

VALUES AND SYMBOLIC MEANING OF OFFERINGS IN THE SEA ALMS TRADITION AT TELUK PENYU BEACH, CILACAP REGENCY LITERARY ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This research, based on a literary anthropology study, aims to describe the values and meanings of symbols in the traditional Sedekah Laut ceremony at Teluk Penyu beach in Cilacap Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. The Sedekah Laut activity is an annual event held in the month of Suro (Javanese calendar), which serves as a tradition to express gratitude to God for the blessings received from the sea and the ongoing safety of fishermen in their pursuit of fish. The method employed in this research is qualitative descriptive analysis. Data collection techniques used in this study include field research methods, interviews, observations, and documentation. The Sedekah Laut tradition, held once a year in the month of Suro, is regarded as bringing blessings to the coastal community of Teluk Penyu, Cilacap Regency, Central Java, Indonesia, as it embodies an expression of gratitude to God for the abundant riches obtained from the sea and a prayer for continued safety for the fishing community along Teluk Penyu beach. The values inherent in the Sedekah Laut tradition include (1) religious values, (2) togetherness, (3) economic values, (4) mutual cooperation, and (5) education. Additionally, important elements of the various offerings in the Sedekah Laut tradition, which hold symbolic meanings, serve as guidelines for life. The primary offering in the Sedekah Laut ceremony is the head of a buffalo, symbolising the abandonment of animalistic traits and the highest devotion to God, who has provided abundant marine resources to the fishermen along Teluk Penyu beach, Cilacap Regency, Central Java, Indonesia.

Keywords: values, symbolic meaning, sedekah laut, teluk penyu beach, literary anthropology

1. Introduction

Indonesia is a vast country, and each region possesses its own distinct culture. The diversity of cultures present in any society inevitably gives rise to unique phenomena. Humans are cultural beings. Culture also influences how societies perceive the world, their territory, and each other (Herusatoto, 2000: 7). According to Koentjaraningrat (1990:180), culture encompasses the thoughts, applications, and creations of individuals within a community, shaped through learning. Culture represents a dimension of human behaviour and the surrounding life. Citizens and culture are essentially one entity, forming a socio-cultural system. Without culture, citizens cannot engage socially, and vice versa. Both are deeply rooted in life and become cultural traditions that are passed down through generations (from ancestors), inherited within society from each generation, indicating that these traditions have existed for a long time, handed down year after year by their forebears. The Sedekah Laut tradition at Teluk Penyu Beach has become an integral part of the community's life.



Cilacap has a long-standing tradition. According to research conducted by Haryanto (2020), this ritual is typically held annually during the month of Suro in the Javanese calendar, which is regarded as a sacred month. During this time, the local community gathers various offerings consisting of seafood, traditional foods, and other symbolic items to present to the sea deity. This practice illustrates that the people of Cilacap have a strong connection with nature, particularly the sea, which provides them with their livelihood.

In the context of literary anthropology, the tradition of Sedekah Laut can be seen as a cultural text that harbours various values and meanings. As Geertz (1973) stated, culture is a system of symbols that imparts meaning to social actions. Thus, the offerings in the Sedekah Laut tradition are not merely rituals, but also represent a form of communication between humans and nature, as well as among individuals themselves. This research aims to delve deeper into the values and symbolic meanings contained within the offerings, and how these influence the social life of the Cilacap community.

Cilacap Village, located in the Cilacap Selatan sub-district of Cilacap Regency, is a coastal area on the southern part of Java Island, rich in diverse traditions that are spread across various regions and have a strong cultural identity. The people of Cilacap continue to preserve these traditions through generations. This is evidenced by the implementation of Sedekah Laut, which is typically held once a year at the beginning of the Islamic month or Sura month (Javanese calendar), usually on specific days such as Tuesday or Friday Kliwon. The purpose of the Sedekah Laut is to inherit the cultural traditions of our ancestors and to express gratitude to God for the blessings received, as well as for the abundant marine resources they obtain, while seeking protection from dangers.

Through the lens of literary anthropology, we can understand that the offerings presented are not merely food, but also possess profound symbolic value. For instance, the rice served signifies prosperity, while the fruits symbolise hope for abundant marine yields. This aligns with Siti Aminah's (2021) assertion that each element within the offerings carries its own meaning, which is related to the beliefs and hopes of the community.

Thus, the tradition of Sedekah Laut at Teluk Penyus Beach is not merely a ritual, but also a manifestation of the cultural values that the community holds dear. Through this study, it is hoped that a deeper understanding can be gained regarding the symbolic meaning of the offerings presented in this tradition.

2. Methodology

In this study, the author employs a qualitative method with an anthropological literary approach. Participatory observation was conducted during the Sedekah Laut ritual to comprehend the processes and meanings inherent in each stage of the ritual. Additionally, in-depth interviews were carried out with community leaders, fishermen, and other participants in the ritual to gain a broader perspective on this tradition. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency (2022), Cilacap Regency has a population that largely depends on the fishing sector, thus rendering this tradition highly relevant to the community's life.



The data collected was subsequently analysed using a semiotic approach to understand the symbols contained within the offerings. Each element in the offerings, such as fish, rice, fruits, and other items, was analysed to uncover deeper meanings. For instance, fish serves as a symbol of marine wealth and an abundant food source, while rice represents fertility and prosperity. Through this approach, the author aims to elucidate how these values are internalised in the daily lives of the Cilacap community and how this tradition contributes to the formation of their cultural identity.

Literary anthropology originates from two terms: anthropology and literature. Anthropology and literature are two distinct disciplines. Although these two fields are different, they both fundamentally concern the study of humanity. According to Endraswara (2013:1), the focus of literary anthropology research is on human attitudes and behaviours as expressed through literary and cultural facts.

Anthropology is a discipline that examines the ways of life of societies. These ways of life can manifest in ideas or activities commonly referred to as customs. Literature is a discipline that discusses and studies literary works. The relationship between anthropology and literature becomes clearer when we recognise that literature reflects the life of a society. This reflection arises from the sediment and contemplation that the author reinterprets. As is the case with any field of study, the scope of anthropology has broadened over time. Anthropology, once characterised by its focus on primitive societies, has evolved. Recently, anthropology not only studies humans in reality but also engages with literature (Endraswara, 2013:2).

Anthropology examines the facts of social life. Meanwhile, literary works are products of the imagination based on factual and/or fictional elements. Literature that imagines facts certainly contains verifiable truths. The truths related to social life can, in principle, be explored through the lens of anthropology.

In this context, literary works are closely related to anthropology. The existence of the concept of literary anthropology is based on two realities: first, the relationship between the field of anthropology and language; second, the connection with oral traditions, which both anthropology and literature regard as significant subjects. Literary anthropology is not merely an aspect of anthropology 'within' literature but rather anthropology 'derived from' literature (Ratna, 2011b:64). Literary anthropology represents an anthropological aspect of literature, wherein literature creates its own cultures that may differ from the real world; in other words, this also implies that the cultures being studied are those that emerge from within the literature itself. Similar research in literary anthropology has been conducted by Falah, F. (2020).

The Symbolic Meaning of Offerings in the Baritan Tradition at Asemdayong, Pemalang, Central Java. Endogami: Scientific Journal of Anthropological Studies, 4(1), 109-117. The Cultural Studies Programme at Diponegoro University reveals the symbolic meaning of offerings in the Baritan tradition at Asemdayong, Pemalang, Central Java. The approach employed in this research is folklore. The folklore approach is utilised to uncover the stories and symbolic meanings behind the offerings in the Baritan tradition. Additionally, the research by Setiyawan, D. (2021),



titled "Analysis of the Oral Literature Tradition of Nyumber in Dermaji Village, Lumbir District, Banyumas: An Anthropological Literary Study," published in the Journal on Education, 3(4), 664-670, investigates the oral literature tradition of Nyumbar, which also falls within the realm of anthropological studies. In contrast, this research focuses on the anthropological literature of the sea offering tradition, which is consistently performed at Teluk Penyu Beach in Cilacap Regency, Central Java, Indonesia.

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the findings included in this research, the values identified within the sea offering tradition along the coastal area of Teluk Penyu in Cilacap Regency are significant. The values inherent in the sea offering ritual highlight its role as a form of gratitude to God for the blessings received and a plea for safety while at sea. The traditional sea offering ceremony begins with a gathering at the Cilacap City Hall, attended by local residents as well as visitors from outside the Cilacap region. Various suggestions are put forward by the Cilacap Local Government to initiate the event. Led by religious leaders, a communal prayer is conducted, aimed at expressing gratitude and seeking divine protection for the surrounding community. The ritual involves the ceremonial release of offerings, particularly the head of a buffalo, which is covered with other offerings and cast into the sea from the shoreline.

The sea offering tradition embodies values from various aspects, including religious, economic, communal, and educational values. The coastal community holds a positive attitude towards the sea offering tradition, celebrating it with enthusiasm and safety.



Figure 1. *Sedekah laut*

3.1. Religious Values

The sea offering tradition in the Cilacap region holds significant religious value. This is evident from the commencement of the sea offering ceremony, where prior to the tradition, a prayer gathering (slamet) is held at the local mosque or community hall after the Maghrib prayers. This is initiated with the recitation of Surah Al-Fatihah by local residents, with religious leaders invoking Allah SWT, followed by tahlil and the recitation of specific surahs that are typically recited during a dzikir ceremony. The recitation of Yasin, Tahlil, and other prayers is led by local religious figures. The prayers are conducted in both Arabic and Javanese, characterised by their length and solemnity. Local religious leaders believe that Allah SWT is more inclined to accept longer prayers articulated in Arabic, especially following statements that invoke



virtue. This well-known religious gathering occurs in the evening before the main ceremony, with the sea offering taking place the following day. A series of prayers are conducted from the initial gathering at the town hall until the end of the ceremony, prior to the sea offering, alongside the preparation of various items to be floated into the sea. The prayer for the offering begins with the recitation of Surah Al-Fatihah and other short surahs, the declaration of Tauhid, and the recitation of sholawat, often repeated thousands of times as part of a regular practice. Upon completion of the prayers, the religious leaders typically recite the Badal Al-Fatihah prayer, marking the conclusion of the Sea Offering Ceremony at Teluk Penyu Beach, Cilacap. The recitation of the Badal Al-Fatihah prayer is a mandatory ritual at the end of the ceremony, serving not only as a prayer but also as a signifier of the conclusion of the offering process, thereby finalising the prayers recited by the religious leaders earlier during both the prayer gathering and the ceremony itself.



Figure 2. *Religious values*

3.2. *Economic Value*

It is undeniable that the tradition of sea offerings at Teluk Penyu Beach in Cilacap holds significant economic value for the coastal community and even for those outside Cilacap. The performance of this offering tradition is quite similar to other public events that involve large numbers of people and attract visitors from outside the region to witness the sea offering ritual. Large crowds gather from various areas, typically with traders setting up stalls selling food, drinks, and souvenirs for visitors to this heritage site. The seafood tradition, due to its economic impact in the market and within the Cilacap region, continues to flourish. Additionally, there are mobile vendors selling a variety of drinks and snacks. It is also important to note that traders offering various tools and supplies used for offerings in other customary processes provide financial benefits to the wider community from the sea offerings tradition, especially since this tradition requires many supplies.

The sea offering procession by the coastal community of Teluk Penyu also seeks profit through various forms such as shells, hermit crabs, shrimp crackers, and the tourist destination of Nusakambangan. Nusakambangan boasts unique natural beauty. This is the means by which the coastal community seeks to earn a livelihood from the sea, particularly at Teluk Penyu Beach in Cilacap.





Figure 3. Economic value

3.3. *The Value of Mutual Assistance*

The tradition of the sea offering is not merely a ritual and a prayer; it fosters strong bonds of kinship and cultivates a sense of belonging among the local coastal community members. The residents of Cilacap, particularly the men, are busy fishing daily without rest, making the fishing tradition an ideal moment for socialising and relieving the fatigue accumulated from a long day at work. This gathering also serves as an opportunity to reconnect with old friends who may have been separated due to work and migration. Such encounters are beneficial for preparing all necessary arrangements for the sea offering ceremony.

Moreover, the hospitality of the community is evident in their enthusiasm for organising events that complement the seaweed tradition, such as rowing competitions among community members, which require numerous boats for the occasion. Interestingly, when organising the traditional sea offering parade, the community volunteers their assistance without needing formal commitments to join in the preparations for the seaweed tradition. The people of Cilacap have taken the initiative to continue the sea offering tradition. Additionally, other communities also participate in helping those in need with all the necessary preparations. This exemplifies the spirit of togetherness and cooperation, showcasing that the culture of mutual assistance within the Cilacap village community remains strong.



Figure 4. The value of mutual assistance

3.4. *Educational Values*



There are numerous educational values inherent in the fulfilment of maritime traditions for coastal communities and their surroundings. The ritual of offering, known as 'sedekah laut', is regarded as having many benefits derived from the entire process, starting from the preparatory stages that involve the entire community, to the offering ceremony itself, which is rich in ancestral cultural elements. Furthermore, the activities that follow the offering ceremony engage the community, ensuring that the event proceeds smoothly and safely. Through the implementation of this offering, it is hoped that various educational values can be introduced to the wider community within the context of the ritual of 'sedekah laut'.

The customs surrounding 'sedekah laut' represent a ritual process aimed at expressing gratitude for the blessings received from the sea and for prayers for safety while fishing in open waters. The activities following 'sedekah laut' include traditional performances such as 'kuda kepang', 'wayang-golek', 'lengger', and many other cultural forms that convey the heritage from ancient times to contemporary society. Additionally, the 'sedekah laut' ceremony offers various proposals that can inform the broader community about Javanese culture and the philosophical meanings embedded within it.

Understanding and appreciating Javanese culture in each region is essential, while also ensuring its preservation without losing the elements, values, and meanings inherent in this cultural process. This aims to ensure that present-day society remains knowledgeable about their ancestral heritage.



Figure 4. *Educational values*

3.5. *Symbolic Meaning*

The ritual offerings that we often encounter in Central Java, particularly in the Cilacap region, such as the Sedekah Laut, carry significant symbolic weight. The Sedekah Laut ritual is believed by the coastal community to be an expression of gratitude to God for the abundant marine resources that provide livelihoods for the coastal residents. This ritual, which is an integral part of the tradition, essentially involves the casting of offerings into the sea and collective prayers to receive blessings, while also paying respects to ancestors who have passed away.

The Sedekah Laut tradition possesses a rich symbolic meaning, beginning with each item prepared for the offering, especially when viewed in terms of their sizes. A distinctive feature is the shape of the buffalo head, known as joleng. The primary offering is the buffalo head, which holds a sacred and mysterious significance. The buffalo head is placed in a small boat surrounded by other offerings. It is the first



offering to be cast into the sea. According to local residents, the buffalo head symbolizes the sincerity of sacrifice and a rejection of ignorance and bestiality, encouraging the community to become faithful and virtuous individuals. When the buffalo head is first cast into the sea, a traditional leader of the Sedekah Laut ritual burns dry straw, the smoke serving to envelop both the buffalo head and the small boat carrying it.



Figure 5. *Symbolic meaning*

Various types of fish presented as the main offering in a tumpeng are symbols of the Cilacap community's struggle to make a living through fishing, which sustains their livelihood and existence. The assortment of fish offered in the tumpeng signifies the prosperity of the coastal community of Teluk Penyus in Cilacap, where fish serve as a vital source of sustenance. The placement of various offerings, beauty accessories, and cooking utensils is a form of respect and gratitude towards Nyi Roro Kidul, the Queen of the Southern Sea. The diversity of beauty accessories reflects the desires of Nyi Roro Kidul herself. The people of Cilacap believe that those who provide what the Queen wishes for will receive her protection and be safeguarded from dangers at sea.

4. Conclusions

The traditional ritual of offering in Cilacap Village, Cilacap Selatan District, Cilacap Regency, is a longstanding custom known as the sea offering tradition, which takes place annually during the month of Suro in the Javanese calendar. This tradition serves as an annual event for the people of Cilacap, whose livelihoods are dependent on fishing. The purpose of this tradition is to express gratitude to God for the abundant blessings and sustenance received, as well as to pray for safety while fishing in the open sea. It embodies a set of values inherent in the sea offering tradition in Cilacap Village, Cilacap Regency.

The values present in the sea offering tradition include economic value, values of togetherness and mutual cooperation, religious values, and educational values. The symbolic meaning of the sea offering tradition in Cilacap Selatan District is closely linked to the depiction of the community's way of life. The implementation of this tradition undoubtedly carries symbolic significance in every aspect of its preparation, presentation, and accompanying elements.

The sea offering is notably characterised by the ritual of dissolving a buffalo's head: (1) The buffalo's head symbolises sincere sacrifice and signifies the abandonment of human ignorance and animalistic traits within individuals. (2) The cone-shaped rice tumpeng represents the exalted position of God. (3) The burning of



dry straw aims to ward off all forms of evil in human life. (4) Kitchen utensils and beauty cosmetics signify the importance of the pleasures and favours of Nyi Roro Kidul, ensuring that when fishermen venture out to sea, she may protect them. (5) There are seven types of flowers, including jasmine, frangipani, roses, and others, symbolising the importance of neighbourly love and harmony for a peaceful and prosperous community.

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