



CONCEPTUALISATION OF SUMBA PEOPLE IN INTERPRETING *NUKKU ZARA* IN  
RITUAL SPEECH OF *PANGADI NGA'A PABENUDI WE'E MARAPU*

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this research is to identify and describe the cultural practice of conceptualisation of Sumba people in interpreting *Nukku Zara* in the ritual speech of *Pangadi Nga'a Pabenudi We'e Marapu*. The research method used is qualitative research with an ethnographic approach. The collection techniques were observation, interview, and document study. Data analysis begins with data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results show that the Sumbanese conceptualisation of the existence of *Marapu* and *Nuku Zara* is always placed in the realm of the existence of the divine creating the universe and the life of all creatures. The role of *Nuku Zara* in the Social and Religious Structure plays a central role as a divine entity that is the main purpose of all forms of respect and rituals. The symbolism in the *Pangadi Nga'a Pabenudi We'e Marapu* Ritual is Betel nut and areca nut in Sumba culture symbolise the unity of communication between humans and ancestral spirits and the Gods, in addition, rice and water symbolise life and fertility. The shift in meaning in the contemporary context due to the pressure of advancing modernisation causes most of the local wisdom with noble values in it to be increasingly degraded and eroded in meaning and the lack of awareness of the younger generation to maintain and preserve local wisdom.

**Keywords:** Conceptualization, *Nukku Zara*, and *Pangadi Nga'a Pabenudi We'e Marapu*.

**INTRODUCTION**

The Sumbanese conceptualization of *Marapu*'s existence has always been placed in the realm of the existence of the Divine who created the universe and the life of all creatures. The Sumbanese concept of the supreme being is known by the expression *Ama magholo/Ina Marawi* which literally means the father who spins and the mother who weaves (Neonbasu, 2016; Ama Kamuri & Sabon Ola, 2023). The titles of the Creator point to the central function and supreme essence, while the ancestral spirits are the intermediaries that connect humans and the Creator (Panda, 2023). All human existence is present and concrete with the hope of getting the gift of a new life that is better than before. The Sumbanese understanding of

*Marapu* is painted as the maker and sustainer of life (Dwinanto et al., 2019). Therefore, in the context of rituals, the name of the Creator is not spoken directly because it is considered a sacred name.

The whole essence of culture is contained in language and language is a cultural requirement. The notion of language as a cultural requirement can be interpreted in two ways. *First*, language is a diachronic cultural requirement because we learn culture through language; *Second*, based on a more theoretical point of view, language is a cultural requirement because the material or material forming language is the same type as the material or material forming the entire culture (Fowler, n.d.). Human social life is impossible if there is no culture. Culture can be understood as something that has raised humans from the level of social animals to and at the top of life as cultured humans. Humans cannot survive as humans without culture. Culture has fulfilled a number of functions including can be seen through several roles, among others; culture: (a) culture defines values; (b) forms personality; (c) forms patterns of behavior; (d) frames individual views; (e) is a source of knowledge; (f) as information and communication; (g) provides solutions in complicated situations; (h) teaches interpretation of traditions; (i) builds cultural social relations and explains differences (Liliweri, 2014).

Language and culture are symbols of identity that signify the existence of the ethnic group (Djawa, et al., 2021). Culture plays an important role in people's lives as members of an ethnic group. The reason is clear and understandable that culture functions as an identity marker that identifies a community as a member of an ethnic group and at the same time distinguishes it from other ethnic groups (Bustan & Kabelen, 2023). These beauties can be seen in the words that are used repeatedly. In addition, there are words that are spoken slowly and there are also words that are spoken quickly and require high pressure. The intestines of the slaughtered chicken are used as a source of reading for the *Rato* (priests) regarding the existence of signs that imply meaning according to the perception of the Tana Righu community. The truth will be reflected and read in the chicken intestines; whether the ancestral spirits accept their requests or not. This is interesting to reveal because the Tana Righu community does not talk to each other to get a response back, but rather there is one-way communication with and abstract.

The function of worship is also reflected in the awareness of the Tana Righu community regarding the relationship between speakers and recipients and the communication pattern is one-way and monologue. Given that the recipient is supernatural and abstract, it tends to be sacred and the speech used has the power to build interactions between humans and ancestral spirits. Sacred communication involves direct contact with supernatural forces where verbal and nonverbal signs carry magical meanings (Filippov, 2022; Genua et al., 2023).(Genua et al., n.d.) To initiate communication with ancestral spirits, the first thing that is done by the *Rato* 'priest' is to offer rice which is sprinkled with the aim of knocking on the door of the spirits to come and take part and sit on the mats that have been prepared. The worship of the ancestral spirits is marked by the provision of food in the form of betel nut and areca nut.

One of the important rituals in *Marapu* belief is the provision of food and drink to ancestral spirits known as *Pangadi Nga'a Pabenu di We'e Marapu*. The act of feeding and drinking is performed to invoke blessings from the ancestral spirits and God. This ritual is filled with sacred rituals that reflect the Sumbanese people's perception of *Nuku Zara* as the ruler of nature and the support of human life. Through this speech, deep linguistic symbolism is used to connect the human world with the spiritual realm, giving new meaning to every aspect of human life.

To vaporize the phenomenon of language in *Nuku Zara* 's concept, we use anthropolinguistic theory which integrates language and culture, emphasizing the interaction between linguistic practices and social context. Language reflects and shapes human thinking and cultural practices. Key aspects of anthropolinguistics are examining language as a cultural resource, the role of social identity in communities, and the historical evolution of language in relation to human cognition (Duranti & George, 2023).

However, in the midst of technological development, traditional belief systems face significant challenges. Modernization, the influence of formal religion as well as social change have brought about a shift in the way Sumba people understand and practice *Marapu* rituals . Younger generations exposed to the times often view their ancestral traditions with a different perspective (Denar et al., 2023). The values associated with *Marapu* including the perception of *Nuku Zara* have begun to shift, both in social and spiritual contexts.

In recent years, many researchers have conducted studies on *Marapu* on Sumba Island with different focuses of study, but this research specifically highlights the conceptualization of *Nuku Zara* in the context of *Pangadi Nga'a Pabenu di We'e Marapu* ritual speech . This research places a focus on aspects of language and symbolism, shifting meanings in contemporary contexts in ritual speech, which have not been explored much in previous studies, thus this research paves the way for understanding how language in this tradition plays a role in building and maintaining spiritual beliefs.

This research is urgent because of the lack of knowledge of the younger generation in maintaining cultural roots and local wisdom in contemporary developments about the value and meaning of culture as a characteristic of Sumba society. In addition, to strengthen and maintain local wisdom in the midst of technological developments and encourage the preservation and development of oral tradition as a nation's identity. The purpose of this research is to identify and describe the conceptualization of Sumba people in interpreting *Nukku Zara*.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This research is qualitative research (Cheong et al., 2023). Qualitative research produces descriptive analysis procedures and does not use statistical analysis procedures or other quantitative means (Miles et al., 2014). Qualitative research is based on efforts to build a view that will be researched and detailed, formed with words, holistic images (Moleong, 2016). This research is located in Tana Righu. Data

collection was conducted from July to October. The data sources in this research consist of two, namely primary data sources and secondary data. Primary data sources were obtained directly from the Rato “traditional priests” or traditional elders, while secondary data sources are data obtained from various sources that strengthen the main data. Data collection techniques are observation, interview, and document study.

The observation stage involved researchers directly observing the ritual process of feeding and drinking to ancestral spirits. The interview technique involved researchers conducting in-depth interviews with Rato or traditional priests who know and often carry out traditional rites in Tana Righu. The interview also involved recording techniques, and *simak catat*. The results of the recording technique were then transcribed in written form. Document study serves to document the process of ritual speech by taking pictures, and documents related to research problems. After the data is collected, the author conducts qualitative analysis and interpretation. The stages in interpreting the data are grouping the data into sub-themes in accordance with the direction the author wants to go. Furthermore, the data is selected to remove irrelevant data and repeated data. Data that is considered inadequate or unclear is sought and deepened again. Then the data that has been codified and has been reduced, interpreted or analysed and compiled in the form of a descriptive narrative.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Sumba people's conceptualization of Nuku Zara

In the context of *Marapu* belief. Nuku Zara is a term used by the people of Tana Righu to refer to the First Man and to the Creator. *Nuku Zara* is interpreted as the highest manifestation in the spiritual realm that creates and maintains life. In the *Pangadi Nga'a Pabenudi We'e Marapu* ritual, *Nuku Z ara* is presented in prayers and praises addressed to the spirits of ancestors, spirits of nature, and the Creator. Conceptually, *Nuku Zara* is not just words, but there are important symbols that describe the harmonious relationship between humans and nature, ancestors, and God. The phrase *Ama Magholo Ina Marawi*, which means “Father who spins, and Mother who weaves”, shows how the Tana Righu community conceptualizes God as a creator who is active in regulating the universe and human life. In this case, ritual language plays an important role as a means to connect the real world with the supernatural world.

The people of Sumba interpret *Nuku Zara* as an entity that cannot be accessed directly by humans. Therefore, ancestral spirits become important intermediaries that connect humans with God. The existence of *Nuku Zara* in this ritual speech shows the concept of interconnectedness between everything in the world, both visible and invisible. This shows that *Marapu* belief is a religious system rooted in the daily life of the Sumbanese people, where nature, humans and ancestral spirits are interconnected entities. The whole life of the Sumbanese community is inseparable from the role of ancestral spirits, they believe that the dead do not just leave life but are still around them who always guard and protect from various

disasters. This belief is why local people always practice cultural rituals because every culture contains spiritual values.

This ritual implies the value of obedience and can be seen in the actions of the Tana Righu people who hold full trust in ancestral spirits that are passed down from generation to generation and practiced in every action. Every action taken certainly has taboos that are prohibited (Djawa, et. Al., 2023).

The concept of *Nuku Zara* is also reflected in local wisdom that maintains harmony with nature. In their daily actions, Sumba people believe that every human action must be carried out with care and respect for nature. *Nuku Zara* is interpreted as the protector of nature, so any form of destructive action is considered a violation of the Creator, nature, and ancestral spirits. This belief gives birth to an attitude of life that respects the environment and avoids behaviors that can damage the balance of the ecosystem. Thus the concept of *Nuku Zara* influences the way Sumba people see and treat the surrounding nature, making it an ethical and spiritual symbol that guides human behavior.

### ***Nuku Zara* 's Role in Social and Religious Structures**

In the social and religious structure of Sumbanese society, *Nuku Zara* plays a central role as a divine entity that is the main purpose of all forms of respect and rituals. Every ritual held by the people of Sumba, especially those related to *Marapu*. It is always related to efforts to get closer to the spirits of ancestors, spirits of nature, and the Creator. The *Pangadi Nga'a Pabenudi We'e Marapu* ceremony is one of the concrete examples of how the people of Sumba honor the ancestral spirits and ask for God's word through prayer offerings by giving food and drink. The act of feeding and minimizing is a form of community gratitude for the abundance of crops, such as janggung, rice, and other types of crops.

In the social structure, traditional figures such as the Rato "Customary Priest" have an important role in delivering prayers to the ancestral spirits. This role shows how important *Nuku Zara* 's position is in maintaining social balance, as rituals and prayers are not only a spiritual endeavor, but also a way to maintain social order. *Nuku Zara* is not only respected in a religious context but also socially where the unity and harmony of the community is highly dependent on the continuation of the ritual and the involvement of the local community. As a divine entity, *Nuku Zara* helps a sense of security, peace and order in the community, all Sumba from young to old are involved in maintaining the values contained in the ritual. *Nuku Zara* is believed to be able to correct the words of the Rato "traditional priests" if there are mistakes in the ritual.

### **Symbolism in the *Pangadi Nga'a Pabenudi We'e Marapu* Ritual**

The *Pangadi Nga'a Pabenudi We'e Marapu* ritual is one of the important rituals in the *Marapu* faith in which there is cultural symbolism. Every element in this ritual, from the speech to the objects used, has a symbolic meaning in the beliefs of the Sumba people. The speech performed during the ritual is not just words but

contains prayers and requests addressed to ancestral spirits, and God. One of the important symbols in this ritual is betel nut and areca nut. Betel and areca nut in Sumbanese culture symbolize the unity of communication between humans and ancestral spirits and the Gods. Chewing betel nut and areca nut during a ritual is a form of respect and an opening of communication with the spiritual world. This reflects the close relationship between humans and nature, and the importance of balance in social and spiritual life. In Sumba, it reflects symbolic behavior that aims to achieve safety and harmony in community life (Nikmatila et al., 2023). In addition, the speech uttered by traditional priests not only contains religious meaning but also reflects social and cultural values. For example, the use of symbolic language in the speech of *Pangadi Nga'a Pabenudi We'e Marapu* shows the strength and depth of Sumba people's belief in ancestral spirits.

In this culture, every speech has magical powers that are believed to open the way between humans and the spiritual world, allowing grace and protection to those who perform the ritual correctly. If the ritual is not carried out correctly, then the person who says it will get calamities, both sick, dead pets, and crop failure. Other elements in this ritual are rice and water which symbolize life and fertility. This symbolism not only contains an aesthetic aspect but is also part of the way the people of Sumba maintain a relationship with the spirits of their ancestors. Each symbol in this ritual has a specific function to connect the ritual participants with greater forces, both natural and spiritual, which are interpreted as the support of their lives.

### **Shifting Meanings in Contemporary Contexts**

The rapid development of technology is also the biggest challenge to maintaining cultural values or local wisdom. The nobility of cultural values as local wisdom is certainly not without challenges. The pressure of modernization has caused most of the local wisdom with noble values in it to be increasingly degraded and eroded in meaning. This has become a reality as more and more people do not understand culture properly. Cultural rites are still practiced, but the content and philosophy behind these rites are not well understood. In addition, the strong materialistic lifestyle has led to commercial cultural practices, where people carry out cultural activities only for economic gain and not to gain life wisdom (Denar, et.al.2023). In the contemporary context, efforts to preserve the meaning of Nuku Zara are becoming increasingly important. Rato (traditional priests) in Sumba are trying to revive traditional rituals with a more relevant approach for the younger generation through Marapu community organizations. The Rato have an important role as spiritual leaders who guide the community in carrying out cultural practices. Their role as custodians of tradition and religious authorities strengthens their social status within the community structure. Through these rites their position is recognized and respected by the entire indigenous community and ensures that traditional values are kept alive and passed on to the next generation.

The ritual is also a means of cultural knowledge distribution, through participation in the ceremony, the younger generation learns about noble values, the meaning of the symbols in the ritual and maintaining a harmonious relationship with nature

and the spiritual world. In a world increasingly connected and full of outside cultural influences, this ritual becomes a symbol of resistance to global cultural homogeneity. Through the performance of rituals, such as Pangadi Nga'a Pabenu di We'e Marapu, the people of Sumba maintain their unique identity while affirming their attachment to traditional values.

## CONCLUSION

From the results of the above research, it can be concluded that the conceptualization of the Sumba people in interpreting Nuku Zara is a form of respect for ancestral spirits, spirits of nature, and the Creator. Nuku Zara is not just a spiritual entity in Marapu belief, but also a symbol that connects humans with nature and the spiritual world. The role of Nuku Zara in the social and religious structure of the Sumbanese community reflects the importance of community unity linked by noble values, despite the influence of modernization that can cause a shift in meaning, this tradition is still maintained as a form of identity and continuity of cultural values.

In addition, the symbolism in this ritual shows that each element in the ritual has a deep meaning related to the spirituality and worldview of the community.

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