

## ***Dulang (Death Ritual) among Maguindanaon : Its Semiotic Interpretation***

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the signs and symbols incorporated in the practice of *dulang*, a death ritual of the Maguindanaon. The *dulang* is a ritual of the Maguindanaon where through the use of kulintang (melodic gong music) the *bpedtunong* (the medium who performs *pag-ipat*) enters into a trance and is possessed by a spirit that facilitates healing. *Pag-ipat* is overlain with symbols comprising a veritable wellspring of folk expression that is at once symbolic and imbued with meaning. Semiotics, the study of meaning-making, explores the study of signs and symbols as a significant part of communication. Semiotic theory provides a vital lens through which to view ritual messages. Chandler (2011) states that signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects. Umberto Eco, an Italian semiotician and novelist, claimed that every cultural phenomenon may be studied as communication (Caesar, 1999). Since all forms of ritual are communicative as stated by Dow (1986), *pag-ipat*, one of the important Maguindanaon death rituals is an interesting topic to be explored using semiotic framework and analysis. The data were comprised of the objects used in the ritual and were analyzed through Barthe's semiotic framework of connotation, denotation and myth. The study reveals that *pag-ipat* communicates certain belief and ideology which can be deciphered through its elements such as form, movement and pattern.

Keywords: *Pag-Ipat*, Semiotics, Meaning-Making, Ideology, Maguindanaon

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## **Introduction**

Maguindanao is not only famous for its beautiful and breathtaking fauna and flora, it is also known for its multi ethnicity which has more than 40 different ethnic groups including the sub-ethnic groups. This variety exists due to the variation of cultural aspects of each ethnic group. Each of this ethnic group represents their own identity which is portrayed in their behavior, lifestyle, economic activities and location, language and dialect, norms and moral values, beliefs and religion, as well as custom practiced in daily life. Uniquely, the cultural identification of the community can also be depicted symbolically through non-verbal communication.

Maguindanaon community is the second largest Muslim ethnic in Mindanao. Nevertheless, it is sad to mention that the in-depth study of the Maguindanaon culture is very limited and not prolific. The specific study of the *dulang* as one of the most interesting study on the cultural tradition and its relationship with communication is very rare.

Therefore, this article will portray and explicate the non-verbal aspects of communication in the *dulang* tradition, mainly on matters relating to the demise customs or the Kapenggay-gay ceremony, so that the cultural identity and the ethnic identification of the Maguindanaons will be known to others.

Through this study, the missing link between the unwritten meaning and practice of the Maguindanaons can help develop cultural appreciation and preservation.

## **Statement of the Problem**

This study intends to make meaning on the death ritual of the Maguindanaon particularly the case of *dulang*.

Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the semiotic interpretation and perception in the *dulang* tradition?
2. What are the semiotic modification in *dulang* tradition?

## **Review of Related Literature**

### **Ritual Is a Communicative Form**

Douglas (1995) claimed that ritual is pre-eminently a form of communication. All forms of ritual are communicative, symbolic behaviors in social situations. They are always perform as if to be read (Rothenbuhler, 1998). Regardless of its other aspects, ritual is also a way of saying. Its movements, patterns and forms have significance or meaning, independent of whatever is physically accomplished by the body movements themselves. These ritual movements are signs of something else, and it is these signs that accomplish the goals of ritual - not the mere movements in their own right. It is these signifying, communicative aspects of ritual, then, that are primary and essential. If they do not function to communicate, they do nothing. (Rothenbuhler, 1998)

## **Symbolicity and Generality**

All human communication, including rituals, is constructed of signs. These are things that stand for something they are not, to someone, for some purpose. Their usefulness depends on it. As this relationship between signs and what they signify is central, it is helpful to distinguish between three types of sign: indexes, icons and symbols. If the “thing which stands” is the signifier, and the “thing for which it stands” is the signified (Peirce, 1932) then indexes can be defined as signs that depend on a causal relationship between the two (Rothenbuhler, 1998).

Icons can be defined as signs that depend on a relationship of resemblance; and symbols as signs that depend on a relationship of convention between the two. Smoke is an index of fire as it is caused by it; smoke in a movie is an icon because it resembles smoke in the audience’s experience; and smoke signals are signals because the relationship between the smoke patterns and the message relates to a social convention. Indexical signifiers are directly dependent on their particular signified: this smoke indicates this fire; this needle movement indicates this flow of current. Icons, however, depend on a general pattern instead of a particular relationship (Peirce, 1932). Symbols, radically more so than icons, open a world of possibilities by breaking free of all particularities.

Such distinctions are important for understanding how ritual works. The stuff of ritual is largely symbolic. Though indexes and icons are involved, symbols are the most common type of sign used and the most important. Ritual is about the general - in a significant way. Ritual action is oriented toward transcendence of the particularities of the situation and social circumstances in which it is performed. Rituals emphasize what is generally true, and, as a type of sign, the symbol both depends on generalization for its meaning and promotes generalization in its interpretation. (Rothenbuhler, 1998).

## **Materiality and Indexicality**

Rituals also always have an indexical component. Communication, including ritual, always brings together inner and outer worlds by the shaping of material to express an idea. (Rothenbuhler, 1998). The material element must work through causal mechanisms. In turn, such material elements and their causal connections can be interpreted as indexical signs.

What makes ritual special is that its performative aspect gives the essential, but ordinary, indexical element of all communication a special importance (Rothenbuhler, 1998). Because indexes do not have the arbitrariness of connection between signified that all symbols do, they are neither as flexible as symbols, nor as unreliable. Performance in a ritual is an index of relationship vis-a-vis the canon, the liturgy, the meaning of the ritual that is usually carried by symbols. The index of performance is a prop of ensurance against the potential indeterminateness of meaning, intention, belief, and other symbolically embedded phenomena. (Rothenbuhler, 1998).

Ritual cannot be performed without bodily participation, nor correctly without bodily participation according to form. As the ritual is a kind of speech act, its effectiveness depends on its relatively correct or felicitous (inspired) performance. This, interestingly, allows for subtle innovations, and one way rituals can be classified can depend on their formal correctness or inspired felicity, their domination by liturgy or their contemporary circumstances. (Rothenbuhler, 1998).

Because the performative aspect of bodily participation is also an index of position vis-avis the meaning and effects of the ritual, the surprising result is that a participant cannot lie in ritual, or at least not ritually. Participants may or may not believe in it, but their disbelief doesn't undo what was accomplished by their participation. (Rothenbuhler, 1998). For example, regardless of rituals, subjective doubts and questions, a wedding creates a married couple who can be symbolically held responsible to their status. Marriage can only be undone by another legal ritual. Similarly, not tipping one's head and looking downward in the presence of a person of higher status may be mistaken, but will still be read as an index of incompetence, disrespect, or both.

In a ritual, the world is lived and the world is imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world. This is a strange consequence of materiality and only possible in communicative forms because of their unique fusing of the material and the ideal. The material form becomes symbolic, according to ideas, and this is how it makes real in this world an ideal world. (Rothenbuhler, 1998).

### **Backward and Forward References**

Rituals always refer in two directions: backward to the social order and culture in which the ritual is embedded, and forward to the people performing the ritual and those with whom they will interact. The former is symbolic and offers the meaning of the ritual; the latter is more indicative and offers the soon to be realized social significance of the ritual. (Rothenbuhler, 1998).

Many writers emphasize the backward reference, speaking, for example, of ritual being out of time, in a sacred space separated from this world. This has led some to dismiss ritual as impractical, maladaptive, even dangerous. Yet this is overstated as, if nothing else, ritual serves as a communicative form for display and alignment in the present.

Ritual, then, is about both position in a cosmic order and alignment in a practical world. It embeds participants, by these two logics, into an ongoing structure: by symbol and index into past and future, origins and destinations, relatively stable meanings and more changeable significances. In effect, ritual is a communication device for uniting the ideal and the material, the general and the particular, the cosmic and the ordinary, the past and the future, the structures of history and the happenings of individual lives. (Rothenbuhler, 1998).

The review of literature cited shows aspects of ritual as potentials of meaning-making and its important role in the discursive environment of communication.

### **Theoretical Lens**

To analyse the non-verbal communication in the demise customs/death rituals of the Maguindanaon, semiotic theory is applied. Linguistics and cultural semiotics is a branch of communication theory, that is the study of signs and symbols (including human beings talk, write, sing, smell, gesture, image, music, arts, etc.) that humans use to convey feelings, thoughts, ideas and ideologies. It includes the study of how meaning which arises from the sign and symbol system is constructed and understood during the perception and interpretation of sensory data.

Cultural semiotic analysis focuses on the cultural and psychological patterns that underlie language, art and other cultural expressions that is used as a tool for representing and interpreting phenomena. Among famous semioticians are Ferdinand de Saussure, 1857 – 1913 (the father of modern linguistics), Charles Sanders Peirce, 1839 – 1914 (the founder of the pragmatism doctrine) and Roland Barthes, 1915 – 1980. There is an overlap between semiotics and communication, because both disciplines share many similar concepts such as code, symbol, meaning, process of decoding, perception and interpretation, although the emphasis is different.

Research field within within cultural semiotics attempts to define culture from semiotic perspective and as a type of human symbolic activity, creation of signs and a way of giving meaning to everything around. Therefore, here culture is understood as a system of symbols or meaningful signs. Because the main sign system is the linguistic system, the field is usually referred to as semiotics of culture and language. Under this field of study symbols are analyzed and categorized in certain class within the hierarchal system. With postmodernity, metanarratives are no longer as pervasive and thus categorizing these symbols in this postmodern age is more difficult and rather critical.

## **Methodology**

The data of this study was taken based on the observation and interview made by the researcher. This study is conducted in Raguisi, Sultan Kudarat. The justification of choosing the district matches the context of the study because the community there has their own culture and the size of the total population of the community inhabited in that area. Raguisi is situated at the West Coast of Cotabato City. It takes about an hour journey by car to this district.

Taking of pictures and videos during the ritual was prohibited by the medium since it may offend the family of the dead. Though there were few photographs taken before the ritual, the ritual proper was not documented due to the lack of approval from the immediate family of the dead person. Qualitative design through the use of semiotic framework and analysis is employed in answering the specific research questions.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **RQ1. What are the semiotic interpretation and perception in the *dulang* tradition?**

For the Maguindanaon community in Raguisi, the demise customs or the death rituals are slightly similar to the demise customs of the Malay community; the ritual starts by firstly bathing the dead body, performing a prayer for the dead body, wrapping the dead body in a shroud and lastly, burying the dead body. Generally, a feast for the dead or the *kenduri arwah* will be held for seven days and seven nights. Besides that, a grand feast to remember the dead will also be held on the seventh, fortieth, hundredth day of the death and upon completing one year from the date the dead 'leaves' the world. Interestingly, the *dulang* ceremony will be performed during these grand feasts.

Implicitly, *dulang* symbolizes the act of feeding the dead and helping him or her to go on with the new life in the new world. *Dulang* also means the deed of alms by the family of the dead to the poor people and the people who attend the feast. The alms refer to the food called

dulang which will be given away (*disedekahkan*) by the family of the dead to those people who attend the feast.

Normally, *dulang* contains few traditional foods (which appear to be obligatory) such as *kuih sinsim* (Kumukunsi), *kuih jala'* (*tinadtag*), *kuih penyaram* (*panyalam*), *kuih berate* (*pinipi*), *kalas* (*Puso*), *saging randang* (banana fritters which are fried flourless), *kuih wajid* (*wagit*), *inti'* (sweet dish which is made of coconut and sugar cane) and also rice and dishes where each will represent something. The semiotic interpretation of these traditional foods will be explicated according to the Maguindanaon interpretation and perception of their cultural identity.

One of the famous foods in *dulang* is *Kuih Sinsim*. The shape of *kuih sinsim* looks like a car stering and wheel except for the color and size. It has circular shape, palm size, white color, sugary taste and solid structure. This *kuih* is made from flour and sugar. The white color and the solid form signifies human bone structure which means that humans have to work hard to fulfill their basic needs by using their *tulang empat kerat*. Therefore this *kuih* is made solid to symbolize the human power and strength in facing the hardships of life.

Another prominent food in *dulang* is *Tinadtag*. It has sweet taste, semicircle shape, golden color and a little bit brittle. *Tinadtag* is made from rice flour and sugar. Implicitly, *tinadtag* represent human hair. The covert meaning behind the tousled structure of *tinadtag* visualizes the hair condition, lots of layers and disheveled if uncombed. The Maguindanaon old generation regards long hair for women as a main concern due to the belief that long hair will perform as head support if one is dead. This belief makes the Maguindanaon, particularly the old women attempt to grow their hair to make it long. Besides, the half moon and the buffalo horn shape of *tinadtag* can also represent the traditional task of the Maguindanaon as a farmer. It can also be considered as a symbol of strong ties among the Maguindanaons.

(*panyalam*) is another obligatory food in *dulang*. This delicacy can be found in three dominant colors; white (made from white sugar), chocolate/brown (made from sugar cane) and green (made from *daun pandan/pandan leaf*) and has two distinguished shape, round and *samarinda*. It has sweet taste because it is made from rice flour and sugar. In Maguindanaon's perception, *panyalam* stand for human heart based on its soft and spongy texture. Heart is one of the most precious parts in human body system because it can reflect one's personality and his/her good or bad deeds. Maguindanaon are very concerned about having good hearted or a benevolent attitude because it can bring tranquility in human relationship. Besides, *panyalam* also symbolizes a sun that surrounds Maguindanaons' world and thus it represents the sincerity of those people who participate in the *Kapenggay-gay* ceremony.

Other than those foods mentioned before, *dulang* also consist of *Pinipi*. It is made from rice which firstly will be cooked, then dried out and lastly will be fried to make it fragile. The uneven and rough texture of *kuih berate* represents the condition in human stomach. Implicitly, *kuih berate* can be considered as a sign of warning to the Maguindanaon people to take great care of what they eat and their health because all consumed foods and beverages will be digested in stomach.

In addition, *dulang* also consist of *Puso* which is made from glutinous rice, and wrapped with *kalas* leaf. *Kalas* has triangle shape and salty taste. Normally it is served with fried fish. In old days, relatives who live far away have to go through a long journey to attend the *Kaligo sa minatay* ceremony. Thus they will take along *kalas* to feed their starving stomach because

kalas has a fulfilling and satisfying taste. With kalas on their side, they will stay out of hunger and tiredness before arriving at the feast venue. Kalas also visualizes the traditional task of Maguindanaon as a paddy planters and rice as a staple food for this community.

Inti' is another important sweetened food in duang. It is made from old coconut which is cooked with sugar cane or gula hangus and has moist taste. Inti' served as sweets to those people who attend the ngeduang ceremony so that they will only talk and story about all the good things of the dead. Symbolically, inti' means helping the dead to possess all the good deeds, from the behavior of all those people who are still alive.

Besides all those main foods stated above, dulang also consist of Kuih wajid (wagit), Saging Randang, rice and dishes such as fried fish, boiled egg and vegetables (long beans masak tumis is the popular one). In the past, normally foods in dulang can only be found during the Kaligo sa minatay ceremony but nowadays, almost all of the foods mentioned can be bought at many small markets, bazaar and tamu at Kota Belud. In addition, kalas, kuih sinsim, penyaram, kuih wajid and kuih jala are also served during ceremony, gathering and festival like marriage, feast, Hari Raya etc. Among the obligatory foods in dluang, only kuih sinsim and kuih jala can last for months whereas the rest can not be retained more than a week except for kuih penjaram and kuih wajid where both can last for about two weeks.

Importantly, during the *dulang* ceremony, the family of the dead or the host will provide plenty of dulang known as dulang ruma'. Normally the host has to prepare a minimum of 60 and maximum of 200 dulang ruma' in every *dulang* ceremony. Dulang ruma' can be further categorized into two, kepala duang/tikok duang (the main dulang) and normal dulang. There are three main dulang provided which will be given away to top three people according to their ranking/importance in the *Kaligo sa minatay* ceremony. The first main dulang will be given away to the imam or the leader of the ceremony and each of the dulang content must have three packs or items. Each pack normally has seven to ten traditional foods, for example three packs of kuih penyaram and in each pack, there are seven to ten kuih penyaram and so forth. Simply, in main duang there are about 21 – 30 traditional foods in which each are packed in three packs. Other extra foods in duang also has to be in three numbers, for example three packs of rice, three packs of fried fish, three pack of vegetables, three can or bottle of beverages, three pack of cakes etc. The second main duang goes to the head of the Surah yassin (Verse from the Quran for the Dead Person) reciter whereas the third main dulang will be presented to the head of the tahlil reciter. The content of dulang in the second and the third main dulang consists of two packs. The normal dulang will be given away to the relatives and guests.

Uniquely, the activity during the *Kaligo sa minatay* ceremony is not only limited to giving away the dulang to those people who attend the feast by the family of the dead. Besides, the ceremony is also consisted of activity nambi' dulang or activity of exchanging of dulangs between those relatives and guests who bring their own dulang to the feast. The act of bringing his own dulang to the feast means that the dulang owner wants to join the *Kaligo sa minatay* ceremony on behalf of his/her family who has already passed away. This dulang is known as duang tampu. They believe that the duang can reach the dead to feed and help him or her to go on with the new life in the new world. Besides, this activity also indicates the generosity of those people involved. Indirectly, it also reveals one's personality and creativity by looking at the content of the dulang and the way it is presented. During the event, the host will appoint one person (as the host's representative) to handle the activity of exchange of dulangs. Normally, the duang owner will make a wish and inform the representative, about

the person who she or he wishes to receive the *duang*. Sometimes it happens when the *duang* owner does not decide the *dulang* recipient and in this case, the representative will act as a decision maker to decide whose *dulang* goes to whom and vice versa.

In addition, besides fulfilling the ritual in the demise custom, there is another *dulang* ceremony which is held during the Hari Raya festival only which is called *dulang raya*'. The purpose for preparing *dulang raya*' is to celebrate the big day because in the past, there is no concept of having open house during Hari Raya like most people do nowadays. Traditionally, the Maguindanaon will bring their own *dulang* and gather at a mosque or surau where they will change their *duang* with another person. Another name for *duang raya*' is *duang subu*. The purpose is the same as *dulang raya*' but it is called *duang subu* because the *duang* owner do not have to go to the mosque to find the *duang* recipient. Instead, he or she will take the *dulang* at dawn to the house of the individual whom he or she has promised to give the *dulang* and vice versa. However, nowadays not many people still exercise the tradition.

## **RQ2. What are the semiotic modification in *dulang* and *Kanggay-gay* ceremony?**

Interestingly, the content and presentation of *dulang* has changed over time depending on the financial status, trend and life style of the people. Traditionally, *dulang* only consists of few traditional foods (as mentioned before). However, nowadays the tradition has changed enormously in which extra foods are also included such as cakes, bottle or can beverages, can foods, snacks, biscuits, sweets and plenty of dishes (fish, chicken, meat and vegetables) which are cooked with varieties of cooking style such as *masak rendang*, *masak kicap*, *masak lemak*, *masak asam manis* etc.

Besides, not only extra foods and beverages are included, but the way *dulang* is presented has also changed. Traditionally, *dulang* is wrapped with *begiang* leaf. Later on, when the Maguindanaon are more creative, *dulang* is placed in a basket called *tudung* which is made from coconut leaf and *designed* to form a basket shape. After some time, box and plastic bag are used to accommodate the extra weight and contents of *dulang*.

Nowadays, to be more practical, *dulang* is placed in a plastic basket, basin, designed paper bag or other things (home appliance) that can be utilized in daily life.

The changes of the *dulang*, either for the contents as well as the presentation have different covert meaning, depending on the wish of the *dulang* owner and the interpretation and perception of *dulang* recipient and guests. Therefore, *dulang* can bring both positive and negative impact. The positive side of *dulang* is that it is considered as a deed of alms giving. In addition, the gathering also inculcates the spirit of neighborhood, collaboration as well as strengthens the ties (*ukhuwah*) among relatives. Nevertheless, *dulang* also has negative impact especially if someone wants to show off by adding extra ordinary contents of *dulang* and presenting it in the most expensive way. Thus, it can create spendthrift habit and boastful manner as well as the feeling of jealousy.

## **Conclusion**

*Dulang* is one of the unique traditions of the Maguindanaon that distinguishes their cultural tradition from other ethnic groups in Mindanao. The underlying or implicit meaning behind the *dulang* is one aspect that makes it appealing and exclusive. Those embedded and covert meaning represents the world view of the Maguindanaon and their cultural identity. The



tradition is still being practiced until today but nowadays the concept of *dulang* has been modified, mostly because Maguindanaon want to adapt the current situation and lifestyle of the people. However, the basic intention of traditional foods in *dulang* are still unchangeable -- to maintain the cultural tradition. *Dulang* has both positive and negative impacts that depend much on the intention, perception and interpretation of the *dulang owner*, *dulang provider* and *dulang* recipient. The researcher believes that *dulang* will always have a big special place in the heart, life and culture among the Maguindanaon. Thus, it is a task for the Maguindanaon to promote and inform others especially the younger generation about *dulang* tradition so that it will not be forgotten.

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