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The Symbolic Meaning of Paro Ba'q: Ancestral Ritual Among the Leuburi People In Lembata Regency

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Abstract

This study explores the symbolic meanings and theological values embedded in the *Paro Ba'q* ritual practiced by the Leuburi community in Kedang, Lembata Regency, Indonesia. The findings reveal that *Paro Ba'q* serves as a holistic expression of ancestral veneration, cosmological perspective, and local spirituality. The ritual involves sacred offerings, symbolic objects, and collective participation, reflecting the community's connection with ancestral and divine forces. Furthermore, *Paro Ba'q* is not only a form of spiritual worship but also a cultural mechanism for maintaining social cohesion, transmitting knowledge, and addressing existential uncertainty. Its contextual adaptability, moral significance, and cosmological coherence affirm the enduring relevance of the ritual amid ongoing modernization. This study contributes to the scholarship on indigenous spiritual traditions in Southeast Asia and offers a nuanced understanding of how ritual practices embody theological reflection and cultural identity within a living tradition.

Keywords: Paro Ba'q, Ancestral Ritual, Symbolic Meaning, Leuburi Community.

Introduction

Indonesia is a nation profoundly rich in cultural diversity, where reverence for ancestral spirits continues to hold a vital role in the spiritual lives of many ethnic communities (Setio, 2019). In various regions, belief in the presence and influence of ancestors within the material world is expressed through traditional rituals inherited across generations (Clark & Rikando, 2023). These practices are not merely seen as spiritual homage, but also as social systems that sustain solidarity and cultural continuity (Durkheim, 1912).

Different communities across Indonesia exhibit unique ways of expressing their relationship with ancestors. Among the Karo people in North Sumatra, for instance, the *Perumah Begu* ritual is performed to invite ancestral spirits to dwell once more in the family home, symbolizing intergenerational reverence. In East Flores, the Lamaholot community conducts the

Bau Lolon tradition to offer gratitude both to the ancestors and to their deity, known as *Rera Wulan Tana Eka* (Hasan et al., 2023).

Such practices illustrate how, within many local traditions, ancestors are believed to play an ongoing role in preserving social equilibrium. Therefore, acts such as offering, supplication, and thanksgiving serve not only spiritual but also cultural functions that structure the relationship between the physical and the spiritual realms (Pakpahan et al., 2020). These conceptual frameworks indicate that the bond between the living and their ancestors is perceived as enduring and tangibly impactful in everyday life (Stucky & Gardner, 2024).

Within this context, the Kedang people of Lembata Regency, particularly the Leuburi community, observe a ritual known as *Paro Ba'q*. Etymologically, *paro* means to offer food, while *ba'q* refers to sharing. Accordingly, *Paro Ba'q* is understood as the act of presenting food to ancestors as a symbolic form of communication between the living and the deceased (Jama & Dulang, 2022). This ritual is not confined to major events but is also performed during significant moments such as harvests, illnesses, or the construction of a new house (Khasanah et al., 2021).

More than an expression of reverence, *Paro Ba'q* serves as a channel for expressing gratitude, maintaining harmony, and seeking protection. Each ritual element, including the food and its arrangement, conveys symbolic meanings that are passed down through generations (Rutan et al., 2018). Thus, *Paro Ba'q* functions as a mechanism for cultural preservation, community identity reinforcement, and generational continuity.

The persistence of this ritual amidst the forces of modernization and external influences demonstrates the vitality of local spirituality and its adaptive nature (Tahara et al., 2023). Such practices not only endure but also continue to provide guidance for navigating critical life situations. In this sense, *Paro Ba'q* acts as a cultural instrument that enables communities to manage uncertainty and reinforce social cohesion (Geertz, 1973).

From an anthropological perspective, this ritual may also be interpreted as a form of symbolic expression that bridges the sacred and the profane (Saroglou & Cohen, 2011). Through symbols, bodily gestures, food, and ritual space, the Leuburi community articulates its worldview regarding life, death, and its relationship with transcendent forces. Therefore, *Paro Ba'q* is more than a cultural practice; it constitutes part of a living theological narrative and spiritual identity.

Based on this background, the present study aims to examine the symbolic meanings and religious values embedded in the *Paro Ba'q* ritual as practiced by the Leuburi community. The study also seeks to explore how the ritual reflects local worldviews, strengthens social bonds, and sustains spiritual continuity in the midst of societal change. By uncovering the theological and cultural dimensions of the ritual, this research is expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of local spiritual dynamics in contemporary Indonesia.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, designed to capture the symbolic structure and lived meaning of the Paro Ba'q ritual within the Leuburi community. Data were gathered through participant observation, enabling direct involvement in ritual performance, as well as through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key cultural figures including molan (traditional healers) and senior members of the community.

Primary data were obtained from direct interviews with four key informants who are recognized as ritual specialists and cultural custodians in Leuburi. These include traditional leaders and community elders with deep experiential knowledge of Paro Ba'q. Secondary data were collected through literature review of books, journal articles, and unpublished manuscripts relevant to Kedang cosmology and ancestral veneration. The data were analyzed using thematic coding, identifying recurring patterns and meanings in ritual speech, actions, and material symbols. Cultural interpretations were grounded in contextual inquiry, allowing the symbolic system of Paro Ba'q to be understood both as a theological narrative and a sociocultural expression.

Research Findings

The findings indicate that each element within the *Paro Ba'q* ritual embodies symbolic meanings deeply rooted in the cosmology of the Kedang community. Offerings such as corn rice, plain water, and palm wine serve not only as symbolic sustenance but also as spiritual channels for communication. These items are arranged in accordance with customary prescriptions passed down through generations, reflecting cultural values, spiritual responsibility, and the community's theological relationship with their ancestors.

One of the most significant elements is *lapa'q milir*, a flat stone designated as the ancestral dining place. This stone is not selected arbitrarily but is ritually prepared and positioned to designate a sacred site for spiritual encounter. The spatial arrangement and placement of ritual

objects illustrate how the Leuburi community consecrates natural elements into sacred symbols. The use of an odd number of leaves as offering containers signifies genealogical structure and communal ties such as those between *Suku Pitu* and *Lelang Leme*. The use of odd numbers functions not merely as an aesthetic principle but as a narrative device affirming ancestral bonds and social identity. In this context, offerings are not only acts of worship but also mechanisms for transmitting collective memory.

The selection of foods, such as *i'a ayang* (tilapia), follows customary classifications that determine what is considered appropriate for ancestral spirits. The choices are informed not only by culinary preferences but also by symbolic associations with sanctity, remembrance, and spiritual connection according to customary law. Palm wine and plain water are used together in the final stage of the ritual procession. These two elements symbolize a duality between transformation and purity. Palm wine, as a fermented drink, signifies spiritual maturity and strength, while plain water represents purity and continuity. Their combination marks the symbolic opening and closing of spiritual interaction.

A central role is held by the *molan*, the ritual leader who is believed to possess spiritual authority and moral charisma. The *molan* leads prayers, interprets signs, and voices the collective supplications of the community. Communal trust in the *molan* reflects a form of authority grounded in spiritual experience and personal charisma, which is unique to the *Paro Ba'q* tradition. The position does not merely represent social hierarchy but embodies an essential function in preserving oral traditions and local religious practice. The *molan* acquires knowledge through a rigorous process of transmission, both genealogical and spiritual, making this role difficult to replace. In every ritual enactment, the *molan* serves as a mediator between the human realm and the spiritual world, reinforcing the Leuburi cosmological view that human life is intrinsically linked to supernatural forces.

The participatory nature of *Paro Ba'q* also facilitates the natural transmission of cultural values, in which younger generations learn through direct involvement rather than passive observation. Collective preparation of ritual items and the structuring of ceremonial stages provide an informal pedagogical space rich in meaning. This tradition fosters a shared sense of responsibility for cultural heritage and strengthens internal solidarity within kinship groups.

The ritual's flexible scheduling reflects the adaptability of local belief systems to the rhythms of communal life. Rather than adhering to a fixed calendar, *Paro Ba'q* adjusts to the

existential and spiritual needs of the community, suggesting that religiosity within this tradition is both contextual and dynamic. This adaptability illustrates that traditional religious practices are not static but continuously evolve in response to changing social and environmental conditions.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that *Paro Ba'q* is not merely a symbolic ritual act, but also a representation of the Kedang community's comprehensive cosmological worldview. In its enactment, *Paro Ba'q* integrates theological, genealogical, and cultural dimensions into a unified sequence of sacred acts imbued with layered meaning. These elements function interdependently, reinforcing one another within a symbolic system that affirms the interconnectedness of humans, ancestors, and transcendent forces (Gill, 1987).

The ritual objects used in *Paro Ba'q*, such as flat stones, odd-numbered leaves, and specific food offerings, cannot be reduced to their physical attributes alone. These items serve complex symbolic functions and reflect the community's spiritual and social order. For example, odd-numbered leaves arranged in particular groupings symbolize balance within imbalance, reflecting a cosmological principle that emphasizes the ambivalence of existence (Foley, 2011). Similarly, the flat stone used for placing offerings signifies the foundation of the spiritual world, acting as a meeting point between the temporal and the eternal (Michaud, 2006).

The arrangement of offerings and selection of food types also point to a system of local knowledge that is carefully preserved and transmitted across generations. No element is arbitrary, as each component adheres to customary laws and spiritual norms that have been institutionalized through collective memory (Pope Paul VI, 1975). This firm regulation of the profane-sacred relationship enables *Paro Ba'q* to function as a living repository of cultural knowledge encompassing cosmology, familial history, and social ideals (Pope Francis, 2013).

One significant ritual component is the closing phase, which involves the use of palm wine and plain water. This pairing does more than signify the ritual's conclusion; it also embodies spiritual transformation and reintegration into daily life. Palm wine symbolizes strength and joy, while water represents purity and equilibrium. This combination reveals a local theological dualism that balances potency with sanctity, beginnings with resolutions, reflecting a dynamic, cyclical understanding of spirituality (Catholic Church, 1994).

Regarding ritual leadership, the role of the *molan* is central in the enactment of *Paro Ba'q*. The *molan's* authority is not derived from formal institutions or hierarchical status but emerges from moral recognition and spiritual merit acquired over time. This includes transmitted knowledge, ritual experience, and ethical standing within the community. As a mediator between human and ancestral realms, the *molan* safeguards both cosmological and moral values, embodying a charismatic and contextual form of religious authority (Second Vatican Council, 1965).

The collective participation of all family members underscores the communal nature of the ritual. *Paro Ba'q* is not perceived as an individual obligation or an elite task, but as a shared responsibility that reflects relational values and social solidarity. Extended families gather, collaborate, and collectively carry out ritual stages, creating opportunities for intergenerational cultural and spiritual transmission (Catholic Church, 1965).

Such gatherings also offer a space for renewing familial ties and reinforcing ancestral identities. During sacred moments, narratives are exchanged, ancestral origins are affirmed, and communal belonging is revitalized. This process contributes to cultural continuity while simultaneously serving as a means of emotional and social restoration (Tahara et al., 2023). In this context, *Paro Ba'q* merges spiritual and social functions, supporting the cultural resilience of the Kedang people (Song, 2021).

Unlike calendrical religious observances, *Paro Ba'q* is performed based on immediate spiritual needs, such as healing from illness, opening farmland, or building a house. This contextual scheduling illustrates the adaptability of local belief systems to respond to everyday challenges. Rather than adhering to formal ritual cycles, the practice reflects a spirituality that remains relevant in changing social and ecological contexts (Nostra Aetate, 1965).

Theologically, *Paro Ba'q* embodies gratitude and the seeking of protection within the spiritual framework of the Kedang people. Ancestral spirits and the divine, identified as *Nimon Rian Arin Bara'q, Hura'q Eleng Dape'q Au'*, are revered as sources of well-being and guardians of communal prosperity. Offerings made during the ritual reflect not only honor but also the recognition of human dependence on a transcendent force that sustains life (Stucky & Gardner, 2024). Hence, spirituality in Kedang society permeates daily life and serves as a foundation for ethical conduct and social engagement.

Salvation in the context of *Paro Ba'q* is not limited to eschatological concerns but includes material well-being, social harmony, and inner peace. This local theology reflects a holistic and contextual understanding of salvation that is grounded in lived experiences. It suggests that salvation is not attained solely through worship, but through equitable relationships, mutual cooperation, and reverence for the ancestors. In this light, *Paro Ba'q* emerges not only as a religious ceremony but also as a profound reflection on the sacred, the social, and the ecological dimensions of human life.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This study focused exclusively on the Paro Ba'q ritual within the Leuburi community in Kedang, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other Kedang subgroups or broader ancestral ritual traditions in Indonesia. Future research could explore comparative analyses with similar ancestor related rituals in neighboring regions to deepen cross cultural understanding. In addition, further investigation into the gender dynamics and youth perceptions within the ritual could offer new insights into intergenerational spiritual continuity.

Conclusion

The *Paro Ba'q* ritual serves as a central medium through which the Kedang community sustains its cosmological worldview, spiritual beliefs, and cultural identity. Through symbolic offerings, ritual objects, and collective performance, the community expresses its ongoing relationship with the ancestral and the divine. The ritual does not merely reflect religious piety but functions as a holistic system of knowledge transmission, moral guidance, and social resilience.

Moreover, *Paro Ba'q* demonstrates that indigenous spiritualities in Indonesia remain responsive to contemporary challenges while preserving deeply rooted traditions. The dynamic nature of the ritual highlights how theological meanings, ethical values, and ecological awareness can be integrated into local religious practices. As such, this ritual continues to provide meaning, cohesion, and ethical direction for the Kedang people in a changing world.

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