



The Theory of Symbols of Purity-Analysis of Symbols in Me-nyimah Kuala Ritual of The Kedayan Community in Kampung Kuala Nyalau, Bintulu, Sarawak

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Article History	Abstract
<p>Received: 26 June 2023 Revised: 12 Sept 2023 Accepted: 01 October 2023</p>	<p><i>Menyimah Kuala (Feeding the Confluence) is one of the ceremonies still performed by the Kedayan community in Kampung Kuala Nyalau, Bintulu, Sarawak to express their gratitude to God and the supernatural powers for the sustenance enjoyed, to avoid any disasters and unto-ward incidents to the local community, and as a closing to the Makan Tahun (Annual Feast) ritu-al. Based on this study, there are no findings from previous researchers about the performance of the Menyimah Kuala ritual. In fact, according to the villagers, the ritual is only performed by the Kedayan community living in Nyalau, Bintulu. The focus of this paper is to uncover the ritual's process and to analyse symbols found in the ritual using the Theory of Symbols of Pu-rity (2020). This study uses the qualitative method (ethnography) which includes Field Study, Participant Observation, Interview, and Library Review. Based on the study, it was found that the ritual performed to attain well-being from either God or supernatural powers are based on the concept of purity which coincides with the Theory of Symbols of Purity (2020) introduced by Mohamad Maulana.</i></p>
<p>CC License CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0</p>	<p>Keywords: Ritual; Symbol, Menyimah Kuala, Makan Tahun</p>

1. Introduction

Sarawak is famous for its ethnic diversity where different ethnics can be found in every corner of the Divisions in Sarawak. According to Article 161A of the Federal Constitution on the indigenous races of Sarawak, which was amended via the Interpretation (Amendment) Bill 2022 and passed on 15 February 2022, there are 31 ethnic groups in Sarawak. This study basically focuses on the rituals practised by one of the ethnic minorities of Sarawak i.e., the Kedayan ethnic group. A.R. Maxwell (1970) has outlined ten different spellings of Kedayan terminology used by previous writers who have written about the Kedayan community. Among the spellings identified by him are Kadaian, Kadayan, Kadáyan, Kadian, Kadien, Kadyan, Kedajan, Kedayan, Kēdayan and Kedeian. However, based on Article 161A mentioned above, the gazetted spelling for this community is Kedayan.

The *Makan Tahun* ritual has been practised by the Kedayan community since time immemorial. However, based on the findings of a study carried out in Kampung Kuala Nyalau, Bintulu, Sarawak, it was found that there are changes in the procedures and methods of implementation today compared to the past. This is due to the existence of elements of *syncretism*. According to William L. Reese (1980), *syncretism* comes from the Greek word *synkretizein* which means “to combine”. Here we can see the implementation process of this year's *Makan Tahun* ritual has changed because of the combination and adjustment between elements of custom and ancestral traditions with Islamic law. This shows that the Kedayan community is still trying to maintain their identity through the practice of the *Makan Tahun* ritual but at the same time adapting it to the teachings of Islam.

Based on recent studies of the Kedayan community's *Makan Tahun* ritual carried out by researchers such as Magiman, M. M. (2012), Nur Afifah Avitha et al. (2011), Ros Aiza (2015) and Omar, S.A., et al (2022), it was found that there is a ceremony in the *Makan Tahun* ritual called the *Menyimah Kuala* that is performed by the Kedayan community in Kampung Kuala Nyalau, Bintulu, Sarawak but not by the Kedayan community in other settlements. The *Menyimah Kuala* ceremony is carried out after the *Makan Tahun* ritual and is held to express gratitude to God for the sustenance obtained as well as to show appreciation, in the form of a feast, to the supernatural beings that reside in the sea in particular. They believe that the performance of the *Menyimah Kuala* ritual can appease the spirits of the sea. Since the Kedayan community in the location of this study rely on the sea as their main source of income, they feel that it is important to perform the ritual in order to ensure their well-being, especially when going to sea to catch fish. For that reason, the *Menyimah Kuala* is practised by the villagers.

2. Materials and Methods

From the methodological aspect of the study, the researcher used the qualitative method (ethnography) when conducting the study in the relevant location, namely Kampung Kuala Nyalau, Bintulu, Sarawak. In the process of gathering and obtaining information, the researcher employed field research and participant observation methods to obtain more in-depth information. To complete the methods of research, interviews with Tribal Leaders, Traditional Practitioners, and individuals directly involved in the ritual were also carried out. All forms of communication and interviews were recorded and transcribed to facilitate the search for data and information when needed. In addition, the researcher also used the library method as a complement to the data obtained. The researcher has analysed related documents such as books, brochures, documents, newspapers, magazines, reports, journals, working papers, thesis manuscripts and the like either through hard copies or online. In obtaining the desired information using the library method, the researcher also selects reference materials from the aspect of writing style whether it is for academics or the public reviews. This is because academic writings always clearly state the source of reference and the discussion is objective and in accordance with common academic rules. For this reason, references to theses are given priority

3. Results and Discussion

The Process of Performing *Menyimah Kuala* Ritual

The *Menyimah Kuala* ritual begins with the preparation of tools or materials required for its performance. Among the tools or materials needed to be prepared are a White Flag, Agarwood, Betel Leaves & Areca Nuts, White Rice, Yellow Rice, Cigarettes, and *Sesajen* (comprising Kelupis (glutinous rice rolls), Penyaram (a traditional snack), and eggs). The *Menyimah Kuala* ritual can only begin when all the tools or materials are ready.

The first step of the performance is started by burning the agarwood (previously using incense) and placing it on a Bornean ironwood stick (kayu belian) called *Tatakan*. The *Tatakan* is a marker that has been planted in the ground by previous communities during the opening of the village area. It needs to be taken care of to ensure that the harmony of the villagers is maintained and preserved. The *Tatakan* is a sign to the supernatural beings that the area is inhabited by humans.

According to Haji Nawang bin Sail (57 years old, interviewed on 10 October 2022), when the *Tatakan* was planted in the olden days, it went through a “heavy” ritual process that can only be carried out by certain individuals who have high spiritual knowledge. This is because the forest and confluence areas are believed to be inhabited by many spirits. Transforming the forest and confluence areas into a human settlement requires great strength and power to deal with the resident spirits. The *Tatakan* planting ritual is seen as a peace agreement between the previous community and the supernatural beings where the latter cannot interfere with the humans in the settlement. Figure 1 shows Haji Nawang bin Sail cleaning the *Tatakan* before placing the burnt agarwood.



Figure 1: Haji Nawang bin Sail cleaning the Tatakan before placing the burnt agarwood.

While the agarwood is being burned, the process of preparing offerings is simultaneously carried out. Food such as Kelupis, Penyaram and eggs are placed on an altar called *Para* that is constructed near the *Tatakan*. The food serves as a feast for the supernatural beings. According to Haji Nawang bin Sail (57 years old, interviewed on 10 October 2022), the food offering symbolises the sharing of sustenance as they believe the spirits also need to eat. Figure 2 shows Mr Johar bin Syawal placing the *Sesajen* on the *Para*.



Figure 2: Mr Johar bin Syawal placing the Sesajen on the Para

As soon as the two processes are completed, the recitation of *Doa Tolak Bala* (prayer to ward off disaster) and certain mantras begins. The prayer reading, led by Mr Johar bin Syawal (57 years old), is carried out to ensure that the *Menyimah Kuala* ritual runs smoothly without any interruption. **Figure 3** shows execution of *Mantra* and *Doa Tolak Bala* (prayer to ward off disaster) recitation led by Mr Johar bin Syawal.



Figure 3: Mantra and Doa Tolak Bala (prayer to ward off disaster) recitation led by Mr Johar bin Syawal

Once the prayers and mantras have been recited, the ritual continues by bringing the white flag along with the betel leaves & areca nuts, white rice, yellow rice, and cigarettes to the sea. The ceremony, led by Haji Nawang bin Sail (57 years old), is conducted as a greeting or salutation to the supernatural beings residing in the sea. During this ceremony, only certain individuals who have a strong spiritual strength and knowledge are allowed to participate and go to the sea. Individuals who do not meet the requirements are not allowed to participate for fear of being overcome by the spirits (*kalah semangat*). According to Haji Nawang bin Sail (57 years old, interviewed on 10 October 2022), *kalah semangat* means a person's spirit cannot withstand the power of the supernatural forces, causing the person to fall ill. At worst it can cause the person to lose his sanity or go crazy. Upon reaching the sea, the Ritual Practitioner will begin reciting certain mantras and prayers to communicate with the resident supernatural beings while casting betel leaves & areca nuts, yellow rice, white rice, and cigarettes. All the ingredients are casted into the sea three times. Figure 4 shows Haji Nawang bin Sail led the ceremony of reciting special mantras and prayers while casting betel leaves & areca nuts, yellow rice, white rice and cigarettes into the sea while bearing a white flag. Figure 4 shows Haji Nawang bin Sail led the ceremony of reciting special mantras and prayers while casting betel leaves & areca nuts, yellow rice, white rice and cigarettes into the sea while bearing a white flag.



Figure 4: Haji Nawang bin Sail led the ceremony of reciting special mantras and prayers while casting betel leaves & areca nuts, yellow rice, white rice and cigarettes into the sea while bearing a white flag

Once the process is completed, the white flag that was brought to the sea is brought back to land and handed over to another Ritual Practitioner to be hoisted next to the *Para*. The process performed by Haji Jalil bin Tuah (81 years old) is called *Unjam*. According to him (interviewed on 10 October 2022), this process is a symbol or a sign of peace between the villagers and the supernatural beings residing in the settlement. In addition, it is also a sign to other villagers not to disturb the foods or any tools or materials in the area. The *Unjam* process can only be carried out by an individual who has the relevant

knowledge in addition to having a strong spirit. This is because the white flag is believed to be one of the mediums of communication with the supernatural beings in another realm. **Figure 5** shows the white flag hoisted next to the *Para* on which the *Sesajen* is placed.



Figure 5: The white flag is hoisted next to the para on which the sesajen is placed

Once the white flag is hoisted, the next process is the recitation of *Doa Selamat* (thanksgiving prayer) with the village community present. The prayer recitation, led by Mr Johar bin Syawal (57 years old), is the finale to the *Menyimah Kuala* ritual. After the prayer recitation ended, the villagers partake in a light meal prepared by the village community itself. Figure 6 shows the villagers enjoying a light meal after the ritual is over.

Analysis Of Symbols Based on The Theory of Symbols of Purity 2020

According to the Theory of Symbols of Purity introduced by Mohamad Maulana (2020), he describes that the ritual performance comprising three main elements, namely traditional elements, religious elements, and divine elements. The three components are closely linked to one another through symbols found in the performance of a ritual that are based on the concept of purity. Based on the findings of the research conducted, it was found that there are some amongst the Kedayan community in Kampung Kuala Nyalau, Bintulu, Sarawak still adheres to the traditional beliefs handed down by their ancestors. As a result, there arise a conflict between those who still believe in the traditional elements and those who only adhere to the religious elements as outlined in the Theory of Symbols of Purity (2020).

Although the ritual has traditional elements that are deemed to be in conflict with the Islamic religion and opposed by most of the village community, it is still being performed by some people who still believe in the ritual. To maintain harmony among the villagers, the *Menyimah Kuala* ritual is not performed on a large scale or overtly like the *Makan Tahun* ritual. It is usually performed on a small scale and only attended by a small number of villagers. According to Mr Ramlee bin Bak (56 years old, interviewed on 15 September 2022), the Chairman for the *Makan Tahun* committee, although most of the villagers do not agree with the ritual, they do not forcefully prevent its practice. Their way of expressing their opposition is by not participating in the ceremony.

Even though most of the villagers are religiously knowledgeable, some of them still think that the *Menyimah Kuala* ritual needs to be carried out to ensure the well-being of the villagers. According to Haji Nawang bin Sail (57 years old, interviewed on 10 October 2022), the ritual could not be performed for two years since the enforcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO) by the government. He believes that as a result, the village is said to be 'hot' and the villagers suffered many misfortunes and calamities such as thefts, deaths, diseases, and reduced sustenance. He also claims that performing the *Menyimah Kuala* ritual can be considered as a communal obligation (*fardhu kifayah*) with the intention of ensuring the well-being of the villagers. In general, the *Menyimah Kuala* ritual exhibits several expressed as well as implied symbols the functions of which can be analysed in greater depth.

In line with the theory, the researcher has categorised the symbols in the *Menyimah Kuala* ritual into two main categories, namely Traditional Symbols (animism) and Religious Symbols. Considering that

the symbols are presented to attain God’s grace, it is a given that every physical performance or offering provided must be pure. This can be seen clearly in Figure 6 as below:

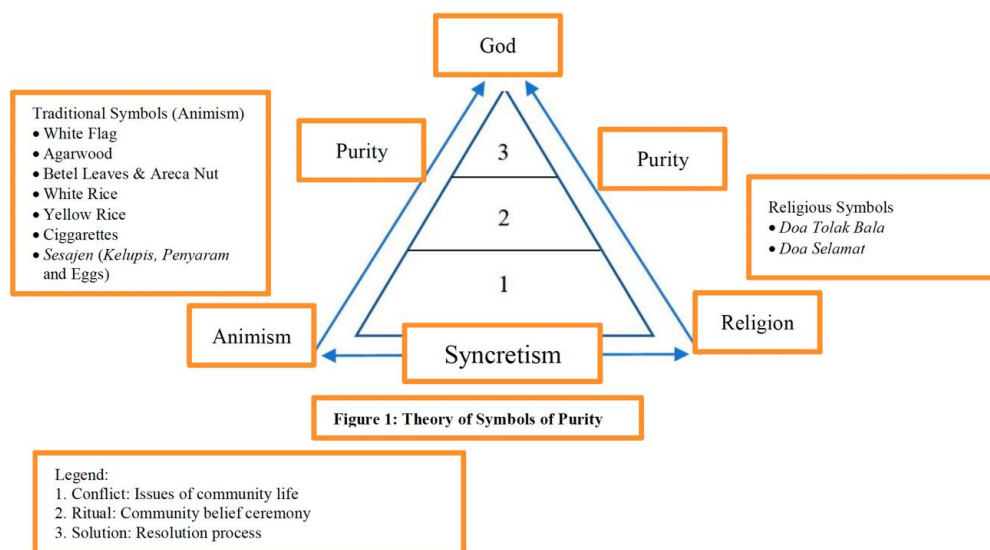


Figure 6: Animism and Religion Symbols in Menyimah Kuala Ritual based on The Theory of Symbols of Purity (2020)

Traditional Symbols (Animism)

When it comes to elements of traditions, they are often associated with practices handed down by previous generations. In today's modern thinking coupled with understanding and appreciation of religion, most of the traditional elements of the previous generations are increasingly being abandoned. In fact, the old traditions are no longer known by the current generation. This is not due to the younger generation forsaking the teachings of their elders, but due to several factors such as conflicting practices with religion, lack of experts to refer to, the implementation of certain rituals being too difficult to practise, and so on. However, there are traditional practices that are still used by today's society even though they appear not to be in line with religious teachings. According to Tugau, M. at. all (2020), this traditional practice is a form of belief that is considered still relevant by some communities. This is because the traditional practice acts as a complement to fill the gaps that still exist in the culture of a society. In the *Menyimah Kuala* ritual, we can see some traditional symbols (animism) that are still used with their own unique meanings. The meanings are as per the Table 1 below.

Table 1: The Traditional Symbols and its meaning in *Menyimah Kuala* ritual

Symbol	Meaning
White Flag	A sign of peace (good and pure intention) A medium of communication between humans and supernatural beings
Agarwood	A cleanser and pacifier between the human world and the ethereal world
Betel Leaves & Areca Nut	An ice-breaker (for communication with the supernatural beings)
Yellow Rice	A willingness to share sustenance with the King/Leader of the supernatural beings
White Rice	A willingness to share sustenance with the ordinary supernatural beings
Cigarettes	As a gift to the supernatural beings
Sesajen (Kelupis, Penyaram and Eggs)	A feast for the supernatural beings Sharing of sustenance

Religion Symbols

Religion is a very broad field to discuss about. There are many definitions or notions given by previous researchers regarding religion. However, according to Nottingham (1985), there is no single definition that can translate religion completely and accurately. This is because religion is diverse and almost impossible to contemplate. But what is clear is that an individual's belief in religion will surely manifest through his/her behaviour. For the Kedayan community, Islam is their faith. That is why the performance of *Menyimah Kuala* is imbued with religious elements. Among the religious elements that can be clearly seen is the recitation of *Doa Tolak Bala* and *Doa Selamat*. The summary of meanings of the two symbols is as Table 2 follows:

Table 2: The Religion Symbols and its meaning in *Menyimah Kuala* ritual

Symbol	Meaning
Doa Tolak Bala	A medium to pray to God to ward off disasters and misfortunes
Doa Selamat	A medium to express thanks and gratitude to God for all the blessings

Divine Element

Just like religion, there are too many meanings and understandings that have been expressed by previous researchers when it comes to the Divine. But in general, we take the Divine element as a component of belief and faith that serves as a guide for society. Regardless of whether a person professes a religion or believes in and have faith in supernatural powers such as a Diety, they all have the same goal, which is to attain blessings and well-being from God. This statement is based on the assertion by Magiman, M.M. et al. (2019) which stated that there are various ways of worship or religious ritual performed by humans but in the end the purpose is to ask for blessings from the relevant Gods. In fact, he also added that most of the offerings and requests are directed to God who is believed to be able to solve problems and crises in their lives. This is because they believe that everything that happens is by the will of God, the Creator. Based on the *Menyimah Kuala* ritual which was carried out in Kampung Kuala Nyalau, Bintulu Sarawak, it was found that the concept of divinity is still clearly and firmly held by the community. In the context of the Kedayan community, which is entirely Muslim, it is a given that the belief is directed towards Allah S.W.T.

In general, the *Menyimah Kuala* ritual has been adapted to the teachings of Islam with the recitation of *Doa Selamat* and *Doa Tolak Bala*. Here, we can see the existence of the concept of *syncretism*. Simply put, *syncretism* can be said to be the realignment or assimilation of several different elements so that they can be accepted and adopted by society as stated by most researchers such as Magiman, M.M. et al (2021), Norazila (2020), Tugau, M. et al. (2020), Azarudin et al. (2020), and Ros Aiza (2015). Although when viewed from the point of implementation method the two beliefs are different, their performance is aimed at the same goal and objective, which is to attain blessings from God.

The two beliefs also place emphasis on the concept of purity, whereby every physical performance and even the symbols used in this year's *Makan Tahun* ritual stressed on the sacred things, both in terms of cleanliness in its implementation and the symbols in the ritual. The concept of purity that can be clearly observed during the performance of the *Menyimah Kuala* ritual from the point of view of religious elements is the use of prayer as a medium to attain blessings in addition to expressing gratitude to Allah S.W.T. According to Dr. Said bin Ali bin Wahf Al Qahtani in his book entitled, *Berubat Dengan Doa dan Ruqyah dari Al Quran dan Sunnah (Treating Illness with Prayer and Ruqyah from the Quran and Traditions)*, prayer from the sharia point of view means asking Allah S.W.T. for His blessings with full sincerity and hope. This is in line with the words of Allah S.W.T. in Surah Ghafir verse 60, which means:

“Pray unto Me and I will hear your prayer: Lo! Those who scorn My service, they will enter hell, disgraced.”

Apart from using prayer as a medium to obtain blessings, the Kedayan community in Kampung Kuala Nyalau, Bintulu, Sarawak also routinely uses the phrase Basmallah (بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ) which means, “In the Name of Allah Most Generous and Most Merciful” in every act of the ritual. The use of Basmallah is not only limited to the performance of religious symbols but also in the performance of

traditional symbols (animism). Every physical act involving the traditional symbol (animism) will begin with the utterance of Basmallah, for example, when burning the agarwood, casting certain materials into the sea, waving the white flag, and so on. The concept of purity can also be seen clearly with the use of a white flag as one of the symbols in the ritual. It is a manifestation of a pure and good intention which is translated as peace between human beings and the supernatural powers.

4. Conclusions

Based on the analysis, it was found that the main concept emphasised during the implementation of the *Menyimah Kuala* ritual is purity. Although there are different symbols presented during the performance of the ritual (traditional symbols and religion symbols), both of them do not stray from being centered around and supported by the concept of purity. The concept of purity that is highlighted is not only limited to the aspect of cleanliness in its implementation but also in the method of implementation as well as in the intentions and aims (i.e., pure and virtuous). The concept of purity according to the Theory of Symbols of Purity (2020) is important because it is directed towards God to show gratitude and to attain blessings from God.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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