

SYMBOLIC MEANINGS AND THE STRUCTURE OF DEATH RITUALS DISCOURSE IN RURAL JAVANESE SOCIETY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY IN MEJING VILLAGE, MAGELANG REGENCY

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Abstract

The death ritual is one of the rituals which is important in the life of Javanese community. One of community that still holds the ritual is Mejing village' community. The purpose of this study is to analyze the symbolic meaning, and structure in the death rituals discourse of the Mejing Village community in Magelang Regency, which is part of Javanese culture. There, the community understands death rituals not only as a form of respect for the deceased but also a cultural practice that reflects the community's belief system, social values, and social relations. The research method is a qualitative ethnographic approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. The results indicate that the death rituals in Mejing Village have structured stages and are rich in symbolic meaning, including tahlilan, kenduri, and cultural practices that reflect the values of social solidarity and respect for ancestors. This research provides an academic contribution to the study of cultural anthropology and efforts to preserve local traditions amid social change.

Keywords: *Javanese culture, death ritual, social values*

INTRODUCTION

Every culture has its own way of dealing with and responding to death. Even the values attached to death vary across cultures and communities. Indonesia, rich in cultural and traditional diversity, views death rituals not merely as a moment of farewell to the deceased but also as a reflection of the community's belief system, social values, and cultural identity (Geertz, 1960; Beatty, 1999). One ethnic group with a rich tradition of responding to death is the Javanese.

Javanese people have varied ways of dealing with death. Javanese people living in rural areas differ from those living in urban areas. Likewise, people living in the mountains also have different death traditions from those living near the sea. The way Javanese people respond to death varies according to their social and geographical environments (Koentjaraningrat, 1985). In rural areas, death rituals are usually done collectively and involve strong community participation, represent values such as *gotong royong* and social solidarity. In contrast, urban communities often conduct simpler rituals due to time constraints, modern lifestyles, and changing religious interpretations. Geographical factors also influence ritual practices. People living in mountainous regions may preserve older traditions and local beliefs more strongly, while coastal communities often show influences from trade networks, life style, migration, and religious movements. It means that Javanese death rituals are not homogeneous but shaped by diverse social, cultural, and environmental contexts within Javanese society.

The Mejing village community is one such community that still adheres to traditional Javanese cultural values that synergize with local beliefs, including death processions and rituals. Death rituals in this village encompass not only religious activities such as *tahlilan* (religious gatherings) and communal prayers, but

also a series of customs and symbolism that continue from the time a person dies and extend for days or even months afterward. These practices involve various elements such as reading prayers, offerings, choosing the time of burial, and forms of participation from the local community.

This research starts from the researcher's interest in understanding the meaning behind each stage of the death ritual in Mejing Village, as well as how the local community interprets death in their social and spiritual lives. Using an ethnographic approach, this study seeks to describe in depth death ritual practices based on direct experiences, social interactions, and narratives within the community. Ethnography was chosen as an approach because it allows researchers to view social realities from an "insider" (emic) perspective, thus capturing nuances and meanings that more structural or quantitative approaches might miss.

The primary focus of this research is identifying the structure and meaning of death rituals, and the roles of individuals and groups in their implementation. In the era of modernization and globalization, many local traditions face pressure to adapt or risk extinction. Therefore, this study will also examine the dynamics between tradition preservation and social change occurring in Mejing Village, particularly in the context of death rituals.

By understanding death rituals in Mejing Village through ethnographic approach, this research is expected to contribute to the study of cultural anthropology and enrich our understanding of how Indonesians, particularly rural Javanese, frame the meanings of life and death through their traditions and cultural practices. Furthermore, the results can serve as a useful source of cultural documentation in efforts to preserve local wisdom amid increasingly rapid change. In addition, this study may provide insights into the ways traditional communities maintain social cohesion, transmit moral values across generations, and negotiate the continuity of ritual practices within the context of modernization and social transformation.

METHOD

The researcher used a qualitative approach, employing the ethnographic method developed by James P. Spradley (1980), which emphasizes understanding culture from an insider (emic) perspective. The research location was Mejing Village, Magelang Regency. The community here still strongly upholds ancestral traditions.

Research collected data using in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The researcher interviewed various religious, and community leaders, and the common people. Observations were conducted by participating in several death rituals. Documentation was conducted by reviewing the community's notebooks, photographs, and recordings of activities.

There were some analysis: domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, component analysis, and cultural theme analysis to identify ritual structures, symbolic meanings, and changes in death ritual practices in Mejing Village.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Ethnographic research in Mejing village shows that the community there performs death rituals not only as technical religious procedures, but also as a complex cultural system encompassing various social, religious, and symbolic values. Javanese Muslims view death not merely as the end of biological life, but as a transition from this world to the afterlife (Karim, 2017). Therefore, death rituals are important social events because they involve not only the bereaved family but also the active participation of the wider community.

Fieldwork indicates that the death ritual procession consists of a series of systematic stages, starting with the announcement of the death, preparations at the funeral home, bathing the body, shrouding it, reciting prayers, performing the funeral prayer, the departure of the body (*bidalin layon*), burial, reading, *talkin*, and the *kenduri sur tanah* ritual. Each stage involves different social actors and reflects the community's cultural values.

Anthropologists note that ritual practices in Javanese society often represent a synthesis between Islamic religion and older local traditions. Clifford Geertz (1960) argues that religion in Java operates as a system of symbols which guide people to interpret and give meaning to their life experiences. Symbolic elements such as prayers, communal meals, and commemorative ceremonies in death rituals, serve not only religious purposes but also cultural ones. The community is helped by these ritual that death is a transition within a broader cosmological and moral order. Through such rituals, individuals reaffirm social bonds, express respect for ancestors, and maintain harmony between the living and the spiritual realm.

Preparations at Home

The initial stage of the death ritual in Mejing begins with preparations at home, including the announcement of the death to the community. After a person is declared dead, the family first notifies family members present at home. Next, the neighborhood head or community leader delivers an announcement to residents over the prayer room's loudspeaker. The announcement usually begins with a greeting and the recitation of "*Inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi raji'un*," repeated several times as a sign of grief and a religious reminder that humans come from God and will return to Him.

In this announcement, the community is informed of the time of the deceased's death and invites residents to come and support the grieving family. Following the announcement, residents spontaneously arrive at the funeral home. The community's presence not only demonstrates empathy but also demonstrates active participation in assisting with various Death Ritual Preparation.

Field findings indicate that the community immediately divides tasks informally but in an organized manner. Young people are usually responsible for setting up a tent in the yard to accommodate mourners and preparing the venue for the *Yasinan* (the recitation of the Quran) and *Tahlil* (the recitation of the Quran), which typically takes place several days after the death. The men prepare a space in the house to place the coffin and arrange the layout to facilitate the handling of the body. Meanwhile, the women are responsible for preparing meals for the mourners and for the community involved in handling the body and burial.

This finding is similar to what Robert W. Hefner said. He argues that religious practices in Indonesian Muslim communities often strengthen social solidarity and build shared moral commitments (Hefner, 2000). Community participation in death rituals show that social relations within village communities are not based solely on kinship ties but also on collective moral obligations.

Interestingly, the food to entertain guests is often purchased in advance from a nearby food stall. The family usually makes payment after the entire ritual. It reflects economic solidarity within the community and a high level of social trust.

The older men typically simply sit on the chairs provided while waiting for the funeral process. They often dwell on the deceased's memories and experiences during his or her lifetime. This activity not only serves as a means of remembering the deceased but also serves as a social mechanism for rebuilding collective memory about the deceased.



Thus, the preparation stage at the funeral home can be understood as the initial phase of a ritual process that not only functions practically in preparing for the funeral, but also has a broader social meaning, namely, strengthening solidarity, building collective memory about the deceased, and affirming the cultural values that are the basis of Javanese society.

Bathing the Body as a Purification Ritual

The next stage is bathing the body, which is obligatory under Islamic law. In the practice observed in Mejing, the body is usually washed first by family members. If the family is unable to do so, the community will assist with the process.

One important rule in this process is that the person washing the body must be of the same gender as the deceased. This relates to the principles of modesty and bodily purity in Islamic teachings. The water used to bathe the body is usually mixed with perfume. In addition to maintaining bodily cleanliness, the use of perfume also has symbolic meaning as a form of respect for the deceased.

According to Mark R. Woodward (2011), Islamic ritual practice in Java are often interpreted as forms of spiritual purification that are both physical and symbolic. These rituals serve as a means for the community to express respect for humans as God's creatures.

Shrouding and the Symbolism of Purity

After being bathed, the body is then shrouded in a white cloth. In this practice, certain body parts, such as the nose, ears, and mouth, are covered with cotton before the body is wrapped in the shroud.

In Islamic tradition, the white shroud symbolizes humankind's purity and simplicity before God. All humans are buried in the same clothes, regardless of social status.

However, in the practice of the Semen Kulon community, there is an additional symbolic element: the use of green cloth to cover the coffin. In Islamic tradition, the color green is often associated with purity and spirituality.

Historian M. C. Ricklefs (2007) explains that visual symbols in religious rituals are often used to emphasize Islamic identity in Javanese social life.

Collective Prayer and the Production of Sacredness

In Islamic teachings, people will perform the funeral prayer before the body is taken to the burial place. If the funeral home is close to a prayer room or mosque, the funeral prayer is usually held there so that more worshipers can participate. However, if the distance is quite far or certain conditions do not allow it, such as

rain, funeral prayers can be held at the funeral home. An imam, usually a religious figure or someone considered to have good religious knowledge, led the prayer. The makmum then stood in a row behind the imam to perform congregational prayer. After the funeral prayer was completed, the activity continued with a joint prayer, to ask for God's forgiveness and mercy for the person who had died.

The community on Java Island regards the death funeral prayers not only as a religious obligation but also as a form of final respect for the deceased and a manifestation of social solidarity. The presence of community in performing in congregational prayers demonstrates the community's belief that death is a social event involving the entire community. The communities' gathering and willingness to pray for the deceased demonstrate empathy for the grieving family and strengthen social bonds

Anthropologists said that rituals, such as funeral prayers, are part of the rites of passage. According to Arnold van Gennep (1960), in various cultures, important life events—including birth, marriage, and death—are marked by a series of rituals that mark a person's transition from one phase of life to the next. In short, death rituals mark a person's transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead and help the community accept this change. They also provide the community with an understanding of the phase of life they are about to enter.

A similar opinion is spoken by Victor Turner (1969). According to him, collective rituals often foster a sense of togetherness and solidarity among members of a community experiencing a particular emotional situation. In funeral prayers, this sense of togetherness is evident when people gather to pray and pay their final respects to the deceased. Thus, funeral prayers not only have religious significance but also serve to strengthen social cohesion within the community.

Bidalin Layon as a Social Ritual

One of the distinctive rituals in Javanese society is the *bidalin layon*, the procession of the deceased's body to the cemetery. This ritual includes two main speeches. The first speech is delivered by a family representative, who apologizes to the community for the deceased's wrongdoings during his lifetime. The family also provides an opportunity for anyone with debts to express their feelings to the family.

The second speech is delivered by a religious leader, who asks the community whether the deceased was a good person. The mourners then answer in unison that he was. This ritual can be understood as a social mechanism for restoring social harmony within the community. By bearing witness to the deceased's good deeds, the community symbolically closes the door to any potential conflicts that may have arisen during the deceased's life.

Hendi Sugianto and colleagues (2024) conducted a study on funeral rituals. The result shows that communal participation has a role to perform religious obligations and reinforce social solidarity and mutual responsibility among community members. Through collective participation in the management of the deceased and funeral ceremonies, the members of the community reaffirm shared moral commitments and maintain harmonious social relations within the community.



***Talkim Mayit* and Religious Education**

In the practice observed in Mejing, *Talkin* is performed after a body has been buried. It is performed by a religious or community leader near the grave after the burial process is complete. This ritual contains symbolic advice addressed to the deceased regarding the circumstances they will face in the afterlife. The advice explains that after being in the grave, humans will be visited by two angels, Munkar and Nakir, whose task is to ask various questions about the person's faith during life. Therefore, the religious leader advises the deceased not to feel afraid or anxious when facing these two angels, as they are God's messengers carrying out His commands.

During the *talkim* ritual, the religious leader then recounts questions believed to be asked by the angels Munkar and Nakir. These questions relate to the main tenets of Islam, such as "Who is your God?", "Who is your Prophet?", "What is your religion?" "Where do you face the Qibla?", and "What is your holy book?" After asking these questions, the religious leader also provides the correct answers according to Islamic teachings: that God is Allah, the prophet is Muhammad, the religion is Islam, the direction of prayer for Muslims is the Kaaba, and the holy book is the Quran. Delivering these answers symbolizes the spiritual guidance given to the deceased so that they can correctly answer the angels' questions in the grave.

Rationally, although the deceased is not able to hear or respond to such advice, the practice of *talkin* holds significant symbolic significance in the community's religious life. This ritual does not only aim at the deceased, but also at the community members present at the funeral procession. The religious leader reminds the community of Islam's fundamental teachings and the importance of maintaining faith in this world. In other words, *talkin* serves as a means of religious education that strengthens the community's spiritual awareness of the afterlife.

The anthropology of religion views ritual as a means of producing religious meaning in society. According to Clifford Geertz (1960), religious ritual is a system of symbols that serves to instill religious concepts in the consciousness of society through repeated symbolic actions. In the context of *talkin*, the

symbols of questions and answers about faith serve to reaffirm basic Islamic beliefs to the community in attendance.

Furthermore, the practice of Talkims also reflect the characteristics of local Islam that developed in the archipelago, in which theological teachings are often practiced through rituals with symbolic and pedagogical dimensions. According to Mark R. Woodward (2011), religious traditions in Javanese society often combine Islamic teachings with ritual practices aimed at strengthening the spiritual awareness of the community. In this context, talkin is not only interpreted as a religious practice but also as a social mechanism for affirming the values of faith in community life

Recent studies on Islamic burial rituals in Indonesia also show the important social and symbolic roles of funeral practices in strengthening religious consciousness within communities. Abdul Manan and colleagues (2024) had an ethnographic study on Islamic burial rituals in Aceh. They found that funeral ceremonies often have function not only as religious obligations but also as symbolic practices that reinforce shared beliefs about death, the afterlife, and moral responsibility among the living.

In summary, *Talkin* can be understood not only as a ritual related to beliefs about life in the grave, but also as a form of symbolic communication that connects the world of the living with the world of the dead. The community, through this practice, does not only expresses the hope that the deceased will attain safety in the grave but also reaffirms collective beliefs about the importance of faith and piety in human life.



***Kenduri Sur Tanah* and Javanese Philosophy**

After the burial ceremony is complete, visitors and those involved in the funeral are usually invited to attend a *kenduri sur tanah*. This ritual is held at the deceased's family home as part of a series of death traditions in Javanese society. The feast is not only an activity of eating together, but also has religious and symbolic meaning related to the community's cosmological views on life and death. In the practice observed in Mejing, *the kenduri sur tanah* is interpreted as a form of asking God for permission to enter the realm of origin in peace. In Javanese beliefs, humans originate from the earth and will ultimately return to it is recognized. This view is related to the Javanese cosmological concept often referred to as *sangkan paraning dumadi*, namely the belief regarding the origin and ultimate purpose of human life.

During the *kenduri*, the deceased's family serves a variety of simple dishes, such as free-range chicken stewed with vegetables, tofu, and various other side dishes. The family prepares these dishes with the help

of the local community. After the mourners have gathered, an elder or religious figure usually leads the recitation of prayers. The prayers are usually in the form of *tahlilan*, although the number of recitations is fewer than in the *tahlilan* rituals on subsequent nights. In these prayers, the religious leader asks God to forgive the deceased's sins and grant him a good place by His side. Prayers are also sent to the deceased's ancestors as a sign of respect for the family line and the spiritual connection between generations.

After the prayers are completed, the visitors enjoy the food made by the family. In this tradition, the food is usually served not only on site but also taken home by the guests. The meal but also has role as a means of sharing blessings and strengthening social ties between residents. Interestingly, in the practice observed in Mejing, there is rarely any food left over after the feast because most guests take it home as a blessing from the event.

Socially, the *kenduri sur tanah* also serves as a gesture of gratitude from the deceased's family to the community for their assistance during the funeral. In rural communities, the community digs the grave and transports the body voluntarily without expecting any material reward. Therefore, the *kenduri* serves as a symbolic means for families to express their gratitude and appreciation to the community for their sincere assistance. This tradition reflects the strong values of cooperation (*gotong royong*) that persist in rural Javanese society.

Some findings of research on communal rituals in Indonesia show that such practices strengthen social cohesion and reinforce the sense of belonging among community members, particularly in moments of crisis such as death. An ethnographic study of Islamic burial rituals in Indonesia by Manan (2024) show that community participation in funeral activities—such as preparing burial facilities and assisting the bereaved family—have an important role in fostering unity and solidarity among villagers. Another study by Butler (2016) on social solidarity in Indonesian traditions shows that *gotong royong* remains an important cultural value that enables communities to manage social and ritual activities, including funeral ceremonies collectively. Through these communal practices, funeral rituals become not only religious events but also social mechanisms that reaffirm shared moral obligations and maintain harmony within the community.



CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the death rituals in Mejing blend Islamic teachings with Javanese cultural traditions. Each stage of the ritual serves not only a religious function but also embodies social values such as cooperation, solidarity, respect for tradition, and the strengthening of community identity.

These findings demonstrate that religious practices in Javanese society cannot be understood solely through a theological approach but must be viewed as part of a broader cultural system.

Furthermore, death rituals also serve as a mechanism for transmitting cultural and religious values from one generation to the next. Through direct involvement in the various stages of the ritual—from preparations at the funeral home to the burial process to the tahlilan (religious recitation)—community members, especially the younger generation, learn to understand social norms, religious ethics, and how society interprets death. Thus, death rituals serve not only as a means of honoring the deceased but also as a social space where cultural values are passed down and maintained within the community. It aligns with Andrew Beatty's view that rituals in Javanese society serve not only a spiritual function but also serve as an important medium for the reproduction of social values and the community's cultural identity (Beatty, 1999).

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