



Resistance Messages Against Capitalism in the Rempug Tarung Adu Tomat Cultural Event by Tomato Farmers in Cikareumbi Village

Faisal Reza^{1*}, Nugraha Sugiarta²

^{1,2}*Communication Studies Program Indonesian University of Informatics and Business Bandung, Indonesia*

³*Third author affiliation, City, Country*

**Corresponding author email: ezafaisal09@gmail.com*

Abstract

This study examines the resistance message against capitalism conveyed by tomato farmers in Cikareumbi Village, Lembang Sub-district, through the cultural tradition of Rempug Tarung Adu Tomat (Tomato Battle). Using a qualitative approach within a critical discourse framework, the research explores how farmers employ symbolism to express collective resistance. The findings show that the resistance is articulated in two stages: first, by deliberately allowing tomatoes to rot as a rejection of unfair pricing; and second, by staging the Tomato Battle as a symbolic protest. Key symbolic elements include the masked guards representing capitalist oppression, the masks themselves symbolizing deception, and the tomato battle signifying solidarity and unity among farmers. Furthermore, the processing of rotten tomatoes into compost and seeds highlights their pursuit of independence from exploitative systems. This resistance is driven by two main factors: the unfair pricing practices imposed by intermediaries and the lack of government support. Ultimately, the farmers' message reflects not only their opposition to capitalist exploitation but also their demand for fair recognition and state intervention.

Keywords: Resistance message; Cikareumbi tomato farmers; Rempug Tarung Adu Tomat

1. Introduction

In Cikareumbi Village, Lembang Sub-district, West Bandung Regency, the community annually holds a cultural tradition known as Rempug Tarung Adu Tomat (Tomato Battle). In this event, residents throw rotten tomatoes at one another as part of a ritual that has become both a local cultural practice and a regional tourism attraction (Aritzia & Pallavicini, 2020).

Traditionally, the Tomato Battle is interpreted as a symbolic act of cleansing from human vices. However, for tomato farmers in Cikareumbi, the event has acquired deeper meaning. It reflects their protest against exploitative market practices, particularly the drastic decline in tomato prices during harvest seasons. According to the Indonesian Ministry of Agriculture (2020), tomato price instability has repeatedly caused significant losses for farmers, leaving them unable to benefit from their labor. Instead of selling at extremely low prices, many farmers chose to let their harvests rot.

This situation inspired Abah Nanu Muda, a local cultural figure, together with the farmers, to transform rotten tomatoes into a medium of resistance. The Tomato Battle thus emerged as a collective expression of discontent with market exploitation and the absence of effective government intervention. Within the framework of class theory, this ritual embodies a form of symbolic struggle between the farmers, representing the proletariat, and middlemen or brokers, representing the bourgeois class (Kalita & Namati, 2021; Øversveen & Kelly, 2023).

Against this background, this study seeks to answer three main questions: (1) How do the tomato farmers express their class struggle through the Tomato Battle? (2) What messages of resistance are symbolically embedded in this tradition? and (3) Why do the farmers choose this cultural ritual, rather than other forms of protest, to articulate their demands for social and economic justice?

2. Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach within the critical paradigm. The critical paradigm views social reality as a construction shaped by dominant power relations and aims to reveal social imbalances (May & Perry, 2022).

Research in this tradition emphasizes competition, conflict, and the interests of marginalized groups, and is action-oriented.

Qualitative research is appropriate for this study because it seeks to uncover meanings and interpretations of social phenomena in their natural settings (Mulyana, 2007; Shodiq & Marhamah, 2021). As noted by Denzin and Lincoln (as cited in Mulyana, 2007), qualitative inquiry is interpretive and depends on the researcher's engagement with people in their own language and context. Similarly, Lim (2025) emphasizes that qualitative research is not designed to predict or control but to generate rich descriptions of social realities.

Data for this study were obtained through field observations of the Rempug Tarung Adu Tomat event, in-depth interviews with Cikareumbi farmers and cultural figures, and analysis of relevant documents, including agricultural reports and prior research. These methods allowed for triangulation to strengthen the credibility of findings.

The analysis employed a critical discourse perspective (Neuman, 2003), focusing on symbols and meanings embedded in the Tomato Battle. Marx's theory of class struggle (Kalita & Namati, 2021; Øversveen & Kelly, 2023) and the broader critique of capitalist exploitation (Das, 2023; Burawoy, 2024) serve as the theoretical framework. Within this lens, symbolic elements such as masks, guards, and rotten tomatoes are interpreted as communicative acts of resistance.

Rather than testing theory empirically, this study uses theory as an analytical tool. The aim is to interpret how the cultural practice of the Tomato Battle conveys messages of resistance, articulating farmers' experiences of inequality and their demand for state intervention.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Phase of Resistance: Forms of Class Struggle

The Cikareumbi tomato farmers initially responded to market instability by seeking alternative income sources, such as working as construction laborers or motorcycle taxi drivers. However, the recurring collapse of tomato prices, combined with high transportation costs and the rising price of seeds and fertilizers, made farming increasingly unsustainable (Ali, 2023). Many farmers felt their labor was undervalued, leading them to let their harvest rot in the fields as an act of silent protest.

This first phase reflected both economic frustration and the farmers' recognition of structural inequality. Although the act of allowing tomatoes to decay symbolized rejection of exploitation, it lacked collective visibility and therefore had limited impact. Over time, discussions among farmers, supported by cultural activist Abah Nanu Muda, generated the idea of transforming the rotting tomatoes into a cultural protest. This was the beginning of Rempug Tarung Adu Tomat (Adelia et al., 2023). By elevating an economic grievance into a communal ritual, the farmers found a more powerful and symbolic way to express their resistance.

3.2. A Voice Without Words: Symbolic Messages in Rempug Tarung Adu Tomat

The annual Tomato Battle combines festive performance with layered symbolic meanings. It begins with the entrance of masked guards, representing capitalist powers that oppress small farmers. The masks themselves symbolize deception, reflecting how middlemen appear to "save" the harvest but in fact exploit the producers (Adelia et al., 2023). The destruction of these masks by hurling rotten tomatoes signifies the rejection of falsehoods in economic exchange.

The climax occurs when all participants, including villagers and farmers, throw rotten tomatoes at one another. Symbolically, this moment dissolves social hierarchy: all are equally covered in the discarded fruit, which represents how farmers themselves are treated as worthless by the market (Ariztia & Pallavicini, 2020). Yet the act also conveys solidarity—the farmers embrace their shared suffering and transform it into unity.

After the battle, the rotten tomatoes are collected and processed into compost and seeds. This act is not merely pragmatic but a message of autonomy: farmers recycle what the market rejects and convert it into new resources. In doing so, they reject dependence on seed and fertilizer brokers while affirming their independence (Adelia et al., 2023).

Viewed through Marx's class conflict theory, these symbolic acts represent proletarian resistance to the bourgeoisie (Kalita & Namati, 2021; Øversveen & Kelly, 2023). The Tomato Battle becomes a "voice without words," a performative discourse that allows farmers to articulate grievances without speeches or political platforms, but through culture and ritual.

3.3. Understanding the Action: The Farmers' Motivation

Two central factors explain why the farmers chose Rempug Tarung Adu Tomat as a medium of resistance. First, the unfair pricing system: oversupply during harvest seasons allowed brokers to manipulate prices without considering farmers' welfare (Ali, 2023). The collapse of prices created recurring losses, which, instead of fostering productivity, pushed farmers deeper into poverty. Second, the weak role of the state: although Indonesia officially

does not adopt a capitalist economy, in practice, capitalist logic dominates agricultural trade. The state failed to regulate tomato prices or mediate between farmers and middlemen (Kompas, 2025).

From the farmers' perspective, this neglect was as oppressive as market exploitation. As Hegel argued, society requires a unifying power to overcome individual egos (Suseno, 2016). In this case, the farmers expected the state to act as mediator and protector, ensuring fair treatment and price stability. Their protest was therefore directed not only against capitalist actors but also against government inaction.

Importantly, the farmers' resistance does not aim at abolishing class differences altogether. Unlike the Marxist utopia of a classless society, their goal is pragmatic: to achieve fair recognition of their labor and to secure protection from the state. Their protest reflects both awareness of class inequality and a demand for justice within the existing social order. In this way, the Tomato Battle functions as a symbolic yet strategic effort to articulate aspirations for economic fairness and cultural identity.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that the resistance of Cikareumbi tomato farmers against capitalism unfolded in two distinct phases. The first phase, allowing tomatoes to rot, was a silent protest that highlighted their economic frustrations but had limited collective impact. The second phase, transformed into the cultural ritual Rempug Tarung Adu Tomat, elevated this dissatisfaction into a symbolic and communal act of resistance.

Through this ritual, farmers conveyed layered messages: the masked guards symbolized capitalist exploitation, the destruction of masks represented rejection of deception, the chaotic tomato battle expressed solidarity among marginalized farmers, and the recycling of rotten tomatoes into compost and seeds symbolized independence from agricultural brokers. These symbolic acts align with Marxist theories of class conflict, where the proletariat resists the dominance of the bourgeoisie through collective awareness and cultural expression.

Two key drivers shaped this resistance: unfair market pricing controlled by middlemen and the lack of effective government intervention. The farmers' protest was therefore directed not only at capitalist practices but also at state inaction in protecting their welfare. Unlike radical Marxist ideals of abolishing class, their resistance sought pragmatic goals: fair recognition of their labor and stronger state support in price regulation.

Ultimately, Rempug Tarung Adu Tomat demonstrates how cultural rituals can serve as a medium of political expression, enabling farmers to articulate grievances and demands for justice without formal platforms. This research contributes to understanding how local traditions function as symbolic resistance, bridging cultural identity and socio-economic struggle in rural communities.

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