

THE SYMBOLIC MESSAGE OF NGARUWAT RITUAL AS AN ANCESTRAL TRADITION OF THE LELES SAGALAHERANG COMMUNITY IN SUBANG REGENCY, WEST JAVA

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Abstract

The Ngaruwat ritual is a tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation by the people of Leles Sagalaherang Village as an expression of gratitude to God Almighty for all the pleasures that have been given, both in the form of faith, health, wealth and also the land on which they are based. The Ngaruwat ritual consists of several series of activities, namely slaughtering goats, making sesajen, Sisingaan procession performances, and ending with a puppet show. The purpose of this research is to find out the meaning of the symbolic message of the series of Ngaruwat ritual activities in Leles Sagalaherang village. The research method used in this study is an ethnographic method with a qualitative approach. The results of the study show that the symbolic message of the Ngaruwat ritual series consists of (1) Slaughter of goats by traditional leaders. Goats are used as a symbol that is interpreted as a source of blessings and goodness for the community. (2) The implementation of Istighosah is a symbol that is interpreted as self-purification from negative or bad influences. (3) Placing Sesajen in a sacred place. Sesajen are an important symbol that has the meaning of a spiritual journey to clean and purify nature to avoid disasters. (4) The implementation of the sisingaan procession is a symbol that means the happiness and gratitude of the community for the produce obtained. (5) The wayang golek performance is a symbol that is interpreted as respect and a reminder of the ancestors who have inherited the Ngaruwat ritual to the people of Leles Sagalaherang village. The conclusion of this study is that the entire series of Ngaruwat ritual activities is a symbolic message that has a special and deep meaning for the people of Leles Sagalaherang village. In general, the symbolic message of the Ngaruwat ritual is a form of gratitude to God and the universe who have provided produce to be processed and consumed by the local community.

Keywords: Ritual communication, Meaning of message, Symbols, Ngaruwat rituals, Ethnography

INTRODUCTION

Ritual is a process of conveying a symbolic message that is full of meaning for the community that does it. Therefore, rituals are often used as community traditions that are passed down from generation to generation so that the ritual continues to exist throughout life. In this regard, Carey (2005: 68) says that ritual refers to the words "sharing", "participation", "association", "kinship", and "owner of shared trust". Furthermore, rituals are conveyed through communication between community members in the local community to keep them sustainable.

Related to the description above, ritual communication is actually communication that is carried out collectively that aims to express one's attachment to the group and

strengthen one's identity within the group. In this context, Mulyana (2013:35) states that ritual communication is usually carried out by communities who always perform certain ceremonies throughout the year and throughout life or in anthropological terms called *rites of passage* which start from births, circumcision, birthdays, engagements, marriages, to death ceremonies. In the ceremony, the community utters words or displays certain behaviors that are symbolic. Furthermore, ruwat bumi is a form of ritual communication that is preserved by the people in West Java. According to Awaliyah, et al (2024: 2), ruwat bumi is a sacred ceremony that aims to care for and maintain the blessings that God has given to humans through the produce of the earth. But in general, the people of West Java perform this ritual as a form of gratitude to God Almighty for all the produce that has been given throughout the year.

In line with that, one of the people in West Java who still consistently performs the Ruwat bumi ritual is the people of Leles Sagalaherang village, Subang. The ritual of ruwat bumi in the tradition of the people of Leles Sagalaherang village is better known as "Ngaruwat". The Ngaruwat ritual is carried out by the people of Leles Sagalaherang village every year in the month of Muharram. The series of Ngaruwat ritual activities in Leles Sagalaherang village began with a pilgrimage to the tomb of ancestors, slaughtering goats, making sesajen and placing them in sacred places, conducting a sisingaan procession around the village, praying together with elders and traditional leaders in istighosah, then a series of ritual activities ended with a puppet show. All series of Ngaruwat ritual activities are full of meaningful symbolic messages. The Ngaruwat ritual is not only an expression of gratitude and togetherness, but also the implied meaning of communication shown through the behavior of the people of Leles Sagalaherang village in every ritual activity carried out. This makes the Ngaruwat ritual carried out by the community in Leles Sagalaherang village an interesting communication event to be researched. Thus, the purpose of this research is to find out the meaning of symbolic messages in a series of Ngaruwat ritual activities carried out by the Leles Sagalaherang community, Subang regency, West Java.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with ethnographic methods. The qualitative approach is an approach that emphasizes descriptive analysis. In this case, Kirk and Miller in Moleong (2005:3), explain that the qualitative approach aims to explore and understand the meaning of culture and focuses on interactive processes and events. In addition, the research method used in this study is an ethnographic method with a qualitative approach. According to Neuman (2013), the ethnographic method is a type

of field research that focuses on providing a *thick description* of culture from an "insider" perspective to make it easier to understand the behavior, interactions, and meanings of the culture holistically.

The research location is a place where research is conducted to collect data with the aim of answering research problems. Furthermore, this research was conducted in Leles Sagalaherang village, Subang Regency, West Java. This location was chosen because the ngaruwat ritual activities are preserved and are still consistently carried out by the community for generations.

Data collection techniques are a way or strategy to obtain necessary and relevant data in research (Moleong, 2005: 58). Furthermore, the data collection technique in this study is carried out by means of participant observation where the researcher observes and participates in the ngaruwat ritual activities, the researcher conducts in-depth interviews with elders and community members as perpetrators of the ngaruwat ritual to find out the meaning behind the ritual activity, and the researcher conducts a documentation study to find out the records of past rituals that have been archived in the form of photos, images, or videos. Meanwhile, the data analysis in this study was carried out by reducing the data that had been collected, describing it in the form of a description to draw conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Ngaruwat as a hereditary tradition that is preserved

The ritual of ruwat bumi or better known as Ngaruwat is a ritual that has been passed down from generation to generation by the people of Leles Sagalaherang village. In this context, ritual is everything that is connected or connected with religious ceremonies, such as birth, death, marriage, and also daily rituals to show oneself to the sacredness of the Gods, spirits, and the universe (Bustanul, 2006: 95). In line with that, the Ngaruwat ritual carried out by the people of Leles Sagalaherang village is a sacred ceremony to express gratitude to God and the universe for the produce obtained. Furthermore, Odea (1996: 78) said that ritual is a collective action to strengthen group solidarity which is shown through the togetherness of groups with the same cultural behavior and values. This is also shown by the people of Sagalaherang village where they prepare a series of ritual ceremonies together because they realize that the Ngaruwat ritual is carried out to protect nature from disasters or bad influences.

Related to the description above, the Ngaruwat ritual in Leles Sagalaherang village has been going on for hundreds of years and has become a mandatory agenda every year. Initially, the Ngaruwat ritual was carried out by traditional leaders

to show gratitude for the harvest obtained by performing rituals as a tribute to the spirit of ancestors or guardian gods of nature. However, after the entry of Islam, the Ngaruwat ritual underwent changes and adjustments in its rituals by prioritizing Islamic values, such as the mantras that were said during the ritual were changed with prayers addressed to God. Currently, some Ngaruwat rituals have begun to be removed and simplified, but the essence of the ritual is still maintained as a form of tradition preserved by the people in Leles Sagalaherang village.

Furthermore, the Ngaruwat ritual is usually carried out in a sacred place called *Pasarean*. In this place, the community gathers to carry out a series of ritual activities, starting from traditional ceremonies by slaughtering goats, making sesajen, distributing produce to the community, sisingaan processions, and ending with a puppet art performance. The series of Ngaruwat rituals does not last only one day but a whole week, but is carried out at night. In this case, according to Koentjaraningrat (2005), a series of ritual activities aims to meet the spiritual needs of the community which are connected to various events, such as rejecting forces, harmonizing the earth and nature, or the cycle of human life.

2. The Symbolic Message of the Ritual Ngaruwat in Leles Sagalaherang village

The meaning of the message refers to the results of the interpretation of messages related to the perception of individuals or groups from a certain socio-cultural background (Ibrahim, 2015). Meanwhile, according to Saiffudin in Hendro (2020: 162), symbols are objects, events, sounds, or forms of writing that are given meaning by humans through language. Humans can give meaning to every object, event, or action they see in the form of thoughts and ideas. In this case, the symbols of the Ngaruwat ritual are shown through objects and behaviors that are interpreted to strengthen group bonds and maintain the balance of nature. In this regard, a series of Ngaruwat ritual activities in Leles Sagalaherang village include:

- a. Slaughtering a goat carried out by traditional leaders is a sign that the Ngaruwat ritual ceremony will begin. Goats are symbols that have the meaning of blessings and goodness for the entire community. All organs from goats from head to toe can be processed and consumed by the community so that they become a source of life and blessings.
- b. Making and bringing sesajen to a sacred place. In the sesajen there is a tumpeng placed in the middle, around which are placed various side dishes, vegetables, and traditional spices typical of Leles Sagalaherang village. Tumpeng is a symbol that is interpreted as a center (flashlight) that becomes a sacred place where people gather to perform rituals, while traditional side dishes, vegetables,

and spices are symbols that have a meaning of the community that protects the sacred place to keep it clean and holy. However, holistically, for the people in Leles Sagalaherang village, the offerings are a symbolic message that is interpreted as a spiritual journey to clean and purify the universe as their sacred place to avoid disasters. Therefore, the essence of sesajen is important and there must be every Ngaruwat ritual carried out.

- c. Distributing produce to the entire community of Leles Sagalaherang village. This symbol is interpreted as a togetherness to be grateful for all the sustenance received from the produce of the earth. All the products obtained can be processed into food consumed by the local community.
- d. Perform istighosah together. Istighosah is a symbol where people can gather to pray to God as a form of gratitude and request to be saved from natural disasters and dangers. Istighosah is usually carried out using the Sundanese language so that the entire community understands all the prayers that are offered. In addition, istighosah is also carried out to strengthen the bond of the Leles Sagalaherang village community group.
- e. Doing a sisingaan procession that becomes entertainment in the midst of the Ngaruwat ritual. The sisingaan procession is one of the typical subang arts such as the anniversary event of the city of Subang, circumcision, and the Ngaruwat ritual. Sisingaan in the Ngaruwat ritual is used as a symbol of happiness that must be celebrated together because the community has obtained good crops and avoided unwanted natural disasters.
- f. Doing puppet shows. Actually, this wayang golek performance does not have a deep special meaning for the people of Leles Sagalaherang village, but the wayang golek performance is part of a series of Ngaruwat ritual activities to respect and remember the heritage of ancestors (karuhun) which has been passed down from generation to generation until now.

Furthermore, the Ngaruwat ritual is the result of social construction as stated by Berger in Sulaiman (2016: 20) in his three assumptions which can be explained as follows:

- a. A series of ritual activities are created through the meaning and views of the people of Leles Sagalaherang village as gratitude to God Almighty and the universe. The people of Leles Sagalaherang village interpret that gratitude is not enough to be done only with worship and prayer, but also must be done with a series of ritual activities in stages, starting from slaughtering goats, making sesajen, performing istighosah, doing sisingaan processions, and performing puppet shows.

- b. The Ngaruwat ritual is adjusted to the context of the times, this can be seen from the ritual process carried out today is simpler and not as complicated as in the past. In the past, the Ngaruwat ritual was expressed in the form of a mantra addressed to spirits or gods of nature, now the mantra has been transformed into a series of prayers addressed to God as the creator of nature. This shows that the people of Leles Sagalaherang village have a dynamic relationship between logical thinking and the social context in which they are located. They realize that traditions are not static, therefore all habits or behaviors that are no longer relevant must be abandoned and adapted to the current social context.
- c. The life of the people of Leles Sagalaherang village is continuously constructed through the process of externalization, objectification, and internalization. In the process of externalization, the people of Leles Sagalaherang village create and express their socio-cultural world through the Ngaruwat ritual which is carried out every year. In the process of objectification, the people of Leles Sagalaherang village carried out a series of Ngaruwat rituals using the Sundanese language that could be understood by the entire community and used as their identity. This aims to maintain harmony and solidarity among community members. In the process of internalization, the series of Ngaruwat ritual activities has a deep meaning for the people of Sagalaherang village. The Ngaruwat ritual is not only a tradition that must be preserved, but also as a guideline that guides the life of the people.

In line with the explanation above, according to Blumer and Mead in Wood (2004), meanings are created and perpetuated through interactions in social groups. Social interaction provides, perpetuates, and changes various conventions, such as roles, norms, rules, and meanings that exist within a social group. This is outlined by Blumer and Mead in the basic assumptions of the theory of symbolic interactionism, including:

1. Humans act on meaning. All human actions are not due to the situation he is facing, but based on the meaning that others interpret in the situation. In the context of the Ngaruwat ritual in Leles Sagalaherang village, every community action behind the ritual is the result of interpreting the meaning based on the knowledge and experience gained while being a member of the community. The behavior and habits shown by the community are a reflection of the interpretation of the meaning of the Ngaruwat ritual so far.
2. Meaning arises from interaction. In this case, the meaning is not attached to the object or event that occurs, but is created through interaction between individuals, such as the meaning of sesajen in the Ngaruwat ritual which is the result of an agreement between traditional leaders and the people of Leles Sagalaherang

village. Putting tumpeng in the middle of the basket (flashlight) is not just aesthetic to make it look beautiful, but has a deep meaning, namely a sacred place or holy place that must be the center of people's attention. The sacred place of the series of Ngaruwat ritual activities is the universe. That's why the Ngaruwat ritual always involves nature and is done in the open area.

3. Meaning is modified through interpretation. In this case, humans are actively interpreting meaning on a continuous basis allowing meaning to be replaced or modified in interaction. In accordance with this context, the people of Leles Sagalaherang village actively interpret the meaning of the Ngaruwat ritual continuously so that all things that are no longer relevant are replaced or modified according to the situation, such as spiritual ceremonies worshipping spirits or gods by reciting various mantras are replaced with istighosah activities where prayers are offered based on the Qur'an and hadist and addressed to God Almighty. However, the essence of both is still the same, namely as an expression of the community's gratitude for the produce that has been obtained throughout the year.

CONCLUSION

The meaning of the symbolic message of the Ngaruwat Ritual includes: (1) Slaughtering a goat. In the Ngaruwat ritual, goats are symbols that have the meaning of blessings and goodness for the entire community. (2) Bringing offerings to a sacred place. In the offerings there is a tumpeng placed in the middle, around which are placed various side dishes, vegetables, and traditional spices typical of Leles Sagalaherang village. The symbol of tumpeng is interpreted as a sacred place, while traditional side dishes, vegetables, and spices are interpreted as the protector of the sacred place. For the people of Leles Sagalaherang village, offerings as a symbolic message are interpreted as a spiritual journey to clean and purify nature to avoid disasters. (3) Distributing produce to all people of Leles Sagalaherang village. This is interpreted as a togetherness to be grateful for all the sustenance received from the produce. (4) Performing istighosah which means an expression of gratitude and plea to avoid natural disasters. (5) Conducting a procession. The symbolic message of the sisingaan procession is happiness that must be celebrated because the community has obtained produce every year. (6) Doing puppet shows. The meaning of the symbolic message behind the wayang golek performance is as a tribute and reminder that the Ngaruwat ritual is an ancestral heritage (karuhun) that must be preserved.

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