

**Symbolic Reverence: An Ethnographic Study on the *Tonggoluan*
and *Pusi*' Death Rituals Within Bolaang Mongondow Society
Through Victor Turner's Perspective**

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ABSTRACT

This ethnography study investigates the sociocultural significance of the *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi*' death rituals that persist in Bolaang Mongondow society despite the threat of modernity. Current understanding ignores its ontological role in preserving the existence of Bolaang Mongondow, so this research aims to explain these traditions as a basis for identity formation and social reproduction through the lens of Victor Turner's symbolic anthropology. Using a rigorous ethnographic field study, data was collected through in-depth interviews and observation of six elders in Bolaang Mongondow. These findings reveal that *Tonggoluan* graves encapsulate the eternal spiritual connection between living and deceased ancestors. Its sacralization reflects a strong belief in a metaphysical realm that upholds the collective memory of this community. Meanwhile, wearing *Pusi*' mourning clothes symbolizes sadness and passing down cultural values from generation to generation. This ritual also builds communal solidarity during mourning, reaffirming Bolaang Mongondow's identity. Essentially, these two traditions combine the temporary and the eternal through the creative reproduction of meaning, forming the basis of local existence. Therefore, maintaining this death ceremony amidst the erosion of modern culture is very important to ensure the continuity of the unique identity of this indigenous community. This encourages a deeper global appreciation of the role of death rituals in strengthening the cultural vitality of the Bolaang Mongondow community group.

Keywords: death rituals; indigenous identity; Bolaang Mongondow; *Tonggoluan*, *Pusi*'; symbolic anthropology.

INTRODUCTION

Inherited ancestral customs often carry deep philosophical values that play an essential role in strengthening communal identity and social cohesion (Ayuningtias, 2023; Budiwanti, 2000; Frans & Wardani, 2015; Hawkins, 2012; Miftahudin & Sugitanata, 2020; Nediari & Hartanti, 2014; Subakir & Dodi, 2020; Sugitanata, Aminah, & Muhasim, 2023; Suprpto, 2020; Yudarta & Pasek, 2015)). This role increases at critical moments in the life cycle, such as death (Lahay et al., 2023; Solihin, 2013). The Bolaang Mongondow indigenous people in North Sulawesi still diligently uphold two death rituals – *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi'* – even though modernity has often eroded local values.

Previous studies focused mainly on the ceremonial aspects of death traditions, for example, post-death tahlilan (Mas'ari & Syamsuatir, 2018; Rodin, 2013; Warisno, 2017). Some of them studied the Islamic eschatological concept of the death ritual (Tottoli, 2020) or debates around the definition of death in Islam (Miller, Ziad-Miller, & Elamin, 2014). However, the fundamental sociocultural meaning underlying death traditions remains poorly understood.

Therefore, this ethnographic study seeks to reveal the deep and complex meaning of the Bolaang Mongondow death ritual. Applying Victor Turner's symbolic anthropology framework, *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi'* rituals are conceptualized as a spiritual and cultural basis for constructing communal identity and social order. Exposing such ontological functions challenges the assumption that they are merely superficial ceremonial relics of the past. This ritual also protects Bolaang Mongondow culture from the threats of modernity.

Through a rich analysis of the symbols and structures of *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi'*, this research aims to spur greater interest in studying death rituals as a source of communal meaning and not simply custom. The report also advocates direct engagement with indigenous communities to gain emic perspectives. Such reflexivity gives rise to a more authentic understanding of the culture we investigate with greater sensitivity. Ultimately, this ethnography shows that maintaining death rituals will sustain the vitality of indigenous groups like the Bolaang Mongondow.

Thus, an in-depth investigation of *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi'* can reveal rituals' sociocultural, spiritual and existential functions for indigenous communities. This enriches academic and policy discourse regarding cultural preservation while stimulating cross-generational and cross-cultural appreciation of the values of death rituals, which are often marginalized amidst the dominant currents of modernity.

METHODS

This ethnographic study adopts Victor Turner's symbolic anthropological approach to elucidate the profound sociocultural meanings (Deflem, 1991; Jules-Rosette, 1994; Turner, 1980) within the *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi'* death rituals of the Bolaang Mongondow community. An ethnographic approach was chosen to

facilitate an emic, contextualized interpretation of the traditions by directly engaging with indigenous perspectives over a prolonged period. Additionally, Turner's anthropological lens enriches analysis of the latent meanings behind overt ritual symbols and practices.

Data collection involves long-term participatory observation of rituals in situ and open-ended interviews with six key Bolaang Mongondow informants meeting specific criteria. Key informants comprise six respondents meeting rigorous standards, including native Bolaang Mongondow ethnicity or residence in the region for over 20 years. They should also intimately understand the *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi*' customs, speak the Bolaang Mongondow language fluently, range between 20-70 years old, have no communication disorders, and agree to participate fully.

Interviews focus on mining informants' perceptions of the traditions' more profound significance, including their ontological role in identity formation and social reproduction. This offsets assumptions, only viewing such rituals as superficial vestiges. Questions also examine how *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi*' shield Bolaang Mongondow culture from modernity's threats. Participant observation entails witnessing patterns firsthand to discern symbolic forms and social processes captured via detailed field notes and audiovisual recordings. All documentation occurs respectfully with permission to demonstrate cultural sensitivity. Overall, the ethnography seeks a thick description showing how Bolaang Mongondow death rituals sustain communal vitality.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Bolaang Mongondow Social Structure, Belief System, and Unique Death Rituals

The Bolaang Mongondow ethnic group enriches Indonesia's cultural diversity with a robust social framework grounded in solid cultural norms and highly-regarded customs (Dipalanga, 2013). Daily, they adhere to an idiosyncratic, animistic conviction system, venerating the Supreme Being Ompu Duata as the cosmic ruler (Mamonto, 2022). Ritual ceremonies and deliberations led by tribal chieftains (*bogani*) occur at critical junctures to pay obeisance to Ompu Duata and seek blessings before major communal undertakings (Mawikere & Hura, 2020b)

The Bolaang Mongondow leadership selection process demonstrates prudence in designating family clan leaders, called *bogani* (Mawikere & Hura, 2020a). *Bogani* selection criteria include physical prowess, valor, wisdom, intellect, accountability for the clan's welfare, and protection against adversaries (Dachrud, 2018). The *bogani* are assisted by counselors (*tonawat*) who possess knowledge of astrology, traditional medicine, healing, and other esoteric arts (Ismail, 2018). Cooperation is the cardinal tenet in accomplishing communal duties for societal prosperity (Djafri, 2015).

Additionally, the Bolaang Mongondow community espouses unique death rituals. The *Tonggoluan*, a cadaver bed symbolizing the enduring soul, varies in practice across villages, indicating diverse interpretations (interview with MM, Bilalang Village community member, July 21, 2023). Bereavement rituals called *polapatan* are pivotal moments for manifesting solidarity and alleviating grief, with duration differing based on each village's conventions (interview with PD, Lobong Village community member, January 1, 2023). The *Tonggoluan* transcends a mundane object, representing sacrosanct beliefs. Strictly safeguarded during its home tenure, violating the taboo against sleeping on it risks death for the transgressor, as AM affirms:

“Tonggoluan biasanya jaga pake sampe 40 hari mar ada lagi yang b pake sampe 100 hari, nda’ bi’ apa-apa sebenarnya. Baru tu polapatan itu samadeng torang babaca doa pa depe arwah, bakirim doa keselamatan; ogeyan pa tempat tota mopira, ampuni dosa-dosa almarhum, pokoknya ba doa akang bae-bae pa orang yang so meninggal”

"The *Tonggoluan* is customarily used from the first day of death until the 40th day but may be kept until the 100th day in certain cases without issue. The *polapatan* is the designation for the ritual prayer recitation ceremony for the soul, involving supplications for salvation, forgiveness of sins and blessings for the deceased." (Interview with AM, Bilalang Village community member, December 30, 2022).



Figure 1. *Tonggoluan* at a funeral in Bolaang Mongondow

Figure 1 shows a bed used to lay a deceased family member, which remained intact and was not slept on by the pitomizing until 40 days after death. This sleeping place is called *Tonggoluan* by the Bolaang Mongondow people.

Subsequently, the *Pusi*' tradition, using white cloth as a mourning symbol, intensifies the grief of families bereaving the loss of loved ones (interview with DD, Mopait Village community member, December 31, 2023). Female family members don the *Pusi*' cloth as an emblem of their grief, removing it only when entering the bathroom. The duration of the *Pusi*' varies between villages, highlighting each community's unique interpretations of death rituals (interview with NM,

Kopandakan Village community member, January 2, 2023). More than mere traditions, the *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi'* constitute integral obligations in Bolaang Mongondow society, revered as unwritten yet sacrosanct laws governing daily life (interview with IF, South Bolaang Mongondow Regency community member, July 21, 2023). This diversity enriches the Bolaang Mongondow ethnic culture.



Figure 2. *Pusi'* (white cloth used by the bereaving family)

Figure 2 shows two hijab-wearing women placing a white material over their shoulders called the *Pusi'*. The *Pusi'* fabric is only worn by the deceased family members as a symbol of a grieving family mourning the loss of their beloved kin.

The *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi'* Traditions as Inherited Tokens of Reverence and Bereavement in Bolaang Mongondow Death Rituals

The *Tonggoluan*, as a unique funerary bed in Bolaang Mongondow death traditions, reflects profoundly meaningful symbolism for the community. The belief that the spirits of departed kin remain with grieving families underpins using the *Tonggoluan* as a resting place for these souls. In this perspective, the *Tonggoluan* transcends a mundane object, symbolizing the continued spiritual bond between the living and the dead (interview with MM, Bilalang Village community member, July 21, 2023).

The *Tonggoluan* also represents profound affection and deference towards the deceased. Designating it as the sole sleeping area demonstrates attentiveness and offering to the spirits, encapsulating strong kinship values and solidarity in Bolaang Mongondow society (interview with PD, Lobong Village community member, January 1, 2023). The stringent taboo against the living sleeping on the *Tonggoluan* further sacralizes this vessel, underscoring that it is no ordinary furniture but a venerated, consecrated space (interview with IF, South Bolaang Mongondow Regency community member, July 21, 2023).

Firm beliefs that violate the taboo spell calamity powerfully demarcate the realms of the living and the dead. This elucidates the community's singular efforts to sustain relations with the spirit world and ancestral continuity in the afterlife. The decree reinforces convictions about a post-death existence where spirits retain defined presence and rights.

In this framework, the *Tonggoluan* constitutes more than a physical medium for repose. It is the embodiment of spiritual values and cultural beliefs. The reverence conferred through the *Tonggoluan* becomes a palpable ritual reflecting the ontological complexity of life and death conceptions in Bolaang Mongondow society. By prohibiting the practical use of the *Tonggoluan*, communities underscore the separation between the mundane and sacred, thereby upholding harmony in relations with the mystical domain.

On the other hand, the *Pusi'* tradition in Bolaang Mongondow society demonstrates enduring symbolic and cultural values passed through generations. White burial shrouds transcend mundane attire for the deceased, epitomising profound grief and the lasting metaphysical ties between suffering families and their loved ones. During funerary processions, the *Pusi'* embodies familial solidarity when confronted with the tribulation of loss (interview with DD, Mopait Village community member, December 31, 2023).

The *Pusi'* signifies more than pragmatic funeral garb, reflecting revered local wisdom and cultural heritage in Bolaang Mongondow communities. Donning it evokes deeper meaning, venerating life and death as integral facets of the life cycle. This tradition becomes a conduit for nurturing kinship, intimacy, and collective spirit when facing adversity (interview with NM, Kopandakan Village community member, January 2, 2023).

Proscriptions against non-relatives wearing the *Pusi'* indicate strict boundaries safeguarding local ethics and customary values. This encapsulates Bolaang Mongondow's desire to conserve their cultural authenticity against external influences that may alter the significance of funeral elements. The decree also preserves cultural identity by ensuring respectful treatment of the *Pusi'* tradition (interview with NM, Kopandakan Village community member, January 2, 2023).

Overall, the *Pusi'* tradition constitutes a complex cultural manifestation, demonstrating how Bolaang Mongondow societies celebrate and rarify the nexus between life and demise. Through its embodiment of symbols and social norms, communities convey bereavement and enshrine their cultural foundations. This elucidates the imperative of retaining cultural roots and honoring intergenerational bonds when navigating life's journeys toward death.

Symbolism and Continuity of Spiritual Bonds in Bolaang Mongondow Death Rituals

Victor Turner's interpretive theory, also known as Symbolic Anthropology, was introduced by Victor Turner, a prominent social anthropology scholar representing the mainstream of British social anthropology. Turner, born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1920-1983 AD, argued that humans are animal symbolists, entities interpreted through symbolic thought and action inherent in humans (Deflem, 1991). All developments of human culture are based on the prevailing situation and conditions. As cultural beings, humans give birth to and develop their culture by utilising symbols (Turner, 1974). Victor Turner divides the character of marks into three parts. First, signs are multivocal, having many meanings intended for various things, both individual and events or phenomena, demonstrating the richness of symbolic importance in a culture. Second, the polarisation of symbols occurs because symbols have broad meanings, and deviant symbolic meanings often emerge. Third, the unification of characters is defined as separate intents (Suwardi Endraswara, 2003).

In analysing the symbolic meanings in a tradition or culture, Victor Turner's interpretive theory can be applied using three dimensions: the exegetical dimension, the operational dimension, and the positional extent (Winangun, 1999). The explanatory size refers to the meanings obtained from sources, in this case, local community informants, regarding cultural behaviour in practising the traditions studied. The operational dimension includes the substances obtained from the conduct of ritual activities, explaining the use of symbols in a ritual context. Meanwhile, the positional extent focuses on understanding characters about other marks to obtain a comprehensive meaning (Sugitanata, 2021).

Then, by implementing Victor Turner's interpretive theory on the *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi*' traditions in *Bolaang Mongondow society*, the researcher explores meanings through two main dimensions: the exegetical and operational. The explanatory extent, which emphasises the substance obtained from sources or local community informants, is an essential foundation for unravelling the complexity of cultural behaviour manifested in the practice of the traditions studied.

Through the interpretive dimension, researchers can immerse themselves in the hidden meanings in the stories and views of the surrounding community towards the *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi*' traditions. By listening to individuals' experiences and interpretations within the cultural context, researchers can understand how specific symbols in these traditions reflect the rich and complex meanings for the local community. Meanwhile, the operational dimension explains how those symbols are actualized through ritual activity behaviour. In every step of the ritual, movement, and symbol presented, layers of meaning can be unravelled through the lens of the operational dimension. This opens a broader window into how those symbols take root in the daily lives of the community and become an inseparable part of their cultural practices.

By integrating the exegetical and operational dimensions, researchers can better understand the *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi*' traditions' symbolic meanings. This creates a deeper picture of how those symbols reflect the community's knowledge of their cultural heritage and how those symbols are enacted and manifested in their daily lives. Thus, the application of Victor Turner's interpretive theory through the exegetical and operational dimensions provides a comprehensive approach to unearthing meaning and significance in the *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi*' traditions, opening the door to a deeper understanding of the complexity and richness of Bolaang Mongondow culture.

From the perspective of Victor Turner's symbolic anthropology, death ceremony practices in Bolaang Mongondow society reflect the exegetical and operational dimensions explained by Turner. The *Tonggoluan*, as a funeral bed, symbolizes the continuity of the spiritual relationship between the family and the souls of the deceased. Differences in the implementation of traditions across villages indicate a diversity of interpretations and performances, creating room for variations in the experience of death ceremonies.

The *Tonggoluan*, as a symbol of spiritual continuity, reflects profound affection and deference towards the deceased. We designed it as the sole resting area that affirms kinship values and solidarity in Bolaang Mongondow society (interview with PD, Lobong Village community member, January 1, 2023). The stringent taboo against the living sleeping on the *Tonggoluan* further sacralizes this vessel, sharply delineating the realms of the living and the dead (interview with IF, South Bolaang Mongondow Regency community member, July 21, 2023).

The decree prohibiting living occupants from using the *Tonggoluan* reifies beliefs about an afterlife, demarcating the secular and sacred spheres. Such rules demonstrate the community's efforts to nurture relations with the spiritual realm and ensure ancestral continuity in the hereafter. The *Tonggoluan* constitutes more than a physical medium for repose; it embodies spiritual and cultural beliefs.

Using the *Pusi*' cloth as a grieving symbol intensifies the sorrow of families losing their loved ones, creating the liminal signs expounded by Turner. The varying periods of wearing the *Pusi*' cloth across villages reflect each community's unique interpretations of performing death traditions. The *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi*' customs function as cultural norms and become an integral part of everyday life, creating bonds between families and the souls of the deceased.

The *Pusi*' tradition of using white shrouds to symbolize grief represents familial solidarity when confronted with the tribulation of loss, depicting cultural values passed down generations. Proscriptions against non-relatives wearing the *Pusi*' indicate the efforts of the Bolaang Mongondow community to preserve the authenticity of traditions and protect their cultural identity from outside influences. The *Pusi*' constitutes more than a practical aspect of funeral ceremonies; it also manifests the complex and diverse culture of Bolaang Mongondow society. Wearing the *Pusi*' conveys grief and memorializes the values that form the

foundations of their culture. Banning non-relatives from wearing the *Pusi*' strengthens efforts to preserve cultural identity and the significance of death rituals (interview with NM, Kopandakan Village community member, January 2, 2023).

Overall, it can be understood that the *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi*' death rituals have deep sociocultural meaning in the Bolaang Mongondow indigenous community. The application of Victor Turner's theory of symbol interpretation reveals how this unique tradition is the basis for forming and preserving this group's identity.

The explanatory and operational dimensions reveal the *Tonggoluan* tomb as a place of eternal metaphysical ties between living creatures and ancestral spirits. Its consecration reflects a deep belief in spiritual life in the afterlife, strengthening collective memory. Meanwhile, *Pusi*'s mourning clothes symbolize the solidarity that arises when a family experiences a tragic loss. This also spreads cultural values that have been upheld from generation to generation.

Both rituals combine the brief and the infinite. *Tonggoluan* represents the idea of memories that persist through time but allow for fluctuating ceremonial interpretations. In contrast, temporary *Pusi*'s clothing carries eternal norms and history. Through the continuous regeneration of meaning, these traditions support the foundation of Bolaang Mongondow's existence – the intertwining of the physical and the mystical. Therefore, amid modern turmoil, the creative reproduction of culture and philosophy in solemn rituals such as *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi*' still maintains the unique identity of this community.

Ultimately, this ethnography explains the existential role of death ceremonies. Therefore, maintaining these traditions will support the survival of the Bolaang Mongondow traditional group. This requires scientific recognition of death's role in affirming a group's vitality.

CONCLUSION

This ethnography illuminates the *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi*' death traditions undergirding the Bolaang Mongondow indigenous community's unique cultural identity and social reproduction. Applying Victor Turner's symbolic anthropological lens reveals their profound sociocultural significance beyond vestigial remnants of the past. The funerary *Tonggoluan* bed encapsulates enduring spiritual connections between the living and ancestral spirits, restricted only to the dead's repose. Its sacralization reflects firm beliefs about metaphysical realms, bolstering collective memory. The *Pusi*' mourning garment signifies ineffable grief while transmitting cherished cultural virtues down generations and rallying solidarity when bereft. More than mere customs, both traditions constitute the building blocks of Bolaang Mongondow life – an inextricable weave of the physical and mystical, the temporal and eternal. Their creative reproduction through rites of death and remembrance sustains this community's unique identity and memory in the face of modernity. These demands comprehending death rituals as more than

obstacles to progress – they anchor indigenous vitality. Hence, policies and scholarship must recognize ceremonies like *Tonggoluan* and *Pusi*’ as sociocultural repositories to spur cross-cultural appreciation of death's role in affirming life's meaning for groups like the Bolaang Mongondow. Sustaining these traditions thus supports indigenous continuity and strengthens the ties binding heritage to the horizon.

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