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Halat: Ritual Speech and Symbolic Exchange in Traditional Dawan Wedding Ceremonies

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the meanings conveyed through ritual speech *(tonis)* and symbolic exchange *(belis)* in the Halat traditional wedding ceremony in Nonbaun Village, Middle Fatuleu Subdistrict, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. It also explores the cultural values embedded in the tradition and the challenges associated with its preservation. This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach incorporating cultural translation analysis. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews with five key informants, including traditional elders, Dawan language experts, Halat participants, and village government representatives, and audiovisual documentation. Data analysis involved three stages: verbatim transcription of ritual utterances, cultural translation analysis, and thematic coding. The findings identify three dimensions of meaning conveyed through *tonis* and *belis*: symbolic meaning, reflected in expressions and ceremonial objects representing dignity and responsibility; relational meaning, expressed through the formation and reinforcement of relationships between families; and spiritual meaning, associated with loyalty, love, and the union of two souls. The study also identifies three cultural values embedded in the Halat tradition: reciprocity, respect, and communal harmony. These values are reflected in ritual expressions, symbolic exchanges, and interactions between participating families. Furthermore, the findings reveal three main challenges to maintaining the tradition: declining mastery of the Dawan ritual language among younger generations, the influence of modern marriage practices, and a shift from collectivist toward individualistic social values. This study contributes to the documentation of Dawan cultural heritage by examining the relationship between ritual language, symbolic exchange, and cultural values in the Halat traditional wedding ceremony.

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1. Introduction

Traditional wedding ceremonies are important cultural practices that mark marital transitions while reinforcing kinship relationships, transmitting cultural knowledge, and maintaining collective identity. In Eastern Indonesia, marriage traditions integrate social, spiritual, and customary dimensions. One example is the Halat traditional wedding ceremony practiced by the Dawan community in Nonbaun Village, Middle Fatuleu Subdistrict. This tradition represents a cultural institution through which ancestral values, family relationships, and customary obligations are maintained.

Halat involves two essential cultural elements: ritual speech (tonis) and symbolic exchange (belis). Tonis employs metaphorical expressions and parallel structures that convey meanings beyond their literal interpretations, while belis represents reciprocal obligations and strengthens relationships between families (Fox, 1988; Bellwood et al, 2006). Ritual objects, such as the destar (headcloth) and belt, also function as symbols of dignity, responsibility, and social recognition. These practices demonstrate how language and material symbols work together to communicate cultural values and regulate social relationships.

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of ritual language and symbolic practices in maintaining Indigenous cultural identity. Majid (2024) demonstrates that ritual speech performs important social and communicative functions in the Palu'e community, while Saparudin et al. (2025) highlight the role of oral performance in transmitting cultural knowledge through traditional ceremonies. Research on marriage exchanges in Eastern Indonesia also illustrates how belis reflects familial relationships, reciprocity, and changing cultural interpretations (Hermawan & Nomleni, 2024; Gesiradja et al., 2025). Nevertheless, traditional practices face challenges associated with modernization, changing social values, and declining intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge (McWilliam, 2022; Clavé & Hijjas, 2024).

Despite these studies, the relationship between ritual speech, symbolic exchange, and cultural meaning in the Halat tradition remains insufficiently explored. Previous research has predominantly examined marriage customs, kinship systems, and customary obligations, leaving the linguistic performance of tonis and its relationship with belis relatively underexamined. This gap highlights the need for an integrated investigation of language, symbolism, and cultural translation within the Dawan marriage tradition.

Therefore, this study examines the meanings conveyed through tonis and belis in the Halat traditional wedding ceremony in Nonbaun Village. Specifically, it investigates (1) the symbolic, relational, and spiritual meanings expressed through ritual speech and symbolic exchanges; (2) the cultural values of reciprocity, respect, and communal harmony embedded in the tradition; and (3) the challenges facing the preservation of Halat amid modernization. By integrating ritual speech analysis, symbolic exchange, and cultural translation, this study contributes to the documentation and understanding of Dawan cultural heritage.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on four complementary theoretical perspectives to examine ritual speech, symbolic exchange, and cultural values in the Halat traditional wedding ceremony. First, Turner's (2017) theory of ritual process provides a framework for understanding Halat as a rite of passage involving symbolic actions that facilitate social transitions and reinforce community relationships. Turner conceptualizes rites of passage through three interconnected phases: separation, liminality, and reintegration. These phases provide an analytical perspective for examining the stages of hakaffui (negotiation), habblas (exchange),

and haholik (celebration) in the Halat ceremony. Through this perspective, the wedding ceremony is understood not merely as a sequence of customary activities but as a social process through which individuals and families negotiate new relationships, responsibilities, and social identities.

Second, symbolic anthropology, particularly Turner's (1967) perspective on ritual symbols, guides the interpretation of ceremonial objects, actions, and expressions as carriers of cultural meaning. Ritual symbols represent shared beliefs, social values, and collective understandings that extend beyond their physical forms. This perspective is complemented by Keane's (1997) analysis of representation, ritual speech, and material exchange in an Indonesian society, which demonstrates the interconnected relationship between words, objects, social authority, and reciprocal obligations. Accordingly, symbols used in the Halat ceremony, including the destar, belt, betel nut, and other elements of belis exchange, are examined in relation to their symbolic significance and their roles in communicating dignity, responsibility, kinship, and communal solidarity.

Third, linguistic anthropology and the theory of performativity provide the foundation for analyzing tonis as a specialized form of ritual communication. Drawing on Duranti's (1997) understanding of language as a cultural resource and Keane's (1997) analysis of ritual representation, this study considers ritual speech as a socially situated linguistic performance whose meanings are shaped by the speaker, audience, cultural conventions, and ceremonial context. Ritual utterances do not simply communicate information; they also perform social actions, establish relationships, and legitimize customary obligations. Recent scholarship further emphasizes that ritual language is closely connected to collective authority, cultural identity, and the reproduction of social relationships (Kádár & House, 2020; Tavárez, 2024). This perspective is particularly relevant for interpreting the metaphorical expressions, parallel structures, and culturally specific meanings embedded in tonis.

Fourth, Schwartz's (2015) theory of basic human values provides a framework for understanding the cultural values expressed and maintained through the Halat tradition. Schwartz conceptualizes values as motivational goals that guide individual attitudes and behaviors across different social contexts. Complementarily, Sagiv and Schwartz (2022) explain how values develop, remain relatively stable, and change across cultural environments. In this study, this perspective is used to interpret reciprocity, respect, and communal harmony as culturally meaningful principles expressed through ritual speech and symbolic exchange. These values are examined in terms of how they guide social interactions, reinforce family responsibilities, and contribute to the continuity of Dawan cultural identity across generations.

3. Method

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to examine ritual speech (tonis), symbolic exchange (belis), and cultural values in the Halat traditional wedding ceremony in Nonbaun Village, Middle Fatuleu Subdistrict, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. An ethnographic approach was selected to understand the cultural meanings and social practices embedded in the ceremony within their natural sociocultural context.

Primary data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and audiovisual documentation. Five key informants were involved, including traditional elders, Dawan language experts, Halat participants, and village government representatives. The interviews focused on the meanings of ritual expressions, the significance of ceremonial objects and exchanges, customary obligations, and the challenges of maintaining the Halat

tradition. Participant observation was conducted to document the stages of the ceremony, interactions among participants, and the use of ritual speech. Audiovisual recordings were used to support the documentation and transcription of tonis. Secondary data were obtained from relevant ethnographic records, customary regulations, and previous academic studies.

Data analysis involved three interconnected stages. First, ritual utterances in the Dawan language were transcribed verbatim to preserve their original linguistic forms and expressions. Second, cultural translation analysis was conducted to interpret the symbolic, relational, and spiritual meanings of tonis and belis by considering their linguistic features, performance contexts, and cultural significance. Third, thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring cultural values, particularly reciprocity, respect, and communal harmony, as well as challenges related to cultural preservation. The interpretation was guided by the theoretical perspectives of ritual process, symbolic anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and cultural values. The findings from observations, interviews, and audiovisual documentation were compared to strengthen the credibility of the interpretations.

4. Result

4.1 Meanings Conveyed Through Tonis and Belis

Based on the verbatim transcriptions and cultural translation analysis, ritual utterances *(tonis)* in the Halat tradition exhibit a structured linguistic form characterized by metaphorical expressions, parallelism, and symbolic language. The analysis identified three dimensions of meaning: symbolic, relational, and spiritual.

Symbolic meaning is reflected in several ritual expressions. The phrase *"Nak Pilu Nahelan Bi Nakan"* (the headcloth is strong on the head) symbolizes firmness of mind, self-respect, and leadership authority. The *destar* (headcloth) is therefore understood not merely as a head covering but also as a symbol of dignity and honor. Similarly, the expression *"A Futu Nahelan Bi Te,on"* (the belt is strong on the waist) symbolizes the readiness and courage to propose marriage and assume responsibility. The phrase *"Nak Init He Ma Kato Ma Fenaij"* (binding the wife) symbolically represents the formalization of marital status, accompanied by responsibilities and loyalty. Furthermore, the expression *"Puahem pis-pisa, maunsem tuk-tuka..."* (even if there are only a few betel nuts, come in so we can eat betel nuts together) represents the bond between the two families, symbolizing their unity in heart and mind.

Relational meaning is conveyed through expressions that emphasize responsibility and the maintenance of harmonious relationships. The belt, represented in the expression *"A Futu Nahelan Bi Te,on,"* signifies courage and readiness to fulfill responsibilities as a husband and family member. Similarly, the expression *"Nak Init He Ma Kato Ma Fenaij"* represents the establishment of a formal relationship between husband and wife, as well as the bond between their respective families. The sharing of betel nuts further expresses togetherness and unity between the two families, indicating their willingness to share decisions, responsibilities, and challenges.

Spiritual meaning is also embedded in these ritual expressions. The headcloth symbolizes firmness of heart and mind guided by noble values. The belt represents inner strength and readiness to fulfill life's responsibilities with faith. The expression concerning the binding of the wife symbolizes the union of two souls in a blessed relationship founded on loyalty, love, and lifelong commitment. Meanwhile, sharing betel nuts represents unity of heart, inner harmony, and sincere togetherness, reflecting the hope that both families will live peacefully and move forward toward a shared goal.

4.2 Values Shaping Social Relations

Three main values embedded in the Halat tradition shape social relations in Nonbaun Village: reciprocity, respect, and communal harmony.

Reciprocity is reflected in expressions emphasizing that social and marital relationships are not determined by the quantity of material exchanges but by togetherness and sharing. The practice of eating betel nuts together symbolizes reciprocal exchange between the two families, indicating that their relationship is based on the principle of balanced giving and receiving.

Respect is reflected in the symbols of the headcloth and the belt. The headcloth represents honor, dignity, and the inner strength of a man as the head of the family, while the belt symbolizes responsibility and commitment to maintaining the family through loyalty. These symbols convey the expectation that a husband should respect his role, care for his wife, and fulfill his obligations with awareness and maturity.

Communal harmony is demonstrated through openness and acceptance of everyone present, regardless of their background, including religious differences. The expression *"ansao mese ma nekaf mese"* (one heart, one mind) indicates that despite differences among individuals or groups, including religious differences, they are expected to maintain unity through a shared commitment to family and community harmony.

4.3 Challenges in Maintaining the Halat Tradition

The Halat tradition faces three main challenges in the context of modernization. First, the declining use of ritual language among younger generations is reflected in their limited mastery of the Dawan language used in tonis. This decline is associated with their limited interest in learning about ancestral culture and their growing attraction to foreign cultures, which they perceive as more appealing and less constrained by customary rules. Limited parental involvement in supervising and teaching children about traditional culture from an early age also contributes to this situation.

Second, the influence of modern marriage practices presents challenges to the maintenance of traditional customs. Marriage practices influenced by foreign cultures tend to emphasize practicality and efficiency, thereby reducing the role of traditional rituals. Consequently, some customary practices that should be performed during engagement and marriage ceremonies are performed less frequently.

Third, the shift in social values toward individualism presents another challenge to the continuity of the Halat tradition. This shift contrasts with the collectivist values underlying Halat, which emphasize togetherness, collective participation, and shared responsibility rather than individual interests.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that tonis functions as a form of ritual communication in which linguistic expressions convey symbolic, relational, and spiritual meanings. The use of metaphors, parallel structures, and culturally specific expressions demonstrates that the interpretation of tonis depends on its cultural and ceremonial context rather than on literal meanings alone. This finding is consistent with Duranti's (1997) perspective that language functions as a cultural resource embedded in social practices. It also corresponds with Keane's (1997) analysis of the relationship between language, material objects, and social representation in Indonesian society. More recent research by Majid (2024) on Tata Liba ritual speech in the Palu'e community similarly illustrates how ritual utterances perform social

functions, particularly in maintaining relationships and restoring communal harmony. Saparudin et al. (2025) also demonstrate that oral performances in the Baduy rice-planting ritual are closely connected to cultural knowledge and ceremonial contexts. In this regard, the findings suggest that tonis serves not only as a medium of communication but also as a means of expressing and transmitting cultural meanings within the Dawan community.

The findings further indicate that the Halat tradition embodies three important values: reciprocity, respect, and communal harmony. These values are expressed through ritual utterances, symbolic objects, and interactions between the two families. The sharing of betel nuts, for example, represents reciprocity and togetherness, while the headcloth and belt communicate dignity, responsibility, and commitment within family relationships. These findings are consistent with Turner's (1967) perspective that ritual symbols convey meanings associated with social relationships and collective values. They also correspond with Hermawan and Nomleni's (2024) study of the Belis marriage tradition in East Sumba, which identifies familial cooperation, mutual understanding, harmony, and respect as important dimensions of traditional marriage exchanges. Furthermore, Gesiradja et al. (2025) explain that belis traditionally represents a social contract through which marriage establishes relationships between two families and reinforces communal bonds. In the Halat context, these findings suggest that ritual speech and symbolic exchange complement each other in expressing customary responsibilities and maintaining relationships between families. Thus, the Halat tradition can be understood as a cultural practice through which social values are expressed and enacted in everyday community relationships.

The findings also reveal several challenges to the continuity of the Halat tradition, particularly the declining mastery of ritual language among younger generations, the influence of modern marriage practices, and the shift toward individualistic social values. These challenges indicate that cultural continuity is influenced not only by the existence of traditional ceremonies but also by the transmission of language and cultural knowledge between generations. A similar concern is reported by Rattu et al. (2025) in their study of the Tatambaken oral tradition in the Minahasa community, which identifies modernization as a challenge to intergenerational transmission while highlighting the importance of family inheritance and institutional revitalization. Clavé and Hijjas (2024) also discuss how traditions in Island Southeast Asia undergo processes of transmission, adaptation, and reinvention in changing social environments. Furthermore, Gesiradja et al. (2025) demonstrate that contemporary interpretations of belis are subject to changing social and cultural perspectives. These studies provide a broader context for understanding the challenges identified in the Halat tradition. Although some customary practices may be adapted to contemporary circumstances, maintaining the Dawan ritual language and the cultural meanings embedded in its symbols remains important for preserving the tradition's continuity. Therefore, documenting tonis, explaining the meanings of ceremonial objects, and encouraging intergenerational cultural transmission may support efforts to maintain the Halat tradition in Nonbaun Village.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the meanings of ritual speech (tonis) and symbolic exchange (belis) in the Halat traditional wedding ceremony in Nonbaun Village from a cultural linguistic perspective. The findings indicate that tonis and belis convey three interconnected dimensions of meaning: symbolic, relational, and spiritual. Through metaphorical expressions,

ceremonial objects, and ritual practices, these elements communicate meanings associated with dignity, responsibility, loyalty, kinship, and the relationship between the two families.

The study also identified three cultural values embedded in the Halat tradition: reciprocity, respect, and communal harmony. These values are reflected in ritual expressions, the exchange and sharing of ceremonial elements, and interactions between participating families. In particular, the sharing of betel nuts represents togetherness and reciprocal relationships, while the symbols of the headcloth and belt communicate dignity, responsibility, and commitment within family relationships.

Furthermore, the findings reveal three main challenges to maintaining the Halat tradition: declining mastery of the Dawan ritual language among younger generations, the influence of modern marriage practices, and a shift toward individualistic social values. These challenges highlight the importance of maintaining knowledge of ritual expressions and the cultural meanings associated with ceremonial practices. Overall, this study provides documentation of the linguistic expressions, symbolic meanings, and cultural values associated with the Halat wedding ceremony in Nonbaun Village. Its findings may contribute to further research on Dawan cultural practices and support local efforts to document and transmit traditional knowledge across generations.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Rati Yonangki Haki: Conceptualization, investigation, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, and writing – original draft.
Yanrini Martha Anabokay: Writing – review and editing, and validation.
Yandri Susuek Ndun: Supervision and writing – review and editing.
All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Statement of the Use of AI

The authors used artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted tools to support grammar checking and language editing. All content was reviewed and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the manuscript.

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