

RITUAL PROCESS IN THE MARAPU FUNERAL CEREMONY OF EAST SUMBA SOCIETY: A STUDY ON PRACTICE AND CULTURAL SYMBOLISM

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Ritual process, funeral process, cultural symbolism, ritual transmission	This research, entitled Ritual Process in the <i>Marapu</i> Funeral Ceremony of East Sumba Society: A Study on Practice and Cultural Symbolism explores the <i>Marapu</i> funeral ceremony of East Sumba as a vital cultural practice that reflects the community's spiritual beliefs and social identity. The research aims to describe the stages of the ritual, identify its symbolic elements, and explain how the tradition is transmitted across generations. Using a qualitative ethnographic method, data were collected through in-depth interviews with a key informant from Kampung Raja Prailiu and document analysis. The findings reveal that the <i>Marapu</i> funeral consists of several structured stages, such as body preparation, lying in state, setting the burial day, procession, and closing; each reflecting social hierarchy and spiritual values. Symbolic elements such as horses, buffalo, red cloth, and gongs represent respect, power, and the connection between the living and the dead. The transmission of this tradition occurs mainly through oral teaching and ritual practice led by traditional leaders, supported by local and governmental preservation efforts. In conclusion, the <i>Marapu</i> funeral ceremony remains a living heritage that preserves East Sumba's cultural identity while adapting to social changes.
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INTRODUCTION

Ritual practices hold an essential place in human societies as structured actions that express cultural values, religious beliefs, and social identities. Funeral rituals, in particular, serve as symbolic transitions that mark the passage from life to death, strengthen communal bonds, and preserve inherited traditions. In East Sumba, funeral ceremonies remain deeply rooted in the *Marapu* belief system, which emphasizes ancestral reverence, spiritual continuity, and cosmological balance. Despite their cultural richness, these rituals are rarely documented in academic writing, creating a gap in scholarly understanding of how traditional communities navigate the symbolic and structural dimensions of death. This study addresses this gap by examining the ritual processes and cultural symbolism embedded in the *Marapu* funeral ceremonies of East Sumba.

The *Marapu* belief system serves as a framework shaping Sumbanese views of life, death, and the spiritual world. Guided by ancestral teachings, the community performs funeral rituals not only as expressions of grief but also as obligations to ensure the deceased's safe journey to the ancestral realm. These rituals involve symbolic offerings, chants, animal sacrifices, and communal participation, each representing a deeper meaning within the Sumbanese cosmology. Drawing on Geertz's (1973)

interpretive anthropology, which emphasizes culture as a system of symbols, the funeral ceremony can be understood as a cultural text through which the community communicates values, hierarchical relations, and spiritual beliefs. However, the absence of systematic documentation poses a risk to the preservation of these symbolic meanings.

In addition to their symbolic components, *Marapu* funeral rituals follow a structured sequence that reflects Van Gennep's (1909) theory of rites of passage. According to this framework, rituals progress through three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation. These stages parallel the funeral process in East Sumba, where the deceased undergoes physical preparation, symbolic separation from the living, and eventual reintegration into the spiritual realm. Although previous studies have discussed *Marapu* rituals in general, few have provided a detailed description of how these stages unfold in the funeral context of East Sumba, particularly within the unique socio-cultural setting of Kampung Raja Prailiu. This gap highlights the need for a focused study that connects theoretical frameworks with empirical cultural practices.

Modern influences such as religion, economic change, and globalization also affect the continuity of *Marapu* rituals. While many Sumbanese today identify with major world religions, elements of *Marapu* continue to shape their cultural identity in syncretic ways. Some ritual practices have undergone modifications, such as reductions in the scale of ceremonies or the number of animals sacrificed, yet their symbolic meanings remain intact. Smith (1987) notes that rituals are adaptable cultural forms that can transform while preserving their essence. This dynamic nature underscores the importance of documenting the contemporary practices of the *Marapu* funeral tradition before further changes occur.

Given the richness and complexity of *Marapu* funeral rituals, systematic research is needed to understand how the ritual process, symbolism, and knowledge transmission function within the East Sumba community. Previous studies, such as those by Lu (2016), Djawa (2014), and Soeriadiredja (2016), provide valuable insights into Sumbanese culture but do not specifically focus on the step-by-step sequence of funeral ceremonies or the symbolism embedded within each stage. To address this scholarly gap, this research adopts an ethnographic approach, drawing on theoretical insights from Van Gennep and Geertz. It aims to document the ritual steps, interpret the cultural symbols, and explore how these traditions are transmitted within the community of Kampung Raja Prailiu.

Therefore, this study seeks to analyze the ritual process of the *Marapu* funeral ceremony in the East Sumba society, as well as the cultural symbolism that characterizes each stage. By providing a detailed and contextualized description, this research contributes to cultural preservation, enriches academic discussions related to indigenous traditions, and offers a deeper understanding of how the people of East Sumba interpret death, ancestry, and communal identity through ritual practice.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using documentary and ethnographic approaches. The qualitative method enabled the researcher to explore the *Marapu* funeral rituals in depth by focusing on meanings, interpretations, and cultural contexts. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured ethnographic interviews with a key informant from Kampung Raja Prailiu, while secondary data were collected from books, journals, and prior studies on *Marapu* traditions and East Sumba funeral practices. Because funeral events were unpredictable and could not be observed directly during the research

period, documentary sources and interviews served as the main basis for understanding the sequence of ritual stages and the symbolic elements embedded within them.

The research was conducted in Kampung Raja Prailiu, located in the Kambera District of East Sumba Regency, a traditional village known for preserving ancestral customs and ritual practices. Data collection took place over one month. During the first week, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with a female community member who possessed extensive knowledge about funeral traditions and had firsthand experience participating in the rituals. The remaining three weeks were allocated for organizing, processing, and analyzing the collected data to ensure accuracy and consistency of the findings.

Data collection in this study involved documentation, interviews, field notes, and the researcher's active role as an instrument. Documentation included an examination of written sources, such as previous research, historical records of funeral ceremonies, and literature on *Marapu*, enabling the researcher to identify recurring cultural patterns. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide that allowed flexibility in exploring the deeper meanings behind ritual practices. Interviews were recorded on mobile phones, and additional field notes were taken to capture contextual details not captured in the audio, such as nonverbal cues and environmental conditions. As the primary research instrument, the researcher interacted directly with the community and interpreted the cultural information with sensitivity to local norms.

The data analysis process involved two steps: documentation analysis and interview analysis. Documentation analysis consisted of reviewing relevant written materials to identify the ritual stages, symbolic objects, and cultural meanings associated with the *Marapu* funeral ceremony. Interview data were transcribed, coded, and categorized based on recurring themes, including ritual sequences, symbolic interpretations, and the transmission of traditions across generations. Through these procedures, the researcher synthesized the findings to present a clear description of the ritual process and cultural symbolism within the *Marapu* funeral tradition of East Sumba.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The findings of this study described the ritual process, symbolic elements, and modes of transmission that characterized the *Marapu* funeral ceremony in East Sumba. The data were obtained through interviews and document analysis, and the presentation of results directly addressed the three research questions. The discussion integrated the findings with relevant theories, including Van Gennep's rites of passage and Geertz's symbolic anthropology.

The Process of the Marapu Funeral Ceremony

The analysis showed that the *Marapu* funeral ceremony followed a structured sequence of stages, beginning with awakening/confirming death, preparation of the body, preparation of the grave, the traditional invitation, the arrival of relatives from afar, burial, and the final settlement. The core steps included preparing the body, placing it in the traditional house, determining the burial day through customary deliberation, conducting the funeral procession, and completing the burial at the family graveyard. These stages reflected the ritual order and communal cooperation that were central to the social identity of East Sumba. Although variations existed by social class, such as a more elaborate process for noble families, the general sequence remained consistent across the community. According

to Van Gennep's framework, the funeral stages represented the phases of separation, transition, and incorporation that marked the deceased's passage to the spiritual realm.

Symbolic Elements in the Rituals

The funeral ceremony contained numerous symbolic objects and actions that conveyed spiritual, social, and cosmological meanings. Sacrificial animals such as horses, buffaloes, pigs, and chickens symbolized guidance, honor, spiritual cleansing, and divination. Ritual objects such as red cloth, coconuts, betel leaves, *mamuli*, and gongs expressed values related to bravery, purity, communication with ancestors, and clan identity. Gravestones and carvings also reflected social status, particularly distinctions between noble and common families. These symbols formed part of what Geertz described as "webs of significance," in which ritual objects were not merely functional but served as carriers of meaning that strengthened collective beliefs and identity. Thus, the symbolic elements of the *Marapu* funeral played a crucial role in expressing cultural values and guiding the spirit to the afterlife.

Transmission of the Funeral Tradition

The transmission of the *Marapu* funeral tradition occurred through intergenerational learning, oral instruction, and participation in ritual activities. Children and younger generations learned by observing and assisting in ceremonies, gradually internalizing ritual sequences, chants, and customary norms. Traditional leaders (*wunang / rato*) served as key transmitters, teaching ritual language, overseeing apprenticeships, and safeguarding exclusive knowledge reserved for specific clans or family lines. Transmission also occurred through moral narratives and stories that reinforced obedience, communal responsibility, and preparation for ritual obligations. Although modernization brought changes, such as simplified rituals due to economic constraints and government regulations, the community maintained the tradition's core symbolic and spiritual meanings. This demonstrated cultural resilience, as the *Marapu* funeral ceremony continued to serve as both a religious practice and a means of preserving cultural identity.

Discussion

The findings indicated that the *Marapu* funeral ceremony was not only a ritual of death but also a cultural system that organized social order, affirmed identity, and maintained continuity across generations. The ritual stages aligned with Van Gennep's theoretical structure, highlighting the transition of the deceased and the social function of reaffirming communal bonds. The symbolic elements supported Geertz's concept of thick description, in which rituals expressed layered meanings embedded in material and non-material symbols. Furthermore, the transmission of the tradition illustrated how oral practices, apprenticeship, and communal participation helped preserve culture despite social change. Thus, the *Marapu* funeral ceremony served as a dynamic expression of cultural heritage that adapted to modern conditions while maintaining its essential spiritual and symbolic framework.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study showed that the *Marapu* funeral ceremony in East Sumba followed a structured sequence of ritual stages, beginning with the preparation of the body and ending with the final burial at the family grave. These stages reflected the principles of separation, transition, and incorporation as explained by Van Gennep, indicating the community's belief in guiding the spirit toward the ancestral realm. The ceremony was also rich in symbolic elements, such as sacrificial animals, red cloth, coconuts, *sirih pinang*, *mamuli*, and gongs, which carried spiritual, social, and cosmological meanings. Through

Geertz's interpretive lens, these ritual symbols served as cultural expressions conveying identity, lineage, status, and belief systems. In addition, the study found that the *Marapu* funeral tradition was transmitted through oral teaching, intergenerational participation, and the guiding role of elders, enabling the community to preserve essential ritual meanings despite ongoing modernization. Overall, the *Marapu* funeral ceremony served not only as a religious practice but also as a cultural institution that sustained social cohesion and reinforced East Sumba's ancestral heritage.

Based on these findings, several suggestions are proposed to support the continuity and preservation of the *Marapu* funeral tradition. Local communities and families are encouraged to involve younger generations in ritual activities and to continue documenting stories, symbols, and ceremonial procedures to ensure that cultural knowledge remains accessible. Elders and ritual leaders are advised to maintain active roles as cultural transmitters by recording or teaching ritual language and symbolism more systematically. Local government institutions may strengthen cultural preservation programs, integrate local knowledge into school curricula, and create cultural spaces where traditions can be practiced and studied. Academics and future researchers are expected to further explore the dynamics of *Marapu* rituals in relation to contemporary social changes, symbolism, and intergenerational transmission. Through collaborative efforts, the *Marapu* funeral tradition can continue to thrive as an essential expression of East Sumba's cultural identity amid evolving social contexts.

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