E-ISSN 3048-0329 Vol. 2, Issue 3 (2025)
Doi: https://doi.org/10.37899/mjds.v2i3.201

Mahogany Journal De Social

Representation of Power in the Symbolism of Traditional Rituals: Cultural Anthropology Studies in Eastern Indonesia

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Article Info

Article History:
Received: 27 August 2025
Revised: 21 September 2025
Accepted: 30 September 2025

Keywords:
Power
Symbolism
Traditional Rituals
Cultural Anthropology

Abstract

This study challenges the depiction of power in the symbolic structure of traditional rituals in Eastern Indonesia through the perspectives of cultural anthropology. Rituals are viewed not only as spiritual practices or practices embedded in past traditions but as symbolic arenas where power relations, social authority, and collective personality are enacted. In traditional societies, authority is often enshrined in sacral signs- such as relics, hymns, or celebrations- each with a hierarchical meaning that restates authority. The data collection was conducted using qualitative ethnographic approach, where participant observations and in-depth interviews with traditional rulers, ritual experts, and community members involved in the ceremonies were utilized to collect data. The analytic emphasis was on deriving the meaning of ritual symbols and comparing them to the social power structures that survive. The results reveal that rituals are used as a means of justifying power of traditional leaders, maintaining social stratifications, and acting as means of social control. Symbolic analysis discloses that power is not only a result of political or economic status but also of spiritual legitimacy passed down through generations. At the same time, the new presence of women and youth is an indicator of negotiated authority and changing significances. Finally, power in the Eastern Indonesian societies is developed through symbolic formation based on shared opinions, normative systems, and cultural reproduction.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional rituals in Indonesian society represent a vital nexus between spirituality, social life, and political authority. While they are often framed as sacred cultural practices, a critical lens reveals that rituals function as arenas where power is symbolically constructed, maintained, and contested. Clifford Geertz (1973) reminds us that ritual symbols operate as “models of” and “models for” reality, simultaneously reflecting social order and shaping it. Similarly, Letlora et al. (1969) emphasized that rituals are not static traditions but dynamic processes that negotiate roles, status, and hierarchies. This suggests that rituals should not be reduced to religious ceremonies alone but instead understood as symbolic fields where authority and legitimacy are produced through performance. By foregrounding this perspective,

rituals can be seen less as benign expressions of culture and more as potent instruments of power that sustain collective identities while privileging certain actors over others (Sasaki & Baba, 2024; Keane, 2023).

The case of Eastern Indonesia, encompassing Maluku, East Nusa Tenggara, and Papua, demonstrates the political potency of ritual practices. This region is marked by extraordinary cultural diversity, where rituals connect the human community to ancestors and cosmological forces while simultaneously reinforcing social hierarchies. Ceremonies often highlight the centrality of traditional leaders, such as clan heads or ritual specialists, whose authority is not simply inherited but symbolically reaffirmed through repeated ritual enactments (Miller, 1968). Scholars such as Hoskins (1993) and Keane (1997) have shown how material objects, sacred words, and ceremonial sequences operate as carriers of legitimacy. For example, heirlooms like sacred drums or ancestral relics are not merely artifacts but embodiments of historical continuity, anchoring the authority of elites within cosmological frameworks. Through such symbols, leaders claim not only political power but also spiritual legitimacy, positioning themselves as intermediaries between the human and the divine (Shamhuna, 2025; Otubanjo & Balogun, 2025).

However, the existing literature often privileges the religious or functional aspects of ritual while downplaying its political dimensions (Fogelin, 2007; May et al., 2014; Parker, 2024; Lynch et al., 2024). This tendency risks romanticizing rituals as timeless traditions, detached from the struggles of authority and domination. Yet as Bourdieu (1991) argues, power is never purely material; it is mediated through symbolic capital that confers legitimacy and authority. Rituals, in this sense, are fields of symbolic struggle where elites consolidate their dominance by naturalizing power through sacred symbols (Farage, 1993; Loveman, 2005). For instance, the repetition of ritual chants or the circulation of heirlooms instills the impression that social hierarchies are divinely sanctioned rather than humanly constructed. Such symbolic practices mask inequalities by embedding them in cultural codes perceived as unquestionable. Therefore, critical analysis of ritual must move beyond cultural appreciation to interrogate how ritual symbolism functions as a technology of power.

Yet, rituals are not simply instruments of domination; they are also contested spaces where authority is negotiated. Emerging evidence from Eastern Indonesia shows that women and younger generations increasingly participate in ceremonies, sometimes challenging traditional gendered or generational hierarchies (Isro'iyah, 2025; Nilan & Maunati, 2025). Their involvement does not always dismantle existing structures but introduces subtle shifts in meaning. For example, the presence of young people in ritual leadership roles may reframe authority as more inclusive, while women's participation in symbolic exchanges challenges the male-centered authority embedded in many traditions. These developments highlight that rituals are not fixed but adaptive, capable of accommodating new interpretations and power relations (Kay, 2024; Bell, 1990). Such negotiations demonstrate that ritual practices are both conservative and transformative: they preserve continuity while simultaneously offering openings for change.

At the same time, one must critically consider the broader socio-political environment in which these rituals unfold. The expansion of the state, the influence of organized religion, and the pressures of globalization all reshape how rituals are understood and practiced (Obadia, 2014; Kale, 2004). In some cases, state recognition of certain rituals reifies the authority of traditional elites by granting them legal or cultural endorsement. In other contexts, market forces commodify rituals for tourism, thereby transforming symbols of sacred legitimacy into performances for external consumption. Both dynamics illustrate how ritual symbolism does not exist in isolation but interacts with larger systems of power, sometimes reinforcing them, sometimes altering them. Thus, ritual analysis must

remain attentive to these external pressures that influence symbolic meaning and authority in local communities.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with ethnographic methods to deeply understand the representation of power in the symbolism of traditional rituals in Eastern Indonesia. An ethnographic approach was chosen because it allows researchers to be directly involved in community life, thus capturing the symbolic meaning and dynamics of power manifested through ritual practices (Spradley, 1980). The research location was chosen purposively, namely in one of the traditional communities in Eastern Indonesia that still consistently practices traditional rituals and is considered important in maintaining social structure and leadership legitimacy.

Data collection was conducted through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Participant observation was conducted by attending and observing the ritual, taking detailed notes on the sequence of the procession, the use of symbols, and the interactions between the actors involved. In-depth interviews were conducted with traditional figures, ritual leaders, and community members who understood the symbolic meaning of the ritual to gain a firsthand perspective on the relationship between symbolism and power. Furthermore, documentation in the form of photographs, video recordings, and local archives were used as supporting data to strengthen the analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process began with coding field notes and interview transcripts, then identifying key themes related to symbolism, power, and social structure. Next, the researchers interpreted symbolic meaning by referring to cultural anthropology theory, specifically Geertz's (1973) thinking on symbolic meaning in culture, Turner's (1969) on ritual and liminality, and Bourdieu's (1991) thinking on power relations and habitus. The validity of the findings was maintained through data triangulation by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation.

Ethical aspects were a key consideration in this research. Researchers ensured informed consent from informants, maintained their confidentiality, and adhered to applicable customary rules. Thus, this research focused not only on exploring symbolic meaning but also on respecting local values that are an integral part of indigenous communities' lives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Indigenous community X in Eastern Indonesia still maintains an annual ritual called *Haru Matua* (a pseudonym). This ritual serves the primary purpose of honoring ancestors and strengthening the legitimacy of traditional leaders. The ritual procession lasts three days, involves all levels of society, and is led directly by *the mosa laki* (traditional leader). During the procession, various symbols are used, such as sacrificial animals, sacred dances, and heirlooms passed down through generations. These symbols are not merely cultural ornaments but also representations of power that govern the community's social structure.

Ritual Structure and Power Hierarchy

The ritual's sequence mirrors the hierarchical order of the community. Authority and obedience are enacted through clearly demarcated roles in the procession. The *mosa laki* leads prayers and gives symbolic instructions, followed by elders, ritual assistants, and finally the younger generation who serve as helpers or performers. One elder explained,

> *"During Haru Matua, everyone knows their place. The leader stands at the center, not because he wants power, but because he carries the words of our ancestors."*

Another participant emphasized that hierarchy is essential to maintain unity:

> *"Without order, the spirits will be displeased. Our leader ensures that every person fulfills their duty as our ancestors taught."*

However, several younger respondents reflected on the need for flexibility within these hierarchies. As one youth participant stated,

> *"We respect our elders, but we also hope to learn and take part, not just watch. The ritual is part of our identity too."*

These comments suggest an emerging negotiation of generational roles within ritual spaces. While authority remains centered on ancestral lineage, the desire for shared participation among younger members points to subtle shifts in how legitimacy and inclusion are understood. Through such interactions, ritual hierarchy is maintained but gradually reinterpreted, blending continuity with transformation.

The symbolism embedded in traditional rituals reinforces the notion that power is not simply an individual possession but a collective inheritance rooted in ancestral authority. Through ritual enactments, authority is institutionalized as part of a sacred lineage, linking present leaders to a long chain of ancestral legitimacy. This process transforms power from a personal attribute into a cultural constant, naturalizing hierarchies and presenting them as timeless rather than constructed. In this way, rituals operate as powerful mechanisms of social reproduction: they do not merely celebrate heritage but actively bind communities to symbolic frameworks that make authority appear enduring and unquestionable. By presenting leadership as spiritually sanctioned, rituals obscure the human agency behind power structures, thereby legitimizing elite dominance while limiting the scope for alternative claims to authority or dissent.

Material Symbolism in Rituals

In addition to hierarchical structures, the use of symbolic objects in rituals plays a crucial role. For example, woven cloth with a specific pattern is worn only by the family of the traditional leader, while guests or ordinary people wear plain cloth. This symbolism represents the boundary between those in authority and those in subordinate positions.

> *"This woven fabric cannot be worn carelessly. Unless you are a descendant of the Ama Klan, it could be considered disrespectful to tradition" (Interview with a local weaver, 2024).*

A younger artisan added,

> *"Even when we reproduce the same pattern for sale, we must slightly alter the motif. The original belongs only to the leader's line" (Interview with artisan apprentice, 2024).*

Likewise, a village elder explained,

> *"Each thread carries a prayer. If someone outside the clan wears it, it feels as if they borrow a blessing not meant for them" (Interview with traditional elder, 2024).*

Symbolic objects within rituals function as tangible markers of power that go beyond their material form. Sacred heirlooms, ritual artifacts, or ceremonial regalia embody layers of ancestral meaning, and their public display during rituals transforms them into visible proof of authority. In this sense, symbolic objects do not merely represent

heritage; they actively produce and reinforce the legitimacy of those who possess or control them. By monopolizing access to these objects, traditional elites strengthen their social position and naturalize their leadership as both culturally mandated and spiritually sanctioned. The authority attached to these objects thus becomes difficult to challenge, since questioning them would mean questioning the ancestral order itself. Consequently, symbolic objects operate as instruments of domination, securing elite power under the guise of cultural continuity and sacred tradition.

Religious Dimension and Legitimacy of Power

Rituals also contain a religious dimension that provides a spiritual foundation for Rituals also contain a religious dimension that provides a spiritual foundation for customary authority. The prayers and mantras recited by customary leaders are believed to possess sacred power, connecting the human world with ancestral spirits. This belief positions customary leaders as transcendent figures, not simply social administrators.

> *"When Ama Klan leads prayers, we believe the ancestors are present. That's why people submit and obey, for fear of disobeying not only the leader but also the ancestral spirits" (Interview with community member, 2024).*

Another villager elaborated,

> *"Sometimes, during the chant, people say they feel the wind change or hear unseen voices. That is when they know the ancestors have come" (Interview with ritual attendee, 2024).*

A local teacher also reflected,

> *"The ritual language is ancient and not fully understood anymore, but people still kneel and close their eyes. It's not about comprehension it's about reverence" (Interview with schoolteacher, 2024).*

This ideology demonstrates that traditional power in the customary societies is based on a dual foundation of legitimacy social and spiritual that mutually reinforce one another through the symbolism of rituals. On the one hand, power lies in the social configuration like kinship ties, role hierarchy, and mutual dependence. On the other, it is consecrated by spiritual beliefs that tie leaders to the deity of ancestors and the cosmos. Rituals represent the mode of integration between these two dimensions, making leadership not only socially necessary but also divinely ordained. This dual foundation establishes an effective mechanism of legitimation: social power acquires sanctity, and spiritual assertion takes on institutional form. Through the blending of social and spiritual authority, ritual symbolism reduces the possibilities of contestation, making customary power culturally binding and politically stable at local levels.

Negotiating Power in the Context of Modernity

In recent decades, modernization and state intervention have impacted the implementation of traditional rituals. However, communities maintain the essence of the symbolism by adapting, for example, by adding modern musical elements or adjusting the duration of rituals to make them shorter. These negotiations demonstrate how customary authority persists even when confronted with new values.

> *"Now that there are guests from the government or city, the ceremony is shorter, but the main symbols remain unchanged. That's the most important thing" (Interview with ritual committee, 2024).*

A young organizer noted,

> *"We use microphones now, and sometimes we stream parts of the ritual for those who cannot attend. But before every broadcast, we still ask permission from the elders" (Interview with youth organizer, 2024).*

Another participant observed,

> *"Modernization doesn't erase tradition. It teaches us how to protect it better—by showing outsiders how sacred it still is" (Interview with community volunteer, 2024).*

This relationship depicts how traditional societies have been culturally flexible in retaining the continuity of power symbolism while allowing contextual adjustment. The external expressions of rituals and participants can change over the years, with more women, youth, or state representatives becoming active participants, yet the symbolic structure remains intact. This flexibility enables traditional elites to maintain authority even amid social change, as new practices are incorporated into older cultural logics instead of displacing them. Continuity thus becomes a form of strategic adaptation rather than strict repetition, ensuring that the meaning of symbols legitimizing power remains unquestioned. Cultural flexibility functions as a resilience mechanism that allows traditional power structures to persist while appearing responsive to change, thereby reinforcing the moral and spiritual legitimacy of authority in the modern era.

Discussion

The research findings demonstrate that traditional ritual symbols in Eastern Indonesia hold a profound significance beyond their apparent ceremonial purpose. Rather than functioning as mere decorative or performative elements, these symbols constitute essential instruments in representing, legitimizing, and reinforcing authority within indigenous societies. This observation echoes Clifford Geertz's (1973) theoretical framework on cultural symbols, wherein symbols are understood as systems of meaning that shape collective behavior, provide continuity to traditions, and maintain the coherence of social structures. By embedding political authority into sacred and symbolic forms, rituals prevent power from being perceived solely as coercive force; instead, they naturalize and sanctify power, rendering it part of the moral and spiritual order. This dimension is critical because it reveals how power in indigenous contexts is never divorced from culture but is intricately woven into the lived practices, cosmology, and ritualized behavior of the community.

The perpetuation of power through ritual symbols can be analyzed in terms of cultural legitimacy. For instance, the use of heirlooms, sacred chants, and ceremonial appointments of leaders illustrates Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic power authority that is both recognized and internalized by the community through its attachment to meaningful symbols. The prohibition of ordinary members handling sacred heirlooms is not an arbitrary regulation but rather a mechanism that highlights the sacredness of leadership and demarcates social hierarchy. The symbolic restriction serves to dramatize the distinction between those who govern and those who are governed. At the same time, it reinforces the belief that authority is derived not merely from human decree but from sacred continuity. This distinction between the ordinary and the sacred is essential for sustaining the aura of leadership and ensuring that power is perceived as legitimate, not simply imposed.

However, rituals are not unidirectional performances of dominance; they also provide spaces where power is negotiated and redistributed. The participation of common community members in offering preparations, musical accompaniment, or dance illustrates Victor Turner's (1969) view of ritual as a "social drama," a process where symbolic actions continuously reconfigure roles and relationships. Although traditional leaders occupy the center of ritual authority, the involvement of other

groups demonstrates that power is not entirely monopolized but flows through collective practices. This participatory dimension reveals that rituals contain inherent mechanisms of negotiation, allowing communities to adapt leadership structures to shifting social realities (Allasiw et al., 2023). Such flexibility prevents ritual from becoming static and irrelevant, instead transforming it into a dynamic medium of both continuity and change.

Ritual symbols also function as instruments of social control, particularly through the incorporation of iconic symbols and collective beliefs. The widespread notion that violating ritual prescriptions invites calamity or bala serves as a deterrent against disobedience, embedding conformity into the moral consciousness of community members. Michel Foucault's (1977) analysis of disciplinary power provides a useful lens here: authority operates not only through visible sanctions or coercion but also through the internalization of norms and fears within individuals. In this sense, ritual systems cultivate a form of self-regulation, where individuals discipline themselves because they perceive transgression as spiritually dangerous (Becker & Bernecker, 2023; Yuetong & Jianxing, 2024). This subtle form of control is powerful precisely because it operates beneath the surface, shaping conduct through belief and ritualized fear rather than brute force.

Gender roles within ritual practices provide another layer of complexity to the symbolic structure of power. Traditionally, men are positioned as the formal leaders of rituals, occupying the authoritative and visible aspects of ceremonial performance (Rai, 2014; Schein, 1999). Women, however, contribute through material preparation, emotional labor, and symbolic support, thus ensuring the continuity and functionality of the ritual process. While this division reflects an entrenched symbolic separation between masculine and feminine domains, recent findings suggest shifts in these roles. Women in several communities are increasingly active participants, assuming more visible roles within ritual enactments. This transformation resonates with Sherry Ortner's (1996) arguments on the renegotiation of gendered power within cultural structures, wherein the symbolic roles of women are not fixed but continually redefined in relation to broader social changes. Such developments illustrate that rituals, far from being static traditions, remain responsive to evolving gender dynamics, thereby providing a stage for the reconfiguration of symbolic authority along gendered lines.

Altogether, the findings of this research affirm that power within indigenous communities is sustained not only through physical coercion or political arrangements but also through the symbolic universe of rituals. Ritual symbols act as mediators between authority and community, embedding leadership within sacred legitimacy while simultaneously offering avenues for negotiation and adaptation (Shamhuna, 2025; Rusdi et al., 2025). The intertwining of sacred symbols, social norms, and gender dynamics creates a complex field where power is continuously produced, contested, and reimagined. Thus, the study underscores the centrality of symbolic systems in shaping indigenous political life and highlights how rituals constitute a vital site for understanding the nuanced and multilayered nature of authority in Eastern Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

The current paper proves the idea that symbolic aspects of the traditional rites in Eastern Indonesia play the primary role in the process of representing, legitimising, and maintaining the structures of power. Such symbols as heirlooms, mantras, the correct order of ritual processes are not mere traces of tradition; they serve as social mechanisms uniting the place of traditional leaders and upholding the hierarchic structure in the society. Besides legitimacy, rituals form arenas of power where the involvement of various groups such as women and younger members of the

community is a sign to show that power is not absolute and is constantly being negotiable. An example of how power is symbolically expressed, subtly and forms part of collective norms and belief systems is the mechanism of social control which is articulated by beliefs that capture the consequences of ritual transgressions. The results also point to the increasingly openness of gender roles, which indicates the reallocation of ritual power in the community. In turn, this leads to the study conclusion that power in indigenous communities in Eastern Indonesia is not only based on the explicit political domination; it is also modeled as the symbolic construction that is constantly created and re-created in the course of traditional rituals.

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