

The Analysis of Food Symbols in the 'Pakan' Ritual of the Penan Saoh in Ulu Jelalong Community, Bintulu Sarawak

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Abstract: The *Pakan* ritual is a performance performed in the Penan Saoh Ulu Jelalong community to be presented to *Baleik*. The presentation consists of symbolic elements based on each type of food served. These symbolic elements are involved with the belief and cosmological system that surround the lives of Penan Saoh community. The main focus of this research is to analyse the symbol of food in the *Pakan* ritual from the viewpoint of non-verbal communication. This research used an ethnographic approach, and the researchers also participated in the ritual. The data was collected through an in-depth interview with the main informant, *Vaie Jau'u*, and other ritual practitioners. The research was conducted in Kampung Julaihi Penan Saoh Ulu Jelalong, Bintulu, Sarawak. The data analysis found that the food delivered to *Baleik* had its own meaning and could be interpreted through shape, colour, and the way it was presented. The food in the *Pakan* tray means love, gratitude, prayer, and hope for more sustenance in the upcoming year. The research also found that the ritual is still practiced to this day by the Penan Saoh Ulu Jelalong community and becomes the identity of its existence in the state of Sarawak.

Keywords: Symbol; Food; Pakan ritual; Tapok; Penan Ulu Jelalong

1. INTRODUCTION

Human life is inseparable from the symbols that influence the culture and life of its people. According to Mohamad Maulana et. al (2021), the relationship between nature and man is inseparable because it has highly sacred values, namely the existence of spirits or spirits that have extraordinary powers that control this nature. According to Needham (1972: 62-68), the earliest Penan community groups in the Bintulu district were in the Ulu Sungai Jelalong area. They are believed to have settled since the 19th century and followed Miri District's Niah and Suai areas. Jay Langub (2010-2021), Advance in Asian Human Environmental Research volume 30, states that Penan Saoh initially from Apau Julan and Usun Apau crossed the Seping River, Mali River, and Koyan River and moved to left Jelalong, which entered the Sekelap plain under the leadership of Semalong Julan entered the Jelalong area. Then, he and his companions moved to the right side of the mountain. Semalong leadership was replaced by Semoling Julan and still inhabits the Merurong area then the leadership moved to Sesian Semalong and Upper Jelalong, near the Tinjar area, then to the Temodoh area. Then, move on to the right side of the screen. Sesian was replaced by Turung Semuling, under the leadership of Turung, Penan Saoh settled in Sekuan. Penan Saoh lived for a long time in Sekuan under several leaders, namely Tugang Menyakit and Segali Tugang. The leader of Penan Saoh changed to Bibeng and then moved to the Liuk Area (Sungai Jelalong area) under the rule of the Sultanate of Brunei, then taken over by Senian, moved to the Sengaya area. Under Luton's leadership, Penan Saoh moved to Long Saoh. After Luton died, he was buried in Long Saoh and Luton Cemetery (Klireng Luton) is still in Long Saoh. Nayang had replaced Luton and after that they had moved to Kebulu. Bibeng had replaced Luton upon his death and at this time it was under

British rule. Sagoh Bibeng succeeded his father during the British rule and was later succeeded by Surei Luton. The leadership of Penan Saoh changed to Agau Luton after Surei Luton, again Penan Saoh moved to Ma'au. Agau was replaced by Leng Luton (1941-1945) during Japanese rule then moved to Vadeu (sungai Jelalong area). Subsequently replaced by Busu Agau in the Vadeu area, Jemat Mejiwit moved to the Liuk area again (British kolonel period 1945) and during Avit Busu in 1963 Penan Saoh still settled in the Liuk area until 1973. Subsequently, Ketu Jemat had replaced Avit Busu in 1973, and then they moved to Long Saoh under the leadership of Ketu Jemat. In 2009 the leadership of Penan Saoh was replaced by Julaihi Ketu. Under the leadership of Ketu Jemat, there has been a black history of the villagers where, on March 17, 1997, their longhouse was burned down. After that, the villagers built their new homes on the same site. After 10 years, in August 2008, black history occurred again when the longhouse occupied by had burned down. Therefore, in 2009, the leadership of Ketu Jemat was changed to her son Julaihi Ketu. In 2011, the villagers unanimously agreed move to another area, namely to the Long Metobi area, but still remain in the Long Saoh area, and the Penan Saoh residents still live in Long Metobi until now under the leadership of Julaihi Ketu.

For Langub (1990: 3) Penan communities in the Baram, Belaga, and Limbang areas are believed to have settled for 30 years. They lived in longhouses and villages, especially in the Bintulu and Suai-Niah areas, making migratory farming a major source to replace sago as their main staple food. Penan's population growth has increased from 1990 to 2012. According to the Deputy Director of the State Planning Unit in Sarawak Premier Department, Encik Awie Abang, Penan's population in Sarawak increased from 1990 by 13,186 people to 17,851 people in 2012. In 2019, the total population of the Penan community in Sarawak increased to 21,367 people.

Penan People

Generally, the Penan community is an ethnic group known for living normally at one time. Progress in the present has changed their lives from nomads to a life of permanent residence. But one thing that has not changed in the Penan community is that they attach great importance to the forest as a complement to their daily activities. Like other communities, the Penan community also experienced changes in their practices, especially religious ones. If in the past, all Penan people still believed in the practice of animism, which is a Pagan custom, but nowadays, most of the Penan people in the Ulu Jelalong area have adopted Christianity as their religion, there are even many of the Penan people who have adopted Islam. Even so, some Penan people still practice Pagan customs by worshiping idols such as believing in the power of *baleik* who believe in the power of nature, the sound of birds and so on. Brosius (1990) in his article entitled "*River, Forest and Mountain: The Penan Gang Landscape,*" explains the role of nature in the lives of Penan people, especially the relationship of Penan with nature and the development that is around them from the aspect of caring for resources in the forest. Penan people have a close relationship with nature, especially the shape of the Earth's surface, mountains, rivers, etc, Bakar, F.A. at. al (2023). Every event in the mountains, river valleys, and so on connects with the life of the people of Penan.

According to Datan & Leh (1997: 13), the Penan people have made the forest a site to find their livelihood. The passage of time has transformed all migratory activities into regular activities for the Penan community in Ulu Jelalong. The proof of this is that the forest according to Zafar, Z at. al (2022) has become an important resource for the Penan community to create oil palm plantations. For the Penan people in Ulu Jelalong, the *pakan* ceremony will be held every time they open a new area according to their beliefs and beliefs. The purpose of this ritual is done, so that they are blessed and protected by the power of God, and they will get more lucrative results, even by being virtuous on the ground, so they will continue to be blessed by God and the spirits of their ancestors. According to oral sources by Mr. Nyurak Ketu (Kapit Division resident): December 17, 2021, the Penan community in the Ulu Jelalong area, especially in study area, namely the Julaihi Ketu long house, Long Sauh. The Penans at Rumah Julaihi, or rumah Ketu before being replaced by Mr. Julaihi Ketu, attach great importance to and respect the forest. In 1978, the people of Kampung under the leadership of Mr. Ketu Jemat and his men, fought for their rights when a timber company entered their forest area. For timber companies that have been working in their areas, they are obliged to provide payments as hardeners to the villagers, and their forest reserves are not allowed to be disturbed. The Penan Saoh People's Forest Reserve is now known as "Meluan National Park". Any timber company is not allowed to encroach. This situation proves that the Penan Saoh have great respect for the spirit of nature.



Figure 2. The Ritual Pakan is Attended by the Penan Pagan Community at the Research Area
(Source: Fieldwork, 2022)

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

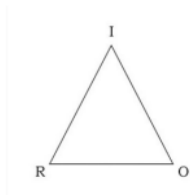
Food refers to symbols rich in various meanings representing an ethnic group or community. Sorre (1962) views food as a symbol of creation that has its own meaning in Christianity. He also discusses food and its relationship with social imbalance. According to him, diet is essential, but it is not just an analysis of the food source; how the food is prepared should also be studied. The perspective of Sorre is supported by Grainers (1976), that it is not only covered from the geographical view where the food is not only seen as food alone but must be viewed through its relation to the environment. This is because food is an essential component of the ritual as it is one of the non-verbal ways of communicating with the extraordinary spirit.

This is precisely similar to the perspective of Rozin (1982) on the attitude towards food preparation as also influenced by the economic and environmental conditions. For example, there is an adaptation to preparing the food to be served. The soybean is a favorite food of the Chinese community. To save fuel, they have accepted the consumption of bean sprouts as one of the food sources that can provide nutrients from soybeans. Cooking the bean sprouts takes only a short time compared to soybeans. He also stated that the characteristics of a culture are not static. Consequently, to sustain the tradition, it can also develop as a mechanism for change. Furthermore, among the driving factors of the changes are the availability of materials, food innovation, and diffusion effects from the assimilation with other ethnicities. This statement is in accordance with the opinions from Shuhirdy et al., (2013) that food is rich in symbolism and plays an important role in human life as well as contributing to a community's customs, traditions, and culture. Meanwhile, in the perspective of Whitt (2011), food is essential to identify the cultural identity of an ethnic group. This is because food not only represents one's personal identity in life, but reflects a community's identity, cultural differences, and boundaries. Additionally, food symbolism also exists in a custom that brings a certain message that has been stated by Foster & Anderson (1978), that food determines the relationship between individuals and groups.

Semiotics in linguistics and culture can be interpreted as a theory of communication. This statement is due to studies of signs and symbols (including the ways people talk, write, sing and smell, gestures, images, music, art, and others) through which people express their feelings, ideas, thoughts, and ideologies. This research covers how meaning is interpreted through sign and symbol systems that can be understood during the perception and interpretation of the situation. The semiotic theory focuses on the cultural and psychological forms that are the basis of language, art, and other cultural expressions used as tools that assist in presentation and give meaning to the event. Among the well-known linguistics in this field are Ferdinand de Saussure, 1857-1913 (father of modern linguistics), Charles Sanders Peirce, 1839-1913 (founder of the pragmatism doctrine), and Roland Barthes, 1915-1980. Semiotic terms represent knowledge that covers various disciplines, such as linguistic studies, signs, symbols, architecture, and visual design (Sobur, 2009). He also added that the sign system of Pierce (1839-1913) is focused on three aspects: icons, indexes,

and symbols. Subsequently, it also focuses on the aspect of representamen that consists of three things: qualisign, sinsign, and legisign.

Peirce (1839-1913) also pointed out that this sign may be read as representamen, while object refers to a concept, thing, or idea. On the other hand, the meaning is a perception, thought, or feeling and an interpretation achieved from the sign given (Danesi, 2004). In addition, the signing model presented by Peirce (1839-1913) is also known as trichotomy or triadic. Peirce (1839-1913) also derived that the meaning of the sign is based on the relationship between three points, which are representation (R), object (O), and interpretation (I). Significantly, (R) is a part of the sign that is perceived through physically referring to something that represents (O), while (I) is a part of the process that interprets the relationship between (R) and (O). The theory used in this research is Peirce's semiotic theory (1839-1913), which is directly related to the focus of the research. Therefore, this writing will provide a basic overview of this theory as it relates to the study of communication, especially in non-verbal communication. Thus, the thinking applied in this research is based on non-verbal communication from the approach of Matsumoto et al., (2011), suggesting that the function of non-verbal communication is divided into three parts. The three parts are defined, regulated, and the message. The relevance of this research is related to non-verbal communication from the statement of Hans & Hans (2015), that in daily life, people communicate by using words seven percent only, and the remaining method of communication is through non-verbal communication (93%). Hence, based on this principle, the meaning of a symbol (food) is a form of non-verbal communication in which the meaning can be interpreted through the theory of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1913)



Key: I - Interpretation
 R - Representamen
 O - Object

3. METHODOLOGY

This discussion was conducted at the research location in Kampung Julaihi Penan Saoh Ulu Jelalong, Bintulu Sarawak where the community is still practicing the ritual of Pakan. This research was conducted in 2019.

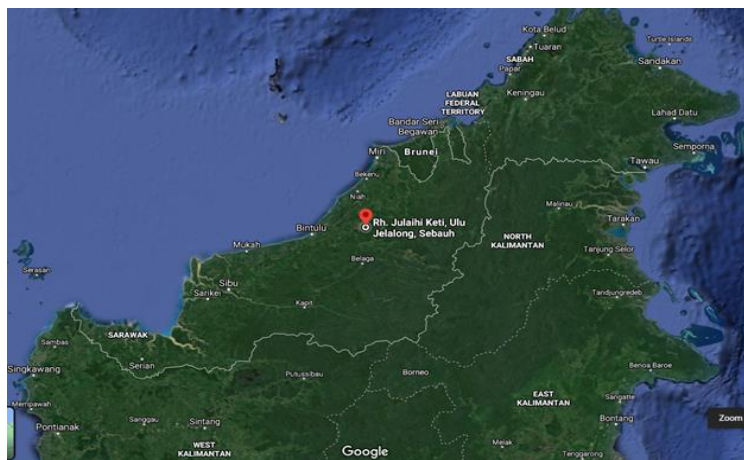




Figure 3: Map of Sarawak State




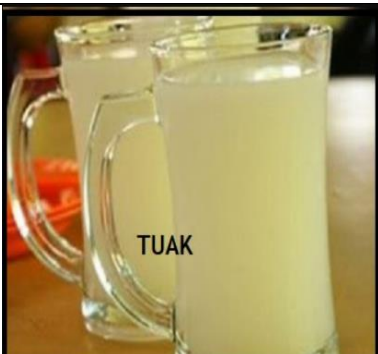
Key: Bintulu



Figure 4: Map of Jelalong and Research Area

This study was conducted using an ethnographic approach which is based on the survey and observation of the research. The in-depth interview was held with Vaie Jau'u and Pengejau Umak, who is the leader and supporter of the ritual of Pakan. Besides, this research also involved library research to obtain the data or information conducted by previous researchers as for reference. The findings of this study will be analysed to identify the food symbols used by the Penan Saoh Ulu Jelalong community in the *Pakan* ritual and it exists with other creatures. This influence has good value in their perspectives because it is the spirit and also the motivation to do good deeds.

Type of food	Figure	Meaning of Symbols
Lupeh		<p>This dish is made from rice, grated coconut, salt, pure leaves and water.</p> <p>It is shaped like a long rectangle and has a salty fat taste.</p> <p>It is prepared by the Penan women a day before the feeding ritual begins.</p> <p>Lupeh dishes are usually sent to Baleik and eaten en masse to the guests during the feeding ritual.</p>
Penyarem		<p>The cake has a sweet taste and brown color.</p> <p>Made from rice flour, wheat flour, water, cooking oil, apong sugar and fried in a small and convex type pan.</p> <p>It is prepared by the Penan women a day before the feeding ritual begins.</p>

<p>Kelapa parut</p>		<p>Vo'nyu is coconut as a grated coconut.</p> <p>Vonyu scar symbolizes the purity and sincerity of people's hearts in hoping and asking for something of their intentions to God (Retalak) and Baleik (Forest Spirit) so that they will always be given protection and safety as long as they seek sustenance on God's Earth.</p> <p>It is prepared by the Penan women a day before the feeding ritual begins.</p>
<p>Sipak dan gulung</p>		<p>A dish dedicated to the guardian or deity of a river or sea is known as a Baleic.</p> <p>Food is the link between humans and Baleik.</p> <p>It must be prepared before the ritual begins.</p>
<p>Vas Kuneng dan Ilu</p>		<p>Vas Kuneng is a yellow rice that carries the meaning of peace and unity and blessings so that you can get abundant life from God.</p> <p>While the Ilu is an egg is the meaning of human life, meaning that humans should be at peace with nature and at peace with God because that egg is placed on a yellow vase.</p> <p>The yellow vase was used to summon the spirit of the ruler who was in the forest. This rice is dyed with turmeric water to get its color.</p>
<p>Burak/Tuak</p>		<p>Wine is a drink to the spirits of the ancestors and the gods when they come to the house when the feeding ceremony is done.</p> <p>The second use of Tuak water is to be served to guests who come. Water is also needed to welcome the arrival of baleik.</p> <p>When guests come to the house during the pakan ceremony, they are asked to pour small quantities of tuak water for the baleik.</p> <p>According to the story of the old people, the water that is thrown will fall on the fodder. So that way, Baleik will know that someone is doing a feeding ceremony.</p>

Lupeh

Lupeh is one of the traditional foods in the life of Penan people. This dish is a long rectangle because it symbolizes the shape of the heart based on Penan community beliefs. Lupeh is wrapped in lerik leaves or pure leaves that are ripe and green and filled with lupeh dough, which is rice that has been pounded into a smooth and white color. The

dish has a fatty taste because it is made from rice and grated coconut. Usually, Lupeh served to guests during the Pakan ritual is eaten with hot coffee or hot tea. In making lupeh, some rules and taboos must be obeyed not only to the lupeh maker, but also to the community around him to maintain the purity of the feed ritual. For example, the Lupeh must be in a state of purity and purity from any impurities. Therefore, the prayer recitation is read to cleanse oneself and the surroundings before making it. The prayer should not be given to any inexperienced or aged individual. This is done to maintain the sanctity and symbol of respect for *Retalak*, who has extraordinary power over ordinary people. According to *Lakei Jau'u*, pinching or touching lupeh in a tray of feed is considered rude and will bring anger to *Retalak*. In Magiman, M. M. (2012) study of the Kadayan people's '*Ritual Makan Tahun*', the element of purity is also clearly seen during the process of wrapping kelupis and making penganan raja, also known as yellow glutinous rice. To maintain the purity of the dish, individuals should take the prayer water first, while only the elderly who have not reached menstruation are allowed to make a dish known as *panganan raja*. Research findings on cultural identity in the context of traditional ethnic cakes Brunei in Sabah by Surayah et.al (2019) also found that tapai making in Bruneian society also has certain abstinence. To maintain the purity of *tapai*, one needs to cleanse oneself and wear clean clothes. In addition, menstruating women are also prohibited from making tapai to maintain the purity of the tapai dish.

Penyarem

Penyarem is a dish that must be offered in the feed tray. The dish is shaped like a hat, and at the end, it forms like small flower petals, brownish in color, and has a sweet taste. The cake's sweet taste comes from the apong sugar produced using candied water from the apong tree. According to the taboos of the Penan community, no one is allowed to enter a special room that stores the penyarem mixture deliberately to avoid being disturbed by evil spirits such as Jinn, demons, and devils, which can lead to death. This is because the food provided to the *Retalak* must be clean and avoid human impurities.

The brown color in the penyarem cake results from using icing sugar, which has a viscous, sweet, and sticky texture. According to the belief system of the Penan people, the brownish color of kuih penyaram symbolizes the wealth of its people, which are rich in forest products that thrive around the area. In contrast to the results of a study obtained by Azah Aziz (2006), which explains that the color yellow in the Malay community is synonymous with symbolic wealth because the color yellow is the color of gold. Thus, Asmah Haji Omar (2005) concluded that the meaning translated through color is culture dependent. This means that a society has its own way of seeing color, and its way of seeing it is not the same as other societies.

Penyarem also carries the meaning of a symbol of love in the beliefs of the community of practitioners. The texture of gula apong which is viscous, sweet and sticky reflects a love that never breaks even though it is far from each other which ultimately leads to unification between Penan communities regardless of Islamic Penan, Christian Penan and traditional Penan. In fact, the traditional Penan people believe that when they eat sweet penyaram cake, they will be able to persuade *Retalak* to provide abundant and long-lasting sustenance, especially in the river and sea, which in turn will unite the entire Penan community.

Yellow Rice and Egg

Yellow rice is a mixture of turmeric. The live turmeric used will give color to the rice that is white. There are two elements (properties) that determine the sign that is consumed from the feed point of view according to the practice of the Penan Saoh community in serving yellow rice in the feed ritual, especially the symbol of application or intention to baleik. It consists of its properties, color, taste, motifs, and decor. Looking at the nature of yellow rice as smooth and smooth, Penan saoh community believes that this nature brings meaning that is divided into two fractions, namely to nature and to the unification of Penan Saoh community and kinship ties of its inhabitants. The purpose of yellow rice dish is generally expected penan Saoh community in kampung Julaihi Ketu Ulu Jelalong, Bintulu Sarawak, will live in harmony and unity. However, for family members, this trait responds as a symbol of family ties where it is hoped that these bonds will be strong with each other.

The yellow color of rice is a symbol of wealth and prosperity. In the event of yellow rice feed is prepared on a small plate, and then will be placed chicken eggs that have been cooked on it. Yellow rice means that people are always given an abundance of sustenance and prosperity. Yellow rice will be sown around the feeding area. By sowing yellow rice (while reciting spells) around the feeding area, all disasters are believed to be avoided. The power and greatness

of this yellow rice can be transferred to the environment, the healer, and even the patient. The strength and power of the evil elements in the environment can be weakened when exposed to the spellbound yellow rice. While the *Ilu* is an egg, it is the meaning of human life, meaning humans should be at peace with nature and God because that egg is placed on a yellow vase.

Sipak and Gulung

Sipak ngan gulung is a typical dish provided in one plate for river keepers, gods, spirits, and Goblin. According to Mr. Lijak Amit, interviewed on June 2, 2023, Sipak ngan gulung is a dish that must be in the Pakan ritual to be presented to Baleik. Sipak ngan gulung combines betel elements, apong cigarettes, tobacco, lime, and areca nut and is believed to connect humans in the natural world and Baleik (supernatural).

Buraq or Tuak

Buraq is fermented water made from rice and yeast. *Buraq* water is a drink offered to the Gods (*baleik*), the spirits of ancestors, and when they come to the house when the feeding ceremony is performed. The second use of *Buraq* water is to be served to guests who come. Furthermore, *buraq* water is also needed to welcome the arrival of *Retalak*. When guests come to the house during the *Pakan* ceremony, they are asked to throw (*mujek*) *buraq* water in small quantities for *baleik*. According to the story of the ancients, the water of the discarded *buraq* will fall into the jar *baleik* *pekurip* (power of God). In this way, the *baleik* *pekurip* will know that someone is performing the tilting ceremony. If he feels that he should attend the ceremony, he will.

4. DISCUSSION

The symbolism found in the *pakana* ritual cannot only be described through physical activity but also reflects the purpose of the act. According to Magiman, M.M. et al. (2020), In conveying the meaning of the purpose, it includes the obvious aspect which is the aspect that leads to the symbolism and the religious form of ritual. The symbols and meanings of the Penan Saoh Ulu Jelalong community are indeed adapted from the experiences of their community through the observation of events in their daily lives. The explanation of the meaning of the symbol reflects the traditional cosmology of the Penan Saoh Ulu Jelalong community which is transmitted through the symbols of food in the *Pakan* ritual. The use of symbols of tradition or animism is taken from the context of the life of the Penan Saoh Ulu Jelalong community itself. This is because they are very closely attached to nature, especially reflecting on the spirits of the river, sea, land and forest (Mohamed et al., 2010). From the reflections, the people discover their meaning of life and are represented by nature. The characteristics of nature, such as the supernatural power that is called *Ipok* has become the picture for living as a community for Penan Saoh Ulu Jelalong people as the source of knowledge in their life.

The definition of a symbol may change from time to time according to the circumstances or will from society. The symbols are often interpreted ambiguously because they can be interpreted more than once at certain times. Therefore, symbols have specific meanings based on the will, understandings, and definitions of the people at that time. Every ceremony must have its rules for it to be accepted by these supernatural powers. The Penan Saoh Ulu Jelalong Bintulu, also do not miss out on the legacy of animism inherited from their ancestors. These elements of animism are still practiced because of the daily necessity for those who still believe in the powers possessed by supernatural elements such as spirit, 'penunggu', and others. They believe that if these elements are not neutralized it will result in undesirable conditions in their lives that will affect the sustenance from the jungle and river.

5. SUMMARY

Food in the dowry *Tapok* of *Pakan*, of the ethnic group of Penan Saoh Ulu Jelalong, Bintulu Sarawak brings the meanings of love, togetherness, happiness, and also prayer and hope that can be seen from the perspective of physical artefacts that are related to non-verbal communication. Even though the study refers to the same ethnicity of the Penan Ulu Jelalong tribe, the differences still exist. This proves that there are differences in the existence of the Penan ethnicity that indirectly brings the similarities and differences in meaning between the food symbols in the *Pakan* ritual.

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