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# **The Symbols Rituals of Salako Community in Sarawak**

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## **Abstract**

This research is about the symbols rituals in the culture of the Salako community in Sarawak. These symbols play a vital role, especially their rituals that serve as guidance in their lives. The main focus of this research is to identify and analyse the meaning of symbols in every ritual performed. The data is collected by using an ethnographic approach in the area of Lundu and Samatan, Sarawak.

Besides, in-depth interviews were conducted in 2019 with indigenous leaders, cultural practitioners known as Nyangahant craftsmen, Koncong craftsmen and Sarawak state councils. The data is analysed by using the semiotic approach as a symbol used in ritual practices as unification. The findings show that the symbolism in the ritual is a self-slavery to seek the blessing of the god, which leads all the deeds in the world will bring great sustenance and bring success in all efforts. Besides, it is a concept of prosperity in the future new generation of Salako community protected from any disasters. Thus, the symbol of ritual means unity to achieve a successful life for its practitioners.

**Keywords:** Symbol, ritual, Salako Community, Nyangahant, Kocong

## Los rituales de símbolos de la comunidad de Salako en Sarawak

### Resumen

Esta investigación trata sobre los rituales de símbolos en la cultura de la comunidad de Salako en Sarawak. Estos símbolos juegan un papel vital, especialmente sus rituales que sirven de guía en sus vidas. El objetivo principal de esta investigación es identificar y analizar el significado de los símbolos en cada ritual realizado. Los datos se recopilan utilizando un enfoque etnográfico en el área de Lundu y Samatan, Sarawak. Además, se realizaron entrevistas en profundidad en 2019 con líderes indígenas, practicantes culturales conocidos como artesanos de Nyangahant, artesanos de Koncong y consejos estatales de Sarawak. Los datos se analizan utilizando el enfoque semiótico como un símbolo utilizado en las prácticas rituales como unificación. Los hallazgos muestran que el simbolismo en el ritual es una auto esclavitud para buscar la bendición del dios, lo que lleva a que todos los hechos en el mundo traigan un gran sustento y tengan éxito en todos los esfuerzos. Además, es un concepto de prosperidad en la futura nueva generación de la comunidad Salako

protegida de cualquier desastre. Por lo tanto, el símbolo del ritual significa unidad para lograr una vida exitosa para sus practicantes.

**Palabras clave:** Símbolo, ritual, Comunidad Salako, Nyangahant, Kocong.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In our daily life, culture plays a crucial role in achieving the prosperity of life that is being connected. Through culture, people can express their thoughts, opinions, emotions, behaviours and personalities. Hence, culture and community are could not be separated from the members of the community since it is medium for them to convey a message through the symbols in ritual tradition. The existence of symbols based on the understanding of the previous generations who have been practised it by their imagination, emotional and intellectual experience and embodied through the psychological and sociological value of human growth (Mohamad Maulana & Othman Yatim, 2012). As a result, the people will perform various symbols of offering in a ritual. Besides, these symbols offering is not something that can be made on any occasion, but it is made based on the intention and necessity of a ritual.

Bidayuh is a collective term that consists of several sub-tribes of Dayak Darat in Sarawak. In the early colonial era, this group has known as Land Dayaks or Dayak Darat. This term has been used to distinguish between the Bidayuh community and the Iban community that has been known as Sea Dayak or Dayak Laut. The Land Dayak

term based on the locality of its people residential location is in the rural area, along the river, and highland (Mohamad Maulana & Norhuda Salleh, 2017). According to Figure 1, the Salako or Selakau or Lara community can be found in Lundu area, which is a sub-tribe of the Dayak Land. Therefore, this situation is unique and signifies that Sarawak there has a great diversity of sub-ethnicities that have their own cultural identity.

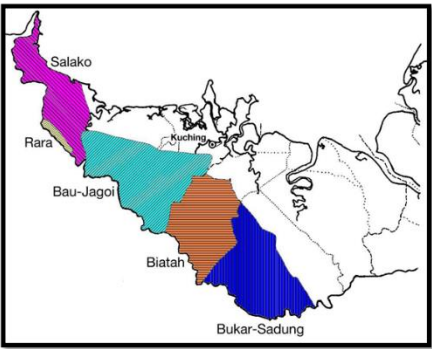


Figure 1: The Distribution of Bidayuh or Dayak Community in Sarawak

Source: Mohamad Maulana & Norhuda Salleh (2017)

Bidayuh is a community that lives in the land of hornbill. It is the fourth largest ethnic group after the Iban, Chinese and Malay. According to the Bidayuh community, the word Bidayuh is a combination of Bi and Dayuh syllables, the syllable ‘Bi’ stands for people meanwhile ‘Dayuh’ stands for mountain or highland. Therefore, ‘Bidayuh’ recognised as the Mountain People (Orang Gunung) or the Highland People (Orang Tanah Tinggi) (Chang, 2004:

6). In the concept of terminology, the Bidayuh ethnic is also recognized as Land Dayaks. This term appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the writings of missionaries and western academicians. The usage of this term is to distinguish this tribe from the Sea Dayaks tribe, which is the Iban ethnic who often attacked ships in the waters of Sarawak. The series of attacks happened in many times, whereas pressured the Land Dayaks tribe to move into the rural area and mountainous regions (William, 1988: 33).

The belief system of ethnicity can identified through the initial belief, which keeps remains with the integration of understanding of animism-dynamism. Hence, Salako community also adapt to this belief system since they already influenced with nature associated with the culture of their life. They firmly believe that every single disaster happened is the result of human-made wrongdoings as a human being. This is because, in their belief, this world consists of humans and supernatural creatures. Besides, they also believe the existence of spirits, ghosts, and others, and it has been associated with their daily lives. Recently, several Salako community has already believed in religion. Still, the influence of paganism remains in their life as it is the heritage from the past generation (Mohamad Maulana et al. 2020: 6).

Even they already believe in religion, they also believe in the existence of a god and everything that deal with god is smooth by Jubata. Jubata is known as the guardian that care for everything in the world including land, water, plants, trees, rain, sea, rivers and others. Therefore, every deal and action must be related to Jubata. Each of this behaviour will be associated with Jubata (Awang Hasmadi, 1994: 43).

Hence, they need to perform the rituals to get Jubata permission and gain prosperity in their life. The traditional beliefs of the Salako community are the result of the traditions and practices of the earlier generations. They believe that this tradition inherited through verbal communication that is always associated with the prosperity of life.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The methodology of research is by using the ethnographic method involving field studies, observations and interviews of the rituals of Salako community in Lundu, Sarawak. The interview conducted into two parts which are in-depth interviews (individually) and focus group interview (grouping). The individual interviews conducted with selected informants consist of custom practitioners, head of the village, Tamu Adat and several family members of the head of the village. Normally, the researchers will go to informants' house to get information through oral stories. These oral stories generally consume a lot of time because the story told in detail and precise. For the focus group interview, it is held within several informants simultaneously at the same time. However, there is a particular group of practitioners that are shy and have a problem to convey the information individually. The data will be collected in grouping and assisted, reminding, correcting information or related stories about the practice of their rituals.



In the interview session, all information and oral stories spoken by the informants recorded for the data. In terms of research ethics, every informant was already informed beforehand about the objective of the research. The researchers also obtained their consent to report and publish the information given. A total of 25 informants that are relevant to the research topic identified and interviewed. All of them are Salako ritual practitioners. Therefore, the research information obtained based on their own experience, and it considered valid in the perspective of empirical research. Their identities also kept in confidential, and they labelled as Informant 1, Informant 2 and afterwards. Besides, this research also used library research to obtain data or information from the previous researchers as guidance. The findings of this study will be analysed to identify the role of symbols in the rituals of Salako community.

### **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

In performing the ritual, symbols play a critical role. Eventually, these symbols have become the primary condition for the ritual. Rituals practised community serve to make ask wish and reject a situation that they can be rewarded as a blessing or to avoid any accident. At the same time, the rituals founded from experience inherited from one generation to the next generation. This condition makes the rituals to continually changing, but the change of method and symbols are still intact based on the wishes of the community.

Salako community recognised as paddy community or (masyarakat padi) that can defined as a group of people who cultivate of paddy plantation as a source of income. This activity is also similar to the Malay community, Kadayan, Iban, Bidayuh, Lun Bawang, Kelabit and others. In the paddy plantations, many problems that can encountered as they are still practising the traditional style of paddy plantation and also without using any modern chemicals and machinery. Only depends on the environment, it hoped that the paddy plantation would produce a lot of profit for the farmers. Therefore, their paddy plantation depends on supernatural powers to avoid any problems such as pest disturbances, rats, birds, drought and others.

By performing the ritual, it hoped that the supernatural power could neutralize the disturbances. Therefore, in Salako culture, the Ngarantika ritual still practices until this day. This ritual conducted to ensure the quality of paddy that can help the Salako community's economic income. This ritual performed to give offering to Jubata, the god of traditional faith in of Salako community. Through this ritual, they will request for protection from various disasters during the planting season and the harvesting season. Hence, this superstition becomes a token of gratitude to Jubata for the sustenance obtained in previous years. It also for the sake of prosperity and health and protection from any evil spirits. Moreover, this ceremony has become one tradition in remembrance the paddy spirit.



Figure 2: Nyangahant Ritual

Nyangahant is a ritual of offering, praying or wish to Jubata, the god in the traditional Salako community to seek protection from any threats and disasters in life. Besides, this ritual is for blessing, harmony and peace of life along with finding for good quality of paddy crops. This ritual is carried out in two forms: the important festivals known as Gawe Ka Padi (a gathering ceremony for paddy fertility) and Gawe Ka Man (a common ceremony for the prosperity of life). Normally, the ritual of Gawe Ka Padi is carried out through the process of the beginning of paddy plantation with Munoh Manuk Ka Pagar (opening of paddy fields), Nyiang Padi Bunting (new paddy seeds), Ngarantika (beginning of paddy rice), and Nuruni' (harvesting process begins), Ngabayatn (end of harvesting process). While Gawe Ka Manusia is a festival that involves the process of human life cycles such as baranak ceremony (births), baturih ceremony (circumcision), batenek ceremony (piercing ears), kawen ceremony (marriage) and death (Awang Hasmadi, 1981). To perform all these ceremonies, the Nyangahant ritual must to be performed first. It is the indu' Gawe or mother of all forms of ritual in the Salako community. Without the

Nyangahant ritual, a wish or request is incomplete and, ultimately the desire in the ritual is not fulfilled.

Nyangahant ritual performed during the Nyemah Ai' Tanah ceremony, which is to celebrate the opening of new land for settlements, agriculture, and development. Besides, the Pamindahan Padukng ceremony performed with the purpose of the relocation of the old burial site to the new site for development reasons. In other words, Nyangahant ritual is the mother of all ceremonies in Salako community to seek help from the supernatural power, Jubata to overcome the crisis in their life. The researcher found three elements that must presence in Nyangahant ritual: (1) the performance item that is Buis, and (2) the ritual conductor known as Tuha Adat and the verses of the mantras.

Usually, the ritual will be performed after dawn and before noon. According to Tuha Adat, the ceremony cannot be delivered in the afternoon because at this time Jubata is resting and cannot be interrupted by any rituals. Therefore, the ritual should be parallel with Jubata's wishes. Besides, the requirements of offering should be prepared at night before the ritual is held and as a team.

The ritual begins with piercing three biji tumpi by using a stick of wood or bamboo is scraped, and placed it in the open window of the house. This process called as Noget. Its function is to allow Jubata and the deceased ancestors' to attend this ritual. The role of Tuha Adat at this time is to seek permission from Jubata and the ancestors' spirit to initiate the ceremony. Usually, the ritual is performed in a house to make it easier for the late spirits to know the place of ritual. Then,

Tuha Adat will read the mantras and communicate with the Jubata and the ancestors of the ancestors in front of Bakol Awapama or the basket hanging in the house. After that, a set of Anak Buis that consist of bontonk, garetant and tumpi will be placed in Bakol Awapama. The next performance is the ceremony of munoh manuk or slaughtered chicken and put in Buis. If the ritual has many wishes such as the prosperity of the family, congratulate newlyweds and others, Tuha Adat will begin the ceremony by flutter the chicken on the head of a person who wishes to gather the wish and convey it to Jubata.

After that, the ceremony will be continued with manoh manuk ceremony and placed it in the designated place based on its purpose of the ritual. According to Tuha Adat, in Buis, there are also other foods according to the request of Jubata such as Manuk, boiled eggs, Baras Bantant, Poe', Jungkahant, Tungkat, coconut oil, sirih, pinang, lime and tobacco. Besides, there are physical materials such as apar, plates, kain pelikat and jewellery. All materials in Buis must be arranged in the correct order. According to Tuha Adat, if Buis was not arranged in the right order, it will affect the ritual. For example, Tuha Adat would have difficulty in pronouncing the Nyangahant mantra and could lead to disaster or tulah. After the preparation of Buis completed, the Tuha Adat will start to recite the Nyangahant mantra.

Then, the mantra is read spontaneously without text. According to Tuha Adat, originally it is a short mantra, but when he recites the mantra over and over again, later there is a power that assists in the form of a mantra is long and well-spoken without interruption. He added that if the readings were interrupted, it would indicate that there

is a mistake of the Nyangahant ritual, such as the order of things in Buis and others. Several behaviours of Tuha Adat during the recitation of mantra such as he will lift hands to feed them food and sprinkle on something. Moreover, Tuha Adat will take some of the food and threw the food to the back. Once the mantra is complete, those who had any person who has a wish, their forehead will be marked with a mixture of Baras Bantant and the blood of slaughtered chicken to gain blessing and prosperity of Jubata. Subsequently, food provided in Buis such as manuk, bontonk, tumpi, and garetant will be distributed to individuals involved in the Nyangahant ritual. The sharing of these foods is to ensure the blessing of the Nyangahant ritual also receive by the family and relatives.

To perform Nyangahant ritual, it requires a precise preparation from the organizer or host - especially the preparation of Buis for the ritual. Buis is a gift to Jubata in the form of food that is decorated as an offering. However, the preparation of the ritual food offerings will vary depending on the ceremony. In Buis, it should have manuk or chicken or pig, bontonk, tumpi' and garetants that is served on a special tray known as Apar. Normally the Salako community is preferred to use chicken in the ritual. It because in their belief, chickens are the protector or guardian of the human and supernatural realm. Besides, the chicken is also considered as Jubata's favourite offering since he will present during the execution of the ritual as a power of protection. Usually, the number of chickens used in the ritual is in odd count whether one, three or seven. However, in Salako culture, the chicken offering is based on the social status of the people.

If the person who wishes or performs this ritual is in moderate status, then he or she can provide one or more. It is based on the intended person capability.

Usually, the rituals carried out by the Salako community have a particular purpose. For example, the wishes are to seek the recovery from sickness, to reject the plague, to vow or to promise to Jubata. Eventually, in every form of the request has the level of difficulty. Normally, the level of difficulty based on the number of chickens offered, such as seven chickens or change to a pig. According to an interview with Tuha Adat or the head of the ritual, the number of chickens or pigs indicates the status of ritual. The more chickens or pigs, the Tuha Adat will invite more Jubata to attend the event. Also, the recitation of the mantra used is quite long since every Jubata has a different function.



Figure 3: Buis placed on Apar

In terms of preparation, the symbols of food might have slight difference based on the ritual. It is because Jubata's role is to cure a

disease and it is not same for a request for opening new land for agriculture or settlement. All of these based on the level of difficulty and the amount of time spent in one performance. Besides, there are differences in the number of chicken used either rooster or hen. In the tradition of the Salako community, rooster always used in the ceremonies related to fighting, opening new land, witchcraft and others as it symbolizes the power of male character and extraordinary energy. As for the hen, the rituals based on calling and guidance, that portrays the image of a woman. It also always used for feeding and calling the paddy spirit.

For munoh manok ritual or slaughtering chickens, it has its condition. The slaughtered chicken neck cannot be broken or cut accordingly. The common practice of munoh manok is to cut it slightly under the cheeks to break the food vessel without breaking the blood vessels and head by using a special knife known as ensaut. It is to prevent the chicken blood from spreading everywhere, and it believed that blood is the favourite of Jinn and ghost that can lead to disaster. For that reason, the ritual of munoh manok must be carried out carefully without dropping a single drop of blood on the ground.

Once the entire internal organs of the chicken are cleaned, it will be removed except for the liver. The liver will be placed inside the cleaned chicken. The liver is placed inside the chicken is to bring the chicken alive in the ritual offering. According to the traditional beliefs of Salako community, the ritual will not function if the chicken liver was thrown and not clean. The clean chicken and contain chicken liver is a form of offering to appeal to Jubata to make the chicken will



change its form in the supernatural realm. It is important for the chicken to be cleaned as it represents the symbol of purity that can bring goodness (Mohamad Maulana, 2012). Besides, pork is also used as a ritual offering. The most commonly used part is the thigh part because it is the favourite of Jubata. Based on the way the chicken and pigs are prepared, it shows that the Salako people are very careful and discipline in providing food for their god Jubata.

In every ritual performed by the community of practitioners, the most important person is the leader of the ceremony. The leader is chosen among the people who are well versed in the way of rituals and also hold the highest position in society. They are also selected by the village community and passed down from one generation to another generation. In Salako community, they are known as Tuha Adat. Tuha Adat is normally in late aged and is believed to have a connection with Jubata, a god in Salako community. Tuha Adat also has supernatural abilities to interact with Jubata. These abilities cannot be learned or contained in books but are usually acquired from their ancestors. Normally, Tuha Adat is a person that has protection or pendinding within themselves. Pendinding can be defined as physically, emotionally and mentally strong because not all things that are wished or request are easy, but sometimes it is necessary to fight against these supernatural powers. Without pendinding, it could lead to death.



Figure 4: Tuha Adat recite the mantra of the ceremony

The Nyangahatn ritual cannot be done easily because it involves supernatural power. In addition, the success of a ritual depends on the role and skill of Tuha Adat by following the rules set by the previous practitioners. Therefore, to become Tuha Adat in Salako community, it is not based on the election of likes of the group, but they are chosen based on their position in the group. It is usually transmitted through dreams, descendants and the chosen ones. The chosen ones can be defined as the result of the observations and research of the previous Tuha Adat.

Based on this research, it found that Tuha Adat group is getting smaller in number. This situation happens due to the influence of the religion of this day. Although several of Salako people have their faith, the need for Tuha Adat still exists until today. It is due to the influence of older generations that have influenced their cultural tradition. The belief in the Salako traditional culture still practised because there is a necessity in their life. This situation does not mean that they abandon traditional beliefs but integrate it with today's religious elements. The

role of Tuha Adat is not the only charge in the performances of Jubata, but also involve to teach the younger generation about the Salako community. For the younger generation, of course, this tradition is unknown, but because of the role for Salako community, it has become guidance for its people since they have smaller in number.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In short, through this research it is found that the Salako community are still practising the traditional faith even though most of them have embraced in religion such as Islam and Christianity. Consequently, the Salako community is always abiding by the concept of Perukunan Diri and Perukunan Kita, a belief on the existence of supernatural powers that every living thing in this world has its guardian known as Jubata. Jubata is their god who needs to be guarded, worshipped and respected through the ritual of Nyangahant since the existence of these extraordinary powers plays a significant role in the way of life of Salako community. If Jubata's feelings are not be taken care of and not worshipped, it worries that he will cause harm to himself and the community which is as idap, badi, and tulah.

This worries can dominate to the feeling of fear and despair of the Salako community and indirectly influenced their daily activities and behaviours. Therefore, the Nyangahant ritual is a compulsory tradition to solve all problems related to the Salako community life. Moreover, the people of Salako hope that by delivering the

Nyangahant ritual it would ease the wrath of extraordinary and supernatural powers. Besides, through this ritual, the Salako people can maintain their unity as an ethnicity. Without a clear understanding and unification, it is impossible for this ritual can be performed because it involves the dependency of the religion practised. Thus, the uniqueness of Salako people that has its own identity to achieve the prosperity of life and peace of their community. It can be stated that the ritual of Nyangahant cultural traditions of the Salako community need to be maintained as it is a tradition the heritage from their ancestors since ancient times. It must be maintained as it will be the symbol and identity of the Salako community.

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