

SYMBOLIC COMMUNICATION IN THE BETTULAK RITUAL: HARMONY BETWEEN LOCAL BELIEFS AND EPIDEMIC PREVENTION STRATEGIES IN LENDANG ARA VILLAGE

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Abstract

The Bettulak ritual is a hereditary tradition of the Lendang Ara community in Central Lombok, rich in symbolic values and local wisdom. After being dormant for nearly five decades, the tradition was revitalized in 2023 as a response to the threat of disease outbreaks and as an effort to strengthen cultural identity. This study aims to reveal the symbolic meanings, revitalization processes, and cultural negotiations involved in the performance of Bettulak in the modern era. Using a qualitative approach with field research methods, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The analysis draws on Mead and Blumer's theory of symbolic communication as well as Geertz and Carey's cultural communication approaches. The findings indicate that Bettulak functions as a medium of symbolic communication that strengthens social cohesion, reproduces religious and traditional values, and serves as a space for negotiation between modernity and tradition. The ritual's revitalization not only restores cultural practices but also shapes a new narrative about the sustainability of the Lendang Ara community's collective identity amid the currents of globalization. These findings underscore the importance of preserving traditions as an adaptive cultural communication strategy relevant to contemporary contexts.

Keywords: Bettulak, symbolic communication, tradition revitalization, cultural negotiation, Central Lombok.

Abstrak

Ritual Bettulak merupakan tradisi turun-temurun komunitas Lendang Ara di Lombok Tengah, yang kaya akan nilai simbolis dan kebijaksanaan lokal. Setelah vakum selama hampir lima dekade, tradisi ini dihidupkan kembali pada tahun 2023 sebagai respons terhadap ancaman wabah penyakit dan upaya memperkuat identitas budaya. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap makna simbolis, proses revitalisasi, dan negosiasi budaya yang terlibat dalam pelaksanaan Bettulak di era modern. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode penelitian lapangan, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi. Analisis didasarkan pada teori komunikasi simbolik Mead dan Blumer serta pendekatan komunikasi budaya Geertz dan Carey. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Bettulak berfungsi sebagai medium komunikasi simbolik yang memperkuat kohesi sosial, mereproduksi nilai-nilai agama dan tradisional, serta menjadi ruang negosiasi antara modernitas dan tradisi. Revitalisasi ritual ini tidak hanya memulihkan praktik budaya tetapi juga membentuk narasi baru tentang keberlanjutan identitas kolektif komunitas Lendang Ara di tengah arus globalisasi. Temuan ini menyoroti pentingnya melestarikan tradisi sebagai strategi komunikasi budaya adaptif yang relevan dengan konteks kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: Bettulak, komunikasi simbolik, revitalisasi tradisi, negosiasi budaya, Lombok Tengah.

INTRODUCTION

In the socio-cultural life of a community, tradition is not merely a static inheritance from the past, but a medium of symbolic communication through which values, norms, and collective meanings are expressed and sustained in social interaction (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969; Suyono, 2022). Tradition functions as a vehicle for transmitting a worldview, morality, and the social structures embedded within a community (Geertz, 1973; Hall, 2013; Fajarini, 2021). Through intergenerational practices, tradition sustains identity continuity, shapes worldview, and provides a value framework, while also functioning as an adaptive channel through which communities respond to social, political, and environmental change (Carey, 2009; Widodo & Ratna, 2020).

A concrete example of tradition as a dynamic medium of symbolic communication is the Bettulak ritual practiced in Lendang Ara Village, Central Lombok Regency. This ritual initially emerged as a collective response to the threat of disease outbreaks that endangered public health and the community's social well-being (Effendy & Sari, 2021). Historically, epidemics in the community created a need for collective actions that were not only practical but also imbued with deep spiritual meaning. The symbols used in this ritual—such as the recitation of salawat, communal prayers, and the planting of penyawek at four border points of the village—are not merely ornamental; they carry profound messages of protection, spiritual strength, and social solidarity (Geroda & Prima, 2022; Saputri, 2022; Rizal, 2023). The penyawek, for example, represents a symbolic protective barrier intended to block the entry of negative forces, both physical (disease) and non-physical (supernatural disturbances).

The revitalization of the Bettulak ritual in 2023, after nearly five decades of dormancy, is tangible evidence that tradition is adaptive to social changes and contemporary challenges (Hall, 2013; Prasetyo, 2021). This revival not only serves to reactivate collective memory but also recontextualizes its meaning in addressing global health issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic and other infectious diseases (Maryani & Putra, 2021; Sari & Nugroho, 2022). This revitalization reflects a growing awareness within the community that tradition need not be confined to the framework of the past but can be reconstructed to meet present-day needs. This perspective aligns with Stuart Hall's (2013) view that tradition is an ongoing process of meaning production, open to reinterpretation according to the social needs of a given period.

From the perspective of symbolic communication theory, Mead (1934) emphasizes that social meaning is formed through symbolic interaction, in which people communicate using shared symbols to construct social reality. Blumer (1969) adds that such meaning is not fixed but is the product of dynamic social negotiation. In the context of the Bettulak ritual, symbols such as the penyawek, communal prayers, and salawat carry not only religious dimensions but also function as communicative media through which social cohesion, collective identity, and communal resilience are continuously reproduced (Carey, 2009; Rahmawati & Latif, 2020). Carey's (2009) concept of communication as ritual further underscores that such practices do not merely transmit information but actively sustain social reality by reaffirming shared values and collective solidarity.

Despite its cultural significance, scholarly engagement with symbolic communication in the Bettulak ritual remains limited in several crucial respects. *First*, existing studies have not systematically examined how specific ritual symbols operate as communicative codes that translate abstract beliefs about disease, danger, and protection into shared social meanings. *Second*, there is a lack of empirical analysis on how Bettulak functions as a community-based communicative response to epidemic threats, particularly in articulating local interpretations of illness prevention that differ from biomedical discourse. *Third*, prior research rarely explores the process of meaning negotiation among ritual participants—how villagers collectively interpret, reaffirm, or adapt symbolic actions in response to changing epidemiological contexts.

Existing studies on symbolic communication in Indonesian rituals largely emphasize institutionalized ceremonies, leaving small-scale, syncretic traditions underexplored and their

communicative role in managing health crises insufficiently theorized. Addressing this gap, this study conceptualizes the Bettulak ritual as a form of “epidemic communication,” highlighting how ritual symbols and collective performances function as culturally grounded mechanisms for social discipline, emotional reassurance, and disease mitigation, thereby offering an original contribution to cultural and symbolic communication studies.

Previous studies support the relevance of this inquiry. Geroda and Prima (2022) found that symbols in the Hudoq ceremony of East Kalimantan strengthen group solidarity while conveying intergenerational social messages. Saputri (2022) emphasized that ritualistic communication in traditional Rejang weddings plays a role in preserving the continuity of traditional values through collectively understood symbols. Effendy and Sari (2021) demonstrated that traditional health rituals can serve as a medium for disease mitigation by fostering collective awareness and togetherness. These findings underscore that symbolic communication within tradition has a strategic function in addressing contemporary social challenges, including health crises and cultural disruptions.

The Bettulak ritual in Lendang Ara Village exhibits a distinctive syncretic character. The combination of the local symbol *penyawek* with Islamic religious elements such as *salawat* and communal prayers reflects a process of cultural adaptation that maintains a balance between local beliefs and religious teachings (Geertz, 1973; Mead, 1934; Arifin, 2021). Geertz (1973) describes this phenomenon as the “localization of Islam,” a process in which Islamic teachings are adapted to local cultural frameworks without erasing the core values of either. In this context, the *penyawek* serves as a protective symbol acknowledged in local tradition, while the Arabic prayers provide religious legitimacy and reinforce the acceptance of the practice within the local Muslim community.

This research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of symbolic communication in the Bettulak ritual, in terms of the meanings of its symbols, the processes of social interaction, and its relevance in the modern context. It is expected that this study will not only contribute empirical insights to cultural communication studies but also offer theoretical perspectives on the preservation of adaptive traditions in the era of globalization (Hall, 2013; Suyono, 2022). Furthermore, the findings of this study have the potential to serve as a reference for designing community-based cultural preservation strategies that emphasize not only heritage protection but also the optimization of tradition as a communication medium relevant to contemporary challenges.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative field research approach with a descriptive–interpretative and ethnographic orientation to examine the symbolic meanings, cultural values, and communicative functions embedded in the Bettulak ritual of Lendang Ara Village. The qualitative approach facilitates direct engagement with the community’s socio-cultural context, enabling close observation of ritual processes while empirically describing practices and interpreting the meanings attributed to symbols, actions, and interactions by participants.

Consequently, the data extend beyond surface-level descriptions to encompass contextual interpretations of verbal and nonverbal symbols, demonstrating how the Bettulak ritual functions as a medium of cultural communication and collective meaning-making. In line with Bogdan and Taylor (1975), as well as Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969), this qualitative approach positions the ritual not merely as a customary practice, but as a communicative process through which social meanings are produced and sustained.

The study was conducted in Lendang Ara Village, Kopang District, Central Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara Province. The location was selected purposively because the Bettulak tradition is still regularly performed, especially in times of public concern over disease outbreaks, and because it exhibits a syncretic character blending local beliefs with Islamic teachings. Data collection took place over three months, from May to July 2025, coinciding

with the period when the community performed the Bettulak ritual in response to concerns over the spread of disease in the surrounding area.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling, with the main criteria being direct involvement in the Bettulak ritual and deep knowledge of its philosophical, historical, and technical aspects. The selected informants included:

1. Customary and religious leaders – knowledgeable about the philosophical foundations, religious values, and customary rules guiding the ritual.
2. Village elders – possessing historical and mythological knowledge about the ritual's origins.
3. Village officials – aware of policy and regulatory aspects related to the ritual's implementation.
4. Community members – including youth and women involved in the preparation, procession, and post-ritual activities.

In total, 12 informants were interviewed, consisting of 5 men and 7 women aged between 25 and 80 years. This composition reflects generational, gender, and social-role representation in the ritual's execution, enabling triangulation of perspectives.

Data were collected using three primary techniques:

1. Participant Observation – Participant observation was conducted through the researcher's physical presence in all stages of the ritual—from preparation and communal prayers to the *penyawek* procession at the village borders—while maintaining a non-intrusive role to ensure natural access and contextual understanding without influencing ritual practices or interpretations. Throughout observation, the researcher adopted a reflexive participant-as-observer role, enabling systematic documentation of symbolic communication while minimizing bias through detailed field notes, reflexive memos, and triangulation with interview and documentary data.
2. In-depth Interviews – Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants to uncover the meanings of symbols, perspectives on the ritual's social and spiritual functions, and interpretations of its relevance in modern life. This method facilitated the exploration of personal narratives while comparing them with collective views.
3. Documentation – Documentation was conducted to complement the observation and interview data. Collected materials included photographs, video recordings, cultural archives, village historical manuscripts, and written records related to the Bettulak practice. Visual documentation was particularly important for capturing symbolic details such as the form of the *penyawek*, decorative patterns, and procession arrangements.

Data analysis employed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of three stages:

1. Data Reduction – Sorting, simplifying, and categorizing data according to the research focus, such as ritual symbols, actor roles, and implementation processes.
2. Data Display – Organizing data in descriptive narratives, tables, diagrams, and visual documentation to facilitate interpretation.
3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification – Interpreting the symbolic communication meanings in the Bettulak ritual, cross-checking (triangulation) between observation, interview, and documentation results, and validating findings through confirmation with informants.

The analytical framework combines the interpretive-symbolic approach of Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969) with Geertz's (1973) symbolic anthropology perspective. This combination enables the researcher to understand symbols not only as visual signs but also as representations of meaning constructed through social interaction and rooted in specific cultural contexts.

The validity of the data was ensured through source, technique, and time triangulation:

1. Source triangulation – comparing information from customary leaders, religious leaders, elders, village officials, and ritual participants.
2. Technique triangulation – comparing data from observation, interviews, and documentation.
3. Time triangulation – collecting data at different stages, including preparation, implementation, and post-ritual, to avoid temporal bias.

Before data collection, the researcher explained the purpose, benefits, and procedures of the study to the village authorities and informants. Participation consent (informed consent) was obtained both verbally and in writing. Informant identities were kept confidential, and the entire research process adhered to qualitative research ethics, emphasizing respect for the rights, privacy, and cultural values of the local community.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Between Mysticism and Policy: A Contextual Analysis of the Bettulak Ritual in Central Lombok

The metaphysics of crisis and ritual restoration the Bettulak ritual is a profound and hereditary tradition of the community in Lendang Ara Village, Kopang District, Central Lombok Regency. At its most fundamental, Bettulak derives from the Sasak language meaning "he/it returns," a term which encapsulates the ritual's central aim: the metaphysical effort to repel a disease outbreak by actively returning the affliction to its source or sender. This function moves beyond mere public health defense and touches upon a deep cosmological worldview. According to Ayunan, the Head of Lendang Ara Village, this ritual is crucial for "sending a disease outbreak back to its source so that it does not spread to the wider public." The performance of Bettulak is initiated by a local mystical narrative in which a supernatural warning of an impending plague, conveyed to a shaman, frames disease not only as a biological threat but as a spiritual and social crisis. Following Victor Turner (1969), In times of crisis, the community uses Bettulak as a collective ritual to manage communal anxiety and restore social and spiritual equilibrium.

Communitas and the Fencing of Order The ritual's execution is a carefully orchestrated process designed to foster communitas and mark the boundaries of the sacred space. It begins with the collective gathering at the village mosque for the recitation of Berzanji and communal prayers, involving all layers of the community, from customary and religious leaders to ordinary villagers (Effendy & Sari, 2021). This initial phase unites the community spiritually before the physical procession begins. The core of the ritual is the torchlit parade that takes place at night. The participants journey to the village's four cardinal entry points, effectively encircling and ritually "fencing" the community. This process embodies the liminal phase described by Turner, where the society temporarily dissolves its hierarchical structure and becomes a unified body focused on the shared goal of purification. As the participants walk, they chant Burdah (salutations and praises to the Prophet Muhammad), transforming the atmosphere into a collective spiritual shield.

At each of the four border points, the ceremonial climax occurs. Cultural leaders plant a *penyawek*—a symbolic disease repellent—a physical marker symbolizing the demarcation of safety. This act is accompanied by the reading of *jampi-jampi* (incantations). The collective planting of the *penyawek* is a powerful, visible symbol of shared responsibility. Simultaneously, the community performs a serene and powerful communal act: the simultaneous call to prayer (Adhan) (Geroda & Prima, 2022). This coordinated effort ensures that both the physical (repellent) and the spiritual (prayer) defenses are activated at the precise moment the village border is secured. **Syncretism and Negotiation of Belief Systems** The structure of Bettulak offers rich empirical evidence for the syncretic nature of religious life in Lombok, where Islam

and local cosmology coexist and negotiate. The blend of the Islamic elements—the communal prayer, the reading of Berzanji and Burdah, and the powerful Adhan—with the local, animistic aspects—the warning from the makhluk halus, the power of the dukun, and the planting of the penyawek—is highly significant.

In the analytical framework developed by Indonesian scholars, this practice aligns closely with the concept of religious moderation (*moderasi beragama*) rooted in local wisdom. As discussed in the *Jurnal Penamas*, local traditions often serve as an effective cultural vessel for expressing theological commitment without diminishing the sanctity of the practices (Suhuputhy, 2021). In this context, the community seeks protection from God Almighty through the Adhan and prayer, while simultaneously addressing the localized supernatural source of the affliction through the penyawek and jampi-jampi. This dual strategy is a pragmatic response, ensuring that the defense is comprehensive, operating across both the physical-spiritual and the local-universal domains. Revitalization as a Strategic Cultural and Governance Policy Perhaps the most compelling modern aspect of the Bettulak ritual is its recent revitalization. The tradition had been largely dormant since the 1970s, making its return in 2024 a noteworthy cultural event. This revival was not spontaneous but resulted from a deliberate consultation between the village head, customary elders, and religious leaders, recognizing a need to reinforce cultural identity and collective health strategy.

The revitalization signals that traditional rituals are dynamically adapting to contemporary needs. Furthermore, the village government has taken steps to embed the ritual into its formal administrative structure. This transition from a voluntary customary practice to institutionalized policy is crucial. Village Head Ayunan confirmed this commitment:

“We are committed to holding this every year. We will even formalize Bettulak into a Village Regulation (*Perdes*) so that it is routinely carried out every year and becomes one of the activities carried out by the village government in the context of cultural preservation.”

This initiative ensures the ritual’s continuity and positions Bettulak as a formalized Intangible Cultural Heritage. More importantly, by incorporating it into local governance (*Perdes*), the ritual becomes a unique cultural communication strategy for public health (Erikson, 2020), ensuring that the ancient wisdom of collective security endures alongside modern awareness of infectious disease prevention (Saputri, 2022). The Bettulak ritual stands as a powerful testament to the social resilience and cultural adaptability of the Lendang Ara community. Analyzed through the lens of Turner’s ritual theory, it is clearly more than a ceremonial repellant; it is a critical process that restores social order during crisis. By fusing deep Islamic practices with core local cosmological beliefs, Bettulak successfully navigates the complexities of a modernizing society. Through the political act of its legalization via a Village Regulation, the community ensures that this rich tradition remains a living, strategic tool for identity preservation and communal well-being for generations to come.

The Semiotics of Protection: Symbolic Communication in the Bettulak Ritual (Expanded Analysis)

The Bettulak ritual, as practiced by the people of Lendang Ara Village, carries a deep richness of symbolic meaning, functioning as an effective medium of communication for conveying collective messages to the entire community. The symbols embedded in this ritual represent not only religious dimensions but also significant social and cultural aspects that strengthen social bonds and solidarity among residents. Through these symbols, the community not only regulates collective behavior but also preserves a sense of togetherness in confronting shared threats—particularly disease outbreaks believed to endanger the health and survival of the community. The system harmoniously integrates verbal, nonverbal, aural, and visual elements into a cohesive cultural narrative.

The Penyawek: From Object to Generalized Other

One of the keys and most tangible symbols is the penyawek, an object or specific plant that is ceremonially planted at the four border points of the village. Symbolically, the penyawek is deeply understood as a spiritual fortress that actively protects the area from the entry of disease and negative forces. The act of planting the penyawek at the village's entry points not only marks geographical boundaries but, more crucially, affirms a layer of supernatural protection maintained through the community's collective spiritual strength (Geroda & Prima, 2022). This visual boundary-making transforms the physical space of the village into a consecrated, defended territory.

“Penyawek is not simply a plant or a material object; it becomes a guardian of the village through collective agreement, shared prayers, and unified intention. In the absence of this communal intention, it remains an ordinary object without symbolic power.”

The phenomenon of penyawek offers a compelling case study for George Herbert Mead's (1934) concept of symbolic communication and the generalized other, as it is enacted through concrete ritual practices rather than abstract symbolism alone. In the Bettulak ritual, penyawek refers to specific ritual objects that are prepared collectively, ritually charged through communal prayers, and then carried in a procession to four designated village border points. At each boundary, the penyawek is symbolically positioned as a protective marker intended to ward off misfortune and external threats.

Within this practical context, penyawek functions not merely as a passive sign but as an active cultural instrument that structures interaction and facilitates the shared construction of meaning related to community security. Through collective participation—preparing the materials, reciting prayers, and performing the boundary procession—the community expresses shared responsibility, collective protection, and social cohesion. By collectively agreeing on the penyawek's protective efficacy, villagers establish a shared social object that embodies their unified stance against danger. This shared understanding, internalized as the generalized other, guides behavior, reinforces moral commitment to communal defense, and ensures the ritual's cohesive and regulatory power in responding to crises. Furthermore, the symbolism of penyawek reflects the broader Sasak local wisdom of *tolak bala* prevalent in Lombok, in which material objects are imbued with spiritual efficacy to manage misfortune and uncertainty (Wulandari, 2019, Penamas). The reliance on locally sourced physical objects underscores the community's intimate relationship with its geographical environment and spiritual cosmology, situating penyawek as both a cultural and spatial expression of collective security.

Aural and Verbal Symbols: Reinforcing Collective Consciousness

In addition to visual symbols, the aural and verbal elements—specifically the recitation of *salawat* and collective prayers—serve as the spiritual cornerstone that strengthens both vertical relationships (human–God) and horizontal relationships (among community members). Led by religious leaders, the recitation of prayers becomes a tangible symbol of unity and social harmony.

“The recitation of *salawat* and *Burdah* unites hearts. When they are chanted together, people no longer feel alone in facing disease. Everyone returns to God, but remains united as a community.”

James Carey (2009) emphasizes that ritual communication is a cultural act that reinforces shared reality and builds collective consciousness, contrasting the “ritual view” with the simple “transmission view.” In this context, the *salawat* and the recitation of *Burdah* within Bettulak act as a binding medium, uniting the community toward a common transcendent goal: protection from epidemics and the safety of the collective. The synchronized movement and sound during the *Burdah* chanting, coupled with the profound collective utterance of the *Adhan* at the border points, creates an intense state of *communitas* (Turner, 1969).

The aural uniformity of the collective voice generates a sense of shared identity and sacred space, which, according to studies on ritual performance, significantly enhances the efficacy of the symbolic message in managing collective uncertainty and anxiety (Rappaport, 1999). This repetition and synchronization serve to re-calibrate the community's worldview, confirming that despite the temporary crisis, their foundational beliefs and social structure remain intact and divinely supported. This act of auditory reaffirmation is particularly vital in mitigating the psychological impact of disease, a theme central to medical anthropology (Kirmayer, 2012), by replacing fear with structured, unified spiritual action. The integration of high Islamic symbolism (salawat, Adhan) with the local tolak bala practice highlights the syncretism that secures both spiritual domains (Suhuputhy, 2021, Penamas).

Visual and Nonverbal Communication: Commitment and Vigilance

1) The Torch: Illumination and Divine Guidance

The torches carried during the village-wide nocturnal procession also bear profound meaning, serving as powerful visual symbols. Universally, torches symbolize illumination, the dispelling of darkness, and the guarding of boundaries. In Bettulak, the torch serves not only as a source of physical light to navigate the night but, crucially, as a sign of the community's spiritual and psychological readiness to face external, unseen threats.

“The torch represents preparedness. We walk at night, but with light. It means we do not confront danger with fear, but with clarity and togetherness.”

This symbolism connects directly to the Islamic concept of Nur (light/divine guidance), suggesting that the community seeks both physical safety and spiritual enlightenment in their act of defense. Circling the four border points while carrying torches constitutes a nonverbal form of communication affirming collective vigilance and unity. The procession visually maps the community's commitment onto its geography, broadcasting the message of defense to both the natural and the supernatural world.

2) Performative Rigor and Shared Determination

Beyond discrete symbols, nonverbal meaning in the ritual is conveyed through participants' orderliness, seriousness, and disciplined, synchronized movement, which collectively express a shared determination to protect the community (Effendy & Sari, 2021). Victor Turner emphasizes that performative rigor in ritual enhances symbolic meaning by embodying social cohesion and collective resilience. Through shared physical and emotional investment, the ritual demonstrates commitment through action, transforming it into a powerful mechanism of social control, shared responsibility, and collective faith in the efficacy of the Bettulak ritual.

In conclusion, Bettulak symbolism constitutes an integrated system of cultural communication that combines verbal, nonverbal, aural, and symbolic elements to convey protection, reinforce social solidarity, and strengthen collective identity, consistent with medical anthropological perspectives on the social and psychological management of illness (Kirmayer, 2012). More broadly, Bettulak demonstrates how local traditions can serve as effective communication media, integrating spiritual, social, and cultural dimensions into a cohesive whole, while shaping a resilient collective identity capable of withstanding the pressures of modernization.

Symbolic Communication from the Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism and Symbolic Anthropology

The Bettulak ritual in Lendang Ara Village is not merely an inherited ceremonial practice but a dynamic communicative process through which symbolic meanings, social relationships, and collective identities are constructed, negotiated, and reaffirmed. Examined through the combined perspectives of symbolic interactionism, symbolic anthropology, and ritual communication, Bettulak reveals itself as a multilayered cultural mechanism that integrates cosmological beliefs, local knowledge, and communal solidarity.

Symbolic Interactionism: Meaning Arising from Social Negotiation

George Herbert Mead (1934) posits that social life is constituted through symbols that function as active instruments for meaning-making rather than static representations. In the context of Bettulak, key symbolic elements—such as *penyawek* (plants or objects believed to repel disease), the recitation of prayers and *salawat*, and the torchlight procession—serve not only as ritual components but as communicative media that guide communal interpretation. These symbols help frame disease outbreaks not solely as biomedical events but as disruptions requiring collective, moral, and spiritual response.

Herbert Blumer (1969) further emphasizes that meanings are not fixed but continuously produced through social interaction. The reactivation of Bettulak in 2023 after nearly five decades of dormancy exemplifies this principle. Although grounded in ancestral cosmology, the ritual has been reinterpreted to address pressing contemporary concerns, particularly increasing public awareness of health risks, environmental vulnerabilities, and the erosion of social cohesion. The transformation of *penyawek*, for instance, illustrates how traditional protective symbols acquire renewed relevance as communities reinterpret them in light of new uncertainties.

Empirical evidence from other Indonesian contexts reinforces this argument. Studies of ritual medicine among Malay communities in Riau show that symbolic healing practices evolve in response to shifting societal conditions (Nurmalinda, 2025). Similarly, research on the Dayak Basap's Belian ritual highlights the dynamic mediation of social, spiritual, and ecological relationships when facing illness and misfortune (Rahim & Mihadja, 2023). These cases demonstrate that symbolic meaning within ritual traditions is continually renegotiated, aligning with Blumer's view of meaning as socially emergent and contextually adaptive.

Symbolic Anthropology: Ritual as Cultural Text and Collective Moral Order

Clifford Geertz (1973) conceptualizes ritual as a “system of symbols” that articulates a community's worldview and moral order. From this perspective, Bettulak can be understood as a cultural text that narrates the community's cosmological orientation, particularly the interdependence between humans, nature, and the spiritual domain. The collective recitation of prayers, the torches illuminating pathways, and the planting of *penyawek* construct a symbolic narrative centered on protection, harmony, and communal vigilance against unseen threats.

Such symbolic configurations regulate social behavior, reinforce moral obligations, and strengthen emotional bonds among participants. Comparative studies highlight similar patterns in ritual traditions across Indonesia. The Kaago-Ago ritual among the Muna people, for example, symbolizes communal efforts to restore balance and repel disease, functioning as a cultural mechanism for interpreting misfortune and reaffirming the community's relationship with spiritual forces (Aris, 2014). These parallels underscore how rituals embody and transmit foundational cultural values, shaping both cognitive frameworks and social conduct.

Ritual Communication: Reproducing Social Reality and Collective Identity

James W. Carey (2009) offers a complementary lens by arguing that communication in ritual form is not primarily about transmitting information but about reproducing shared social reality. Bettulak exemplifies this ritual mode of communication: the coordinated collective procession, synchronized prayer recitations, and communal planting activities reaffirm shared values, reinforce social roles, and solidify a sense of collective responsibility. Such coordinated symbolic actions strengthen social cohesion by transforming abstract values—such as mutual care and vigilance—into embodied communal practice.

Comparable ritual events, such as the Nyadran tradition in Java, similarly reinforce communal identity, maintain intergenerational continuity, and restore cultural equilibrium (Tuti & Safitri, 2024). Viewed through this lens, Bettulak operates as a communicative performance that

sustains the community's shared reality, particularly in the face of perceived threats such as illness and social fragmentation.

Revitalization: Tradition as a Living Communicative System

The revival of Bettulak in 2023 demonstrates that tradition is not a static inheritance but a living symbolic system capable of responding to shifting social conditions. Contemporary scholarship shows that many Indonesian rituals are being revitalized not solely for cultural preservation but as practical, locally rooted responses to modern crises—including disease outbreaks, environmental degradation, and socio-economic uncertainties (Wardhani & Arditama, 2021). In this context, Bettulak's resurgence reflects an active negotiation of symbolic forms to maintain cultural resilience and ensure community well-being.

Through the combined frameworks of symbolic interactionism, symbolic anthropology, and ritual communication, Bettulak emerges as a dynamic cultural phenomenon that transforms symbolic resources into communicative, moral, and practical strategies. Far from being a passive heritage ceremony, Bettulak functions as a living cultural mechanism that sustains social cohesion, negotiates meaning, and reinforces communal resilience. As such, it illustrates how ritual traditions continue to play vital roles in shaping collective responses to uncertainty, guiding moral action, and maintaining cultural continuity in the contemporary era.

Social and Cultural Functions of the Bettulak Ritual

The Bettulak ritual strategically reinforces the social and cultural foundations of Lendang Ara, functioning as a dynamic medium that integrates spiritual, social, and cultural dimensions to strengthen social cohesion and collective identity. Inclusive participation across social groups, with communal prayer and salawat recitation at the mosque, fosters interpersonal bonds and builds social capital, contributing to community stability amid social and environmental challenges (Effendy & Sari, 2021). Beyond interpersonal ties, Bettulak cultivates harmony, collective responsibility, and mutual support, transmitting ancestral values and local beliefs through symbols such as *penyawek*, which embody the interconnectedness of humans, nature, spirituality, and the supernatural (Saputri, 2022).

Rooted beliefs frame disease as both medical and spiritual, positioning the ritual as a mechanism that negotiates human-spiritual relations while reaffirming identity and solidarity. Its revitalization in 2023 demonstrates persistence and adaptability, supported by village authorities and community leaders, and underscores its relevance in contemporary disease contexts (Geroda & Prima, 2022). Bettulak also allows integration of local beliefs with Islamic values, expanding its symbolic and social reach (Carey, 2009). Ultimately, Bettulak is a dynamic process of meaning-making that strengthens community solidarity, preserves cultural knowledge, and adaptively addresses public health concerns, continuously reaffirming social bonds, spiritual awareness, and cultural foundations.

Dynamics of Revitalization and Implications for Cultural Communication

The 2023 revitalization of Bettulak after decades of dormancy highlights the community's capacity to renegotiate ancestral traditions in response to persistent disease threats, illustrating culture as a dynamic system reproduced through social interaction (Geertz, 1973; Barker, 2016). This revival emerged through collaborative communication among leaders, authorities, and youth, involving persuasion, education, negotiation, and collective reflection to adapt tradition to contemporary social and public health needs (Effendy & Sari, 2021; Carey, 1989). Stakeholder involvement affirms Bettulak as a living cultural practice, preserving core symbols while incorporating adaptive elements that address public health and community solidarity (Hall, 1997; Sztompka, 2004). Village government support via resources and formal regulations (*perdes*) grants institutional legitimacy and integrates modern bureaucratic structures with inherited cultural practices (Geroda & Prima, 2022; Smith, 2006).

Formal regulation ensures structural organization, sustainability, and ongoing adaptation, positioning Bettulak as an integral component of village life that reinforces collective identity and social cohesion (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). Symbolic elements—*penyawek*, communal

prayers, and torchlight processions—communicate protection, unity, and shared hope, shaping collective consciousness and reproducing social values and norms. Overall, Bettulak exemplifies how tradition and cultural communication synergize to safeguard heritage, sustain communal resilience, and adapt cultural values to contemporary challenges, demonstrating the enduring social vitality of inherited practices (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983).

Reflection and Theoretical Implications

Research on the Bettulak ritual in Lendang Ara contributes to symbolic and cultural communication theory by demonstrating that Bettulak operates as a dynamic communicative process, continually adapting to changing social contexts rather than remaining a static ceremonial practice. This process is actively produced, interpreted, and reproduced through meaning-laden symbolic interactions embedded in daily social life (Blumer, 1969; Carey, 1989). Consequently, traditional rituals should be understood as living communicative spheres in which sociocultural meanings are constructed, negotiated, maintained, and transmitted through collective participatory practices.

Symbolic interactionism, as articulated by George Herbert Mead (1934) and Herbert Blumer (1969), This framework posits that social interaction is grounded in symbolic exchange, through which shared meanings are constructed. In the Bettulak ritual, symbols such as *penyawek*, collective prayers, *salawat*, and torchlight processions operate as communicative media that shape collective interpretations of spiritual and social threats while reinforcing community solidarity. Consistent with James Carey's (1989) ritual communication perspective, Bettulak does not merely disseminate information; it constitutes a participatory process that reaffirms communal identity and reinforces social cohesion.

Clifford Geertz's (1973) Symbolic anthropology frames ritual as a system of symbols embodying a community's worldview; within this perspective, Bettulak functions as a cultural text in which *penyawek*, prayers, *salawat*, and torchlight processions articulate protection, devotion, and collective security, sustaining the community's moral and spiritual order. From a practical perspective, the revitalization of Bettulak is closely tied to institutional support, as village government involvement through local regulations (*perdes*) provides formal legitimacy, structural guidance, and resources for its sustainable implementation. (Geroda & Prima, 2022). This institutionalization demonstrates how symbolic communication can operate as an instrument for social development and cultural resilience (Smith, 2006). By embedding the ritual within local governance systems, Bettulak becomes part of a broader strategy for community empowerment and cultural sustainability.

The findings highlight the policy relevance of Bettulak by demonstrating how traditional symbolic communication can function as a socio-cultural resource for public health, education, and community cohesion, aligning with development approaches that integrate local wisdom to enhance quality of life and cultural sustainability. (UNESCO, 2019). This study encourages cross-disciplinary research integrating cultural communication, public health, and policy analysis, highlighting traditions like Bettulak as adaptive communication media that respond to social change and inform more innovative, participatory, and globally relevant cultural preservation strategies (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). In conclusion, Bettulak is best understood as an active process of symbolic communication that reinforces social networks, shapes communal identity, and sustains cultural resilience, offering a valuable framework for developing preservation models that mobilize tradition as a constructive social force in addressing contemporary challenges.

CONCLUSION

The Bettulak ritual in Lendang Ara Village functions as a dynamic medium of symbolic communication, not merely as preserved heritage but as a living, negotiated practice. Core symbols—*penyawek*, collective *salawat*, and torchlit processions—express protection against disease while reinforcing social solidarity, collective responsibility, and communal identity.

The framework of symbolic interactionism developed by Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969) perspective highlights how meaning is produced through ritual actions, with the community actively interpreting symbols and negotiating shared meanings. Bettulak's revival after nearly fifty years demonstrates the adaptive nature of cultural communication, embedding new meanings within existing symbolic structures to address contemporary social and public health concerns.

Clifford Geertz's (1973) symbolic anthropology further deepens this interpretation by conceptualizing rituals as systems of symbols that express a community's underlying values, cosmology, and worldview. Within Bettulak, the symbolic layering of *penyawek*, prayers, and torch processions represents narratives of protection, collective devotion, and the safeguarding of village boundaries. These symbolic actions interweave indigenous cosmology with Islamic religious practices, transforming the ritual into an inclusive space of cultural negotiation that harmonizes diverse belief systems. Bettulak thus functions not as a static repetition of ancestral customs, but as a dynamic form of cultural communication that sustains the social, moral, and spiritual equilibrium of the community.

The revitalization effort—driven by traditional leaders, religious figures, village authorities, and the broader community—highlights the importance of multilevel collaboration in sustaining cultural heritage while responding to contemporary threats. The village government's role in institutionalizing Bettulak through local regulations ensures procedural continuity, formal legitimacy, and sustainable community participation. As a result, Bettulak becomes an effective manifestation of symbolic communication that serves two major functions: offering spiritual protection and reinforcing collective identity, cohesion, and community resilience.

Implications for Scholarship

This study demonstrates that Bettulak is a dynamic communicative system, showing that traditional rituals evolve in response to socio-political, environmental, and public health challenges, and operate as sites where meaning and identity are renegotiated. It further illustrates how rituals can be revitalized through collective deliberation, institutional support, and contemporary reinterpretation, providing insights into how local traditions serve as cultural resources for addressing modern crises.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

Beyond theory, Bettulak offers practical insights for community leaders, policymakers, and health officials. The ritual serves as a culturally grounded platform for health education, collective participation, and disease prevention. Local government support through regulation and resources sustains its practice, while collaborative revitalization models promote intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. Bettulak also strengthens social bonds, trust, and communal resilience. Overall, the ritual exemplifies how cultural traditions function as adaptive media of symbolic communication, integrating local, religious, and social values, and providing frameworks for cultural preservation, public health, and social cohesion in contemporary contexts.

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