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

Faradila Hasan
Institut Agama Islam Negeri Manado, Sulawesi Utara, Indonesia, Jl. Dr. S.H. Sarundajang Kompleks Ringroad I Manado, Kelurahan Malendeng, Kecamatan Paal Dua, Kota Manado, Sulawesi Utara 95128
E-mail: faradila.hasan@iain-manado.ac.id

Dinda Fadillah
Institut Agama Islam Muhammadiyah Kotamobagu, Sulawesi Utara, Indonesia, Jl Pierre Tendean Gang Bohusami, RT 22 Rw 10 Lingkungan V Kel. Gogagoman Kec Kotamobagu Barat, 95718
E-mail: dindafadillah700@gmail.com

Evra Willya
Institut Agama Islam Negeri Manado, Sulawesi Utara, Indonesia, Jl. Dr. S.H. Sarundajang Kompleks Ringroad I Manado, Kelurahan Malendeng, Kecamatan Paal Dua, Kota Manado, Sulawesi Utara 95128
E-mail: evra.willya@iain-manado.ac.id

Arif Sugitanata
Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, Jl. Laksda Adisucipto, Papringan, Caturtunggal, Kec. Depok, Kabupaten Sleman, Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta, 55281
E-mail: arifsugitanata@gmail.com

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; Suprapto, 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 tahliian (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-apanya sebenarnya. Baru tu polapatan itu samadeng torang babaca doa pa depe arwah, bakirim doa keselamatan; ogeyan pa tampat 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 thepitomizingtil 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’](image)

Figure 2. *Pusi’* (white cloth used by the bereavering 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).

*Symbolic Reverence: An Ethnographic Study on the Tonggoluan and Pusi’* Death Rituals Within Bolaang Mongondow Society Through Victor Turner's Perspective
Faradila Hasan, Dinda Fadillah, Evra Willya, Arif Sagitanata
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

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

Faradila Hasan, Dinda Fadillah, Eeva Willya., Arif Sagitanata
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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We want to thank the Bolaang Mongondow indigenous community, especially the elders, ritual specialists, and villagers who participated in and supported this research. We sincerely appreciate your kindness in welcoming us and generously sharing your insightful knowledge on the meaningful Tonggoluan and Pusi’ death rituals. This work would be impossible without your trust and openness in elucidating these traditions’ profound role in sustaining community identity and memory. We also thank the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful feedback in improving this paper. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, and publication.

REFERENCES


Symbolic Reverence: An Ethnographic Study on the Tonggoluan and Pusi’ Death Rituals Within Bolaang Mongondow Society Through Victor Turner’s Perspective
Faradila Hasan, Dinda Fadillah, Evra Wielya, Arif Sugitanata


