values, and any analysis that begins from those scalar values inherits the reductions they encode.

This is not an argument against using engagement data; it is an argument for treating it as evidence of platform operation rather than evidence of cultural meaning.

4.2 Commodification: Heritage as Sales Funnel

The corpus reveals that the dominant discursive register on TikTok is commercial-promotional. Of the 38 videos assigned a discursive register, 22 (57.9%; 35.5% of the full 62-video corpus) were unambiguously commercial in nature, featuring direct product promotion, ordering information, price points, and delivery logistics; these 22 videos accumulated 8,169,551 views, or 57.4% of total corpus engagement. The platform thus sorts cultural content not into curatorial categories but into transactional ones, and it amplifies the transactional most aggressively. This is consistent with Fusté-Forné and Filimon's [9] observation that visual platforms have collapsed the distinction between social media marketing and social commerce, with the latter increasingly subsuming the former [7].

Empirical multimodal discourse analysis of TikTok live-stream commerce demonstrates how this collapse is linguistically and visually performed: Zhang, Xia, and Zheng [38], examining cross-border textile livestreams, show that hosts construct commercial address through coordinated verbal, visual, and auditory modes that work together to compensate for the absence of tactile and olfactory channels, with commercial discourse itself becoming a site where consumer trust and product value are actively produced rather than merely communicated.

The discursive consequence is a reorganisation of dumbeg's address. In the ritual register, dumbeg addresses a community gathered in ceremonial co-presence; in the commercial register, dumbeg addresses an aggregate consumer reachable through direct messaging and online order forms. The food is still recognisably dumbeg, but the relational structure within which it appears has been transformed. What van Dijck et al. [34] term commodification is therefore not merely the introduction of a profit motive (small artisanal producers have always sold their products) but the platform-mediated reorganisation of the cultural object's relational field.

Notably, the commodification logic produces particular constraints on what the commercial register can include. A 30-second commercial video cannot accommodate the slow temporality of sedekah bumi or the cosmological register's symbolic depth; these elements drop out not because producers reject them but because they are not programmable within the format the algorithm rewards [5].

4.3 Selection: The Algorithmic Production of the Tuban–Rembang Asymmetry

The corpus reveals a striking visibility asymmetry: videos featuring dumbek attributed to Tuban (East Java) generated 8,135,769 views across 17 videos, whereas videos featuring dumbeg attributed to Rembang (Central Java) generated 634,198 views across 19 videos, a 12.8-fold difference. Conventional marketing analysis would read this as a digital promotion gap and prescribe corrective intervention: better content, more posting, paid amplification. Platform discourse analysis offers a different reading.

First, the asymmetry is not explained by any property of the underlying foods. Rembang has the greater historical depth, the more elaborated cosmological register, and the documented Wali Songo origin narrative [26, 29]; if cultural significance translated transparently into algorithmic visibility, the asymmetry would run in the opposite direction. Second, the asymmetry is not explained by simple posting volume; Rembang attribution actually appears in slightly more videos (19 vs. 17). The asymmetry is produced at the level of algorithmic selection, which has identified the dumbek-Tuban variant as the better-performing content niche and amplified it accordingly. Each amplification produces engagement that further reinforces the selection, in a feedback loop that Bucher [1, 2] terms algorithmic recognition: visibility breeds visibility, while invisibility breeds further invisibility.

This is the threat of invisibility in operation. From the platform's perspective, dumbeg-Rembang is not historically more significant; it is simply a less-engaging instance of the same content category, and the algorithm allocates its scarce resource (user attention) accordingly. The cultural depth of the Rembang origin is not legible as a feature within the variables the algorithm reads. What Rembang lacks, more specifically, can be articulated through the distinction Kozinets, Gretzel, and Gambetti [17] draw between content creators, whose value derives from creative authorship and stylistic distinctiveness, and online influencers, whose value derives from relational trust and social capital accumulated through sustained audience engagement. Algorithmic visibility on TikTok rewards actors who occupy both positions simultaneously: those who produce platform-native creative content while also embedding themselves in relational networks of trust with viewers. The dumbek-Tuban variant has, by some configuration of luck and individual practice, accumulated such hybrid actors; the dumbeg-Rembang variant has not. This is not a deficit that more posting can remedy, because the hybrid position is itself a structural achievement, not a quantity of output. What appears, from outside the platform, as a digital promotion gap is, from inside platform logic, a perfectly rational allocation of distribution capacity. Reframing the gap as algorithmic recognition asymmetry has practical consequences: it suggests that more posting alone will not close the gap, because the gap is not a quantity gap but a vernacular gap (see Section 4.4). This pattern resonates with documented cases of geographic origin displacement in the absence of geographic indication protection [11].

The asymmetry holds across virtually every engagement dimension, suggesting a stable algorithmic preference rather than a transient anomaly (see Table 2).

The asymmetry is, however, sensitive to the corpus’s highly skewed view distribution. A single identity-curiosity video attributed to the Tuban variant accounts for approximately 4,000,000 views, just under half of the Tuban total. Excluding this outlier reduces the view ratio from 12.8× to roughly 6.5×, and the mean-per-video ratio from 14.3× to roughly 7.7×. Median per-video views, which are less sensitive to single-item skew, indicate a smaller but still substantial gap. The asymmetry therefore remains directionally robust, but its magnitude should be read as an order-of-magnitude indication rather than a precise coefficient. This skew is itself consistent with the argument advanced here: algorithmic selection on TikTok distributes visibility in a strongly power-law fashion, so that a small number of amplified items

dominate aggregate metrics. The outlier is not noise to be removed but evidence of the selection logic under analysis.

Table 2
Comparative engagement: dumbek (Tuban) vs. dumbeg (Rembang)

Metric	Dumbek (Tuban)	Dumbeg (Rembang)	Ratio (T:R)
Videos (n)	17	19	0.9 ×
Total views	8,135,769	634,198	12.8 ×
Average views per video	478,575	33,379	14.3 ×
Historical depth	Pantura variant	15th–16th c. origin	inverse

Alt Text: Comparative table of TikTok engagement for Dumbek (Tuban) versus Dumbeg (Rembang) across four metrics. Videos: 17 vs. 19 (ratio 0.9×). Total views: 8,135,769 vs. 634,198 (ratio 12.8×). Average views per video: 478,575 vs. 33,379 (ratio 14.3×). Historical depth: Pantura variant (Tuban) vs. 15th–16th century origin (Rembang), an inverse relationship.

4.4 Programmability: Three Discursive Registers as Platform Genres

Programmability is the logic through which platforms shape the genres in which content circulates. Three such genres are identifiable in the corpus, each operating as a distinct discursive register that translates dumbeg into a particular platform-legible form.

The commercial-promotional register (n = 22; 8,169,551 views) addresses dumbeg as a purchasable product, organising the video around price, ordering, and delivery cues [9]. This register has the highest aggregate visibility but also the lowest cultural specificity; videos in this category tend to be substitutable with promotional content for any artisanal food, and they are characteristically silent on ritual context, etymology, and cosmology. This pattern is consistent with Mears's [20] field-theoretic distinction between market-oriented and community-oriented creators: market-oriented creators pursue mass audiences for short-term, directly-monetisable attention, and they characteristically produce content that is generic, substitutable, and detached from the personal or place-based authenticity that anchors community-oriented influencers. The dumbeg corpus suggests that the commercial register on TikTok performs precisely this market-oriented logic for heritage food: it captures attention by severing the food from the ritual and cosmological registers within which it has historically been meaningful, treating the finished product rather than its cultural depth as the unit of value.

The identity-curiosity register (n = 6; 4,669,100 views) frames the food as a regional naming puzzle, typified by prompts such as Namanya apa di kota kalian? ("What is it called in your city?"). This register achieves the highest per-video engagement of any category, an average of 778,183 views per video, and the most-viewed single video in the corpus (4,000,000 views) belongs to it, posing the question "What is

it called in your region? Dumbek, clurut, or clorot?" The register's algorithmic success is not coincidental; it operates by translating the etymological register of pre-platform discourse [13] into a participatory format that exploits TikTok's comment-section affordances. Viewers do not merely consume the video; they contribute their local naming convention, producing a crowd-sourced ethnographic map distributed across the comment thread. This is a genuine instance of platform vernacular [10]: a discursive form native to the platform, one that did not exist in pre-platform discourse and that has reorganised etymological knowledge into participatory metadata. It is also worth noting that this register's success comes at the cost of geographic specificity, the video flattens regional variants into interchangeable answers, and the cultural depth of any particular variant is not part of what the format can carry.

The nostalgia-heritage register (n = 10; 670,810 views) invokes childhood memory, ancestral knowledge, and the affective texture of tradition [16]. It is the register most continuous with pre-platform discourse, and accordingly the register that performs least well algorithmically, its average per-video engagement (67,081 views) is roughly one-twelfth that of the identity-curiosity register. Within van Dijck's [33] framework, this register represents the construction of connective heritage: memory mediated through platform-circulated artefacts, where what is remembered is partly determined by what circulates. The relative weakness of this register's algorithmic performance has a consequential implication: the genre that most preserves heritage discourse is the genre the platform most consistently underweights (see Table 3).

The contrast with a partially comparable case sharpens this finding. The comparison is offered as an analytic contrast rather than a matched pair: the Xinhua case concerns an agricultural landscape under formal heritage designation in China, the dumbeg case a portable confection without such designation in Indonesia, and the two corpora were assembled under different sampling frames. What the juxtaposition supports is a claim about actor configuration, not a controlled comparison of outcomes. Wang et al. [35], analysing 80 food-related TikTok videos at the Xinhua Ziquejie Terraces, document a configuration in which dialect-based authenticity, seasonal agricultural rhythms, and intergenerational kitchen scenes coalesce into a sustained nostalgia-heritage register that performs strongly within platform vernacular, attracting 1.66 million likes across 137 videos. The dumbeg corpus shows the inverse pattern: in the absence of a comparably anchored creator from Rembang, the nostalgia-heritage register is undersupplied (n = 10 videos, average 67,081 views), and the platform vernacular is filled instead by commercial intermediaries and identity-curiosity content creators positioned outside the producer community. Ricciotti's [25] systematic review of the shift from value chain to value network thinking offers a way to articulate this asymmetry more precisely. Where traditional value chains organise production through linear sequences of value addition from producer to consumer, value networks organise production through collaborative, intangible, and digitally mediated coordination among multiple nodal actors. Contemporary heritage tourism increasingly depends on this networked form: tangible food assets, intangible heritage meanings, audience engagement, and creator labour are integrated through nodal participants who connect production to circulation. The dumbeg case suggests an inverted condition: in the absence of nodal actors who can integrate these flows, the value network does not consolidate, and what remains is a residual value chain configuration in which intermediaries

capture margin without contributing to heritage interpretation, and producer communities remain at the chain's upstream extremity rather than becoming networked nodes in their own right.

This contrast suggests that the nostalgia-heritage register's algorithmic underperformance in the dumbeg corpus is not an inherent limitation of the genre, but a function of who occupies it. When the register is mobilised by a place-based digital actor with sustained access to seasonal labour and kitchen practice, it becomes algorithmically viable; when it is mobilised by external creators without such embedding, it remains thin and intermittent.

Table 3
Three discursive registers in the dumbeg TikTok corpus (coded subset, n = 38)

Register	n	Total views	Avg / video	Discursive function
Commercial-promotional	22	8,169,551	371,343	Sales address; product-as-content
Identity-curiosity	6	4,669,100	778,183	Participatory ethnography; native platform genre
Nostalgia-heritage	10	670,810	67,081	Connective heritage; algorithmically underweighted

Alt Text: Three-row table summarising discursive registers in the dumbeg TikTok corpus. Columns are register, number of videos, total views, average views per video, and discursive function. Commercial-promotional: 22 videos, 8,169,551 views, average 371,343 views per video; functions as sales address treating the product as content. Identity-curiosity: 6 videos, 4,669,100 views, highest average at 778,183 views per video; functions as participatory ethnography native to the platform. Nostalgia-heritage: 10 videos, 670,810 views, lowest average at 67,081 views per video; functions as connective heritage that is algorithmically underweighted.

The three registers are not equally distributed, equally visible, or equally faithful to pre-platform discourse. The commercial register dominates volume, the identity-curiosity register dominates per-video reach, and the nostalgia-heritage register, the closest to traditional discursive forms, is the smallest in both. Programmability, in other words, is not a neutral architecture; it actively privileges certain forms of cultural address over others, and the privileging is consequential for what survives in platform-mediated heritage.

4.5 The Unplatformizable: Embodied Knowledge and Gendered Invisibility

If platform logic determines what becomes visible, it is equally important to attend to what remains outside its scope. The argument advanced in this section is inferential rather than ethnographic: it reasons from what the corpus does not contain, read against the existing ethnographic and educational literature on dumbeg production, and it should be assessed on that basis (see Section 3.1). The

production of dumbeg involves a body of embodied technical knowledge transmitted between generations of predominantly female artisans, as documented in prior studies: the sugar syrup must be cooled to manget-manget ("just comfortably warm") before mixing, lest premature gelatinisation ruin the texture; the batter must be beaten (digeblok-geblok) until the chewiness develops; the wurung must be filled to three-quarters capacity before steaming for 45 to 50 minutes [18]. None of these instructions is transmitted in writing within the producer community; they are absorbed through co-presence, demonstration, and corrective practice [24]. The knowledge is not propositional but procedural, and its medium is the body.

Figure 2 illustrates the five procedural stages of dumbeg production. What the figure makes visible is also, instructively, what it cannot make visible: the caption for step two records that ingredients are combined "to form a smooth, thick, brown batter," but not the tactile judgement by which manget-manget is recognised; step four specifies "30–45 minutes until set," but "set" names a perceptual threshold available only to the trained eye. The figure documents a procedure; it does not, and cannot, document the embodied knowledge that executes the procedure. This gap is not a deficiency of the illustration but a demonstration of the argument: the procedural surface is platformizable, the embodied substrate is not.

This embodied knowledge sits in structural tension with platform logic in several ways. It is not extractable into the metric formats datafication requires; manget-manget is not a temperature reading but a calibration only the trained hand recognises. It is not addressable through commercial framing because it does not detach from the producer-apprentice relation in which it is reproduced. It is not selectable by algorithm because there is no decontextualised content to select; the knowledge exists in the practice, not in a representation of the practice. And it is not programmable because it cannot be reduced to a sequence of instructions executable by anyone in possession of the recipe.

The gendered character of this knowledge compounds its platform invisibility. The economic structure of dumbeg production places the labour of these female artisans at the centre of the value chain while leaving it formally uncosted; published cost analyses for batches of 1,000 pieces account for materials, packaging, and overhead, but treat producer labour as a residual subsumed within profit margin [18]. On TikTok, this same labour is correspondingly under-represented; the commercial register frames the finished product as the unit of value, and the identity-curiosity register frames regional naming as the unit of cultural interest. Neither register provides an algorithmically rewarded position from which to make visible the embodied, gendered, intergenerational labour that produces the food in the first place. The result, we suggest, is not a neutral absence but an active production of invisibility, in which platform logic and pre-existing gendered economic structure appear to reinforce one another. Confirming this mechanism, as opposed to establishing the absence itself, would require producer testimony that the present design does not supply. Javanese domestic kitchens have historically been gendered female spaces, a pattern documented in Old Javanese textual sources from the ninth century onward [14] and sustained through present-day artisan communities.

This finding has implications for how heritage scholarship conceptualises preservation in the platform era [8]. Preservation strategies that focus on increasing visibility on platforms, more content, better content, viral content, will, by the structural argument made above, preserve precisely the dimensions of heritage that are platform-legible while continuing to render invisible the dimensions that resist platform translation. A more honest preservation strategy would acknowledge the limits of platform-mediated visibility and would invest equally in the non-platform infrastructures (community apprenticeship, ritual continuity, oral transmission, cooperative producer organisation) that sustain what platforms cannot represent.

5. Discussion

Three implications emerge from this analysis for the broader study of heritage food in platform-mediated environments. First, the digital promotion gap is the wrong analytical category. As the dumbek–dumbeg asymmetry demonstrates, what looks like a marketing deficit is more accurately understood as algorithmic recognition asymmetry, produced by the interaction of platform selection logic with a content corpus in which one variant has accumulated early algorithmic favour [2]. Corrective interventions framed in marketing terms, post more, post better, post with paid amplification, are likely to deliver disappointing returns because they treat as a quantity problem what is structurally a vernacular problem. Closing the gap, if it can be closed at all within platform logic, requires translating Rembang dumbeg into formats the algorithm reads as native, which in turn risks reproducing the very flattening of cultural specificity that was the original concern.

Second, the registers through which platform-mediated heritage circulates are not neutral conduits but active reorganisers of meaning. The commercial register reorganises ceremonial co-presence into transactional address. The identity-curiosity register reorganises etymological knowledge into participatory metadata. The nostalgia-heritage register reorganises ritual continuity into mediated affect [33]. Each reorganisation makes something newly visible while making something else newly invisible. Heritage scholarship that takes the platform-mediated artefact as its object will systematically miss what falls outside these registers, including precisely the embodied, gendered, ritual dimensions that have historically anchored the food's cultural significance.

The comparison with Wang et al.'s [35] analysis of the Xinhua Ziquejie Terraces illuminates a further dimension of this asymmetry. Wang and colleagues propose that rural influencers operate as "nodal mediators" connecting tangible food assets with intangible heritage meanings within an emerging value network, translating agricultural practice into digital narrative and channelling audience feedback back into production decisions. The dumbeg case suggests that this nodal position is itself a precondition that not all heritage communities possess. Where the place-based digital actor is absent, the value network does not simply fail to form; it forms around different actors, commercial intermediaries and external content creators, whose relation to heritage knowledge is structurally different from that of the embedded creator-influencer hybrid. Notably, even in cases where a place-based rural influencer is present, gendered invisibility in the production economy persists: Wang et al. report that the Xinhua

influencer employs at least six village women in field weeding, sweet potato processing, and filming assistance, work that supports the visible content but does not itself become visible content. This suggests that the gendered invisibility identified in the dumbeg case is not merely a consequence of the missing rural influencer but a deeper structural feature of how platform-mediated heritage economies allocate visibility, one that may persist even when the most algorithmically successful configuration is achieved.

Third, and most consequentially, the platformization of heritage is asymmetric in its effects on producer communities. The artisans who produce dumbeg are not the dominant actors on the platform; the dominant actors are commercial intermediaries (whose register receives 57% of corpus engagement) and content creators outside the producer community (whose identity-curiosity videos receive the highest per-video engagement). The economic asymmetry of the pre-platform value chain is reproduced and amplified in the platform-mediated economy of attention, where intermediaries and external content creators capture the visibility that translates into market expansion. Geographic Indication designation, which would legally anchor dumbeg's identity to Rembang and provide regulatory infrastructure for protecting both name and producer community [11, 8], offers one institutional response, not as a marketing tool but as a counter-platform mechanism establishing claims that the algorithm itself cannot adjudicate.

The irony of dumbeg's platform invisibility is sharpened by the cosmological framework in which the food itself is embedded. The Javanese rice goddess Dewi Sri belongs to a pan-Indonesian complex of feminine rice deities [31] whose mythic structure invariably narrates female sacrifice and bodily transformation as the origin of rice itself: the goddess dies, and her body becomes the grain that sustains the community. The conical form of dumbeg, modelled on both Meru and the female body of Sri, materially indexes this cosmology. Yet on the platform, where dumbeg appears, the female bodies that produce it do not. The cosmology celebrates female sacrifice as origin; the platform economy reproduces female labour as background. The figure of Dewi Sri is everywhere in dumbeg's symbolic register and nowhere in its digital one.

These implications challenge what might be termed the digital optimism characteristic of much heritage food scholarship, in which platforms appear as neutral amplifiers of cultural visibility [19, 36]. Platform discourse analysis suggests instead that platforms are constitutive infrastructures, reorganising the discursive field within which heritage becomes legible and re-distributing visibility according to logics largely opaque to the producer communities most affected by them [23]. Acknowledging this constitutive role is the first step toward developing heritage scholarship adequate to the contemporary mediascape.

6. Conclusion

The dumbeg corpus forces a specific analytic difficulty into view. The most platform-native register, identity-curiosity, with its 778,000 views per video, thrives precisely by severing naming from place:

dumbek, clurut, clorot become interchangeable answers to a comment-section puzzle, and regional specificity becomes the content the algorithm cannot carry. The register most continuous with pre-platform discourse, nostalgia-heritage, under-performs by an order of magnitude. And the embodied, gendered producer knowledge that anchors dumbeg as a cultural object at all does not enter platform legibility under any register. Taken together, these are not three separate findings but a single structural condition: on TikTok, dumbeg becomes most visible at the exact points where it becomes least itself.

This inverts the central assumption of the digital-visibility preservation paradigm. Strategies that seek to rescue heritage by making it more platform-legible do not merely risk cultural flattening as a side effect; they operate through a logic in which flattening is the condition of visibility. The dumbek and dumbeg asymmetry is not solved by Rembang producers "posting better" because better, in platform vernacular, means more severable from place. The question facing heritage policy, then, is not how to win within platform logic but whether the forms of recognition platforms produce are the forms of recognition heritage communities need.

This reframing does not resolve cleanly. Geographic Indication designation, cooperative producer organisation, and continued ritual practice address dimensions that algorithmic visibility cannot reach, but they do not replace what platform-mediated attention delivers: market access, demographic reach, a presence in the digital memory of younger consumers. Heritage communities are therefore positioned in a choice that is not fully theirs, between a visibility that costs cultural specificity and a specificity that costs visibility. Naming this condition is the minimum that platform-aware heritage scholarship can contribute. The harder task, developing institutional forms, producer coalitions, and critical literacies capable of holding both sides of the trade-off without collapsing one into the other, lies beyond the boundaries of a single case study. It is nonetheless a task with a clear institutional address. Geographic Indication registration, cooperative organisation among producers, and public investment in the non-platform infrastructures of transmission are all instruments available to states and to civil society, and all operate on terrain that algorithmic selection does not govern. Whether they are adequate to the asymmetry documented here is an empirical question that platform-aware heritage scholarship is now positioned to ask. What the dumbeg case offers is a model clear enough that the trade-off can be seen.

Declarations

Competing interests:

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics approval:

Not applicable. This study did not involve human participants. The analysis draws exclusively on publicly available social media content, and no personally identifiable information was collected or retained.

Consent to participate:

Not applicable.

Clinical trial number

not applicable.

Consent to Publish declarations

not applicable.

Use of AI tools

AI tools were used to assist in language editing and structural revision of the manuscript. All conceptual framing, theoretical interpretation, data analysis, and final argumentation are the authors' own. The authors take full responsibility for the content, integrity, and originality of the manuscript.

Funding:

No funding was received for this research.

Author Contribution

K.N. and R.E. conceived the study and developed the theoretical framework. H.M. designed and executed the TikTok data collection and performed the engagement metric analysis. K.N. conducted the thematic coding of discursive registers and the ethnographic reconstruction in Section 2.4. H.M. prepared Figures 1 and 2 and Tables 1–3. R.E. and H.M. wrote the main manuscript text. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability

Aggregated TikTok engagement metrics are summarised within the manuscript. The full coded corpus, comprising publicly available video metadata and caption text, is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical constraints regarding the use of publicly accessible social media data.

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Figures

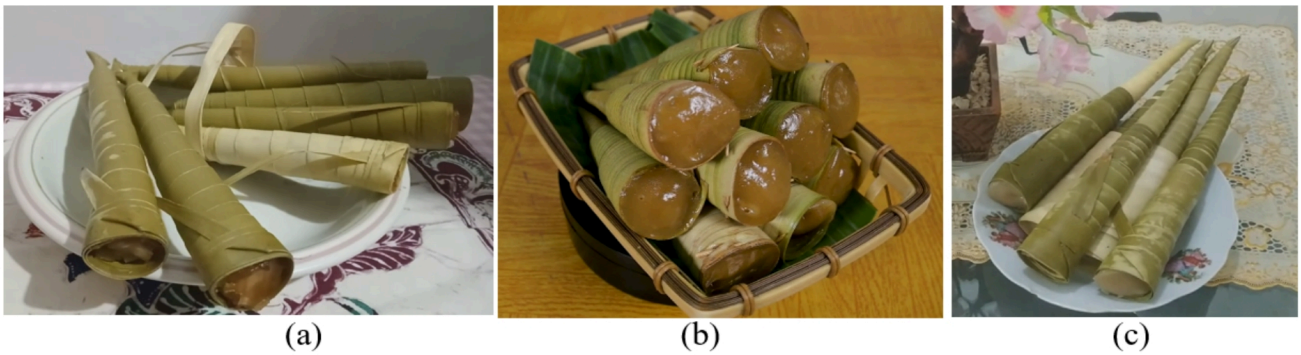


Figure 1

Regional variants of traditional rice cakes: (a) Dumbeg, (b) Celorot, and (c) Jumbrek. Source: Field documentation, 2026.

Alt Text: Three-panel comparison of regional Indonesian conical rice cakes wrapped in palm leaves: (a) Dumbeg in elongated green palm-leaf cones on a white plate; (b) Celorot in shorter cones upright in a bamboo basket lined with banana leaf; (c) Jumbrek in slender two-tone cones of green and pale dried leaf on a doily plate.

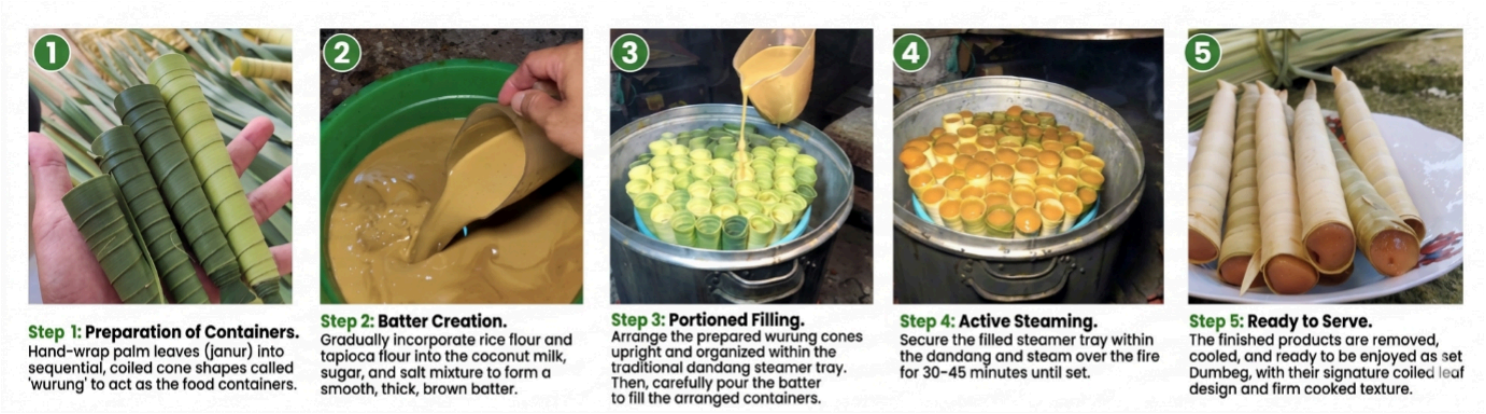


Figure 2

Steps preparing Traditional Dumbeg. Source: Field documentation, 2026.

Alt Text: Five-panel sequence of traditional Dumbeg preparation: (1) hand-wrapping palm leaves (janur) into coiled cone containers called wurung; (2) pouring thick brown batter of rice flour, tapioca flour, coconut milk, sugar, and salt; (3) arranging the wurung cones upright in a dandang steamer tray and filling them with batter; (4) steaming the filled cones over fire for 30–45 minutes; (5) the finished Dumbeg cakes cooled and arranged on a plate, ready to serve.