

HUMANS AND NATURE: The Meaning of Communication in the *Ngaji Rasa* Ritual of the Dayak Segandu Tribe in Indramayu

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Abstract

The Dayak Hindu Buddhist Community of Bumi Segandu Indramayu is a group of people who belong to a community that has a particular faith. This community performs three rituals, namely *Ngaji Rasa*, *Kumkum* and *Mepe*. The purpose of this research is to find out how messages are conveyed in the rituals of the Indramayu Dayak tribe and what message meaning is conveyed from the ritual activities of *Ngaji Rasa*, *Kumkum*, and *Mepe*. This research uses qualitative methods with ethnographic communication studies, with data collection techniques through observation, interviews and documentation. The results of the research conducted that (1) communicating messages in the *Ngaji Rasa*, *Kumkum*, and *Mepe* rituals is not conveyed directly, but important messages are communicated both verbally through advice, and nonverbally through ritual attributes. (2) The meaning of the message to be conveyed from the *Ngaji Rasa*, *Kumkum*, and *Mepe* ritual activities is to show the close relationship between humans and nature, where nature is considered a source of life for the Indramayu Dayak people who must be respected and maintained.

Keywords: ritual communication, Dayak Segandu, ethnography, message meaning.

Introduction

Indonesia is a multicultural country with diverse ethnicities, religions, and beliefs, as well as various languages spoken. Cultures that have existed for a long time and have been passed down from generation to generation have become deeply ingrained in society, making them traditions that are preserved. These continuously evolving beliefs within society are usually maintained through the characteristics of local wisdom. Ultimately, this local wisdom becomes a guiding principle that communities firmly uphold.

Hofstede, as cited in Wulandari et al. (2020), identifies four concepts that broadly represent various manifestations of culture: symbols, heroes, rituals, and values. Hofstede emphasizes the significance of culture by analogizing it as the

"software of the mind." Culture is the driving force behind human behavior; without it, humans are merely beings without meaning.

The diversity and uniqueness of customs and traditions among ethnic groups are heterogeneous (Septadinusastra, 2022). For instance, cultural norms in ceremonies represent an irreplaceable tradition regularly and systematically performed according to cultural standards and community laws. These include birth, marriage, death, and burial ceremonies. In this context, geographical conditions and location influence the cultural practices of surrounding communities, leading to the rich ethnic and cultural diversity in Indonesia (Aprianti et al., 2022).

Ritual communication is the process of conveying messages to a community about their religious practices and belief systems. Specific symbols are always interpreted during rituals, demonstrating how ritual communication takes place. Individuals engaged in ritual communication express their commitment to their family, community, tribe, ideology, or religion.

Mulyana, as cited in Sopacua & Kissya (2022), states that ritual communication is generally conducted by groups that routinely perform a series of ceremonies throughout the year and across their lifetimes, known in anthropology as rites of passage. Rituals have become an integral part of community traditions, as reflected in Indonesia's vast local cultural heritage, which is rich in values that foster meaningful lives. Therefore, rituals serve as a vital medium for communities to build and interpret their lives in relation to others, to God or a supreme power, and to nature or their environment (Rumahuru, 2020).

The rituals performed by a community or society always carry messages, which can be categorized into two types: verbal and nonverbal messages. Verbal messages are those expressed through words, either spoken or written. The key elements of verbal messages include language and words. Meanwhile, nonverbal messages are conveyed without words, relying more on expressions and symbols. Language can be defined as a system of symbols governed by rules for combining these symbols, which are used and understood by a particular community.

Literature Review

The *Dayak Hindu Buddha Bumi Segandu Indramayu* tribe, commonly known as the Dayak Indramayu tribe, is a Dayak community residing in Indramayu. This community does not originate from the indigenous Dayak tribes of Kalimantan; rather, they are a distinct group with different beliefs and lifestyles compared to other ethnic groups in Indonesia. The term Dayak Segandu reflects their personal identity without any affiliation with the Dayak tribes of Kalimantan. Similarly, the term Hindu Buddha in their name does not indicate a

religious identity. This community upholds cultural rituals, recognizing culture as an essential aspect of human life. Understanding and preserving cultural traditions is crucial for society, as it enables individuals to maintain a strong sense of identity and unique characteristics that differentiate them from others. This is particularly important in the face of globalization and literacy challenges that integrate foreign values (Reznia, 2018).

The Dayak Indramayu community is divided into three groups: *Dayak Preman*, *Dayak Seragam*, and *Dayak*. The *Dayak Preman* dress like the general population, while the *Dayak Seragam* wear black knee-length trousers but do not wear shirts. The last group, simply called *Dayak*, is the most dominant. In their daily lives, they only wear black and white knee-length trousers without shirts, but they accessorize with items made from bamboo, such as black and white conical hats, bamboo belts, and necklaces featuring the emblem of Pancasila, as they deeply uphold the values embodied in Pancasila.

Amidst the predominantly religious population of Indramayu, the Dayak Indramayu community does not adhere to any of the officially recognized religions in Indonesia. Instead, they follow a spiritual belief system known as *Sejarah Alam Ngaji Rasa*, which teaches morality through the representation of *Pewayangan* (wayang characters) in *Ngaji Rasa*. This belief system emphasizes the unity of humans and the universe. One of its core customary rules requires men to respect and honor women.

This is reinforced by Tarsono (2014), who states that the *Ngaji Rasa* teachings are not based on any sacred texts, religion, or specific culture but instead draw from the examples set by *Ngaji Rasa* figures whom they regard as having great responsibility toward their families. Within this teaching, they highly respect women and build friendships with people of all races, religions, and ethnicities. Rituals are also an essential part of a community's culture, as they not only represent cultural heritage but also serve as a means for people to communicate, interact, and establish social relationships.

Ritual activities are typically performed to maintain or preserve what they have achieved or to seek safety, smooth progress, and ease in various aspects of life. This is evident in the ritual traditions of this community, such as *Ngaji Rasa*, *Kumkum*, and *Mepe*. The Dayak Indramayu community is also taught *kidung pujian* (songs of praise) using the *Jawa Dermayu* language, which, in terms of melody, resembles the classical musical style of *tarling* (a combination of guitar and flute) (Umam, 2016). The focus on the communicative messages within rituals has often been limited; thus, there is a need to address this gap by understanding how communication plays a role within a ritual and how it shapes meaningful messages. Therefore, the researchers are highly interested in studying the communicative messages present in the rituals of *Ngaji Rasa*, *Kumkum*, and *Mepe*.

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative research method using the ethnography of communication approach, which is one of the models within qualitative research. The ethnography of communication is a subfield of anthropology, particularly cultural anthropology. Ethnography itself is defined as a detailed description of behavioral patterns within an ethnic group in ethnology (the study of nations and cultures). According to Kuswarno (2008), the ethnography of communication views communicative behavior as an outcome of the integration of three skills possessed by individuals as social beings. These three skills consist of linguistic competence, interactional competence, and cultural competence.

From a broader perspective, the ethnography of communication is a method that falls under the constructivist paradigm and is viewed through an interpretivist theoretical perspective. Ethnography serves as a means for researchers to immerse themselves in the environment under study and communicate with research subjects within the framework of constructivism, which is based on the idea that social reality is created and maintained through the subjective experiences of research subjects (Taufik, 2019).

This study employs a qualitative approach. Denzin and Lincoln, as cited in Nurlaila (2019), define qualitative research as an inquiry conducted in a natural setting to interpret occurring phenomena, utilizing various existing research methods. In this study, the researcher adopts a constructivist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm views the truth of social reality as a result of social construction, implying that the truth of social reality is relative.

The type of research applied in this study is descriptive research. Descriptive research aims to provide a detailed and specific depiction of an event or situation, broadly addressing questions such as who, when, where, and how. Descriptive research follows a structured approach to describing an object and social phenomena, which are presented in a narrative form (Moleong, 2007: 135).

The research location for this study is Krimun Village, Losarang District, Indramayu Regency. The researcher selected this location because the Dayak Bumi Segandu community in Losarang, Indramayu, is the only Dayak Indramayu community that adheres to the belief system based on the *Ngaji Rasa* concept.

Results and Discussion

Ritual communication encompasses additional rites such as praying, reading sacred texts, pilgrimage, flag ceremonies, graduation ceremonies, and religious celebrations. This form of communication reaffirms an individual's commitment to their family traditions, community, tribe, nation, state, ideology,

or religion. Ritual communication also frequently employs powerful language to express one's deepest emotions.

According to Mulyana (2005), ritual communication is a type of communication that is typically conducted collectively. Societies often perform various ceremonies annually and throughout their lives, which anthropologists refer to as rites of passage. During ritual activities, individuals exhibit symbolic behavior or articulate specific words.

Communication of Messages in Rituals through Wejangan and Attributes

The rituals of *Ngaji Rasa*, *Kumkum*, and *Mepe* for the Dayak Indramayu community are deeply rooted in their beliefs and can be regarded as traditions that have been upheld since the early existence of the Dayak people in Indramayu. The Dayak community believes that these rituals serve as a form of respect for nature, which provides life. These three ritual processes are conducted separately but complement one another.

Messages within rituals play a crucial role in the life of a community, particularly in social relationships. The ritual communication messages within the Dayak Indramayu community are closely related to sharing, participating, gathering, and fostering friendships among members who share the same beliefs.

As explained by Hammad (Sulaeman et al., 2019: 35), ritual communication is associated with sharing, participating, gathering, and establishing friendships among community members with similar convictions. The primary goal of communication within rituals is not merely to convey messages explicitly but to preserve the unity of the community. Instead, the purpose of communication is to represent or revive the collective beliefs of society.

Those who participate in ritual communication reaffirm their commitment to family traditions, community, nation, tribe, ideology, or religion. As widely recognized, the *Ngaji Rasa*, *Kumkum*, and *Mepe* rituals of the Dayak Indramayu community represent a form of commitment to their community and ethnic group. However, one of these rituals, *Ngaji Rasa*, is open to participation by community members or local residents who seek "blessings" from engaging in the ritual.

The communication of messages within the rituals of the Dayak Indramayu community is not conducted directly or explicitly by stating what the messages are. Instead, messages are conveyed through *wejangan* (advice or guidance) given to members, particularly new members who wish to participate in the *Ngaji Rasa*, *Kumkum*, and *Mepe* rituals. Through these *wejangan*, members can interpret the messages themselves, ensuring the preservation of the community's unity and the revival of shared beliefs.

Regarding ritual practices, members of the Dayak Indramayu community are not compelled to participate in every ritual event. Participation is voluntary,

as long as individuals understand what is right. The tribal leader or senior members of the Dayak Indramayu community never impose participation or require members to follow rituals regularly.

The Dayak people, from various backgrounds including those formerly unaffiliated with the community (*Dayak lepas*), former gang members (*preman*), and those in uniform—participate fully in the rituals without coercion. Their involvement serves as an affirmation of their commitment to family, community, or ethnic traditions. The Dayak community and its surrounding members perceive the *Ngaji Rasa*, *Kumkum*, and *Mepe* rituals as essential practices that must be carried out in accordance with their intended purpose and the messages they convey.

According to Mulyana (2006: 70), different perspectives exist in communication studies regarding language as a verbal message, which can be categorized into functional and formal aspects. The functional perspective views language as a shared tool for conveying ideas, while the formal perspective considers language as structured sentences composed according to grammatical rules. In this context, both spoken and written language serve as components of verbal communication used by the Dayak Indramayu community. Spoken language is a functional verbal message used to convey information and messages among community members in face-to-face communication. The Dayak community speaks various languages, including Javanese, refined Javanese (*bahasa Jawa halus*) when addressing elders, and Indonesian. Meanwhile, in ritual activities, written language functions as a formal verbal message. An example of this can be seen in the *Ngaji Rasa* ritual, where participants recite *kidung* (sacred chants) and hymns as part of the ritual proceedings.

The verbal messages conveyed during the *Ngaji Rasa* and *Mepe* rituals are as follows: (1) in the *Ngaji Rasa* ritual, before entering the *Pasenggahan* (sacred gathering space), a *Dayak lepas* member acts as a guide at the entrance, greeting other members. Those entering must shake hands with the guide while saying "Sambung tangan", to which the guide responds, "Lagi disambungaken." This greeting is similar to a regular handshake but is accompanied by a Javanese phrase. (2) The members recite praises to nature and *Kidung Alas Turi* (sacred hymns) in Javanese, following the texts provided in ritual books. (3) In the final part of the *Ngaji Rasa* ritual, the tribal chief or an appointed elder narrates the history of the *Pandawa Lima* (the five Pandava brothers from wayang mythology) and delivers *wejangan* (spiritual guidance) to the members regarding the messages and meanings embedded within the ritual. (4) in the *Mepe* ritual, participants begin by saying "Sambung tangan", followed by the *Mepe* procession.

Traditions ingrained within an individual or group reflect their identity and typically involve various ritualistic processes. Nonverbal messages in the *Ngaji*

Rasa ritual serve as symbolic teachings within the Dayak Indramayu community. According to Mulyana (2006: 65), messages are not limited to spoken words (verbal communication) but can also manifest as displays, including clothing, jewelry, facial decorations (makeup or beards), and other forms of nonverbal communication.

In relation to the above, the *Ngaji Rasa* ritual follows a structured process. First, since some Dayak members reside outside the Losarang area, all members must gather at the *Pasenggahan* before the ritual begins. Next, members prepare themselves by selecting the appropriate attire and accessories. Finally, they prepare ritual offerings (*sesaji*) as a form of respect during the ceremony. Following the *Ngaji Rasa* ritual, the *Kumkum* ritual takes place, where participants immerse themselves in water. The *Kumkum* ritual does not involve wearing any ceremonial attributes. The final ritual, *Mepe* (sunbathing), follows afterward. During *Mepe*, members put back on the attributes they had removed for the *Kumkum* ritual.

Each stage of the ritual carries its own symbolic meaning. The preparation of ritual offerings (*sesaji*) serves as a meaningful symbol for the tribal chief and members. The attire and accessories, including necklaces, bracelets, and staffs, function as identifiers representing each member's identity. Additionally, during the *Ngaji Rasa* ritual, members must observe the correct prayer position sitting in a circle around the central pool in the room. Beyond the ceremonial process, nonverbal communication is also embedded in the symbols found in the *sesaji* and ritual attributes worn during *Ngaji Rasa*. These elements are essential prerequisites for performing the ritual tradition.

The Meaning of Messages: Close Relationship between Humans and Nature

Meaning is related to how an individual perceives the messages conveyed and received during the communication process. In this context, every action and object used in a ritual carries specific meanings, including the *Ngaji Rasa*, *Kumkum*, and *Mepe* rituals, each of which holds its own significance in every stage of the procession.

When linked to Symbolic Interactionism Theory, this concept explains that humans interact with others by sharing meanings for a certain period and for specific actions. According to George Herbert Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism (West & Turner, 2008: 81-84), there are three core concepts: (1) Mind – This concept states that individuals performing ritual activities interpret their experiences based on their own understanding. In this case, the meaning of the rituals performed depends on the ideas of *Ngaji Rasa* and the beliefs held by the Dayak Hindu Buddhist Bumi Segandu Indramayu Community. (2) Self – At this stage, members of the Dayak Hindu Buddhist Bumi Segandu Indramayu Community discover their identity through the experiences gained from

performing the rituals they believe in. This stage is based on the concept of *Ngaji Rasa*, which they embrace, and the rituals they perform to be spiritually reborn and become better individuals. (3) Society – The Dayak community is known for its hospitality. They apply the teachings of *Ngaji Rasa* and always practice kindness towards everyone, especially those around them. As a result, the perspectives of the Dayak Hindu Buddhist Bumi Segandu Indramayu Community are accepted, appreciated by the surrounding society, and have gained widespread recognition.

Each practice of *Ngaji Rasa*, *Kumkum*, and *Mepe* must be carried out with patience and full awareness, without coercion. *Ngaji Rasa* is not merely a ritual but a teaching that emphasizes the behavior of the soul. According to Fisher (Putri, 2016: 22), no meaning is identical, even though they may be very similar. Meaning originates from an individual's mental actions without being influenced by others.

In line with this, according to Aubrey (Wandayu, 2023), meaning in the framework of communication is related to how an individual understands a message. Every communication process generates meaning, which emerges from the messages sent, received, and processed by the recipient. Within the communication framework, meaning arises from the collaboration of individuals involved and their interactions with one another. The entire process of meaning-making is embedded within the content of the message, as humans cannot engage in conversation if they do not understand the messages being conveyed or explained. Through these three rituals, it is hoped that humans and nature can unite, fostering mutual care and respect. This is because humans are born from nature and, upon death, will return to it.

This signifies that language connects its users to the external world, enabling mutual understanding. In this regard, Djajasudarma (Maulidiyah, 2017: 8-9) outlines three levels of meaning existence: (1) First Level: Meaning constitutes the content of a linguistic form, where the Dayak community interprets messages based on the relationship between the speaker and the listener. At this level, trust and loyalty are formed through the connection between community members and their tribal leader or the speaker who delivers messages in every ritual.

This can be observed in how they uphold ritual traditions, ensuring they are conducted at the designated times. This demonstrates that these rituals are regarded as strengthening the bond among members. (2) Second Level: Meaning serves as the essence of linguistic expression. Similar to the first level, in addition to trust and loyalty, the meaning of respect also emerges due to the relationship between community members and their tribal leader or speaker.

These three rituals are performed as a way to honor nature for providing life and tranquility. The Dayak community heavily depends on nature and firmly

believes that it sustains their lives. (3) Third Level: Meaning becomes the core of communication, yielding specific information where the focus is on the messages being communicated. At this level, patience, awareness, and the pursuit of righteousness are key messages conveyed by the tribal leader or speaker.

The meanings of patience and awareness extend beyond mere processes; they represent deeply internalized values derived from the emotions of those performing the rituals. The rituals of the Dayak Indramayu community are also intended as a means of learning righteousness, as humans are inherently prone to making mistakes. This understanding encourages members of the Dayak tribe to practice self-restraint and refrain from actions deemed inappropriate.

The faith of the Dayak Indramayu people in nature is highly emphasized during the *Ngaji Rasa*, *Kumkum*, and *Mepe* rituals, as these ceremonies contain various life philosophies believed to ease their journey through life. The rituals of the Dayak Indramayu tribe are not merely traditional ceremonies to honor nature; they are also considered a gathering occasion for members who do not reside in the *Pasenggahan* area.

The Dayak community is deeply dependent on nature and believes that nature provides balance in life, offering blessings that must be honored and respected. Through ritual ceremonies, they express gratitude to nature for sustaining life through all its elements. This belief is particularly strong among the Dayak Lepas, who have dedicated their entire lives to the Dayak way of life, relying entirely on nature. Therefore, they sincerely hope that the *Ngaji Rasa*, *Kumkum*, and *Mepe* rituals proceed smoothly to ensure the preservation of Dayak traditions.

Conclusion

Based on the research findings and discussion, the following conclusions can be drawn: First, the message delivery practiced by the Dayak Indramayu community does not communicate messages explicitly or directly. Instead, the Dayak Indramayu people conduct the *Ngaji Rasa*, *Kumkum*, and *Mepe* rituals, which are essential aspects of their lives.

In these rituals, important messages are conveyed both verbally through guidance and spoken language, as well as nonverbally through ritual attributes and symbols. This practice aims to preserve community unity and reinforce shared beliefs among its members.

Second, the meaning of the *Ngaji Rasa*, *Kumkum*, and *Mepe* rituals illustrates the close relationship between humans and nature, where nature is regarded as a vital source of life that must be respected and preserved. The messages embedded in these rituals emphasize the importance of patience, self-awareness, and reverence for nature values that can be directly internalized through participation in the rituals.

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