

IDENTIFICATION OF SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS IN SEKAPAN BURIAL RITUAL

Pengenalan Simbol Dan Motif Dalam Ritual Sekapan Pengebumian

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Abstract

Kelirieng is a burial pole used by 'Orang Ulu' at Belaga District in Kapit Division, Sarawak and is made of hardwood. In this study, burial pole of the Sekapan ethnic group were observed to identify the meaning of symbols and motifs carved on a pole. This research was conducted using qualitative method involving field observations, in-depth interviews with custom holders, local and previous documented resources. It was believed that the sculptors were able to communicate with spirits during the carving process. The selection of motifs for the grave pillar should be based on with characteristics of the deceased and not contradict social stratification. Each motif and symbol carved during the burial process is symbol of gratitude to supernatural beings and shows the strength of the animistic faith in the Sekapan community. Kelirieng ritual is a form of ceremonial homage to the aristocratic class, known as Laja' or Maren', practiced by 'Orang Ulu' communities.

Keywords : *animistic; belief; motif; Sekapan; Orang Ulu*

Introduction

Kelirieng is made from a trunk of Borneo ironwood, i.e., *Belian* (*Zwageri eusideroxylon*). The inner part of the bole was drilled out to create a hollow log. The outer part of the bole is then carved with specific symbols corresponding to the nobility of the corpse. This symbol is based on their hierarchy: *Laja'* (kings), *Maren'* (upper middle class of the royal lineage), *Panyin'* (most of the longhouse community), and *Dipen'* (slaves) (Jennifer, 2006), most of motifs that carved was based on *Laja'* and *Maren'* such as *Antu* motifs. Kelirieng's works as a burial post emerged from pagan ideas about spiritual practices before the introduction of other religions. As stated by Zayyanid (2020), pagan believers were considered primitive because they believed that the universe had a soul. This soul must be honored to benefit humanity rather than disrupt it. The term of paganism originally described a person's status rather than a name for religion. The change in its usage as a religious term may be related to the original followers.

Moreover, primitive groups who appointed and revered certain individuals as great beings and worshipped them as gods. This means, the Sekapan ethnic has adapted the beliefs of paganism in their burial. Burial of bodies or remains at Kelirieng represents the unity with nature and is consistent with pagan beliefs. The use of Kelirieng as a grave post was only permitted to certain groups of people; *Laja'* and *Maren'*. Before the ceremonies, sculptors with thorough knowledge of Sekapan customs carved motifs and symbols into the funerary pillar based on their hierarchy (Strickland, 1995; Mula, 2019).

Kelirieng

According to J. Guerreiro (2017), the burial customs for individual royal lineage or burial known as *Laja'* in Sekapan community was in a wooden pole made of *Belian* wood (*Eusideroxlyen zwageri*), namely Kelirieng. This wood was chosen due its high strength and durability. The height of the Kelirieng can reach up to 10 meters and represents the wealth of the deceased. The wealth mentioned must be able to support food supply for carpenters, sculptors, laborers, and *dipen'* (slaves) from tree felling to successful Kelirieng construction specific carved symbols.

Meanwhile, as reported by Chin. L (1981), a Kelirieng was carved from top to bottom, with niches up its sides for the bodies of slaves and followers and hollowed at the top for the jar containing the bones of the chief. A heavy stone slab is the surmounted-on top of the pole. Same

as mentioned by J. Guerreiro (2017), that the owner must be richer to feed the carpenters, carvers, and other laborers.

Carving and Design of Kelirieng

Several carvings with motifs and symbols were made by sculptors namely Kalong Aso, Kayu Aren' or Udai Odok', Kalong Mata Udang, Odok', Kalong Balan Tana' Lunganan, Kalong Kelawit-kawit, Rope, Leech, and Fern. Sculptors also carved tiger motifs into coffins or biguan'. The use of these motifs and symbols for grave poles is related to the Sekapan community's belief in animism such as the motif Udai Odok' carved by sculptors to achieve a peaceful afterlife, following the theory of Mohamad Maulana.

Theory of Symbol

According to Tylor's evolutionary theory, animism is described as characteristic of tribes low in the scale of humanity, which then change to deeply modified in its transition, but from first to last preserving an unbroken continuity, into the midst of high modern culture. To rephrase, although cultures develop over time, ancient remnants of primitive beliefs and practices can be found in the most advanced societies as cultural survivals (Tremlett et. al, 2017). Besides that, as stated by Tugang (2014), the elements in animism have driven the believe in all objects that are created by God are having its own power and spirits. It is, therefore, rituals carried out is meant to ask for good, apology, permission and happiness to maintain the well-being among the humans and nature.

Concurrently, according to Maulana (2012) followed by Turner's theory, animism is the belief that all objects and living things have a soul or spirit. Belief in animism simultaneously serves to express beliefs about society not only for the functionalist purpose of keeping man in his social place, but also for the existential purpose of giving him a social place. People who offer and deliver sacrifices to supernatural forces practice animism, which has been passed down by previous generations. Symbolic theory posits that the motifs and symbols found at Kelirieng provide an understanding of the meaning of carvings, which are in the context of traditional community beliefs and religions.

Methodology

Study Site and Data Collection

This study is conducted in Sekapan Piet (N2. 6783°, E113. 76834°) and Sekapan Panjang (N2. 64564°, E113.74751°), in the contemporaneous Belaga burial area of Sungai Bungan. This study uses a qualitative method using and collecting data from various sources. The researcher obtains data through observation, interview, and interactions with the Sekapan community. Data were collected from informants particularly Temenggong (custom chiefs), Penghulu (Orang Ulu leaders), and long house chiefs, carpenters, craftsmen, and local. Researcher capable of gathering information from residents and other sources about Kelirieng's motifs and symbols.

Researchers observed the burial area to identify the various motifs engraved in Keliering. The identification of the motifs and symbols engraved at Kelirieng is based on hierarchy; laja', maren', panyin', and dipen' (Abdullah, 2017; Nagu, 2018) Motifs and symbols are classified as leeches, fern, dragon, bamboo shoots, Odok' (ghost face), Kalong Aso' (dragon and dog combination), Kayu Aren' or Udai Odok', Kalong Mata Udang, Kalong Balan Tana' Lenganan, and Kalong Kelawit-kawit.

Theory of Sacred Symbols

The Theory of Sacred Symbols served as a guide for researchers in this research. This theory was founded in 2020 by Mohamad Maulana Magiman and is based on the extending Sacred Symbol Model that he introduced in 2012. He combined the model with Turner's framework to develop the Sacred Symbol Theory.

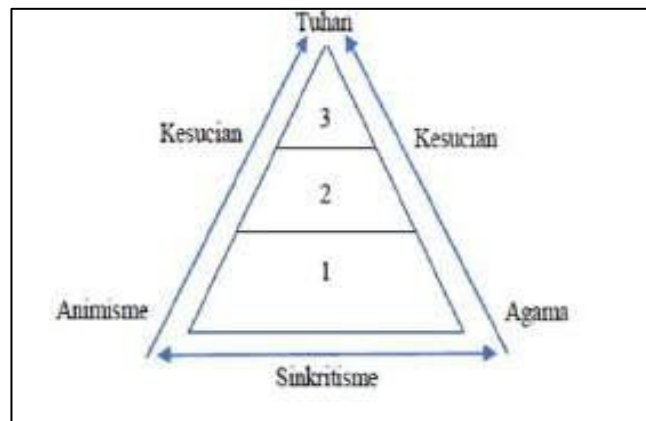


Figure 1: Theory of Sacred Symbols

There are several guidelines for relating theories to research. The first guidelines are issues of community life (crisis), followed by community faith ceremonies (ritual), and the third guidelines are conflict resolution processes (solution). According to the initial guidelines, a crisis is defined as stress that causes divisions in a community. This may indicate Kelirieng motifs and symbols based on animistic beliefs that required rituals but were eventually banned due to the rise of other religions. The concept of syncretism unites two faiths in a single communal practice and was used to overcome conflict between the religious community and individuals who continued to practice ancient traditions. Based on motifs and symbols, this engraving is still relevant for modern use, however any ritual worship is excluded; Both religious organizations have endorsed the use of these practices through the concept of holiness. The identical goal of this concept is the pursuit of God's well-being (solution guideline) for all aspects of the theory, which are interconnected and ultimately unite into symbols for the implementation of rituals.

Result and Discussion

Kelirieng Structure

There are two different types of Kelirieng. Figure 2 shows a Kelirieng with two doors. These doors are used for placing a coffin; The 1st place is for the deceased and the 2nd will be used for his/her spouse. Figure

3 shows a Kelirieng without doors but with a small compartment for *tajau* which is to store bones. This point can be supported by a statement from Nagu (2018), that states *tajau* is a clay pot in which all remaining bones of the body collected from Biguan. Upon inspecting Kelirieng's construction, it can be observed that every pillar has distinct rope carvings. Meaning that, the number of knots carved indicates the gender of the first deceased person in that family. One knot means a man and 2 knots means a woman that has mentioned by informants. Since this ethnic group's daily life depends primarily on forest resources, ferns and animals are a common symbol in their carving. As explained by Nagu (2018) in his research, the symbol of ferns with intertwined roots refers to the unity of the villages and represents the history of deceased. This motifs accordance with Sekapan's ethnic lifes, which always shows respect for leaders and works together in daily life. Meanwhile, the symbol of bamboo shoot is often used in carvings influenced by the daily food sources of Orang Ulu includes Sekapan's ethnic. This symbol was carved in Kelirieng with a pattern resembling a pyramid (Zulkipli *et. al*, 2022).

Motifs and Symbols of Kelirieng

The motifs and symbols found in Kelirieng that relate to the theory are Kalong Aso', Odok', Udai Odok', Kalong Balan Tana' Lunganan, leeches, gong and bamboo shoots.

Motifs Kalong Aso'

According to Padri *et al* (2021), this Kalong Aso' motif combines a dragon and a dog and was commonly used in the Ulu community. The head is shaped like a dragon's head, and the body is reminiscent of a swimming dog; it is also believed to represent a water spirit. This statement can be supported by the informant's statement, which is, Kalong Aso' motifs was carved to show gratitude towards their pet, a dog that is considered an important animal in villager's daily lives. Moreover, the identification of this motif as a symbol of unity is seen as a sign of the power to avoid evil or misfortune. According to

Mohamad Maulana's theory of sacred symbols, the use of this motif is related to the element of animism, which is a symbol of seeking

*Identification of Symbols and Motifs in Sekapan
Burial Ritual*

protection from evil spirits or life crises. The Sekapan ethnic group also believed that this motif could strengthen unity within the community.

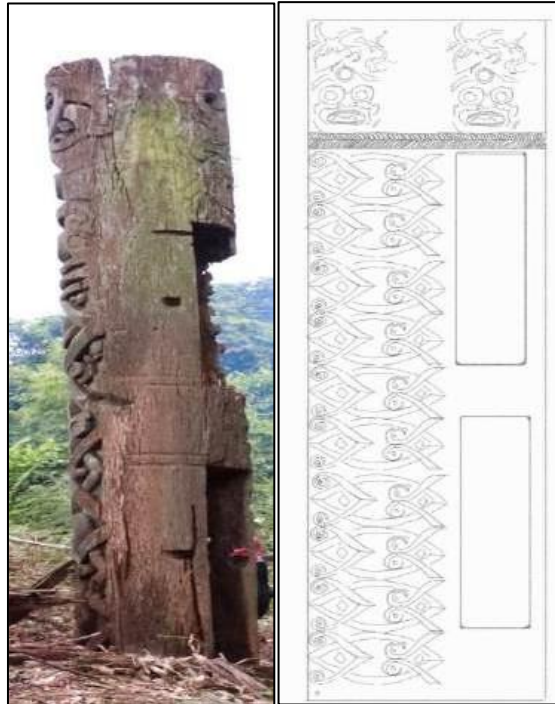


Figure 2: Kelirieng Structure 1 with upper and lower entrances for placing the coffins



Figure 3: Kelirieng Structure 2 consisted of a few compartments for housing Tajau



Figure 4: Kalong Aso' represents a water spirit

Motifs Odok'

According to Nagu (2018), Odok' motifs, mostly known as Antu motif (ghost motif), are carved on the top of the Kelirieng and separated by a rope motif. The Ulu community, including the Sekapan ethnic group, often uses the Odok' motif in their carving because they believed that the spirits of the motif can protect the family of the deceased from any harm. As mentioned by informants, sculptors must be careful when carving and respect the spirit of the subject. It was believed to be related to divine elements. In addition, the Odok' motif represents the Creator protecting people and demanding obey the established commandments and prohibitions. This Odok' motif indirectly reminds the living population that people will experience the kingdom after death, in the Islamic sense the kingdom of the Barzakh.



Figure 5: Odok' motifs symbolize protection from evil spirits

Udai' Odok' Motifs

The Udai Odok' motifs or also called 'The Tree of Life', which was inspired by observation from the top view of a fig tree from a bird's eye view (Padri et. al, 2012). Initially, this motif received the title Tree of Life Motif because of the shape of the carved bat, which is decorated with animals, plants and fruits. This motif shows a connection with elements of animism. The traditional culture of the community in

Nurul Hayati Rosli, *et. Al.*,

Sarawak is based on local wisdom such as customs, traditions, and proverbs, all aimed at living a peaceful life. This issue can be associated with the Udai Odok' motif carved by sculptors to represent interdependence between residents and create a balanced community group accordance to Theory of Sacred Symbols by Mohamad Maulana, 2012.



Figure 6: Motifs Udai' Odok' (tree of life)

Leeches Motifs

Figure 7 shows that Kelirieng carvings contain leech motifs, and some communities believe they come from ferns. These carving elements consist of lines, interweaving, and shapes (Abdullah, 2017; Nagu, 2018). Undeniably, the geometric pattern of the leech line is repeated to show unity and balance. Leech or fern motifs are very popular since the Sekapan population lives in rural areas and has turned the forest environment into a source of income. This motif also aims to represent the value of life, which is closely linked to the mythical element of sacrifice, considered a sign of resistance or opposition. In terms of theory, this motif highlights the aspect of animism, in which those with strong beliefs feel a sense of surrender or are willing to make sacrifices to carry out an activity that the community deems appropriate or prescribed.



Figure 7: Leeches motifs represent the unity and balance of life

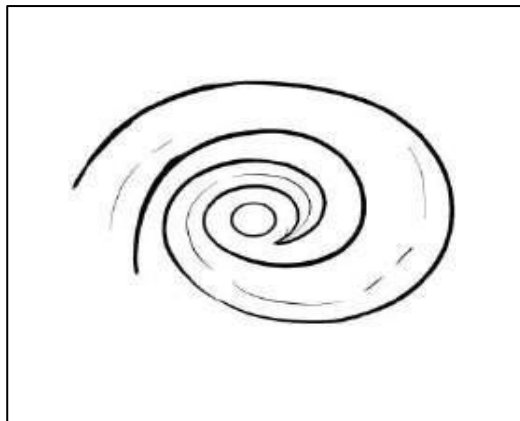


Figure 8: Close-up sketch of a fern

Various ethnic groups in Sarawak use fern symbol carvings to give meaning to the ever- changing cycle of human life. Meaning that, this motif is considered a symbol of purity and complements the Kelirieng funerary pillar before other carvings begin. The act is seen as a symbol of respect and order towards spirit motifs (Maulana, 2012)

Dragon Motifs (Naga)

Figure 8 shows the carving of a water dragon motif on the wooden surface, known as the Kalong Balan Tana' Lengunan motif. The curved carvings facing each other depict negative aspects associated with evil spirit, while the fading carvings below depict the head of a fanged dragon (Padri, 2015). This motif depicts the purity symbol indicating the nobility status of the Kelirieng's owner and is one of the Kelirieng's complementary carvings.

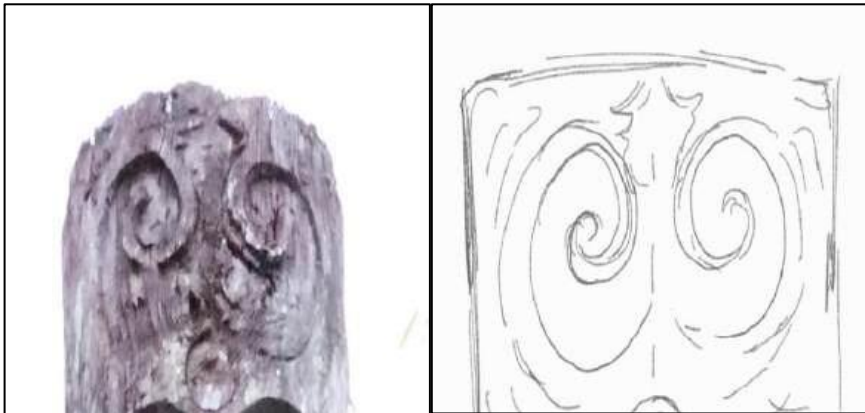


Figure 9: Kalong Balan Tana' Lengunan motif showing the noble status of the individual

Gong Symbols

The gong motif engraved as eyes on the Kelirieng sculpture has no detailed meaning, but from the perspective of the of the Ulu community, the gong is a valuable material possession and a symbol of wealth for a family that is common directly from the ancestors, directly displaying elements of animism (Sahari, 2015; Abdullah, 2017; Nagu, 2018). In addition to valuable material possessions, gongs are also used as a communication tool in the Ulu community. The sound of the gong is determined by the ceremonies or events in the daily life of the community as well as the appropriateness and rhythm of the various strikes. This further proves the theory, that people making offerings and deliver offerings to supernatural forces is a practice of traditional belief (Maulana, 2012).



Figure 10: The gong symbol is used as an eye (left) and additional engraving (right).

This gong motif is also like the Pune motif, which represents travel away from traditional territory or in times of war (Nagu, 2017). By using this motif, people are reminded to always respect the surrounding tribes and cultures. Meantime, the circular pattern seen in these design motifs also represents the process of collaborative decision-making or discussion that leads to a decision (circular shape) (Hendrias, 2014; Murniati, 2023). Based on the theory, the meanings of the symbols used in the tradition are discussed between groups to reach a consensus that leads to a peaceful situation and ritual social interaction (Maulana, 2012)

Bamboo Shoots Symbol (rebung)

The bamboo symbol is carved in the shape of a pyramid (Nagu, 2018). This symbol can be carved with other carvings depending on the carver's expertise, such as bamboo shape to the Udai' odok' motif. Inevitably, rebung is one of the main sources of food for the Ulu ethnic group and has many benefits to their daily life, such as building fences (Hendrias, 2014; Mubarak, 2017). This symbol is believed to represent the successor from generation to generation, and prevents culture or tradition from being forgotten, while proving that this motif has elements of tradition.

Based on the theory, traditional beliefs, or animism, refer to practices that have been accepted by the community of practitioners for generations. Here, it can be demonstrated that the Orang Ulu believed

that the bamboo symbol could serve as a reminder of their ethnic group's practice and is still relevant today as a motif that does not involve any ritual that goes against current religion (Legino, 2016; Murniati, 2023).



Figure 11: Pyramid-shaped rebung represent the ancestor of the tribe

Conclusion

In general, the symbolism of the Kelirieng ritual is not only represented by external actions, but also reflects the purpose of each ritual action. The Kelirieng ritual is primarily performed by motif carvers who are familiar with the customs of the Sekapan ethnic group and have extensive knowledge of the family and motifs of the deceased.

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