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Unveiling Cultural Meaning in Ritual Language : An Ethnolinguistic Brief Analysis Of The *Geleten Pelumut* Ceremony in The Adonara Community

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Abstract

This study explores the forms and cultural meanings embedded in the *Geleten Pelumut* ritual speech as practiced by the Adonara community in Sukutokan Village. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study employed participant observation and in-depth interviews to collect data. The findings reveal thirteen distinct layers of cultural meaning expressed through the structure of the ritual speech, which includes the opening, the core body, and the conclusion. These meanings encompass reverence for ancestors, spiritual interconnectedness, requests for permission, communal solidarity, traditional guidance, well-being, divine blessings, moral orientation, metaphysical dimensions, the principle of *bonum commune* (the common good), gender equity, social interaction, and expressions of hope. This analysis highlights the significance of ritual language as a vessel of cultural identity and moral philosophy within the Adonara context, contributing to broader ethnolinguistic and anthropological discussions on the functions of ceremonial discourse.

1. Introduction

Language constitutes a fundamental pillar of culture, with the two existing in an inseparable and dynamic interplay that generates and sustains cultural meaning. Far from merely reflecting culture, language is actively shaped by the cultural contexts in which it develops. The distinctive features of any language emerge directly from the cultural system that nurtures it. As Bolinger (1975) asserts, language is intrinsically human, a behavioral phenomenon intimately connected to social attitudes

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and values (Bolinger, 1975, pp. 13–30). This reciprocal relationship underscores how language both shapes and is shaped by cultural norms.

Rituals, in turn, function as powerful mechanisms through which cultural customs are sacralized and perpetuated. Leach (1976), as cited by Tavárez (2014), conceptualizes ritual as a communicative act grounded in a stable semantic framework, where repetitive and structured linguistic forms demarcate specific registers, genres, and communicative intentions. Ritual language is often characterized by formulaic paired utterances or couplets, employed exclusively by designated ritual specialists to invoke blessings from ancestors or divine entities. These rituals may be individual or collective, serving as a mirror to the cultural identity of their participants.

On Adonara Island, ritual language plays an indispensable role in the preservation and transmission of ancestral traditions and spiritual beliefs. The local community regards these rituals—deemed gifts from "God Almighty" (Rera Wulan Tanah Ekan)—as vital protective practices safeguarding them from misfortune. One prominent example is the *geleten pelumut* ritual.

The *geleten pelumut* ceremony functions as a symbolic "cooling" of mechanical devices such as engines and dynamos, rooted in the cultural belief that these machines originate from fire and thus require ritual cooling to prevent accidents or operational failures. This ritual is exclusively performed by the *Ata Mua*, a ritual specialist appointed through ancestral lineage. It is believed that unauthorized performance of the ritual, particularly by individuals outside the Wungu lineage, may result in grave consequences, including death.

In Sukutokan village—situated near Mount Ile Boleng in the Kelubagolit Subdistrict of East Flores Regency—the *geleten pelumut* ritual embodies profound cultural significance. The community maintains that their ancestors entrusted them with stewardship of the land, along with the responsibility to uphold their cultural heritage. Central to this ceremony is the ritual speech, which encapsulates layered cultural meanings including divine protection (Rera Wulan Tanah Ekan) and the communal endeavor to avert calamity.

Notably, the ritual language is rich with polysemous terms whose deeper meanings risk being lost among younger generations, particularly under the pressures of modernization and external cultural influences. Therefore, this study endeavors to explore and analyze the linguistic forms and embedded cultural significances within the *geleten pelumut* ritual speech among the Adonara people of Sukutokan village. Employing semantic and cultural linguistic frameworks, the research contributes theoretically to our understanding of the intricate nexus between language, meaning, and culture in ritual contexts. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for community members, scholars, and cultural heritage advocates dedicated to safeguarding the intangible cultural legacy of the region.

2. Research Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design, employing participant observation and semi-structured interviews as the principal methods of data collection. These methods were chosen to enable an in-depth exploration of the geleten pelumut ritual as practiced in Sukutokan Village, located in the Kelubagolit Subdistrict of East Flores Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. By immersing in the cultural setting and engaging directly with ritual participants, the study sought to uncover the rich linguistic and cultural dimensions embedded within the ritual performance.

The research involved two primary informants who were selected based on their direct involvement in the ritual and their cultural authority. The first was an *Ata Mua*, a ritual specialist who also served as the central figure in the performance of the geleten pelumut. As the custodian of ritual knowledge and practice, the *Ata Mua* provided invaluable insight into the symbolic meanings and linguistic structure of the ritual speech. The second informant was a male family member of a motorcycle owner who participated in the ritual. His perspective contributed a more experiential and

communal view of the ritual's purpose and impact, offering a broader understanding of its role in local social life.

The instruments used for data collection included structured observation checklists and semi-structured interview guides, both designed to facilitate systematic data gathering while allowing for flexibility in capturing emergent themes. In alignment with qualitative research principles, the researcher functioned as the primary instrument, responsible for interpreting and contextualizing the data within its cultural framework. This reflexive role enabled a deeper engagement with the participants and the ritual setting.

Data collection procedures were conducted in two primary phases: participant observation and interviews. During the observation phase, the researcher actively participated in the geleten pelumut ritual. This process involved several stages, including preparation, participation, observation, and documentation. Preparation entailed acquiring a foundational understanding of the ritual's sociocultural context and the specific role of the *Ata Mua*. Participation required the researcher to follow local customs and adhere to established ceremonial protocols. During the ritual, careful attention was paid to participants' behaviors, gestures, and linguistic expressions, with an emphasis on minimizing disruption to the ceremony. All observations were thoroughly documented to capture the sequence of ritual events and the nuances of ritual language for subsequent analysis.

In addition to observation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the two key informants. These interviews were guided by open-ended questions that encouraged detailed narratives about the ritual's meaning, structure, and cultural relevance. The researcher employed both written notes and digital audio tools to record significant utterances and interpretations, thereby ensuring the accuracy and richness of the linguistic data.

Informant selection was guided by purposive sampling, with a focus on individuals possessing substantial knowledge of the geleten pelumut ritual. The primary criterion was the ability to articulate the ritual's cultural and linguistic significance, particularly as it relates to traditional forms of speech and symbolic communication. This approach ensured that the data collected reflected not only the performative aspects of the ritual but also its deeper socio-cultural and spiritual meanings.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings derived from a comprehensive linguistic and cultural analysis of the *geleten pelumut* ritual speech. The ritual discourse is systematically divided into two primary components:

1. *Bau Lolon* (the opening ritual speech), and
2. The *Geleten Pelumut* speech (the main ritual content).

Each segment reveals distinct layers of cultural meaning, expressed through specific linguistic structures and thematic content.

3.1 The Opening Ritual Speech: Bau Lolon

The *bau lolon* serves as the formal opening in major traditional ceremonies on East Adonara, encapsulating foundational cultural values through its linguistic expressions.

3.1.1 Honoring Ancestors

Within Lamaholot tradition, reverence for ancestors is sacrosanct, reflecting a deep spiritual and social obligation (Geertz, 1973). For example, the phrase:

Ina-k ama-k nenek moyang-nek

(Mother-my Father-my Ancestors-my)

It utilizes possessive suffixes that indicate first-person singular ownership, arranged from mother to father to ancestors. This hierarchical ordering underscores the maternal lineage's centrality and portrays ancestors as conduits of divine will, resonating with notions of kinship and spiritual authority (Schieffelin, 1985).

3.1.2 Spiritual Relationships

The ritual language evokes a profound connection with the supernatural realm. For instance, the expression:
Prem'a progene (literally "dark")

It functions as a metaphorical reference to the spiritual realm or deceased ancestors, deployed exclusively in sacred contexts to convey reverence and sanctity (Duranti, 1997).

3.1.3 Requesting Permission

A culturally significant practice involves seeking consent from ancestral spirits before proceeding. The verbal formula:
Ge' molo, menu molo (Eat first, drink first)

It symbolizes customary offerings to ancestors and encodes the complementary roles of *tuak baun* (male) and *neak liwo* (female), emphasizing equilibrium in social and spiritual relations (Basso, 1996).

3.1.4 Togetherness and Collectivity

Expressions of unity and communal responsibility permeate the ritual. The invocation:
Go leta raga keluarga goe (I ask to protect my family)

It reflects a collective ethos, invoking divine and ancestral protection over the family unit, while phrases like *Terlebih go anak* ("Especially my child") highlight intergenerational continuity and social obligation (Durkheim, 1912).

3.2 The Ritual Speech of Geleten Pelumut

The main ritual speech of *geleten pelumut* is performed to solicit protection and blessings for mechanical devices such as motorcycles and generators. The discourse symbolically articulates the relationship between humans, technology, nature, and the divine.

3.2.1 Symbolic Cooling of the Machine

Central to the ritual is the metaphorical "cooling" of machines, which are culturally construed as embodiments of fire, power, and potential danger (Turner, 1967).

The phrase '*Kame leten pelumut hewok sa'i hewok sai'*
(We cool with water, drip by drip)

With its repetitive structure, it emphasizes gentleness and carefulness, reflecting a cultural ethos that demands spiritual respect toward man-made objects to avert catastrophe (Geertz, 1973).

3.2.2 Appealing to the Divine for Protection

The ritual speech frequently invokes *Rera Wulan Tanah Ekan*, the supreme spiritual entity believed to safeguard life and nature. For example:

Rera wulan tanah ekan, teti pona baling waten
(God of the sky and earth, guard this path)

It demonstrates the community's theistic worldview, wherein divine protection extends beyond humans to encompass their possessions and endeavors (Eliade, 1959).

3.2.3 Emphasis on Ancestral Authority

Ritual authority is firmly grounded in ancestral lineage, especially through the Wungu family line. Expressions such as:
Lia Wungu, Ana Mua, su'at hewok ba'an
(Wungu descendants, sacred speakers, pour the holy water)

It identifies the designated ritual leaders, underscoring how genealogical legitimacy is inseparable from spiritual power (Turner, 1969). This exclusivity delineates ritual participation and affirms social stratification.

3.3 Cultural Meaning Embedded in the Ritual Speech

The *geleten pelumut* ritual speech embodies profound cultural meanings that reinforce the Adonara community's worldview, values, and collective identity.

3.3.1 Maintaining Harmony with Nature and the Supernatural

The discourse reflects an ecological cosmology that emphasizes interconnectedness among humans, nature, machines, and the spiritual domain (Ingold, 2000). Though machines are modern artifacts, they are symbolically integrated into the natural and spiritual order and must be treated with respect. The ritual's symbolic cooling functions as a metaphor for restoring equilibrium between the elemental forces of fire (danger) and water (protection), resonating with ecological theology principles (Tucker & Grim, 2001).

3.3.2 Ritual Language as Cultural Repository

The use of metaphor, repetition, and coded symbolism in the ritual language preserves ancestral wisdom and cultural knowledge. Phrases such as *prem'a progene* ("dark-dark") and *tuak baun-neak liwo* (male-female offerings) function as linguistic vessels, accessible primarily to cultural insiders. Such language acts as a repository for transmitting cosmological beliefs, social norms, and ethical values across generations, emphasizing the importance of linguistic preservation amidst modernizing forces (Hymes, 1974).

3.3.3 Language as a Marker of Social Structure

The ritual discourse simultaneously reflects and reinforces the social hierarchy and identity within Adonara society. The terms *Ana Mua* and *Lia Wungu* denote ritual leaders whose authority is hereditary, illustrating how language operates as a boundary marker determining inclusion and exclusion within sacred practices (Bourdieu, 1991). Thus, ritual language is both a tool of social cohesion and stratification.

4. Conclusion

The *geleten pelumut* ritual speech is not merely a collection of traditional utterances but a profound linguistic and cultural performance that reflects the Adonara people's worldview, where the sacred and the everyday are intricately intertwined. This ritual speech serves as a conduit through which beliefs, values, and social norms are expressed, enacted, and preserved. Embedded within its structure is a symbolic system that articulates the community's understanding of harmony, protection, and ancestral connection.

The ritual's core message conveys the importance of balance between opposing yet complementary forces—particularly the elemental interplay between fire and water, representing danger and protection. Machines, though modern in origin, are symbolically interpreted within this traditional framework as objects requiring spiritual cooling, suggesting that human-made technology is still subject to the laws of the spiritual and natural world. This worldview underscores the belief that divine and ancestral powers continue to govern the safety and prosperity of human life. The invocation of deities such as *Rera Wulan Tanah Ekan* and the exclusive authority granted to ritual specialists from the *Lia Wungu* lineage highlight a cosmology deeply rooted in both theism and genealogical legitimacy.

Moreover, the ritual language functions as a vessel for transmitting cultural knowledge across generations. Its metaphoric structures, repetition, and symbolic expressions do not merely serve poetic purposes but act as a repository of indigenous wisdom, social organization, and ecological consciousness. Through this language, community members learn not only their roles and responsibilities but also the sacred relationships that bind humans to nature, to their ancestors, and to the divine. In this way, ritual speech becomes a powerful tool for sustaining cultural identity, maintaining social hierarchy, and fostering environmental harmony.

Given the richness and complexity of this linguistic tradition, it is imperative that efforts be made to preserve and revitalize such ritual practices. As external influences and modernization increasingly pose threats to indigenous knowledge systems, the documentation and analysis of ritual language gain urgent relevance. Future research should extend to comparative studies of ritual speech across other ethnolinguistic communities in East Nusa Tenggara to further explore Indonesia's vast linguistic heritage. Such scholarship is essential not only for linguistic anthropology but also for broader cultural preservation and intergenerational transmission of meaning in traditional societies.

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