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## Unveiling the Symbolic Meaning and Function of *Tu Dhe'u* Ritual: A Semiotic Analysis of Rodent Control Practice in Maluriwu Village

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**Abstract:** This research explores the symbolic meanings and functions of the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual, an agricultural ceremony performed by the Maluriwu community in response to rat infestations. This research aimed to unveil the symbolic meanings and function of the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual using Roland Barthes's semiotic approach. To collect the data, the researchers conducted an unstructured interview to explore the informants' perspectives on the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual's symbolic meaning and function. The data were subjected to qualitative analysis using a descriptive approach. The findings indicated several symbolic elements embedded within each stage of the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual such as *Dhe'u* (rats), *Sope* (rat boat), *Pa'e* (prayers), Purification using coconut water, Traditional Sites, Sea, *Tua Ka*, *Tu Laja*, and *Phije*.

**Keywords:** *Tu Dhe'u*, Symbolic Meaning, Function,

### INTRODUCTION

Rituals have long been an integral part of the lives of many Indonesian communities, remaining resilient despite the passage of time. These rituals represent human religiosity, expressing awe and recognition of forces beyond human control, such as wind, fire, water, earth, the moon, the sun, and mountains (Anoegrajekti et al., 2024). Rituals can be seen as cultural phenomena. It is a transmitted cultural symbolic actions and codes from a generation to the generation after. Each ethnic group and region possesses unique and distinctive rituals that signify their culture. Culture, as an evolution of values, encompasses all aspects of life, including the physical, individual, and social relationships, continuously refined to enhance human potential and societal progress. This affirms that cultural formation efforts can always be improved and are not bound by rigid limitations (Sugianto et al., 2022).

Indonesia is place to a diverse array of traditional ceremonies, ranging from ancestral worship to agrarian rituals celebrating the harvest season. This diversity reflects the richness and depth of Indonesia's cultural heritage. Each ritual provides an opportunity for communities to connect with their own identities, honor their ancestors, and strengthen ties with nature and one another (Ida Ayu Putu Aridawati, 2020; Rondo & Hudayana, 2023) Despite the pervasive influence of globalization and modernization on many aspects of life in Indonesia, rituals remain a cornerstone for maintaining cultural identity (Gual & Kaesnube,

2023). This strong foundation explains why many Indonesian communities continue to practice traditional rituals with pride and devotion (Suharji, 2014), such as the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual, which is still performed by the people of Maluriwu Village in Palue Sub-district today.

Maluriwu Village is one of the villages in Palue Sub-district, located in Palue Island, north of the water of Flores Island. Administratively, it is a part of Sikka Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province (Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Sikka, 2019). This village is renowned for its customs passed down from generation to generation. The village is located in Palue Sub-district, an area situated north of the waters of Flores Island. The majority of the population in Palue are farmers, relying primarily on agriculture and horticulture for their livelihoods. The *Tu Dhe'u* ritual is a specific ceremony conducted to control the plague of rats, which frequently attacks the agricultural fields, often resulting in crop failure. In addition, this ritual is performed to drive away rats that invade food supplies, damage clothing, and harm the community's woven fabrics.

The people of Maluriwu Village believe that this ritual can successfully eradicate rat infestations as long as all the ritual procedures are followed precisely, including adhering to the prohibitions established during the ceremony. An elder typically leads the ritual and must be attended by all village residents. During the ritual, some villagers beat *Gong* and *Gendang* (one of the assemblies in traditional music), accompanied by traditional dances performed by both men and women dressed in red garments, headbands, and holding spears (Gabriel, 2022). Throughout the ceremony, various prohibitions are imposed on the entire village population. One of the key prohibitions is the restriction on work or any kind of activity for several days, as well as refraining from creating noise or commotion throughout the village. Motor vehicles are also prohibited from entering or leaving the village. During this ritual, all villagers are prohibited from wearing white clothes. The underlying meaning of these restrictions is to invite the community to reduce their daily activities and fully devote themselves to the spiritual forces being honored during the ritual. These prohibitions symbolize the recognition that, at that moment, a greater power is believed to be in control of all things.

Indeed, despite the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual being a preserved local heritage, understanding its symbolic meaning and significance is still limited to certain community segments. This is due to the oral and practical approach to knowledge transmission and restricted access to traditional resources, literature, and written documentation. Therefore, this study aims to delve deeper into the symbolic meaning and function of the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual. The researcher will analyze these aspects based on the perspectives of traditional elders, village leaders, and relevant literature that can support the data analysis process.

Regionally, research on pest control rituals as a form of local wisdom in Sikka Regency has not been conducted by other researchers, conducting this study the first of its kind and an interesting topic to investigate. However, on a national scale, studies on the meaning and function of pest control rituals from various regions in Indonesia have been carried out in recent years. Several studies on the ritual of expelling pests from several regions in Indonesia generally focus on the process, function and meaning of rituals carried out before and after the planting season and generally present the same results (Gabriel, 2022; Gual & Kaesnube, 2023; Aridawati, 2020; Imanda et al., 2021; Sugianto et al., 2022).

These rituals have the meaning of expressing a request for safety, smoothness, and fertility so that the harvest is abundant, to be kept away from disaster, and an expression of gratitude to God and ancestral spirits. Meanwhile, the latest research (Gual & Kaesnube, 2023) examines the function of communication practices found in the Nahake tradition. The results of the study show that Nahake functions as a communication medium that bridges humans with God and ancestral spirits to be able to ask for rain. This previous research also used some approaches such as an ecolinguistic approach (Aridawati, 2020), ethnography (Gual & Kaesnube, 2023; Rondo & Hudayana, 2023), literature (Gual & Kaesnube, 2023),

and dance sociology (Suharji, 2014). Unlike the previous research, the recent research employs the semiotic approach to unveil the symbolic meaning and function of the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual.

Furthermore, this research arises from the condition where there was limited scientific documentation to record and preserve this *Tu Dhe'u* ritual performed in Maluriwu village, Palue Sub-district. This study intends to bridge the knowledge gap surrounding the ritual's meaning and functionality by employing a comprehensive approach to oral traditions and written sources. In doing so, it will contribute to a broader understanding of the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual within the community and academic discourse, preserving its cultural value. This research also seeks to ensure that the richness of the *Tu Dhe'u* tradition is documented to facilitate both preservation and wider accessibility for future generations.

## METHOD

This research employed a descriptive qualitative method. Qualitative research in social sciences, particularly in cultural research, plays a pivotal role in understanding the complexities of human behavior, beliefs, traditions, and social cultures. This method is very appropriate to use in exploring the intricacies of culture as it allows researchers to investigate the meanings, values, and social changes within a community or society. It generates descriptive data, often in the form of written or spoken, and observable behaviors that emphasize a comprehensive understanding of context and individual experiences to uncover the meaning behind phenomena with the analysis relying on the researcher's insight and analytical skills (Eni, 2018).

The researchers conducted the research in Maluriwu village of Palu'e Sub-district, Sikka Regency for 2 months. Five people were selected to be research participants to get the data. They became the interviewee whose information was taken as primary data for this research. Those interviewees are the village officials, customary elders, community leaders, customary council members, and members of the community who are knowledgeable about the *Tu Dhe'u* tradition and have participated in this ritual for decades. There were two types of data used in this research; primary and secondary data. Primary data were taken from the interviews while the secondary data were taken from related journals, books, online news media, and YouTube videos. Both types of data help the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the symbolic meaning and function of *Tu Dhe'u* ritual.

In analyzing the data, the researcher employed qualitative analysis techniques outlined by Creswell (in Eni & Mansur, 2024) encompassing editing, translating, data analysis, and drawing conclusions. The first step was editing where the researchers transcribed the oral data collected from interviews into written form. It was crucial, as much of the information was conveyed orally, and transcription ensured that no valuable information would be lost. Following this, the translation stage was undertaken, where data was translated from the source language to the target language to ensure clarity and accessibility for analysis. Once this process was complete, the researchers continued to the data analysis phase, in which the information was systematically examined to identify patterns and insight aligned with the research objectives.

In this research, the researchers employed Roland Barthes's Semiotics theory to unveil the symbolic meaning and the function of the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual. Using Barthes's Semiotics theory, the researchers examined the denotative meanings of key ritual elements, such as specific actions or objects, and explored their connotative implications within the cultural context. Finally, the conclusion-drawing stage synthesized the analysis findings to address the research questions, revealing the essence of this research and providing insights into the ritual's cultural significance.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before technology became an integral part of human civilization, communities primarily depended on the knowledge, practices, and values passed down through generations, often called local wisdom, to sustain their way of life. Scholars have defined local wisdom through various definitions. Local wisdom encloses cultural values to guide the local people or community in managing social life and environment which serves as the foundation to keep natural resources, cultural development, and education and also functions as the source of advice, beliefs and social norms. According to Sibarani (Sibarani, 2018), local wisdom is local knowledge that comes from fundamental values of cultural tradition and provides direction to communities' lives and behavior.

He added that the local wisdom is used by indigenous people or local people to overcome their social problems and increase their community welfare since it consists of hard work, discipline, education health, cooperation, culture creativity, gender management, culture creativity and preservation and environment care. From this definition, local wisdom can be understood as valuable knowledge owned by an indigenous community who share the same character, that is expressed through daily practices or behaviors that encompass values, norms, ideologies, language, and so forth, that serve as identity markers, shape the community's life to the common good, and solve the community's problems. As it serves to preserve the local identity, local wisdom needs to be sustained for future generations.

The *Tu Dhe'u* ritual is one of the common rituals held by Palue people. There are three villages in Palue Sub-district which often held this ritual since ancient times. Those villages are Maluriwu, Kesokoja and Reruwairere. This ritual is typically conducted every five years, coinciding with the onset of the planting season or the arrival of the west monsoon, generally around January or February. During this time, crops are often threatened by rat infestations. The local people believe that those rats are manifestations of their ancestors arising from a perceived lack of respect or attention. There are no informants or any printed works of literature that know the specific time when this ritual began. Otherwise, those interviewees believe that it existed before the Palue people knew the religion. Generally, these stages of rituals are similar between one village and another. The difference lies only in a few items used in this ceremony. This ritual is a very long ritual that has several stages. The stages of the Dhe'u ritual carried out by Maluriwu village are as follows:

### **Deliberation (Customary Deliberation)**

This initial stage involves discussion or deliberation among community members to reach a consensus on the need for the ritual, outlining its significance and the roles of participants. The members include *Lakimosa* (traditional leaders), *Hana Halo Wai Walu* (general community), local government, religious leaders and other community leaders. In this deliberation, some important decisions are taken such as determining the time for the ritual, collecting funds, and drafting customary rules and taboos that must be adhered to by the entire community during the ceremony. *The Lakimosa* from various customary clans are present, such as *Lakimosa Hata Hina* and *Lakimosa Hata Ama*, who have customary responsibilities to ensure that the ritual aligns with ancestral traditions. The community must participate by contributing funds and preparing food and venues to accommodate guests during the ritual. Donations may also be made by members of the Maluriwu community residing outside Palue Island. Commonly, this ritual is not attended by the Maluriwu's villagers but also involves other neighboring villages, whose members are invited to participate in the event.

### **Making *Sope* (Constructing the Rat Boat)**

After deliberation, the villagers construct a *sope*, a symbolic boat designed to represent the journey of the rats, emphasizing the collective effort to address the infestation. This boat

will be used to carry the rat to the open sea. In this process, there is *Ata Ngi'i Dheu* (the Rat Tooth Clan, one of the clans believed to play a significant role in this ritual) and the indigenous community takes the *Hao Dheu* (*Hao* is bamboo and *Dheu* is Rat), bamboo used for the ritual, to be cut and crafted into the boat (or more precisely, a raft). The bamboo-cutting process is not arbitrary. Only individuals with heredity rights and trusted by tradition are allowed to perform the cutting, as it carries significant risks, including life-threatening consequences if not done according to customary rules.

The boat is made from three bamboo stalks, each measuring eight segments in length. The bamboo is carried to customary sites or monuments and is worked on by people of customary beliefs. Additionally, fibers from the *enau* tree (sugar palm tree) are used as binding materials to construct the boat. Holes are made in each bamboo-segment as a place to put the rats in. Before cutting the bamboo, there are prayers made which in the Palue language called *Pa'e*. The purpose of holding this *Pa'e* itself is to ask permission and blessing from the ancestors and God so that the process runs smoothly and no misfortune occurs as a result of the bamboo cutting.

### **Releasing the *Maba-Ko (Gong-Gendang)* and other Ritual Instruments from the Traditional House.**

After putting the the *Sope* in customary site, the next stage is releasing the *Maba-Ko or Gong-Gendang*. This stage involves the lowering of ritual instruments, signifying the transition into ritual space, and the formal commencement of the *Tu Dhe'u* activity. This process is done by *Hata Weta* (the Sisters clan) who have special heredity rights to perform this ritual. Before all these items are lowered, the *Hata Weta* asks for blessing from the ancestors through *Pa'e* (traditional prayers). After praying, the *Gong-gendang* and all ritual items are washed with coconut water and *Hule* (*Hauli* fig tree) leaves. The number of coconuts used is five and five pieces of *Hule* leaves. The gong is then sounded five times, symbolizing the commencement of the official ceremony.

### **The *Tu Dhe'u* Ceremony.**

The word *Tu* in the Palue language means 'send', while *Dheu* means 'rat'. Literally, *Tu Dheu* is interpreted as a ritual of sending rats away from the village. However, it can be more understood as a ritual to expel the rats' infestation from the village. In the Muluriwu community belief systems, are not merely regarded as common rodents or pests but are also seen as manifestations of their ancestors, often referred to as *Rata*, meaning 'king'. Thus, when the ritual takes place, the villagers are prohibited from addressing the animal by its original name, *Dheu*, and must instead use the term *Rata*.

The *Tu Dhe'u* ceremony is conducted for five days and begins after the *gong-gendang* and all ritual items are lowered and placed at the Male Ndeku Tubukoe traditional site. The community, consisting of *Lakimosa* and *Hala Halo Wai Walu*, gathers and performs traditional dance as an act of respect for their ancestors. The dance are accompanied by the sound of *gong-gendang*. The community is required to wear red clothes and red headbands. The rat capture ceremony has been going on since the first day of the *Tu Dhe'u* stage. During the ceremony, the rats, which are considered the King, are captured by special people who are believed to have spiritual powers to bring and capture rats for generations. The rats that are successfully captured are then stored in *Hao Dheu* (rat bamboo) which is located at the traditional site. These captured rats are guarded for five full days by individuals who have spiritual abilities known as *Mogi Manu/ Hata Pisa Ne*. They are tasked with protecting the captured rats from any malevolent spirit that could potentially harm or endanger the community.

For the first three days, the ceremony is centered at the Male Ndeku Tubukobe Traditional site, where various traditional rituals are carried out, including prayers and

offerings. On the third day, the *gong-gendang* and all ritual are brought down to the Lengo Wewe Nduku traditional site through *Lala Dheu* (a sacred path known as the rat trail). After reaching the site, the *gong-gendang* is sounded five times a sign that the transition of the ritual to its new location is successful.

On the fourth day, the *Tua Ka* (communal eating) event is held for residents of Maluriwu village and visitors from neighboring villages who come to witness or participate in this ritual. Neighboring villagers and outsiders are the main priority to be given food. The funds obtained for this activity usually come from personal funds collected voluntarily by the community members. The fifth day is the culmination of the ceremony with the ritual of sending the rats to the sea. The rats that have been filled into bamboo boats are delivered to the sea at a predetermined time, usually around 11 a.m. or 2 p.m.

This process is very sacred, and along the journey to the sea through *Lala Dheu*, *gong-gendang* is sounded, and the traditional Pa'e prayer is recited. All villagers participate in the procession. The stored rats are equipped with supplies such as sweet potatoes, corn, bananas, rice, coconuts, and agricultural products from the residents. The boat containing the rats is then pushed out to sea and escorted by several young people and other elders of the community. While the rats are being escorted, the participants are required to return to their respective homes solemnly without any commotion and are prohibited from looking back (towards the sea) or lingering on the beach.

The rat escorts will row the non-motorized boat until they find signs of black or white birds, dolphins, whales or any sign that is considered as a sign of the presence of ancestors. Once these signs appear, the bamboo boat containing the rats will be left at that location and the escorts return to the shore. During their return, they are prohibited from making loud noises and having negative thoughts, and looking back. Upon arriving at the shore, the escorts proceed to the traditional site to take part in the *Tu Laja* (blood cleansing) ritual which is carried out in the afternoon. This purification ceremony marks the end or conclusion of the sacred event after all participants return to their homes in silence and solemnity.

### ***Phije* (The Period of Restrictions)**

Following the ritual of escorting rats into the sea, the Maluriwu community enters a period known as *Phije* which is conducted for five days. During this time, several prohibitions are strictly enforced, including 1) no activity of residents entering and leaving the village, 2) no sand collection activities on the beach or activities along the coastal area, 3) a band of using motorized vehicles for the villagers, 4) no loudly talking, gathering and doing activities that cause noise, playing music either on cellphones or speakers, 5) not wearing or drying white clothing or fabric in public spaces, 6) no picking leaves, cutting trees and others, or engaging in similar activities, 7) restricting on the use of electricity since morning until nighttime hours. People who violate will be subject to customary fines according to the community's established regulations. Early morning on the fourth day of the *Phije*, the entire community is invited to ascend the mountains.

Once there, they engaged in the ritual of striking the threes, and houses with wooden sticks or other objects, creating noise while chanting the phrase '*pana mo, pana mo*' which means 'go away go away'. This activity begins with the houses located in the mountainous area to the houses in the coastal areas. When they reached the sea, they threw all the objects used to hit the houses. Subsequently, the participants bathe in the sea. After that, the community then returns home in silence maintaining this tranquility until the fifth day.

### **Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis of Symbols in *Tu Dhe'u* Ritual**

Barthes introduces a way to understand the meaning of symbols through a two-level analysis: denotation and connotation. Barthes argued that Denotation is the basic or direct meaning of a symbol that literary seen or felt. At this stage, meaning is objective and not

influenced by subjective values. Meanwhile, Connotation is an additional meaning attached to a symbol, influenced by cultural, social, or emotional context. This analysis allows us to explore the literal and cultural meanings of symbols, as well as how they shape the myths. Based on the stages in the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual, several symbols can be identified and analyzed.

### ***Dheu (Rats)***

In the context of *Tu Dhe'u* ritual, *Dheu*, or rats, carry a denotative meaning as rodents, pests and disease carriers. These animals are commonly found in households, where they frequently feed on food supplies such as corn, rice and sweet potatoes. Additionally, they often damage clothing, sarongs and other fabrics owned by residents. Despite the efforts to exterminate them using rat poison, the rats persistently reappear, and their population never seems to diminish. When these pests attack, hundreds of rats invade homes, destroy food supplies, damage crops, and ruin clothing, leading to significant material losses for the community. To address this problem and mitigate the destruction caused by these pests, the community performs the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual, symbolically representing their collective effort to eliminate the threat posed by the rats.

Connotatively, rats are believed as reincarnations of Maluriwu's ancestors. The existence of rats are believed to signify a form of misfortune resulting from the community's negligence in upholding their cultural and customary obligation. For instance, violations of customary norms in daily life by the villagers are thought to invite such disasters. Additionally, the failure to properly conduct the most recent *Tu Dhe'u* ritual is also perceived as a cause for the resurgence of these pests. Another prevalent belief among the community attributes the rat infestation to a collective forgetting of their ancestors. This neglect of ancestral respect and tradition is considered a spiritual imbalance that manifests in the form of these destructive pests, urging the community to reaffirm their cultural practices and reconnect with their heritage through the ritual.

### ***Sope (Rat Boat)***

*Sope* or rat boat carries denotative meaning as a tool or media to carry the rats to the sea. It is made from bamboo and tied using ropes made from the fibers of sugar palm. Ni Made in (Harun, 2024) stated that bamboo is a type of plant capable of adjusting to the specific soil and climatic conditions of its growing environment. This adaptability enables it to thrive even at elevations reaching 3800 meters above the sea. In addition to its excellent survival ability, all parts of bamboo, such as young shoots and stems, can be utilized for various purposes, including as vegetables, architectural materials, fences home barriers and others. This plant can grow abundantly and create a cooling effect. While sugar palm plant has significant potential to be developed. Almost every part of this plant can be utilized. The leaves are used for roofs of houses or huts, while its young seeds are used for sugar palm products used as food or drink ingredients. The old stems for flour. Roots are crafted into vases and baskets, while the fibers are used for brooms and ropes. Male flower clusters produce sap that can be used as sugar, drinks, vinegar, alcohol, and raw materials for ethanol to support bioenergy needs. In connotative meaning, the rat boat is associative with the spiritual vehicle of carrying all misfortunes or negative energy back to its source. Why is a bamboo boat used instead of a conventional motorboat? This choice is made to preserve the natural ecosystem balance in the Maluriwu village.

### ***Pa'e (Prayers)***

*Pa'e* is a chant addressed to God and the spirits of ancestors delivered in the Palue language. This prayer conveys a plea for the smooth execution of the ceremony and the swift resolution of the ongoing plague. Connotatively, *Pa'e* represents a form of spiritual communication between humans, God and ancestral spirits that can strengthen spiritual

relationships or bonds and demonstrate reverence for sacred entities. Through prayer, the community expresses their belief that divine and ancestral support will aid in their efforts to cleanse negative energy and restore spiritual harmony. The recitation of *Pa'e* also reflects the recognition of human limitations and dependence on the omniscient power of God, it also shows that humans are weak creatures who fully rely on the power of God.

#### Purification using Coconut Water

In several rituals in Sikka Regency, coconut water is often used as one of the mandatory ingredients in certain rituals, such as the Huler Wair ritual (Natsir et al., 2023) in Kojawair village, the Hetilapang tradition (Ivon & Nasa, 2024) in Nangatobong village, and the Lega Mitran tradition (Nona Supartin et al., 2024) in Habi village. Denotatively, coconut water is a natural source of electrolytes beneficial for the body, characterized by its refreshing and sweet taste. In areas like Sikka Regency, which experience high temperatures, coconut trees thrive abundantly, including in the Palue Sub-district, particularly in Maluriwu village. Maluriwu community particularly people in Sikka generally regard coconut water as clean and pure, as it is extracted from within the coconut fruit, which is naturally protected by a hard shell and thick husk, ensuring it remains free from contamination. Thus, it is frequently used in rituals because it is regarded as a symbol of purity.

#### Traditional Site

The traditional monument is a hard, wide flat stone that can reach one meter or more in length and is placed in the center of the village. Almost all villages in the Palue sub-district have this stone. Usually, every traditional ritual ceremony is always concentrated in this place. This stone has been around since the ancestral time. The symbol of this traditional monument carries a denotative meaning where the Maluriwu community considers the stone monument to be sacred. It is revered because the spirits of their ancestors are thought to dwell within it. Monument is home to the spirits of their ancestors since ancient times. Women and outsiders are strictly forbidden from touching the stone, as such actions are considered disrespectful and displeasing to the ancestral spirits. Anyone who wishes to touch the stone, whether intentionally or not, must first permission from the local traditional elders to avoid the curse that may befall those who touch it without proper authorization.

#### The Sea

The sea was chosen as the best final disposal site for rats in the Palue Sub-districts reflecting both geographical and symbolic considerations. Situated on Palue Island, the community utilizes the sea for the drowning and disposal of rats, which are considered pests and disease carriers. Symbolically, the sea represents purification and healing, considering embodying the community's belief in its capacity to cleanse and liberate. The ritual of disposing of rats as pests and diseases in the sea carries deeper cultural and spiritual meanings, signifying the release of burdens, purification from sins, and the removal of negative energy from the community. Additionally, the sea's role in erasing and carrying away bad things reinforces its efficacy in breaking the cycle of pest and disease transmission. By utilizing the sea, an element distinct from the land, the Maluriwu community symbolically serves the connection between the source of rat infestation and the inhabited environment, emphasizing the separation and eradication of harmful influences.

#### *Tua Ka*

*Tua Ka* is an event to provide food and beverages not only for the local villagers but also for guests from neighboring villages and even from outside the Palue sub-district. The *Tua Ka* celebration requires significant costs. During this event. In this event, it is essential to ensure that everyone receives sufficient food and drink and leaves with a sense of satisfaction. Denotatively, the event serves as an expression of gratitude, symbolized by the

act of feeding a large number of people. Sharing food with the community and guests represents the distribution of blessings and fosters solidarity among community members. Additionally, it strengthens social bonds and reflects the principle of sharing fortune, which is believed to bring blessings and prosperity to the Maluriwu community.

### ***Tu Laja***

*Tu Laja* is the bathing ritual performed by those responsible for carrying and releasing the rats in the middle of the sea. Typically, the participants include 6-8 people consisting of several young people and an elder from the community. This bathing ritual is regarded as a cleansing ceremony, intended to ensure that all negative energy left in the middle of the sea along with the rats does not return to the village.

### ***Phije***

*Pije* or prohibition is one of the integral parts of the customs observed during the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual. *Pije* or abstinence period applies to the entire Maluriwu village community. Several rules must be adhered to during this time, rooted in long-standing traditions passed down through generations. Any violation of these prohibitions results in penalties, determined under established agreements. Connotatively, *Phije* conveys lessons about obedience and discipline towards the rules inherited from ancestors, highlighting the community's deep respect for traditions and values. These prohibitions serve as mechanisms for regulating harmony between humans and spiritual entities. For instance, the prohibition of sand mining for 5 years means to maintain the harmony of nature and human activity. Through *Phije*, Maluriwu people acknowledge and deeply respect the spiritual power embodied. They believe this energy is vital to the success of the ritual. Any deviation or violation, no matter how minor, is perceived as a significant disruption that could compromise the ritual's efficacy and purpose. This understanding highlights how the ritual is not just a series of actions but a deeply meaningful practice that reinforces the community's shared values, spiritual beliefs, and commitment to respecting their cultural traditions.

### **The function of the *Tu Dhe'u* Ritual Group Identity**

As a cultural practice deeply rooted in the community, the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual serves as a marker of identity for the people of Maluriwu Village. This marker signifies that the community shares common characteristics, values, and behaviors, distinguishing them, albeit subtly, from other communities in Palue that also perform the ritual. For instance, in Maluriwu village, the materials used to construct boats are bamboo and aren palm trees, whereas, in other villages within the Palue sub-district, the primary material is the *rita* tree. This difference reflects each community's unique perspective and values regarding these materials, which are considered more aligned with the characteristics of a particular community. When these objects are incorporated into the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual, they symbolize the values, characteristics and behaviors of the community they represent. This function is supported by Durkheim's theory that shared values and norms can maintain the cohesion and sustainability of social groups by symbolizing the collective identity of the participants (Durkheim, 1995).

### **Future Guidelines**

Several informants emphasized that the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual has a very essential function in shaping, regulating, and maintaining the social order of the village community. Apart from being a ritual that aims to drive away rats and keep people away from the potential plague, this ritual also serves as a collective reminder for the community about the spiritual connection with ancestors. This is reflected in the following statements:

*“Tu Dhe’u is not only a ritual for driving away rats, distancing the community from misfortune, but also a reminder that we, the community, live alongside the spirits of our ancestors. Therefore, we are obliged to remember them in every ritual related to religion or customs, for example, we must offer offerings during traditional ceremonies or express intentions (prayers) during mass in church for certain days.”*

In addition, this ritual also serves as a guideline for the community to continue to comply with the applicable customary rules. One of the informants explained:

*“We are also regulated not to arbitrarily violate the applicable customary rules to prevent this misfortune from occurring. We must follow taboos during this ceremony, which we consider as our guidelines”.*

From these statements, it is clear that the community interprets Tu Dhe’u as more than just a ceremonial ceremony. This ritual includes spiritual, customary, and social aspects. Tu Dhe’u helps people maintain a spiritual connection with ancestors considered guardians of life balance. Through this ritual, the community is invited to always remember their ancestors by offering or praying for them at certain moments, either through traditional ceremonies or religious practices such as church masses. Moreover, this ritual regulates people’s behavior by setting norms and taboos that must be followed during the implementation of the ritual. These rules serve as guidelines that protect the community from the possibility of being affected by a plague or catastrophe. For example, certain taboos are applied to ensure that each person acts under prevailing customary values. On the other hand, the Tu Dhe’u ritual provides moral direction to the community by instilling values that encourage them to act well, such as respecting customs, maintaining balance with nature, and carrying out religious obligations.

### **Cultural Preservation**

Ritual has an important role beyond being markers of identity for certain indigenous groups or communities and serving as future guidelines. Traditional rituals also function as a medium of education and cultural preservation for the community that performs the ritual. Through actions, symbols, and narratives, rituals convey morals and social values while acting as safeguards against the influence of foreign cultures. Several informants highlighted that involving children in the *Tu Dhe’u* ritual is a direct way to teach and transfer knowledge about the ritual to younger generations. As one informant shared:

*“We were never formally taught by our parents about this ritual, nor was it part of the school curriculum when we were students. We learned by participating in the ritual itself.”*

This function aligns closely with the theory of Connerton (in Husaini, 2023) that posits that ritual functions as a mechanism for remembering and preserving cultural traditions. He argues that rituals help societies internalize values through repetitive actions. By performing rituals repeatedly, the community collectively remembers important traditions without relying on the external form of documentation. Thus, by participating in the *Tu Dhe’u* ritual, younger generations are exposed to and internalize values that hold importance within their community. The values embedded in the rituals' actions and symbols are transmitted in a way that ensures their preservation. Through this process, ritual becomes a powerful education tool in fostering continuity and strengthening the community’s identity.

Based on the explanations, the researchers found that the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual plays an important role in Maluriwu's community. The *Tu Dhe'u* ritual is a tradition inherited from the ancestors that is considered effective enough to repel rat pests which of course cause significant losses. Despite its importance, the ritual has primarily been transmitted orally, without formal efforts to document its process, meaning and cultural function. This oral tradition underscores its role as a living heritage, preserved through practice and communal participation rather than written records. As discussed previously, the significance of the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual extends beyond its main function as a traditional pest control method. The ritual functions as a mechanism for preserving the cultural identity of the Maluriwu community, transferring knowledge, encompassing cultural wisdom, moral teaching, and social norms.

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals that each stage of the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual performed by the community in Maluriwu Village is embedded with various symbols. These symbols are objects, actions, and verbal expressions that carry profound meanings related to the community's cultural beliefs, values, and relationship with their environment. Those symbols found such as *Dheu* (Rats), *Sope* (Rat Boat), *Pa'e* (Prayers), Coconut Water, Traditional Site, the Sea, *Tua Ka*, *Tu Laja*, and *Phije*. As discussed in the findings, the significance of the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual is not merely as a pest control method. This ritual serves multiple functions within the Maluriwu people, acting as a marker of group identity, a framework for future guidelines, and a medium for cultural preservation. It reinforces a shared sense of belonging among community members and provides a structured pathway for transmitting values, traditions, and knowledge to future generations, ensuring the sustainability of their cultural heritage.

This study is limited to the analysis of denotative and connotative meanings in the *Tu Dhe'u* ritual. Therefore, further research is recommended to explore the mythological dimension of the ritual, as proposed in Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. Future studies could examine the myths associated with the symbols in this ritual, which would enrich the understanding of the symbolism embedded in the cultural practices of the Maluriwu community, as well as provide a deeper perspective on the construction of more complex meanings within the context of local culture.

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