



Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts

**From Ritual to Performance: A Semiotic Exploration of Ngayo Ritual in
Bungan Religious Ceremonies**

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From Ritual to Performance: A Semiotic Exploration of Ngayo Ritual in Bungan Religious Ceremonies

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Except where due acknowledgements have been made, the work is that of the author alone. The thesis has not been accepted for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature of any other degree.

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to examine the traditional religious ceremonies of the Orang Ulu community through a semiotic analysis of symbolic elements, with a particular focus on the Kayan people, an ethnolinguistic subgroup residing in the Long Amo longhouse, Belaga, Sarawak. Emphasis on the Ngayo ritual, a central practice within the Bungan belief system, which came before the arrival of Christianity in the Orang Ulu community. Performed as an offering to the goddess Doh Tenangan, the Ngayo ritual seeks to ensure protection, prosperity, health, and the expulsion of misfortune and taboo. Despite the widespread influence of Christianity since 1948, a minority of households in Long Amo continue to practise the Bungan tradition. Data for this research were collected through ethnographic methods, including participant observation, documentation, and interviews with local informants. The analysis employs Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory in conjunction with Richard Schechner's performance theory to interpret the symbolic and performative dimensions of the ritual. The findings highlight the resilience of indigenous belief systems and their evolving role within contemporary cultural contexts. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the traditional practices among the Kayan and underscores the importance of preserving ritual diversity within the broader Orang Ulu community.

Keywords: Belaga, Bungan, Kayan, Long Amo, Orang Ulu, Semiotic

Dari Ritual ke Persembahan: Satu Eksplorasi Semiotik terhadap Ritual Ngayo dalam Upacara Keagamaan Bungan

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneliti amalan upacara keagamaan tradisional komuniti Orang Ulu melalui analisis semiotik terhadap elemen simbolik, dengan memberi tumpuan khusus kepada masyarakat Kayan, subkumpulan etnolinguistik yang menetap di Rumah Panjang Long Amo, Belaga, Sarawak. Fokus utama kajian ini ialah ritual Ngayo, yang merupakan sebahagian penting dalam sistem kepercayaan Bungan - kepercayaan warisan nenek moyang yang telah wujud sebelum kedatangan agama Kristian. Ritual ini dipersembahkan kepada dewi Doh Tenangan sebagai usaha memohon perlindungan, kesejahteraan, kesihatan, serta untuk menolak musibah dan pelanggaran pantang larang. Walaupun kemasukan agama Kristian sejak tahun 1948 telah menyebabkan pengurangan pengikut dalam amalan kepercayaan tradisional ini, namun sebahagian daripada penduduk kampung Long Amo masih mengekalkan adat tradisi tersebut. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan teori semiotik Charles Sanders Peirce untuk menganalisis elemen simbolik dalam ritual, dengan menghubungkannya dengan kerangka Teori Persembahan oleh Richard Schechner untuk memahami fungsi sosial dan kepentingan ritual tersebut. Data dikumpul melalui pemerhatian, dokumentasi dan temu bual. Kajian ini memperlihatkan bagaimana simbol dalam upacara Bungan berperanan dalam pembentukan makna kolektif dan identiti budaya, serta menekankan kepentingan pemeliharaan kepelbagaian budaya dan amalan ritual dalam komuniti Orang Ulu secara keseluruhan.

Kata kunci: Belaga, Bungan, Kayan, Long Amo, Orang Ulu, Semiotik

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This study aims to explore the profound relationship between the *Ngayo* ritual, a key aspect of the *Bungan* tradition, and the traditional beliefs of the Orang Ulu community. It will also examine the significance of this ritual in promoting the well-being of the Orang Ulu, both historically and in contemporary times. The research will specifically focus on the Kayan people, a sub-ethnic group within the Orang Ulu. From a performance perspective, this study will analyse the preparation and execution of the *Ngayo* ritual, investigating the various stages of the ceremony, from its initiation to its completion.

This research aims to examine the procedures and methods involved in performing the *Ngayo* rituals, using Semiotic Theory to analyse the symbolic meaning within the ritual and Performance Theory to show how those symbolic meaning enacted systematically in performance structure. The study focuses on the Kayan people, who reside at the Long Amo Longhouse in Belaga, Sarawak. The objective is to observe and analyse the ritual's procedures within this ethnic group and explore its cultural significance at various social levels—individual, household, and community especially in light of the decline in its practice following the introduction of Christianity. Additionally, the study seeks to contribute to the preservation of ethnic cultural identity and values. Semiotic Theory serves as the analytical framework to explore the *Ngayo* ritual, its connection to *Bungan* customs, and its broader significance to the community while Performance Theory serve as a way to explain every procedure taken in the ritual is analysed in orderly manner. This chapter

outlines the research background, problem statement, research objectives, research questions, theoretical framework, significance of the study, and research limitations.

1.2 Background of Study

Borneo has always been known for its diverse ethnicities, cultures, and lifestyles but still lives together in peace (Rousseau, 1990). Sarawak is one of the states within Borneo. In addition, Sarawak is a state with a population of 290,750 people based on the statistics of the Sarawak Government from 2010 to 2020 (Statistic Sarawak, 2020). Apart from its ethnic diversity, Sarawak is also famous for its cultural uniqueness. Each ethnic group found in Sarawak has its own beliefs and rituals. Rituals are a sequence of activities involving gestures, words, objects, and performances. Rituals may be prescribed by the traditions of a communities, including religious communities. There is almost no limit toward action or deed in a ritual. According to Catherine Bell (1997), it is said that rituals can be characterised by formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule governance, sacral symbolism, and performances. Meanwhile, Stromberg defines ritual as a simple religious ceremony of some sort (McConachie.B, 2011). In short, ritual is something they use as a social bonding tool. In this case, the *Ngayo* ritual is important not only for its religious need but also as a social bonding tool among the Kayan people, as this ritual needs to be performed during *Do Lemdoh*, *Bungan*'s celebration day. Both ceremonies are related to the Kayan ethnic group, which the researcher will explain more by dividing into three sub-topics for this introductory part. First, the researcher will explain about the Orang Ulu community and introduce a little about the sub-ethnic group under it, especially the Kayan, since they are the focus subject for this research. The second topic is about the *Bungan* religion and the background story for this Kayan custom on how it spread until Belaga and when it started to become a religion

for the Kayan people. Finally, the introduction to the *Ngayo* ritual, which is the main idea of this research.

1.2.1 Orang Ulu Sub Ethnic: Kayan

There are 27 ethnic groups in Sarawak, each with its own distinct culture, way of life, and beliefs (Omar et al., 2016). In 2015, the federal government classified the Bumiputera status in Sarawak to include three major groups: the Iban, Bidayuh, and Orang Ulu. The term *Orang Ulu* serves as an umbrella category that encompasses more than 20 minority groups. Within this cluster, Sims (2019) identified sub-groups originating from Apo Kayan, Krayan-Kelabit, and Apo Duat. Wan, Renganathan, and Philip (2015) further noted that the Orang Ulu community comprises 26 sub-ethnicities, including the Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit, Kajang, Murut, Penan, Saban, Ukit, Sihan, Punan, and others. In this study, the researcher will only focus on the Kayan, one of the dominant sub-ethnic groups of the Orang Ulu. According to Rousseau (1990), the Orang Ulu ethnic group is known as the inhabitants of the Upper River. This ethnic group prefers to settle along the river courses such as Ulu Sungai Sarawak and Ulu Baram Miri. They prefer to settle along the river due to easy access to daily necessities such as transportation, food sources and even agriculture (Bato, 2007). Among all the sub-ethnic groups of the Orang Ulu, the Kenyah and Kayan are the two most important groups (Horn, 2012). As mentioned before, this research will focus only on the Kayan and the Kayan people are a comparatively homogenous entity, sharing one language and ethnic identity (Horn, 2012). Rousseau (1990) also mentioned that Kayan is one of the largest groups of central Borneo with a relatively homogeneous culture. Mostly in the district of Baram and Belaga the Kayan could easily be found (Wan, Renganathan and Philip, 2015) and Rousseau stated that in Sungai Asap, Kayan, Busang, Bahau, Mahakam - Kayan place

their origin in the upper Kayan river area also known as Apo Kayan or Apau Kayan (Rousseau, 1990) as per shown in Image 1.1.

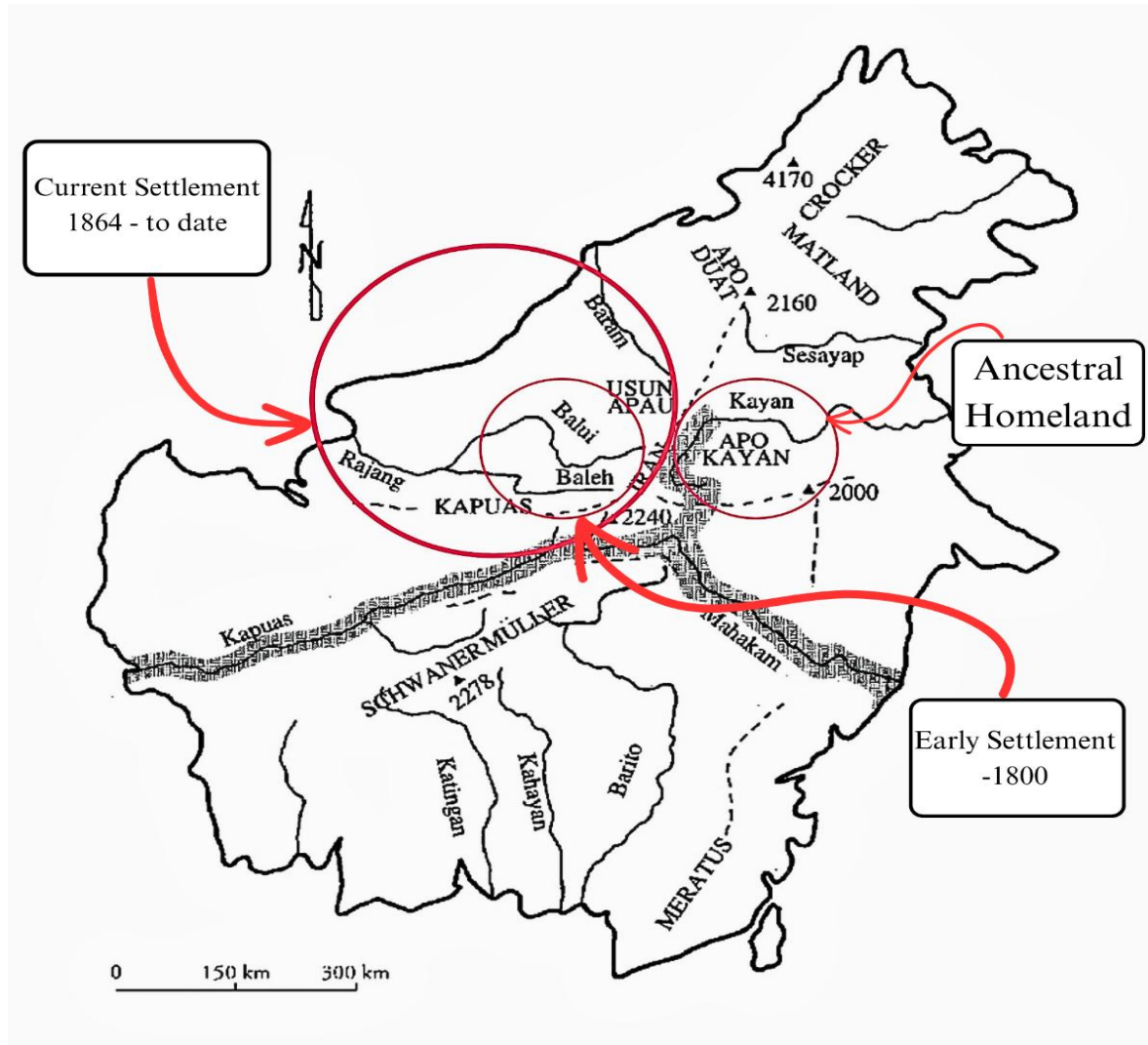


Figure 1.1: Early migration of the Kayan in Sarawak, Malaysia (Image Source: Wan et al. (2015))

In 18th - 19th the Kayan people started to immigrate from their homeland (Apo Kayan) region of Kalimantan (Chan, 2007). Early 1800, the Kayan migrated into Sarawak and populated the whole Balui area (Rosseau 1974a:76) as per shown in Image 1.1. It is stated that several groups of Kayan were migrated to the Balui area in Belaga Sarawak, which is

another part of Borneo (Wan, Renganathan and Philip, 2015). The Kayan ethnicity was very widespread in the center of Borneo. This tribe's village can be found near the river's banks. As the Kayan described as an agrarian and riverine based people (Chan, 2007), they also occupy the main zone and divide the area where there is a river flow (McDougall & Hose, 2020). Due to migration after migration, most Kayan ethnic villages can now be found in the divisions of Miri, Kapit, and Bintulu. Besides, according to Pringle (1970), the Kayan fled from the lower Balui because of the Iban but later Brook administration confines them to the headwaters of the Balui using the Great Kayan Expedition, 1863 (Chan, 2011:49) as shown in the Image 1.1, their current settlement. Because of this, the Kayan ethnicity is divided into three more groups: Kayan Baram, who live in Miri; Kayan Belaga, who live in the interior of Kapit; and finally, Kayan Tubau, who live in Bintulu. Meanwhile, Belaga is located near the Balui River which is also known as the Rejang River by others, and people used to call Belaga the Upper Rejang.

Belaga has an area of 19,403.2 square kilometers, and its population was 37102 in 2010. This settlement has two connected main river accesses, the Balui River or the Rejang River, and the Belaga River. Based on Image 1.2 shows the Belaga District is situated in the Hulu Rajang area, Sarawak's second largest, and spans 19,403.27 km². Belaga town serves as the district's hub (Modin A et al., 2023). Belaga town is accessible via two main modes of transportation. One way is to take the water express from Sibu to Kapit, then from Kapit to Belaga via the Rejang River. The journey from Sibu to Kapit takes about three hours, followed by two hours from Kapit to Belaga. The Bintulu-Bakun roadway spans around 250 kilometres from Bintulu Town to Belaga and takes approximately four hours to drive (Modin A et al., 2023).

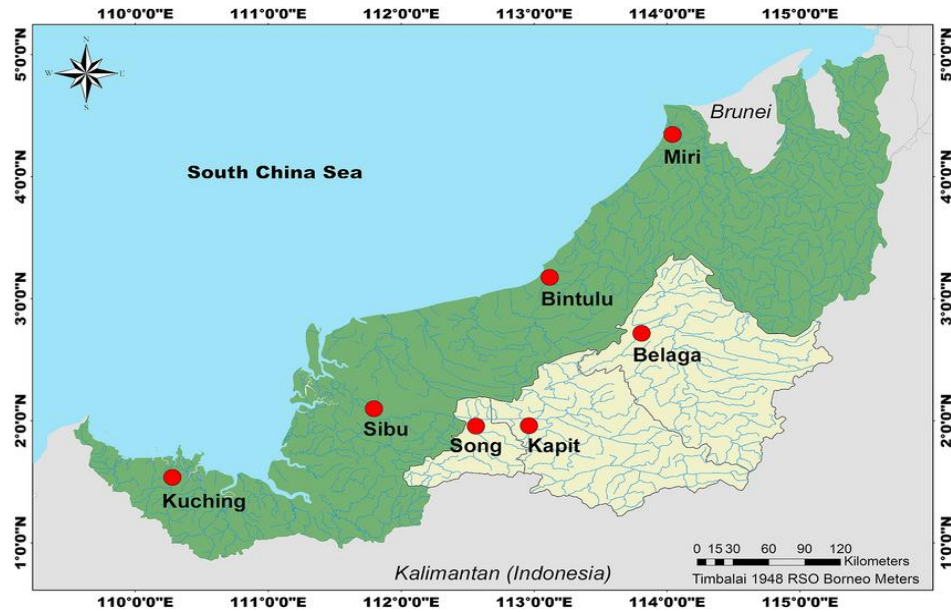


Figure 1.2: Map of Sarawak state, showing major rivers, tributaries and Belaga location
(Image Source: Nur Emyliana Yunos et al., 2022)



Figure 1.3: Map of Sungai Asap and Belaga (Image Source: ZH9567 Mapping Facebook Page, Informal Secondary Source : 10 January 2023)

Meanwhile, there are two major rivers at Belaga, which are Belaga River and the Rejang River. The Belaga River provides access for villagers from the interior of Belaga to

commute to town or earn a living, whilst the Rejang River is for people that live in Belaga to travel to Kapit, Sibul, or any longhouse built alongside the Rejang River and vice versa by using Boat Express. The Belaga District has a sub-district office that oversees Sg. Asap. In Belaga, there are 85 villages including Sungai Asap area. Whereas based on the data obtained by the Belaga District Office in 2020, there are 15 Kayan villages in Belaga and Sungai Asap. Sungai Asap is an area that is also part of the Belaga District. The research site can be reached by road. The journey from Bintulu to Sungai Asap takes approximately two hours, followed by another three hours from Sungai Asap to Belaga town. As shown in Image 1.3, Sungai Asap is located at the upper side of Belaga meanwhile Belaga Town is located in between Bakun Dam since the Dam is located at east Belaga. The research is taking place in the Belaga Town area since there is only one Kayan village that is still practicing this tradition. In Belaga Town area, there are only four villages within the town namely Kampung Melayu Belaga, Kampung Hijrah, Kampung Dajah Layang and Uma Kayan Long Amo. Kampung Hijrah is a new settlement for part of the Malay race in Belaga, while Kampung Dajah Layang is a mixed village and Uma Kayan Long Amo is a Kayan village. Among these four villages in Belaga Town, this study will only focus on the Kayan village, Uma Kayan Long Amo.

Formerly, this longhouse is known as Uma Balo Kasing or Uma Lirung Amo as stated by Rousseau (1974,1990,1999) and Baling (2002). According to Henry Chan (2007), the Kayan became dominant around the Balui area around 1800. From this chronological description of the Kayan expansion journey around Sarawak, it can be deduced that the Kayan people moved to Belaga around 1860. According to the current chief of Long Amo, known as *Maren Uma* Lato Juman, the longhouse might have been established around 1900. He further stated that Long Amo was founded in Belaga around 1960 by Balo Kasing, the

first *Maren Uma*¹(Chief Leader) of Long Amo. However, this account cannot be fully verified, as his recollection of the year is unclear. Moreover, he himself was brought from another village by *Maren Uma* Balo Kasing to succeed her as the *Maren Uma* of Long Amo. Back then they used to live way deep into the forest quite a while along with the Sekapan community before they move out at their current placement now. Their houses are built using teak wood, their roofs are made of leaves, and they live simple lives. According to Jawing Bato (personal communication, 2022) in his story during that time they depend on natural resources. They plant their own vegetables or rice; they go hunting or fishing. But after that, they moved to their new housing site, which is up to now after going through some agreement with the Sekapan people (L. Juman, personal communication, 2022), they finally have their own land to build a longhouse. Besides that, they also move from their old site because they misheard '*Payo*'² as '*Ayo*'³ (L. Juman, personal communication, 2022). When they heard that, they ran away from their house and hid in the forest. Most of those who fled are believed to have opened settlements in Long Tawang, Long Boh, Long Mendalam and Long Mekam. Then a few migrated downstream of Sungai Balui and opened new territories in Udu Belavan, Lusong Laku, Long Benalui and Long Taman. At that time, Long Amo village was called *Leng* (in the forest) Amo. The Sekapan people who used to live with them called Long Amo as *Ba Lo'o*, Kuala Amo meaning the river mouth because Amo River is a tributary that collides with the Rejang River and the Long Amo villager live hiding in the forest along the Amo River. But soon after their agreement with the Sekapan people, they came out from the forest and established a village that remains to this day. Besides, the

1 Not like Long Amo practices hereditary leadership, unlike other village that follow democratic system.

2 Deer in Kayan language.

3 Bandits in Kayan Language.

tourists that come which they called as *Mat Saleh* or *Kelunan Tu'en* often pronounced the word *leng* as long, the name *leng* Amo became Long Amo. Moreover, the longhouse is called Long Amo because it is located near the Amo River. It was once called Uma Balo Kesting in conjunction with the name of the early founder and *Maren Uma* of the longhouse but long after they moved to their new settlement, the *Maren Uma* changed the name Balo Kesting to Long Amo as a lot of people started to call Uma Balo Kesting as Uma Kayan Long Amo. In earlier times, this longhouse was the only one where all villagers adhered to and practiced the *Bungan* custom. However, in recent times, some residents have converted to Christianity due to social changes, the passing of the eldest family members who upheld traditional practices, or interfaith marriages (E. Among, personal communication, 2022).



Figure 1.4: Uma Kayan Long Amo Current Placement (Image Source: Long Amo Facebook Page, 10 January 2023)

1.2.2 Kayan Old Religion: Bungan

The Orang Ulu ethnic group was never exposed to religion. They practiced worship ceremonies as a custom (Bato, 2007). As for their religion, they didn't have any religion until Jok Apui came and introduced them to the *Bungan* custom in 1948/1949 (Lake' Baling,

2002). *Bungan* custom is a new belief that nullifies the negative effects of bad auguries that would hinder their agricultural activities (Chan, 2007). Since Long Amo was a new reform longhouse, the only belief system they recognised at that time was brought by Jok Apui. Besides, all agrarian tubal communities around the Balui River and Apau Kayan Kalimantan during that time abandoned their old belief system to convert to *Bungan* custom (Chan, 2007). Since then, they are among the longhouses in Belaga that practice the *Bungan* religion alongside Uma Aging and along with three other Punan Longhouses, which are Punan Ba, Punan Biau, and Punan Tepaling (Lake' Baling, 2002). The Punan longhouses claim that the *Bungan* custom was brought to them by a Kayan trader, as the Kayan said that they would have a better life using this new belief (Chan, 2007). However, according to Lato Juman (2022), nowadays, Long Amo is the only Kayan village where part of the villagers still practices *Bungan* along with some of the Punan or Penan people, while Uma Aging has only one household that practise it. Sometimes they invite *Guru Bungan*⁴ from Long Amo to lead the ceremony for their family. Even when any of the Kayan longhouses in Belaga or Sungai Asap wanted to perform *Bungan* customary practices, they always take *Guru Bungan* from Long Amo to lead the ceremony since they are the only longhouse that still has *Guru Bungan* successor (Ding, D., personal communication, 2022)

⁴ Person in charge to lead the *Bungan* religious ceremony or the leader for the custom.



Figure 1.5: Material for Bungan ceremony (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

Bungan is a custom belief held by the Kayan people before Christianity arrived. It's named after its foremost spirit, which is called *Doh Tenangan*, a woman spirit who takes care of her followers. *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan* is her Kenyah name, while *Doh Tenangan* is her Kayan name (Rousseau, 1999). *Bungan* is a belief that their ancestor spirits are still here with them and take care of them daily (J. Bato, personal communication, 2022). Lato Juman (personal communication, 2022) also said that since they followed the *Bungan* way, their life has gotten even better until now, unlike when they were still using the *Dipuy* custom. He mentions that *Bungan* is also a place for them to ask for protection and fortune from their foremost guardian spirit, *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan*, without needing heavy ritual ceremonies like the *Dipuy* custom.

Before they inherited the *Bungan* custom, the Kayan people followed the *Dipuy* custom. *Dipuy* custom, also known as the *Adat Apo Lagan*, was started by the Kenyah (Rousseau, 1990). Just like *Bungan's* custom, *Dipuy* is also named after its foremost spirit,

which was responsible for the rituals in it, the taboos among the people who practice it, and the omen of the old religion. As told in any stories about this *Adat Apo Lagan*, *Dipuy* caused a lot of trouble for the people who followed her. This practice limits their daily life a lot. They are worried they will violate the taboo made by *Dipuy*. For every activity, they must observe the omen in which they refer to the bird that flew by, giving signs on the action that should be taken, and follow it with a mandatory sacrifice of chicken or pig.

Originally, *Dipuy* was Boh Daleh Gerang's successor, the father of the spirit of paddy that was brought to life by *Doh Tenangan* (Lake' Baling, 2002). When *Dipuy* first took over, *Dipuy* was still practicing the beliefs handed down by Boh Daleh Gerang, which is the belief learnt by Boh Daleh Gerang through *Doh Tenangan*. However, as time went by, *Dipuy* added various restrictions and taboos. In short, *Dipuy* wanted total authority among humans, which brought difficulty to the followers. *Dipuy* customs were perceived as an inconsistent faith that contributed to its lack until the arrival of the *Bungan* reform (Rousseau, 1998). As a result, many abandoned *Dipuy* customs since it commands prohibitions for the followers from eating venison, and if they wanted to make a farm, they had to choose three people to abstain from while making the farm. However, when *Dipuy's* methods became harder and less effective, *Bungan* interfered (Rousseau, 1999). Rituals help to maintain the balance between living and the environment. Since *Dipuy* couldn't keep the balance as one of the followers kept on crying, asking for help, *Bungan* interfered by visiting a man in his dream (J. Bato, personal communication, 2022).

Bungan custom was founded in 1940 by Jok Apui from Long Avong, which is known as Apo' Kayan (Kalimantan), the first village that practiced this custom. Jok Apui adopted these beliefs after repeatedly complaining to *Bungan Malan Pesilong Luan* about his difficult life even after he converted to Christianity (Lake' Baling, 2002). Based on every

story that tells about *Bungan* custom, it all started with Jok Apui as he cried about his bad luck and said everything, he did was wrong. No matter what belief he follows, he still doesn't get a better life, and he is tired of it. So, he asks the spirit of life to just take his life away. Since *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan* is the spirit who granted life to the human being, she hears Jok Apui moaning every day to take his life. So, she comes to him through a dream and asks if he wants to follow her beliefs, which are the beliefs of *Bungan Semalan Pesilong Luan*, the root of their original beliefs before *Dipuy* changed them. *Bungan* promises that it will guide and bless Jok Apui's life if he is willing to follow her instruction and abandon his current beliefs (Lake' Baling 2002). The *Bungan's* goddess instructs Jok Apui that no matter what he wants to do, he has to ask for the grace of *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan*. For example, if he wants to build a house, he can convey his intention to *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan* by raising an egg on a machete to ask for her blessings. Upon hearing her proposal, Jok Apui vowed to follow and practice these beliefs and left his old beliefs. Since that day, Jok Apui's life has gotten better, which makes people around him curious, and that is how people started to follow these beliefs (Rousseau, 1990). Even Lato Juman (personal communication, 2022) and Jawing Bato (personal communication, 2022) also tell the same story of how the *Bungan* custom was founded by a man named Jok Apui from Apo Kayan. From this story on how the *Bungan* custom is founded, it can be said that it is indeed true that this custom was brought by a Kenyah man from Apo' Kayan around 1940 as a revolution to abandon their old belief, which is the *Dipuy* custom. Since they didn't have proper religion during that time, they accepted the *Bungan* custom as part of their belief and as their religious belief (Rousseau, 1990). Semin (personal communication, 2022) also mentions that they decided that the *Bungan* custom became their religion from the day they inherited this custom from their ancestors till this day. Moreover, *Bungan* is a rejection of the *Dipuy*

approach; they alter the custom accordingly by reintroducing some of the components of *Dipuy* in *Bungan*, and there are various kinds of rituals to ask for good things in life in *Bungan* custom, which they embrace as their religion to cast away bad spirits or omens from their house and family and ask for blessings in everything they did in daily life. Some of the components that reform from *Dipuy* to *Bungan* is *Bungan Amin*⁵, *Bungan Ayak*⁶, *Pela Batong*⁷, *Napok*,⁸ *Dayong*⁹ and so on. These components constitute the actions performed within the *Bungan* religious framework to express worship and gratitude, seek protection and prosperity, and eliminate misfortune. Each of the components in *Bungan* serve distinct purposes and functions such as rite of passage, seasonal ceremonies, healing practices and protective ritual.

Table 1.1: *Bungan's* Religious Component

Rites of Passage	Naming a baby, Wedding, Death and small ritual for personal achievement such as birthday celebration, good grade in study or get a job.
Healing Practice	<i>Dayong</i> for sick people, <i>Napok</i> and <i>Pela Batong</i>
Seasonal Ceremonies / Protective Ritual	<i>Do Lemdoh</i> (Harvest Festival), <i>Bungan Ayak</i> , <i>Bungan Amin</i> , <i>Ngayo</i>

⁵Ceremony to bless the house, asking for protection and expelling bad luck for everyone in the house.

⁶ Ceremony before they celebrate *Do Lemdoh* festival.

⁷ Blessing for one individual or a family.

⁸ Ask for a blessing before opening new land, harvesting, or any activities that need large areas; perform when the villagers have a bad dream that is related to the longhouse and an act to ask for protection during a pandemic.

⁹ Ritual for health or examine the meaning of someone's dream.



Figure 1.6: Item needed for Bungan Amin (Researcher's Personal Image)

In short, those components serve each function when needed and structured to fulfil these spiritual or social functions. Above all that religious framework, Ngayo is one of the important rituals in Bungan religion. This ritual is held every *Do Lemdoh* celebration which is a celebration for the Bungan religion. Like the Dayak people that celebrate Gawai Day, the Orang Ulu community celebrate *Do Ledoh* or *Do Lemdoh*. A prayer ceremony will be done every *Do Lemdoh* where they thanked their ancestor spirit for giving them sustenance, health, and protection.

1.2.3 Ngayo Ritual

Ngayo is a ritual that must be performed at every *Do Lemdoh* celebration, and this ritual can only be performed by men. This ritual is known as a sacred offering made to drive away or exorcize evil spirits and bad luck. It is also associated with the symbol of victory

after war. *Ngayo* is a term used in the Kayan language meaning head hunting. Activities, while the Dayak referred to it as *Ngayau*. According to Rousseau (1999), the Kayan perform this rite whenever they bring home an enemy headhunt because they believe that this head represents a supernatural danger. This is another reason why only men can take part in this ritual. As Lato Juman (personal communication, 2022) mentions, another reason why only men participate in this ritual is that it is a symbol of preparation, where every man of the tribe prepares for war. As a symbol of returning victorious after the war, they bring the enemy's head and display it in front of their house to show their pride in victory, but nowadays, they no longer need to do that after they switched from the *Dipuy* custom to *Bungan*. In the past, the *Ngayo* ceremony was a very ritualistic and solemn custom. A freshly severed human head - usually that of an enemy was used as an offering (J. Bato, personal communication, 2022). It was believed that this act granted protection from the spirits of the ancestors and the spirit of the sacrificed person. Therefore, performing the *Ngayo* ritual was essential to appease the enemy's spirit, preventing vengeful harm and transforming it into a source of protection. However, from the point of view of the Kayan today, *Ngayo* is just a ceremony as if going to war since they no longer want to be involved in war or fight with another ethnic group. Besides, there indeed occurred a deep connection between the community members on how they overlook this tradition's evolution since some men refuse to participate in this ritual as they see this ritual as a carryover from *Dipuy* (Rousseau, 1999). Even men nowadays also didn't have the excitement to participate in this ritual during the *Do Lemdoh* celebration as they were no longer interested in the traditional belief (J. Bato, personal communication, 2022). But, unlike the *Dipuy* custom that takes ten days to complete this ritual, they only need two days to complete this ritual according to the *Bungan* need. Besides, to prove they are no longer related to the *Dipuy* way, they choose to slaughter

a chicken or a pig instead of a human head (J. Bato, personal communication, 2022). This sacrificial animal is according to the ability of the people in the room. If there are many men in the house, then there will be more than two chickens that will be sacrificed (E. Among, personal communication, 2022). Meanwhile, for the main performance of the ritual, which is the *Ngayo* dance, called *the Ujet Bato* dance, they'll use the head that they have kept for many years (G. Luhut, personal communication, 2022). During the ritual, the man who is involved is not allowed to enter the house. They will prepare, rest, and eat only at the '*ruai*'. In this ceremony, they will follow *Guru Bungan's* instructions; they will gather around an enemy's head that has been kept for generations before taking it down from its 'home'. They call it *Kuhong*¹⁰. It is kept in the *Sang Kayo*¹¹. People are not allowed to look into the bunch of leaves where they kept the *Kuhong* and only strong spirit men can carry the *Kuhong* throughout the ritual. This is because, once a weak person brought this head during a ceremony, his body became weak or fell ill, and he had nightmares¹² (Lanyau.D.D, 2022).

¹⁰ *Ngayo* head.

¹¹ Palm leave is used to cover the head, and the leave will be use throughout the ritual.

¹² Hereditary beliefs told by the villagers.



Figure 1.7: '*Kuhong*' that been kept for generation (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

Kuhong is a sacred instrument in the Bungan belief system. Its removal from its designated place must be accompanied by a ceremonial celebration, and the *Guru Bungan* will perform the '*Tehari Dahok*'¹³ before they take it out. The sound of the *Gong*, along with their *Parap* and 'chanting' voice. This is a sign that they want to bring the head down from its place. After the head is lowered, they will give it a drink and *Guru Bungan* will '*Mara*'¹⁴ again. Next, they will go down to the riverbank to build a hut and burn it. After performing all those necessities, they will perform the *Ujet Bato* dance around the house. It was a sign of a victory dance coming home from war. During this ritual, women are not allowed to be near or involved. They only help prepare materials needed for the ritual and play musical instruments to celebrate the victorious return of their warrior. They believe that if women

¹³ The initial preamble to inform that they are celebrating the festival *Do Lemdoh* for *Bungan*, so the head spirit won't be mad they took it out.

¹⁴ That's how they call for deeds the *Guru Bungan* in giving a word to the head and also the *Bungan* spirit.

are involved in the ritual, it will bring bad luck to them and to the entire longhouse. After doing the victory dance, they will cook the chicken or pig that was slaughtered earlier at the longhouse '*ruai*'. They will enter the house once *Guru Bungan* says it is finished, and they can enter the house. Further explanation will be given in chapter four as this chapter only briefly describes the direction of this study. So, *Bungan* religion will be further discussed in the following chapters. The researcher will identify and further explore the details of the ritual, including the process of preparation involved.

1.3 Problem Statement

Research on rituals and beliefs in Sarawak has been diverse, yet uneven in its focus. Some studies have highlighted the role of rituals in development, such as the use of the *Miring* ritual in building conservation (Ugih Echoh, Abdul Gapor, & Abdul Rahman, 2020), the preservation and establishment of new settlements (Ugih Echoh et al., 2020), and documentation of how rituals are performed among various Bornean ethnicities, particularly in Sarawak (Chelum et al., 2021). These studies emphasize that rituals hold significant meanings across ethnic groups, functioning at personal, communal, societal, and even spatial levels.

For the Dayak, for instance, the *Miring* ritual continues to be practiced even after conversion to Christianity (Bilon@Senang & Tugang, 2018). In contrast, the Orang Ulu are reported to have gradually abandoned their traditional practices following conversion (Lake' Baling, 2002). In 1989, a meeting of Kayan chiefs in Belaga even led to the declaration that there was no need to celebrate *Do Lemdoh* as the *Gawai* celebration had taken its place

(Emmor, 2017). Similarly, the *Bungan* tradition, once a major celebration, is now in decline due to tensions with Christian beliefs (Jenifer Laeng, 2019).

Despite the cultural significance of the Kayan people within the Orang Ulu community, studies on their rituals remain scarce and superficial. Rousseau's *The Old Kayan Religion and the Bungan Religious Reform*, while valuable, primarily provides a broad overview on *Bungan* beliefs but does not giving the detail information on the origins or performance structure of the *Ngayo* ritual. Existing academic writings on Kayan rituals are limited, while much of the information circulates informally through social media or personal blogs. The majority of scholarship focuses on other Orang Ulu groups such as the Punan, Kenyah, and Penan, covering aspects like music, dance, handicrafts, laws, and social structure, while studies specifically on the Kayan especially concerning the *Ngayo* ritual are extremely limited.

Another important gap is that most existing studies approach these rituals mainly from an anthropological perspective, focusing on their cultural and social functions. However, there is little academic attention given to understanding these rituals through the lenses of semiotics and performance studies, which could reveal the deeper symbolic meanings and performative aspects embedded in the practices. It is therefore hypothesized that by applying semiotic and performance theories, this study will uncover the symbolic structures and performative functions of the *Ngayo* ritual, thereby addressing the lack of comprehensive documentation and enriching the academic discourse on Kayan cultural heritage. As a result, this research aims to fill the gaps in the existing literature by providing a focused study on the *Ngayo* ritual within the Kayan community in Belaga.

1.4 Research Question

These questions were designed to assist the researcher in examining the relationship between ritual, religion, and the theoretical framework employed in this study. Furthermore, similar to the research objectives, the research questions functioned as a guiding framework throughout the research process. The following research questions were utilized to inform and direct this investigation:

1. What is the significance of the relationship between the *Ngayo* ritual and the *Bungan* religious tradition?
2. How do the symbolic elements, as outlined in Peirce's semiotic theory, enhance the analysis of the *Ngayo* ritual ceremonial process?
3. How does an understanding of the symbolic meaning of the *Ngayo* ritual contribute to the field of performance studies?

1.5 Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study was to explore and provide a comprehensive understanding of the *Ngayo* ritual within the context of the *Bungan* religion. To achieve this overarching aim, the researcher formulated three specific objectives that served as a framework guiding the research process. Moreover, these objectives also informed the interpretation of the research findings. The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To examine the significance of the relationship between the *Ngayo* ritual and the *Bungan* religious tradition.

This research is seeking to explore the connection between the *Bungan* religion and the *Ngayo* ritual. The researcher is aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the origins of the *Ngayo* ritual, its significance within the *Bungan* belief system, and the reasons for its performance during the *Do Lemdoh* festive day. Through this objective, the researcher is further elucidating the relationship between the *Ngayo* ritual and the *Bungan* religion, providing clarity on how these elements are interacting and their respective significance to one another.

2. To apply Charles Sanders Peirce's Semiotic Theory in the analysis of the *Ngayo* ritual process.

The researcher is describing the ritual process using the theoretical framework being applied in this study. In addition to outlining the ritual process, the researcher is analyzing the functions and meanings associated with the symbolic elements of the ritual, specifically the stages of gathering, presenting, and dispersing. These symbolic elements are serving as a medium for analyzing the preparation of the ritual and for understanding what they symbolize within the context of the *Ngayo* ritual.

3. To interpret the symbolic meaning of the *Ngayo* ritual systematically through the lens of performance theory.

The study will reinterpret the analysis that has been concluded about the symbolic meaning in the *Ngayo* ritual into the lens of performance studies. Examining how its symbolic elements contribute to a broader cultural significance by gaining insights into how its symbolic elements function as forms of performance so this will offer new ways of culture development, preservation, and even adapt traditional rituals within contemporary contexts.

Based on the objective above, the researcher is elaborating on and summarizing the analysis of the symbolic elements in the *Ngayo* ritual, focusing on its performance structure and procedural stages, and explaining what these symbols are representing in the research findings chapter. This summary also provides a comprehensive overview of the relationships and development of ideas, presenting a coherent and sequential understanding of the ritual's significance.

1.6 Significance of Study

This study involves the collection and documentation of the *Ngayo* ritual, with the aim of contributing valuable findings for further research across various disciplines, such as music, costume design, management, anthropology, and more. The study also seeks to deepen understanding of the *Ngayo* ritual from the Kayan perspective and to distinguish it from similar rituals within other Dayak ethnic groups and Orang Ulu sub-ethnic communities. Additionally, this research aims to raise awareness of the Kayan people's traditional religion, providing exposure to their cultural practices.

Through this work, the researcher hopes to inspire creative individuals interested in documenting, performing, or exploring the arts related to Orang Ulu traditions. The study also aspires to make a meaningful contribution to cultural studies, particularly in the field of ritual research within the Kayan community. By documenting these rituals, the study ensures that the cultural heritage and traditional practices of the Kayan people are preserved and not forgotten. Furthermore, this research explores the application of semiotic theory within performance studies. It demonstrates how performance theory, particularly in the context of theatre, can play a vital role in preserving the Kayan's ancient religion and rituals. Ultimately,

the research highlights the value of performance studies as a tool for safeguarding cultural traditions.

1.7 Scope and Limitation

The researcher is examining three specific scopes within this study. The primary scope of the research is focusing on the *Ngayo* ritual found in *Bungan*, the ancient Kayan religion. This directly connects the second scope to the *Bungan* religion and the Kayan community. The researcher is conducting this study in a Kayan village in Belaga, specifically Uma Kayan Long Amo. As previously mentioned, *Bungan* is their religion, *Do Lemdoh* is their celebration, and *Ngayo* is the ritual performed as part of the *Do Lemdoh* celebration. The table below summarizes the key points of this research.

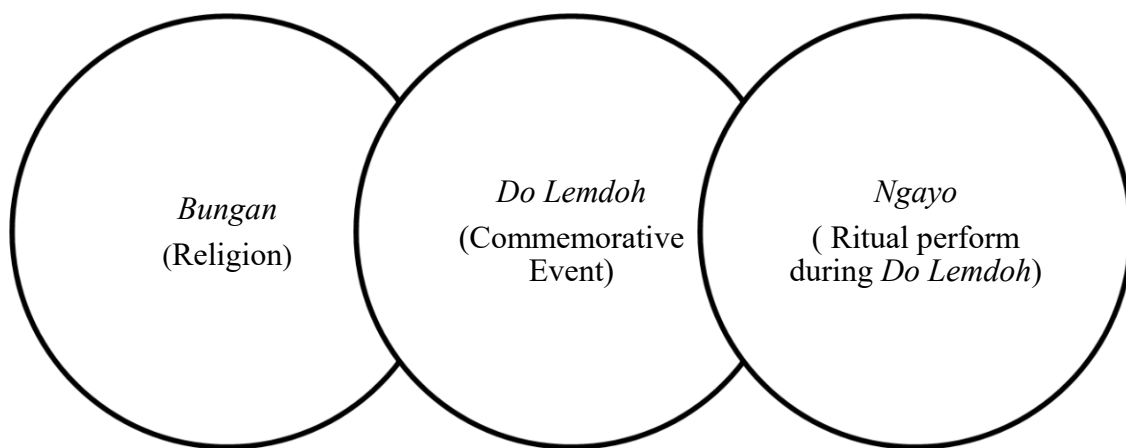


Figure 1.8: Show the different between the research objects

The third scope is the semiotic theory of symbolic elements and the performance theory by Richard Schechner that is used to analyses the ritual preparation and performance.

In short, scope one will elaborating more about the custom and tradition in the Kayan community, second scope is about the significant of the *Ngayo* ritual towards the community and the third scope is the analysis of the ritual. This study is focused on the Orang Ulu ethnic group, especially the Kayan people, who are one of the Orang Ulu sub-ethnic groups. Meanwhile, there are several limitations to this study. Most of the limitations were due to the smaller sample size and collected data. Even though the participants for the interview varied based on age, gender, and role, there was still not enough data about the ritual since most of the villagers converted to Christianity and they barely can remember how the older generation doing the tradition. Since this custom has been practiced for a long time and the person who knew about this custom has passed away, they answer based on their memory recall or what their elders once told them and based on the folk stories that have been shared through generations. Therefore, there will be a slight difference from the participant's answer. Secondary data for this ritual is limited. Most secondary data is extracted through short writing in the study of other ethnic writing, news writing, blogs, social media, and folklore.

1.8 Definition of Terms

In this research, Peirce's semiotic theory and Schechner's performance theory serve as the operational frameworks for analyzing the *Ngayo* ritual. "Symbol is a type of sign whose meaning or ability to represent something is based solely on established habits, dispositions, or general rules that govern its interpretation" (Pierce, 1933, as cited in West, 2013, p.31). Peirce categorizes signs into icons, which communicate by resemblance; indexes, which communicate by direct or logical connection; and symbols, which

communicate through socially constructed meanings that must be learned (Yakin & Totu, 2014). Since symbols are arbitrary, conventional, and evolving (Pietarinen, 2015a), this study operationalizes them to uncover how gestures, objects, and ritual actions in *Ngayo* signify cultural meanings within the Kayan community. The analysis is guided by four semiotic elements—symbols, representation, reference, and meaning—to interpret both the ritual procedures and their symbolic significance.

At the same time, Performance Theory provides a structural lens to examine the ritual as a cultural performance. Schechner emphasizes that rituals can be studied through stages similar to theatre production process, pre-production, production, and post-production which help in identifying preparation, enactment, and aftermath as performative layers of meaning. By combining semiotics and performance, this research operationally defines the *Ngayo* ritual as a symbolic performance, where every act, gesture, and sequence functions both as a sign and as part of a staged cultural expression. This integrated approach enables the study to move beyond descriptive anthropology, offering a deeper understanding of the *Ngayo* ritual's symbolic and performative significance within the Kayan community.

1.8.1 Theoretical Framework

The symbolic elements in Peirce's semiotic theory serve as a key theoretical framework for this research. By operationalizing the concept of symbols, the researcher analyzes the *Ngayo* ritual to uncover its cultural significance, as symbols are abstract and culturally dependent signs whose meanings are established through social and cultural conventions. This makes Peirce's framework suitable for understanding how the *Ngayo* ritual conveys meaning within the Kayan community. To further situate the ritual as a

performative act, the study also applies Schechner's Performance Theory, which examines rituals through the structure of theatrical performance. Accordingly, the *Ngayo* ritual is analyzed in three stages: before the ritual (pre-production), during the ritual (production), and after the ritual (post-production). Through this combined application, the ritual is understood as a symbolic performance, where every gesture, object, and sequence functions both as a sign carrying cultural meaning and as part of a staged cultural expression.

1.8.2 Research Findings to Support the Variables / Findings

This research is based on an in-depth study of the observed ethnic group, with a particular focus on the characteristics and significance of their rituals. In addition to extensive literature review, the researcher conducted interviews with villagers who are regarded as knowledgeable about the rituals. The researcher also observed the ritual process directly and documented it through images and videos. Permission to record the proceedings was obtained from the ritual leader, as specific cultural protocols had to be respected during the performance. For example, women were prohibited from interfering with the men participating in the ritual.

A qualitative ethnographic approach was employed to ensure that the data collected aligned with the research objectives. Literature related to the research topic such as books, dissertations, newspapers, magazines, and journal articles was reviewed to provide contextual background. Content analysis was then applied to interpret the data in order to address the research questions. Given the limited written resources available, the study relied heavily on interviews with selected informants to supplement the documentation and provide deeper insights into the *Ngayo* ritual. Content analysis was also integrated to interpret the

data and address the research questions. Given the limited resources available, the researcher relied heavily on interview data obtained from selected informants to supplement the study.

1.9 The Importance of This Research

The scholarly work on the *Ngayo* ritual and the *Bungan* religion remains relatively limited within academic discourse, highlighting the need for further research. One of the earliest and most significant written accounts of *Bungan* customs was produced by Lake Baling and later translated by Jerome Rousseau in 1990. While this manuscript offers valuable insights into the myth of Jok Apui, the origins of the *Bungan* belief system, and detailed ceremonial procedures including taboos and obligations that distinguish *Bungan* from *Dipuy* customs, it is insufficient as a sole reference for understanding the complexity of *Bungan* practices in contemporary contexts.

This research is therefore important because it seeks to document and analyse the *Ngayo* ritual in greater depth, not only to enrich the existing body of knowledge but also to preserve and contextualize this ritual as a vital component of Orang Ulu religious heritage and cultural identity. By bridging the gap left by earlier works, this study provides new perspectives that integrate symbolic interpretation and performance analysis, offering a more comprehensive understanding of *Ngayo* as both a spiritual practice and a cultural performance. Ultimately, the findings aim to serve as a critical reference for future scholarship on indigenous ritual traditions.

1.9.1 Contribution to Theory / Study Field

The aim of this study is to deepen the understanding of the *Ngayo* ritual within the *Bungan* belief system, which forms an integral part of the old Kayan religion, and to highlight its significance within Orang Ulu communities. This research is important because scholarly work on *Ngayo* remains limited, and documenting it not only preserves an essential aspect of Orang Ulu cultural heritage but also expands the discourse in ritual studies. By analysing the *Ngayo* ritual through the lens of semiotics and performance theory, this study contributes a fresh perspective to the field, offering both symbolic and performative interpretations that extend beyond existing textual accounts.

In doing so, the study enriches ritual studies by situating *Ngayo* as a living practice embedded in cultural meaning, while at the same time broadening the scope of performance studies. The findings can inspire performance artists to reinterpret the data into creative works or even adapt the ritual itself into performative expressions that introduce Kayan traditions to wider audiences. This dual contribution preserving indigenous knowledge while fostering innovative academic and artistic engagement, ensures that the *Ngayo* ritual is recognized, studied, and appreciated as both a cultural and performative phenomenon. This approach also offers an innovative alternative to traditional textual representations of culture and rituals, allowing for a dynamic, performative way to present these traditions beyond media documentation.

1.9.2 Contribution to the Communities

This research provides insight into the rituals practiced within Sarawak's diverse communities. In addition, it contributes to broader cultural awareness by encouraging ritual practitioners and policymakers to recognize and preserve traditions across multiple ethnic groups, rather than focusing solely on a single ethnicity. By doing so, it supports the continuity and appreciation of cultural heritage, helping to prevent these practices from being forgotten. Furthermore, this study enables the researcher to document her own cultural traditions while highlighting the distinct differences in ritual practices among various ethnic groups.

1.10 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has presented an overview of the study's background, scope, limitations, problem statement, research questions, objectives, and significance. This foundation has enabled the researcher to define the central focus of the study and to establish a clear direction for the research. Additionally, it has helped refine the topic for deeper investigation in Chapter Four. The subsequent chapter will provide a review of relevant literature, including scholarly articles, journals, and other academic sources, to further support the research objectives and strengthen the study's analytical framework.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher will elaborate on the scholarly work instrumentally in conducting this study and in shaping the writing process. The references will be categorized into three main areas of focus. The first area discusses about the central subject of this study, which is the *Ngayo* rituals and *Bungan* customs, collectively referred to as Orang Ulu's Old Customs. The second area focuses on the theoretical framework employed in the study, specifically semiotic theory, which enabled the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the theory. The third area addresses the symbolic elements within the structure of the ritual performance. Each reference used in this study is directly relevant to the research, and the researcher will discuss these materials in detail throughout this chapter.

This chapter will review previous research and writings related to the study topic, including articles, journals, newspaper clippings, magazines, and books. Engaging with this literature allowed the researcher to gain insights into the subject of the study, which not only strengthened the researcher's understanding but also helped in framing the direction and structure of the study. Although some of the literature may share similarities with this research, they differ in scope and approach, providing a distinct contribution to the study.

2.2 Orang Ulu's Old Custom

2.2.1 Bungan

Many ideas and practises were preserved in *Bungan* custom, often known as Kayan's old religion. This custom, as described by Rousseau (1974) in his essay *The Social Organization of The Baluy Kayan*, has a fundamental pattern to eliminate taboos, omens, times of ritual inactivity, and costly sacrifices. Rousseau went deeper into *Baluy Kayan* society's social life, particularly their population, in his dissertation, as the community in *Baluy Kayan* lives kilometres apart along the *Baluy River*. According to Rousseau, *Bungan* reform was an instant success in 1950 since it replaced their previous custom, *Dipuy* custom, also known as *Adat Apo Lagan*. In this dissertation Rousseau briefly talk about the *Bungan* reform as his main title for this dissertation is more to the *Baluy Kayan* population and through his writing it is said that a Kenyah wanderer brought the *Bungan* belief to Uma Bawang, and it quickly spread across the *Baluy Kayan* community. *Bungan* is a belief system in which they retain the majority of their traditional practises while removing the various prohibitions and onerous ceremonies. The majority of their ritual ceremony practises are simplified. In short, this new religion that they practised affected a lot of their daily lives. With this *Bungan* reform, it seems like their daily activities are more manageable.

After that, Rousseau continued his essay within this community by distinguishing between two Kayan beliefs, *Dipuy* custom and *Bungan* custom in his next writing and Rousseau explained further about these two main beliefs. According to Rousseau (1999), he explained that *Dipuy* is called after the spirit responsible for the old religion's ceremonies, taboos, and omens, whereas *Bungan* represents a revolt against *Dipuy's* way of thinking. It all started with Jok Apui's vision in 1940, when he mentioned in his dream that two of

Bungan's most powerful spirits, *Doh Tenangan* and *Lake' Tenangan*, had visited him and ask him to back to the origin beliefs they use to follow. He has followed the *Bungan* belief system ever since.

The people in *Lepo Jalan* converted to *Bungan* in 1944, followed by those in the *Baluy* region in 1948 and 1949. It is stated that incorrect ritual performance was the cause of *Dipuy* becoming harsher and less effective. *Tenangan* is said to be a powerful spirit with piercing eyes; she understands and can access everything through people's dreams. *Dipuy*, on the other hand, is noted for being rude, malicious, and haughty. *Dipuy* is *Tenangan*'s sister, hence both spirits are related to each other. Ritual does actually serve to sustain the health of individuals, communities, and fields, and the *Bungan* solution retained the old framework but in a new format after being examined based on the aim and relevance of *Dipuy* custom. In this writing, Rousseau clearly explains how the *Bungan* and *Dipuy* exist and the difference between these two beliefs.

As stated by Baling (2002), *Bungan* was introduced by Jok Apui after *Doh Tenangan* and *Lake Tenangan* visited him in his dream since he was continually complaining about his poor luck. *Dipuy*, according to Baling also, makes people's life miserable. *Dipuy* is quite particular about her omens and rules. They will be executed promptly if they break the taboos or forget to tell her, making some sacrifice for their task. Baling also lists the people which longhouse fully follow *Bungan* custom, and which longhouse divided between *Bungan* and Christian. It is separated into two sections in this writing: Part One for *Adat Dipuy* and Part Two for *Bungan* custom. This work was originally composed in Kayan and then translated into English. This text outlined what to do and what not to do during *Bungan* sessions, as well as serving as a guideline for the Kayan's tradition. This book contains a comprehensive list of Kayan customs. For example, marital customs, customary law, the custom of naming

a child, the custom of the departed, and the custom of *Dayong*. Baling then describes the differences in those customs after the *Bungan* customs were reformed in the next part.

E. White (1967) states that *Dipuy* custom refers to this animistic belief as '*Lali*'. *Bungan* custom existence claimed to be the same story of Jok Apui's dream as Rousseau (1999) and Baling (2002). E. White summarises what is prohibited in *Dipuy* but permitted in *Bungan*, such as eating deer, which is outlawed in *Dipuy* but permitted in *Bungan*. They also don't have complicated omens or taboos. The writer also reported that, in addition to Jok Apui, another person claimed to have met *Bungan* in his dream. Tinggai told the writer that he encountered *Bungan* in a vast building, and *Bungan* said that the building is a barrier between hell and heaven. The writer concludes that the *Bungan* cult had a beneficial overall influence. However, where conversion is inconsistent, there might be frequent friction between new converts and supporters of old doctrines.

Meanwhile, based on Ritchie (2022), *Bungan* could be for land blessing ceremonies. Rituals can be viewed as symbolic acts that shape reality rather than just representing it. This perspective depicts the transformational power of rituals in which they perform an old religious ceremony known as '*Pela Daleh*' to separate the residents of Belaga from the ghosts of their ancestors. This is another type of cleansing ritual in *Bungan* custom where the Shaman will be possessed by the *Bungan Malan* female deity. During the site selection process for the construction of the Bakun dam, the cleansing rites were necessary to appease the spirits of the land and rivers. It was important to hold a large *Pela* because they believed that their ancestral graves and the home of the spirits will drown. This is to ensure that no one will be hurt, and everyone will prosper after they are resettled. As for Gini Gorlinski (2017) writing, she investigates how the Kenyah community of Sarawak, Malaysia, navigated the preservation of their traditional culture in her writing. She distinguishes

between 'religion'—the formal doctrines and practices of a faith—and 'religiosity,' which she defines as an individual's or community's intrinsic sense of spirituality and relationship with the spiritual realm. Since the Kenyah did follow the Bungan custom which they call as *Adet Pu'un* before they converted to Christianity. The study emphasises that sociocultural variables, linguistic expressions, and the community's changing relationship with spirituality all play important roles in determining which components of their musical traditions survive, transform or perish.

Anthropologist Henry Chan (2007) investigates how the Punan Vuhang community transitioned from traditional hunter-gatherers to settled agriculturalists. Historically, the Punan Vuhang relied solely on the rainforest for survival. His research contributes to conversations about indigenous societies' adaptability and resilience in the face of environmental and socioeconomic change. Aside from the Punan Vuhang community, Chan describes how the Kayan dominated the Balui and how they migrated into Sarawak in his writing. The Kayan are agrarian and riverine-based people, and according to the research they are also the ones who introduced the *Bungan* belief to the Punan Vuhang. In Short, the *Bungan* tradition brought by a Kayan trader to the Punan Vuhang people, they started to follow this belief since all agrarian tubal communities in Balui River and Apau Kayan in Kalimantan convert to *Bungan*. While Oliver Venz (2016) investigates the Kayan people's intricate system of taboos and avoidance phrases, focussing on the idea of '*mawa*', which denotes the sudden and unexplained disappearance or diminution of something. Venz emphasises that '*mawa*' is used to describe instances in which items, such as crops, decline or vanish for no apparent reason, indicating a belief in supernatural forces. The Kayan have a complicated system of avoidance phrases built into their culture. These terms convey prohibitions based on social taboos or sensitive situations. In Kayan culture, certain social

interactions and situations are declared unsuitable or forbidden using avoidance terminology. Individuals who say these prohibited words may unwittingly invoke the presence of otherworldly powers for example, in *Dipuy* custom, taboos affect practically every aspect of life, including behaviour towards the elderly, food taboos, and eating prohibitions. Meanwhile, Tan Chee Beng (2016), a cultural anthropologist, explores the *Bungan* conversion in the Long Geng Badeng community from their traditional *Bungan* faith to Christianity. The indigenous rituals of the Badeng Kenyah were often elaborate and complex. The adoption of Christianity introduced a more simplified and less demanding set of religious practices, making it an attractive alternative for many community members. By the 1950s, *Adet Bungan* had gained widespread acceptance in Sarawak's Balui district, with the majority of Kayan villages incorporating the practice. Unlike other writing that attribute the introduction of the *Bungan* belief is by Jok Apui, Tan Chee Beng states in his writing that Jok Aging, a Kayan from Long Linau, was the one who introduced the *Bungan* belief to the Badeng Kenyah community. The *Bungan* follower in Long Geng said that Bungan is one of the *Bali* (spirits, God, goddesses) and they have their own *Bungan* House and *Bali*'s House to pray.

Both Rousseau's writings highlighted Orang Ulu's traditional religions and how those beliefs were being reformed to improve their lives. The first writing of Rousseau is more on the social organisation of the Baluy Kayan, which is more comparative data between the ethnographies of the Baluy Kayan and the Baram Kayan, but it does indicate how the *Bungan* reform influenced their way of life and social life. In the meantime, he conducts a comparative study of the Kayan religion, focusing on ceremonial life and religious reform in another writing. In this chapter, Rousseau distinguishes between the old custom of *Adat Dipuy* and the new reform of *Adat Bungan*, noting how the *Bungan* reform maintains the old

tradition while being less severe. Furthermore, the researcher can see a clear distinction between *Dipuy* and *Bungan* in that literature, as well as the importance of this religion to the Kayan people. Rousseau explains in this book how *Adat Dipuy* exerts stronger control over the people's daily lives, whereas *Adat Bungan* makes it simpler for them while maintaining everything in place. Baling (2002) writing's goal is to create the series to enable the recording and dissemination of some of this rich and continually changing corpus of oral literature. It is designed not only to preserve the community's historic traditions, but also to serve as a source in the future. Meanwhile, E. White (1967) is researching the history of *Bungan* customs and how the community reacts to it. E. White also highlighted how this customary ritual became tolerated alongside Christianity.

Ritchie (2022), Gini Gorlinski (2017), Henry Chan (2007), Oliver Venz (2016) and Tan Chee Beng (2016) may discuss subjects that are different from the subject matter of this study. However, it also assists the researcher in understanding and gathering information that can be employed in this study. According to Ritchie (2022), the *Bungan* custom has a significant impact on every business that they conduct in their daily lives, with the ritual serving as a cleansing ceremony to fend off negative omens while establishing a new settlement. Gini Gorlinski (2017) and Tan Chee Beng (2016) both discusses the same matter on how Kenyah transitioned from *Adet Puun* to *Bungan* custom to Christianity, and how a Kenyah men spread *Bungan* customs to the Kayans. Despite these changes, they manage to revive their traditional music and rite accordance to the Christianity beliefs. Meanwhile, Henry Chan (2007) writes that the *Bungan* ritual was taught to them by the Kayan, and they chose to adopt it because they believe it could reduce the negative consequences of bad omens that would have affected their agriculture activities. Venz (2016) examines the Kayan people's use of language, taboos, and supernatural belief, demonstrating how language may

be utilised to maintain social order and cultural coherence through supernatural concepts. Through this writing, the researcher can conclude that most of the ethnic that under the Orang Ulu community especially the Kenyah, Kayan, Punan and Penan do follow the *Bungan* custom before they convert to their current belief, most of their reason to follow this *Bungan* custom is because the original supreme deity is *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan* and the most importance reason is that the reduction of ritual offering and no restriction.

The researcher deduced that the majority of the ethnic groups within the Orang Ulu community, particularly the Kenyah, Kayan, Punan, and Penan, adhered to *Bungan* customs before adopting their current beliefs. The primary reason they adhere to this *Bungan* custom is that the original supreme deity is *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan*, and the most important reason is that there are no constraints on the decrease of ritual offerings. In short, the researcher can see the chronology of how the *Bungan* custom became significant to the Kenyah, Kayan, Penan, and Punan, where it was come from their ancestor's beliefs at the first place, and as time passes, they clarify it as their custom or tradition, which they call as *Adat*, after that they embrace it as part of their religious belief. This belief also becomes a system to link all the ethnic groups under the community.

2.2.2 Ngayo

Kayo or *Ngayo* in the Kayan language means headhunting or to go to war, while among the Dayak people, they call the practice of the headhunting as *Ngayau*. Both bring the same meaning and idea, the distinction between these two groups can be observed in the variation of pronunciation and spelling. Within the Kayan community, specific rites must be conducted before going to war. The *Ngayo* ritual serves as a reenactment of headhunting

ceremonies (Rousseau, 1974). During this rite, only the men of each household participate, symbolically ‘hunting’ enemy heads as trophies to cure ailments and acquire wealth. They are not permitted to return home but must cook, eat, and sleep on the riverbank until the following day. Rousseau also distinguishes this ritual between *Adat Dipuy* and *Bungan* traditions: the process takes ten days under *Dipuy* customs but only two days within *Bungan* (Rousseau, 1999). In contemporary practice, participation has declined, with some men rejecting the ritual as an outdated remnant of *Adat Dipuy*, whose taboos have lost their meaning. Historically, *Kayo* required a fresh head to be presented at the longhouse whenever the ritual was performed. However, over time, the practice evolved; instead of obtaining new heads, communities reused the same skulls preserved for many years to maintain the ritual’s continuity.

According to *Adat Dipui*, *Ngayo* is not the same as *Bungan*. Based on Baling’s (2002) writing, during the *Bungan* reform, they altered several *Ngayo* ceremonies. They still adhere to the requirement that only men participate in this ceremony. They are encouraging people to sacrifice chicken and pig during this rite. They will pray before beginning the process. They had to bring a fresh head for the ceremony, as well as take out the pig’s liver and mix it with rice within a banana leaf to make offerings to ward off auguries. They must complete this procedure without eating samblour deer, mouse deer, *mekei* (*monosodium glutamate*), or yams for ten days. Those who transgress the taboos will suffer from a yellow illness known as *medam nyemit* (a high fever that causes us to turn yellowish or pale), and only a powerful priest can assist them, or they will die. However, they no longer need to hustle in *Bungan*. They merely need to do the ritual by feasting and relaxing; no specific routine is required. Lifting an egg and sacrificing a chicken suffices, while the pig is utilised to bless everyone in the longhouse. The *Ngayo* rite is only performed when the priest orders it;

Bungan will not chastise the human if they don't have time or perform it late. In addition, they just require two days to finish the process.

Both Rousseau and Baling outline the dos and don'ts of *Ngayo* ceremony in accordance with the *Adat Dipuy* and the *Bungan* reform. Both writings draw a clear distinction between the differences that existed during the *Adat Dipuy* and when they finally switched to *Bungan* reform. Furthermore, both writings explain how the ritual is performed. Following the reformation of the *Bungan*, every Orang Ulu village that follows this *Bungan* custom adopts the new nature of the ritual.

Weltanschauung refers to the framework concepts and beliefs that individuals, organisations, and cultures use to interpret their reality (Awang Pawi, 2013). Beside the Orang Ulu, other ethnic also using the *Ngayau* term in their daily life. As mentioned earlier, the things that differentiate it are the pronunciation, the terms or spelling in each ethnic language and also their belief. Even though the *Ngayau* term has the same meaning, which is going to war or head hunting, but the way they prepare for that certain ritual is different. There are two forms of *Ngayau* among the Iban: *Kayau Anak* and *Kayau Serang*. *Kayau* has varied meanings and purposes for the Iban, and *Kayau* is determined by their aspirations. *Kayau Serang*, according to Kiyai @ Keai (2021), is a large expedition where the Iban people aim to expand their territory or exact revenge on another colony. Meanwhile, *Kayau Anak* only requires a few groups of people to ambush those on their way to the jungle or the river. This *Kayau* is a vengeance movement against a specific individual, and it is one of the most terrifying *Kayau* among the Iban since they never know when they will attack. Furthermore, before they travel to *Ngayau*, they will perform a *Miring* ritual to ask for blessings and to protect them from harm.

Following that, the Bidayuh people regard *Ngayau* as a dance of celebration for the returning warrior following the war. This dance will be performed for the *Nyobeng* ceremony. According to Rebeka et al. (2018), this ceremony was employed by their ancestor to clean and sanctify the skull of *Kayau*. Furthermore, it is a request for the people's safety, happiness, and peace. Previously, this dance was performed to honour a returning warrior, but it is now performed to honour or welcome an important or highly regarded guest.

Next, Murut people participate in *Ngayau* activities because they believe that this culture will help them in life. Furthermore, it is an important culture that must be inherited in order to receive blessings (Min & On, 2019). The Murut, like others, have specific ceremonies for the *Ngayau* activity. *Lansaran* is a traditional performance in which they swing or glide on a flexible wooden board supported by numerous pieces of wood underneath. They used to do this to commemorate the return of the warrior. They will dance and sing on the *lansaran* stage while burning the skull that the warrior brings home until it is dry and placing it atop the *lansaran*. Nowadays, this performance is solely employed as a gimmick to liven up the ceremony.

Different ethnic groups have different ways of translating *ngayau*. *Ngayau* does have the same significance for every ethnic group which goes to war or engages in headhunting activities, but each ethnic group celebrates and ritualizes the *ngayau* action in their own way. Despite the same meaning or concept of asking for blessing or protection, each ethnic group celebrates the culture in its own unique way. The Dayak had varied types of *ngayau*; *Kayau Anak*, *Kayau Serang*, *Kayau Mimpi* and *Kayau Lantang*. Hence, their ritual was significantly darker than those of other ethnic groups. The Kajang performed the *Kayau* rite using a flexible wooden board, while the Orang Ulu performed the *Ujet Bato* dance for their *Kayau*

ceremonies. In conclusion, each ethnic group had its own unique way of performing the *Ngayau* ritual; the Orang Ulu had their own ritual ceremony, as did the Kajang and Dayak.

2.3 Semiotic

Semiotic research investigates the creation and transmission of meaning using systems of encoded and decodable signs. According to Aston and Savona (1991) a semiotic theorization of the spectator's decoding action is a necessary task. It is also likely to be a tough task because semiotics has its own constraints because of its openness to the charge of reductiveness as a result of a strong concern in formal features. In addition to this topic, these two philosophies are often discussed in any topic related to semiotics. Ferdinand de Saussure understanding toward semiotic is more too linguistic and understanding of language. Charles Sanders Pierce, on the other hand, is more complicated. In semiotic, Charles follows the trichotomy sign system, which consists of the following: Icon: a sign related to its object by similarity; index: a sign that points to or is connected to its object; and symbol: a sign where the relationship between sign and object is agreed upon by convention and there is no similarity between sign and object.

It has long been and continues to be customary for semiotic approaches to ritual to employ language as the major paradigm for assessing and deciding rituals as systems of signs; this arises from the fact that semiotics is commonly associated with linguistics (Kreinath, 2006). Besides, it is said that Clifford Geertz and Victor W. Turner attempted to analyse rituals using semiotics, which goes beyond linguistics. They concentrated on the performance of ritual actions by doubting the universality of linguistic signs and not viewing ritual sequences as linguistic propositions. Therefore, from that semiotic analysis, Geertz

explores the meaning of ritual symbols and convinced that the true meaning of a ritual symbol, which varies with each performance, is only available in the context of its use. Due to that, the use of linguistic conceptions of sign cannot specify ritual acts as forms of social action.

Semiotics, derives from the Greek *semesion*, meaning sign, *semainon* which means signifier and *semainomenon* meaning signified or indication. In general, semiotics is the study of signs or an epistemology about the existence or reality of signs in society life (Yakin & Totu, 2014). Many pioneers or researchers have agreed upon that simple definition (Eco, 1979; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993; Panuti & Zoest, 1996; Chandler, 2002) but Ferdinand de Saussure, a linguist scholar have proposed the term 'semiology'. Semiology is from Greek word *semeion* which mean 'sign' and the principle that emphasised language as a system of signs was the fundamental focus of Saussure's theory. He is more concerned with the underlying system of language (*langue*) than with the use of language (*parole* or speech) (Yakin & Totu, 2014). Meanwhile, Charles Sanders Pierce created the term 'semiotic,' which he believes is equivalent with the notion of logic, which concentrates on the knowledge of the human thinking process, as illustrated in his writings released between 1931/1958. Pierce theory also contains three typologies or taxonomies of signs (icon, index, and symbol).

Peirce (1965, Vol. II: 242), semiotics is a sign that may be identified by the process of semiosis, separated into three categories: first representation, second object (object), and third (interpreter) (Tengku Mohd. Ali, 2007).

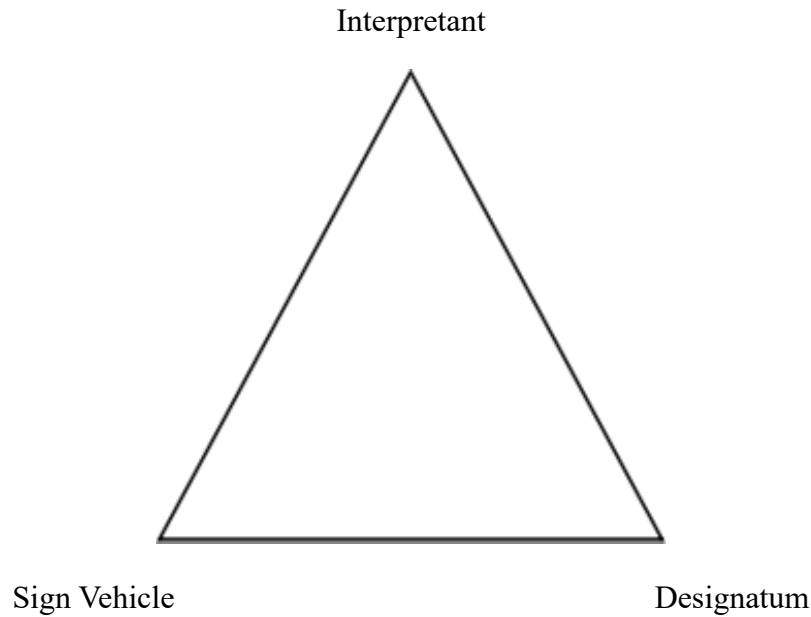


Figure 2.1: Morris's Triadic Semiosis

Table 2.1 is the process of triadic semiosis applied by Morris, where this process is inspired by Pierce's triadic semiotic ideology. Charles Morris is one of Pierce's followers, who agrees that semiotics can be separated into three groups. Morris' triadic process, sign vehicle means "which acts as a sign" (Morris, 1938b:3) and *designatum* means "which the sign refers to" (Morris, 1938b:3). The interpretant is defined as "that effect on some interpreter by virtue of which the thing in question is a sign to that interpreter" (Morris, 1938b:3). According to Tengku Mohd. Ali (2007) Morris also classified his semiosis process into three categories: syntactic, semantics, and pragmatics. Syntactic is an observation for the relationship between sign and object; semantics is concerned with the relationship of signs to their design and thus to the objects which they may or may not denote; and pragmatics is concerned with the relationship between signs and their wearers or interpreters, or more precisely, the sign and interpretation (relationship of emphasis). Despite similarities in function, meaning, and notion of semiotics, Pierce, unlike Morris, separates his triadic

semiotic process into nine sorts of signs: icons, indices, symbols, *qualisign*, *sinsign*, *legisign*, rheme, decent signs, and arguments. Morris, on the other hand, only has three types: syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic.

Meanwhile, in *Semiotics: The Basics*, written by Daniel Chandler in 2007, offers a thorough and approachable overview of the study of signs and symbols and how they are used or interpreted. This book is a useful tool for students and individuals unfamiliar with semiotic theory because it provides an overview of important ideas, theorists, and frameworks. Chandler starts off by defining signs using the structuralist viewpoint of Ferdinand de Saussure, according to which signs are made up of the following elements: signifier, signified, representamen, object, and interpretant. Chandler applies semiotic analysis to a wide range of subjects, including media studies, advertising, literature, and film. He shows how semiotics may be used to decode and analyse common signs and symbols, revealing underlying cultural and ideological themes. He demonstrates, with straightforward explanations and real-world examples, how semiotics illuminates the complicated link between signals, meaning, and society which help the researcher understand easily on how to interpret the semiotics theories into her research.

In conclusion, most scholarly writings extensively discuss the development and understanding of semiotics. Notably, nearly all works on semiotics reference the foundational theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Peirce. Following these two pioneers, scholars such as Roland Barthes, Charles Morris, Umberto Eco, and Julia Kristeva have further contributed to the study of meaning and communication. The prominence of Saussure and Peirce in semiotic discourse is due to their significant discussions on the

purpose and application of semiotics. Consequently, their theories provide a fundamental framework for understanding and differentiating key semiotic concepts.

2.4 Symbolic Element in Ritual Study

Symbol invented for the goal of abstracting from the distinction between concepts and language (Pierce, 1865). Pierce also stated that those whose relationship to their objects is based on an assumed character, which are the same as generic signs, can be referred to as symbols. Although the concept of symbols focuses on logical comprehension, comprehension can also be used as a representation. As a result, in one sense, all symbols are relative to understanding, but only in the sense that everything is significant to the understanding. That is, symbols can define their ground or assumed properties, objects, and interpretants directly.

Over the last century, research on symbols and myths has grown significantly and produced genuine insights, particularly in the general science of signs known as semiotics (Ladner, 1979). The word '*symbolon*' comes from the verb '*symbolleîn*' in Greek, which means "to throw together, bring together, put together," as well as "to collect" and "to compare". In addition, '*symbolon*' also could be spiritual and mystical meaning. Besides that, symbol also have strong involvement in science, philosophy and art. Since then, symbolism has gone through many revivals in terms of philosophy, semiotics, linguistics, and anthropology depending on the use of study. Based on all that, Charles Sanders Pierce and Ferdinand de Saussure began to make classifications and developed their own

conception of semiotics. As a result, Pierce idea is more to logical meanwhile Saussure based on linguistics.

Rituals provide powerful actors with an opportunity to legitimise their authority through symbolic means, promote ideological viewpoints, and shape social interactions within specific communities (Kertzer, 1988). Since ritual involves in both enactment and action for a given certain performance and with some elements, that complex ensemble of symbols, structures, language, and movements shapes the performance, and these things indirectly reflect ritual behaviour as well (Dacin et al., 2010b). In this regard, rituals are effective conveyors of cultural content, particularly symbolic elements.

In conclusion, symbols have always had their own meaning and have gone through many revivals. Besides, symbols are also flexible elements that can be applied either linguistically, artistically, or scientifically and that is why symbols can define its own ground. In addition, these two semiotic philosophies, namely Saussure and Pierce, have their respective meanings and understandings related to symbols.

According to Foster (2003), symbolism is the foundation of civilisation because it allows humans to create meaning, share knowledge, and form complex social institutions. Foster also investigates how symbols interact in many cultural contexts, impacting language, art, rituals, and beliefs. In the writing, she emphasized that symbols are arbitrary yet conventional, the meaning of the symbol shaped by societal agreements rather than inherent meanings. In short, as per Foster (2003) writing, we can say that symbols form the basis of human communication and cultural expression, influencing language, art, and ritual. Meanwhile in Davesa et al.'s (2017) research, it is determined that we can use symbols to elaborate a ritual. In the researcher's writing, which is about a dance ritual, the researcher

uses symbols to explain the meaning of the *Pedang* Dance ritual movement. This dance symbolises an honouring movement where they move in a circle and play sword movements. In short, in this ritual, they show respect towards the warrior who is coming back from war, and using the symbol element, the researcher explains every detail related to the ritual performance. For example, one of the movements, which is the circling movement, symbolises as if they are peeping for their enemies.

All cultural meanings are created using symbols that point to events or objects (Spradley in Tinarbuko, 2008). Based on those statements, Sinulingga and Tampubolon (2020) use the symbolic element to describe the meaning of the *Cawir Metua* ceremony. The *Cawir Metua* ceremony is in Karo culture and means "death ceremony. There are three types of ritual, and *Cawir Metua* is a ceremony for an old person who dies and has his or her children and grandchildren left. Besides, this ceremony also shows some respect for the deceased, and through this ceremony, customary debts are submitted. This dance performance that they are doing symbolises a form of respect towards the elderly who have reached their highest expectations in life. Through this research, the researcher learned that even the cloth or item that is being used could symbolise something. For example, one of the items used in this ritual is *maneh-maneh* (a cloth that the deceased used), which symbolises the medicine for longing.

Lastly, symbols also have the ability to influence and have deep meaning on something. Besides, dimensions for symbols can also be found as a symbol of existence, it can take many forms, both concrete and abstract that address in traditional ceremonies value. Through symbols it can sharpen behavior and performance culture (Embon, 2019). As in the *Rambu Solo* ceremony which are a *Toraja* tribal tribe tradition of holding the last ceremonial

for persons who have died. Based on this study, Embon mentioned that the symbol is arbitrary and conventional (Pierce) (Budiman 2011;22) (2019;3) and the types of symbols practised in the research are verbal and non-verbal. Verbal symbols are verbal interactions between humans that convey meaning. The symbol will subsequently carry the meaning and be linked to the thing. The spoken symbol of this *Toraja Rambu Solo* tradition is found in a prayer that carries the concept of asking for protection and a perfect existence. Meanwhile, nonverbal symbols are utilised when a message is sent without using words, but rather through sign language, body language, facial expressions, eye contact, and items such as clothes, hairstyles, and so on. According to the symbol element, the ceremony seems to have its own meaning and have connection either in verbal or non-verbal action.

In conclusion, symbols can be useful in deciphering the meaning of anything. Particularly in cultural studies. This is due to the fact that symbols are not limited to a single meaning. Symbols derive their meaning from social agreements rather than inherent properties. Symbols can be expressed through conversation, behaviour, objects, application, or presentation. Furthermore, as already stated, symbols might be rationally grounded. As a result, symbols can have an impact on the meaning of anything. In short, symbols is arbitrary, convention and cross cultural which could define individual and group identities, influencing traditions, beliefs, and societal structures.

2.5 Performance Theory by Richard Schechner

Richard Schechner's *Performance Theory* (2003) is a seminal work in the field of performance studies, providing a multidimensional framework for understanding a wide variety of human actions as performances. Schechner contends that performance is not restricted to the stage but also exists in rituals, social ceremonies, sporting events, and even daily life routines. His multidisciplinary approach draws on anthropology, theatre, sociology, and ritual studies to provide a more in-depth understanding of performance as both conduct and event. "Restored behaviour" is a key notion in Schechner's theory, defined as "physical, verbal, or virtual actions that are not-for-the-first time; that are prepared or rehearsed" (Schechner, 2003, p. 28). Restored behaviour consists of repeating and recreating behaviours from previous settings, making it both reflexive and symbolic.

Abdullah and Hasnan (2023) conduct in-depth research of the *Makan Tahun festival*, an annual thanksgiving rite of the Kedayan people in Limbang, Sarawak. The researchers use Richard Schechner's (2003) "the nest" concept from performance theory to analyse the festival's structure. This paradigm divides the event into four stages: pre-performance (planning and organisation), gathering (participant assembly), enactment (ritual performance), and dispersal (conclusion and cleanup). The researchers used a qualitative methodology to interview key informants, such as village leaders, event organisers, and community members who have been active since 2015, as well as to observe participants during the 2022 *Makan Tahun*. The work of Abdullah and Hasnan (2023) provides insightful information about the *Makan Tahun* festival as a performative and social occasion that goes beyond its ceremonial beginnings to serve as a forum for interethnic cooperation and cultural expression. The festival's intricacy and importance in the larger conversation of cultural

sustainability and community dynamics may be understood via an organised lens thanks to the use of Schechner's performance theory.

To connect the human realm (*microcosmos*) with the spiritual realm (*macrocosmos*) during healing rituals, this study explores the complex interactions between the shaman (*kelamat*) and ancestor spirits (*keombo'an*), Sharifuddin Zainal et al. (2021) uses Richard Schechner's performance theory to examine the *Igal* ritual's transitional stage, in which the *kelamat* uses role-playing to embody different *keombo'an*. The study offers a sophisticated viewpoint on how ceremonial acts serve as both cultural manifestations and spiritual practices by utilising performance theory. Meanwhile, Awang Long et al. (2018) present a comprehensive analysis of the *Pag Pasahaya Baihu'* ritual, a traditional ceremonial performance of the *Suluk* ethnic community, through the lens of Richard Schechner's performance theory. Their study aligns this ritual with Aristotle's classical elements of theatre—namely, plot, theme or message, language, character, music, and aesthetic components—highlighting the ritual's theatrical structure and performative qualities. By using Schechner's performance theory, the researchers present a methodical examination of the performative elements of the ritual, providing fresh interpretations and settings for the *Pag Pasahaya Baihu'* and advancing the recognition of its aesthetic significance within the *Suluk* ethnic culture.

Finally, the use of Richard Schechner's Performance Theory is extremely useful for analysing the structure, symbolism, and dramatic features of ritual practices. These investigations demonstrate that rituals are more than just religious or cultural traditions; they are intricate acts with profound symbolic and aesthetic significance. For example, the study *Pesta Makan Tahun Kaum Kedayan* (Nur Afifah Vanitha Abdullah & Nur Haidatul Atirah

Hasnan, 2023) demonstrates how such rituals fulfil essential social roles such as cultural identity preservation and community bonding. Using performance theory, ethnographic methodologies, and semiotic analysis, researchers demonstrated that rituals may be interpreted as living cultural texts that represent spiritual, social, and historical values. Based on these data, the researcher can examine how different ethnic groups perform and interpret their rituals, which will help to deepen the analysis of the *Ngayo* ritual. By merging Peirce's Semiotic Theory with Schechner's Performance Theory, the researcher builds a stronger framework to interpreting the *Ngayo* ritual's symbolic and performative features.

2.6 Conclusion

Based on the writing above, the researcher could understand more about her research topic and the theoretical framework that is being used for this research. The researcher learned more about the old religion in Orang Ulu and the differences between the old customs and the reformed *Bungan* practices. Besides, the researcher also learns the meaning of *Ngayau* in every ethnic group. and the differences in the rituals being held for the *Ngayau* between them. Last but not least, the researcher also began to understand more about the medium that was used as her theoretical framework, which is the symbol element, and based on those writings, the researcher can underscore the versatility of semiotics in analysing various forms of cultural practices, which she could use some of them as a guide on how to use symbol elements to analyse a ritual performance. In conclusion, through the literature review, the researcher found that in most of the *Ngayau* ritual writing and the past writing, the past writer didn't go deeply into the *Ngayau* topic for the Orang Ulu community. So, the researcher will fill in the gap by studying this ritual and focusing on the structure of its performance, which has received less attention from past researchers.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Research methodology is the method of approach used by the researcher throughout the study. This aims to answer the research questions and ensure that the objectives of the study are achieved. In this chapter, the researcher will explain the method used by the researcher, which is a qualitative method that involves conducting a study using the conceptual framework that has been issued. The data obtained is based on field research and interviews that have been designed following the study design. The framework that is explained in this chapter is a process practiced by the researcher throughout the study. The data collection technique used by the researcher in this study involves using primary and secondary data.

3.2 Chapter Outline

The relatively significant knowledge gap about the Kayan community in Belaga was the main factor that led the researcher to conduct the study in a Kayan community village in Belaga, Uma Kayan Long Amo, or Long Amo village. The fieldwork took place one week before the village's festival began. This timing was necessary for the researcher to gather information by arranging appointments and observing the preparations for the *Do Lemdoh* festival, which eventually led to the performance of the *Ngayo* ritual. Each chapter in this study was structured to provide explanations according to the research objectives.

In Chapter 1, the researcher discusses the significance of the study and provides a brief overview of the research. The study focuses on the traditional *Bungan* customs practiced by the Orang Ulu ethnic group, with a particular emphasis on the Kayan community in Kampung Long Amo, Belaga. Additionally, the researcher outlines the conceptual framework and primary focus of the study which is the *Ngayo* ritual. However, this chapter serves as an introductory section, offering only a general overview of the research direction, while the detailed findings are presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 2 presents a review of previous studies related to the research subject, examining both similarities and differences. The researcher analyses and summarizes past research relevant to the Kayan community, the *Bungan* religion, *Ngayo*, rituals in Sarawak, and semiotic studies. Additionally, the researcher identifies gaps in existing literature to establish the study's contribution to the field. Furthermore, this chapter provides a deeper understanding of the research theories and subject, helping to refine the study's framework and direction. Meanwhile, in Chapter 3, the researcher explains the methodology employed in the study. This chapter provides a brief overview of the research processes and procedures undertaken. Additionally, it details the research design, selection of informants, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques.

Chapter 4 is a critical section of the study, where the researcher presents and elaborates on the research findings. In this chapter, the researcher analyses the data in accordance with the chosen theoretical framework, systematically breaking down the results. Additionally, the researcher draws conclusions based on the findings and addresses the research objectives. Subsequently, Chapter 5 provides a summary of the research findings and conclusions. In this chapter, the researcher reiterates the significance of the study and offers recommendations for future research.

3.3 Research Design

The research design outlines the overall plan and methodology employed by the researcher to answer the research questions and achieve the research objectives. It defines the methods, procedures, and techniques used for data collection and analysis. The aim of this study is to explore the significance of the *Ngayo* ritual in the *Bungan* religion for the Kayan community and to uncover the meaning behind this tradition. To achieve this, the researcher applies Peirce's theory of symbols and Schechner's Performance Theory as the foundation of the research design. Additionally, a research framework is developed based on the chosen theoretical approach. This study adopts a descriptive research design, utilizing a qualitative method for data collection and analysis.

3.3.1 Theoretical Framework

According to Geertz (1996), every item, action, event, quality, or relation can become a symbol when it is understood as the outward manifestation of a conception, emphasizing that the notion of symbols is not limited to language. Unlike icons and indexes, which signify through resemblance or causal connection, symbols derive their meaning from shared cultural conventions and interpretative frameworks. Peirce's semiotic theory further explains that signs consist of representation, reference, and meaning, with symbols functioning as abstract representations whose significance arises from social agreements rather than inherent qualities (Church, 1969; Chandler, 2007).

Building on this foundation, the present study adopts and adapts the framework of Debyani Embon (2019), who applied Peirce's theory of symbols in her analysis of the *Toraja Rambu Solo* ritual. Embon distinguishes between verbal symbols such as prayers and non-verbal symbols such as ritual tools, musical instruments, sacrificial animals, and offerings, demonstrating how symbolic elements can be systematically deconstructed to uncover ritual meanings. Her framework provides a practical model for operationalizing Peirce's abstract semiotic concepts within ritual studies.

In this research, Embon's categorization is applied to the *Ngayo* ritual of the Kayan community in Belaga, with symbolic components identified and organized according to the ritual's structure: preparation, performance, and aftermath. This categorization enables the researcher to systematically analyse both the verbal and non-verbal elements of *Ngayo* and to interpret their cultural significance within the *Bungan* belief system.

To strengthen the interpretative lens, Schechner's Performance Theory is also integrated. While Peirce's semiotics provides a framework for identifying and classifying the symbolic elements, Schechner's approach situates these symbols within the dynamics of performance, emphasizing how ritual is enacted, embodied, and experienced. Through this combined framework, the *Ngayo* ritual is examined not only as a set of symbolic signs but also as a performative event—one that communicates meaning, reaffirms cultural identity, and adapts over time in response to social change.

Thus, by drawing from Peirce's semiotics, Embon's application to ritual analysis, and Schechner's performance theory, this research establishes a comprehensive theoretical foundation for investigating the *Ngayo* ritual. This integration allows for both a semiotic interpretation of symbols and a performative understanding of how those symbols are

enacted and experienced in the Kayan community. The symbolic components are systematically arranged to align with the study, as illustrated in the image below.

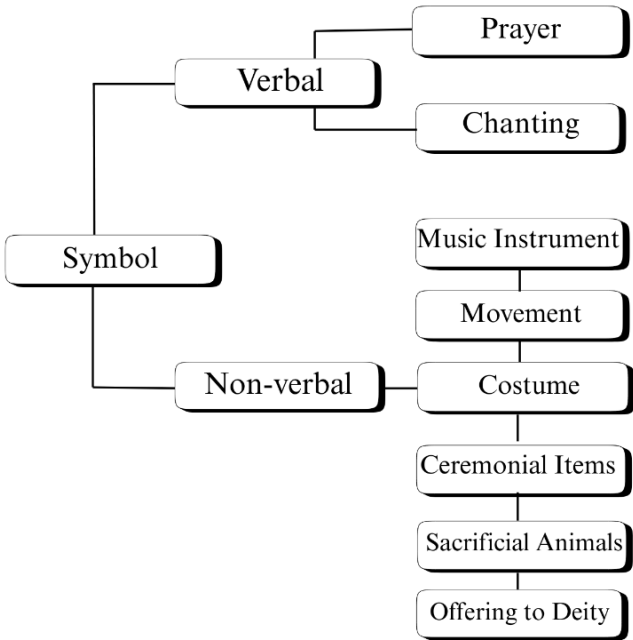


Figure 3.1: Theoretical Framework adopted from Debyani Embon (2019) framework

Table 3.2 presents the analytical framework employed by the researcher, reconstructed to align with the specific focus of this study. Peirce’s theory of symbols highlights that meaning is socially constructed rather than derived from resemblance or direct connection, allowing symbols to appear in both verbal and non-verbal forms (Rizma et al., 2021). This research adopts these two categories—verbal and non-verbal symbols—and further refines them into sub-topics to facilitate a detailed analysis of the *Ngayo* ritual. This interpretative structure is significant, as symbols function as the foundation of meaning within a cultural system, where their significance emerges through social convention, interpretation, and communal consensus (Bennett, 2015).

To complement this symbolic analysis, Richard Schechner's Performance Theory is also applied to examine the *Ngayo* ritual as a performative event. Schechner (2003) emphasizes that performance theory can be used to analyse diverse forms of performance, including ritual, provided that key elements such as space, time, and audience are present. In this research, performance theory enables the researcher to analyse how the *Ngayo* ritual is enacted, who performs it, and what roles the Long Amo villagers play in its preparation and execution. Following this, the ritual is interpreted through a theatrical lens by dividing it into three stages the pre-production, production, and post-production which modelled after theatre production processes.

By combining semiotic and performance perspectives, the researcher is able to systematically analyse both the symbolic meanings and the performative structures of the *Ngayo* ritual. This approach also allows for the adaptation of the ritual into theatrical elements, including actors or characters, time and space, props, costumes, dialogue, music, movement, and audience. Such integration not only strengthens the symbolic interpretation of the ritual but also highlights its performative dimensions, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding the *Ngayo* ritual within the cultural and religious context of the Kayan community in Belaga.

3.4 Data Collection Method

This study was conducted using a qualitative ethnographic approach, as it provides the most suitable framework for understanding the cultural and symbolic dimensions of the *Ngayo* ritual within the Kayan community. Ethnography, as a branch of qualitative research, emphasizes the study of people within their natural setting through prolonged engagement,

observation, and participation (Creswell, 2013). It allows the researcher to capture the lived experiences, practices, and meanings embedded in the daily lives and ritual performances of the community.

In this study, the researcher collected both primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through fieldwork, including direct observation of ritual preparations and performances, interviews with community members, and documentation of events and artefacts. Secondary data were gathered through a review of relevant written resources to complement and validate field findings. Communication with informants was conducted in both Malay and Kayan languages to ensure deeper understanding and accuracy in capturing cultural expressions.

The use of ethnographic qualitative methods was particularly crucial for this research, as the *Ngayo* ritual is not merely a performance, but a cultural and religious expression embedded with symbolic meanings. Through ethnography, the researcher was able to interpret how the villagers of Uma Kayan Long Amo prepare, perform, and assign meaning to the ritual, offering an in-depth understanding that goes beyond surface-level description. This method thus provided the most effective way to address the research objectives and to document the *Ngayo* ritual within its authentic social and cultural context.

Several research instruments were employed to support the ethnographic approach in this study. These instruments included interviews, observation and documentation, which were systematically used during fieldwork. The interview guides ensured that the questions remained aligned with the research objectives, while observation captured both verbal and non-verbal aspects of the ritual and daily practices of the villagers. Audio and visual recordings allowed the researcher to revisit the data for accuracy, and consent forms reflected

the ethical considerations of the study. Such instruments are essential in ethnographic research as they help the researcher to capture the depth of cultural practices and the meanings attributed to them by the community (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Creswell, 2013).

3.4.1 Observation

Throughout the fieldwork, the researcher stayed in Long Amo village from 25th May to 5th June 2022, spending a total of 12 days immersed in the community. This prolonged stay was necessary in order to observe and fully comprehend the preparations undertaken by the villagers for the *Do Lemdoh* ceremony. During the *Ngayo* ritual, which was performed as part of the *Bungan* festive day, the researcher participated and observed how the ritual was carried out in its actual context.

The observations began on 28th May, when the village chief instructed the men to collect palm leaves to be used for wrapping glutinous rice, known locally as *sekuho*. These were cooked the following day, 29th May, as part of the *Do Lemdoh* preparations. From this point onward, the researcher closely followed the sequence of activities, including the gestures, preparations, and ritual processes. On 30th May, in the afternoon, the villagers gathered at the chief's gallery for congregational prayers, followed by *rewang* (communal work) in the chief's room. That evening, they ate together as a symbolic act to mark the beginning of the *Do Lemdoh* celebration.

Permission was sought from the village chief and the participating villagers to document the process through photographs and video recordings. This allowed the

researcher to systematically record and later analyse the performance of the ritual. By employing the ethnographic qualitative method, the researcher engaged in participant observation, direct interaction, and cultural immersion, which enabled her to interpret the *Ngayo* ritual through the lens of lived experience. Furthermore, the entire process was examined using the categories of pre-production, production, and post-production, aligning with the chosen performance theory framework and ensuring a structured ethnographic analysis of the ritual.

3.4.2 Interviews

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with multiple informants who were regarded as knowledgeable about the *Ngayo* ritual and its significance within the *Bungan* religion. On 26th May 2022, the researcher first sought recommendations from the *Maren Uma*, Lato Juman, who suggested several individuals who could serve as potential informants. On the same day, the researcher visited each household to request participation in the study. Out of the households approached, only nine villagers agreed to be interviewed, as some felt uncertain about their knowledge of the *Bungan* religion and the significance of the *Ngayo* ritual.

Ethnographers should retain flexibility in selecting interview participants to avoid biased or misleading data and to ensure a reflexive approach to research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In line with this, the researcher scheduled interviews based on the informants' levels of knowledge and experience. Women were interviewed first on 29th May, followed by the men on 30th May, and finally the two *Guru Bungan* were interviewed last, as they were regarded as the most authoritative sources on the *Ngayo* ritual. Prior to

each session, the researcher briefed the informants on the nature and objectives of the study, clarified the types of questions that would be asked, and explained the ethical procedures. Participants were informed that the conversations would be recorded, their consent was obtained through signed forms, and they were assured that the information provided would be used strictly for research purposes.

Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes to one hour, depending on the depth of the informants' responses. To ensure a thorough understanding, the researcher prepared a structured set of questions while also allowing for spontaneous, follow-up questions to emerge during the discussions. In this way, the researcher was able to finalise and cross-check the information gathered, providing a strong foundation for subsequent analysis.

In addition to the formal interviews, the researcher also engaged in ongoing conversations with villagers during the *Do Lemdoh* ceremonies. By asking questions about what they were doing and the meanings behind their actions, the researcher deepened her understanding of the cultural and ritual practices. This approach combining in-depth interviews with participant observation reflected the principles of ethnographic qualitative research, which emphasises prolonged engagement, cultural immersion, and the interpretation of meaning through the lived experiences of the community.

3.4.2.1 The participants

The researcher initially selected ten individuals as potential informants for the interview sessions; however, only nine were able to participate. The informants were chosen based on their expertise in relation to the research topic, as well as their perspectives on the culture from different generational standpoints—elderly, adult, and youth. As noted earlier, the researcher informed each informant about the purpose of the interview, explained that

the conversation would be recorded, and obtained their consent to use the information and images collected as part of the study. The list of individuals interviewed is presented below:

Table 3.1: List of Informants

No	Names	Age based on the year the interview was conducted.
1	Lato Juman	87 years old
2	Jawing Bato	80 years old
3	Domian Ding	68 years old
4	Gumeh Luhath	67 years old
5	Semin	67 years old
6	Paya Abeh	59 years old
7	Epui Among	57 years old
8	Dora Domian	32 years old
9	Selina Steward	27 years old

3.4.2.2 Questions for interviewer

This are list of the question that will ask during the interview session:

Table 3.2: List of Question for the Interview with the informant

No	Questions
1	What did you understand about the <i>Bungan</i> religion?
2	How long have you following this religion and why?

3	We know that <i>Ngayo</i> ritual is one of the important performances in <i>Bungan</i> , what did you understand about the <i>Ngayo</i> ritual?
4	What is <i>Do Lemdoh</i> and when did the <i>Ngayo</i> ritual being perform?
5	Who is the person involving during the <i>Ngayo</i> ritual?
6	What is the significance of the <i>Ngayo</i> ritual, does it need to be performed every <i>Do Lemdoh</i> and what are the consequences if they didn't do the <i>Ngayo</i> ritual?
7	Is <i>Ngayo</i> ritual and <i>Bungan</i> religion related with each other?
8	What should be done before, after and during the <i>Ngayo</i> ritual?
9	Why did woman cannot involve in the <i>Ngayo</i> ritual and what happen if they involve in the ritual?
10	What is the use of the heads and leaves brought during the <i>Ngayo</i> performance of the ritual?

Table 3.3: List of Extra Question for the Interview with *Guru Bungan*

No	Questions
1	How long have you been a <i>Guru Bungan</i> ?
2	How did you become a <i>Guru Bungan</i> and how did you learn to become a <i>Guru Bungan</i> ?
3	Who is the first <i>Guru Bungan</i> in the Long Amo village?
4	How is the process of selecting heirs for this custom?
5	How long does it take to become a <i>Guru Bungan</i> and what is the process done for the receiving?

3.4.3 Documentation

The researcher systematically documented the results of her observations and interviews throughout the fieldwork. Documentation began on 28 May 2022 and continued

until 3 June 2022 at Long Amo village. This extended timeframe was necessary to capture the entire sequence of the *Do Lemdoh* celebration, from the initial preparations to the closing ceremonies, as all of these stages were closely related to the *Ngayo* ritual within the *Bungan* religion.

In line with ethnographic qualitative methods, the researcher immersed herself in the community and carefully recorded the events through field notes, photographs, videos, and audio recordings. Permission was consistently requested from the villagers before taking any images or videos. On 1 June 2022, the researcher also sought special permission to be present at the men's gallery near the *Kuhong* during the *Ngayo* preparations, as women were traditionally prohibited from entering or approaching certain spaces during the ritual. With the consent of the *Maren Uma* who happen to be the *Guru Bungan* also, she was allowed to observe the process more closely while maintaining cultural respect.

The documentation not only included visual and audio records but also detailed notes of gestures, activities, and conversations observed during the ritual. The villagers were informed that the photographs and videos would be used strictly for research purposes. By employing this ethnographic approach, the documentation process served as a crucial tool for data triangulation, allowing the researcher to return to the recorded materials for verification and deeper analysis of the *Ngayo* ritual performance and its symbolic meanings.

3.4.4 Literature Review

In addition to fieldwork observations, interviews, and documentation, the researcher also relied on secondary sources to complement and strengthen the findings. These included books, academic papers, previous studies, online materials, and journal articles that were

directly related not only to ritual practices but also to the theoretical framework employed in this study, namely Semiotic Theory and Performance Theory. Engaging with these materials enabled the researcher to better understand how Peirce's Semiotic Theory could be applied in the analysis of the symbolic meaning in *Ngayo* ritual and Schechner's Performance Theory help with the performance structure analysis.

Within ethnographic qualitative research, the integration of secondary sources serves as an essential step to contextualize field data and compare lived experiences with existing literature (Creswell, 2013; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Such an approach allows the researcher to situate the findings within broader scholarly discussions and to enrich the interpretation of the ritual. By combining first-hand ethnographic immersion with a thorough review of relevant literature, the researcher was able to establish a more comprehensive analysis, ensuring that the symbolic and performative aspects of the *Ngayo* ritual were examined systematically and critically.

3.4.5 Fieldwork

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in Uma Kayan Long Amo, a Kayan village in Belaga, which required a five-hour journey by car from Bintulu to reach the longhouse. The researcher stayed in the village for 12 days, from 25 May to 5 June 2022, to allow for prolonged engagement with the community. While *the Do Lemdoh* ceremony itself was celebrated between 30 May until 1 June 2022, preparations began as early as 28 May, when villagers gathered the necessary materials, prepared food, and decorated the *ruai* to enhance the festive atmosphere. The researcher's early presence was essential, as

ethnographic fieldwork requires long-term immersion to document and interpret the community's practices within their natural setting (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

Throughout the *Ngayo* ritual on the day of the *Do Lemdoh* festival, the researcher participated in and observed the event directly. She carefully documented every gesture, preparation, and ritual process through fieldnotes, photographs, and video recordings, while also asking clarifying questions to villagers during the proceedings. This combination of observation, participation, and reflexive questioning reflects the ethnographic method, which prioritises understanding cultural practices as lived experiences rather than as abstract descriptions (Sangasubana, 2014). To avoid data confusion, the researcher observed before, during, and after the ritual, ensuring a comprehensive and accurate record of the *Ngayo* ritual process.

3.5 Analysis Data

The acquired data were analysed using the theoretical framework presented earlier, combining Peirce's semiotic theory with Schechner's performance theory. This framework served as the foundation for systematically interpreting the findings of the fieldwork. In line with the ethnographic qualitative approach, data analysis involved organising, categorising, and interpreting the collected materials to uncover their cultural and symbolic meanings (Creswell, 2013; Sangasubana, 2014). This ensured that the interpretations went beyond surface description and reflected the lived realities of the *Ngayo* ritual within the Kayan community.

Following Peirce's semiotic theory, the data were first divided into verbal and non-verbal symbols. This distinction made it possible to identify and interpret prayers, ritual

objects, gestures, musical instruments, and offerings as symbolic components whose meanings are socially constructed through shared conventions (Atkin, 2006; Chandler, 2007). These symbolic components provided the foundation for understanding the ritual not merely as isolated acts, but as a system of meaning embedded in cultural practice.

To complement this, Schechner's performance theory was employed to situate the symbols within the performative dimension of the *Ngayo* ritual. The ritual process was examined through the lens of performance, using the stages of pre-production, production, and post-production to structure the analysis. This enabled the researcher to highlight the roles of participants, the organisation of space and time, and the involvement of the community as both performers and audience, reflecting how rituals function as cultural performances rather than static traditions.

By integrating semiotic and performance perspectives, the researcher was able to offer a more holistic analysis of the *Ngayo* ritual. This approach aligns with the ethnographic principle of reflexivity, which emphasises the researcher's active role in interpreting data while remaining attentive to the cultural context (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Through this analysis, the study provides a systematic interpretation of the symbolic meanings and performative structures of the *Ngayo* ritual, thereby advancing understanding of ritual practice within the *Bungan* belief system.

3.5.1 Interview Data Analysis

The information gathered during the interview sessions was first transcribed. Since some informants were not fluent in Malay, the interviews were conducted primarily in the Kayan language. The transcripts were later translated into Malay to ensure clarity and

accuracy for analysis. Once the transcription process was completed, the researcher carefully filtered and organised the data.

The analysis began with identifying similarities across the interview responses, which were then synthesised into consolidated statements representing shared perspectives. Where differences or variations in responses emerged, these were also incorporated into the study to capture the diversity of views and experiences within the community. This process ensured that the analysis reflected both collective understandings and individual nuances of the *Ngayo* ritual.

By comparing and categorising the informants' responses according to themes aligned with the research objectives, the researcher was able to interpret the symbolic significance of the ritual more systematically. This method of analysis was consistent with the ethnographic approach, which emphasises capturing insider perspectives in their own cultural and linguistic context (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Through this process, the interview data not only complemented the observational findings but also deepened the understanding of how the Kayan community perceives and assigns meaning to the *Ngayo* ritual within the framework of the Bungan belief system.

3.5.2 Secondary Data Analysis

The secondary data obtained by the researcher consisted of past research, dissertations, journal articles, books, newspaper reports, website materials, and government sources. All of the collected data were systematically analysed and categorised according to their relevance to the research topic. To strengthen the analysis, the researcher organised the sources into subtopics, beginning with literature on the Bungan religion and the *Ngayo* ritual,

followed by works on the theoretical frameworks employed in this study, namely Peirce's Semiotic Theory and Schechner's Performance Theory.

After collecting and organising the sources, the researcher compared the data across different materials to identify both similarities and differences in the findings. This comparative analysis ensured that the information extracted was reliable, valid, and directly useful to the objectives of the study. For example, sources that documented the *Ngayo* ritual in relation to the *Bungan* belief system were cross-checked with theoretical writings to determine how symbolic and performative elements of the ritual could be analysed.

By triangulating secondary data with primary fieldwork findings, the researcher was able to validate interpretations of the ritual and situate the study within the broader academic discourse. This process reflected the ethnographic qualitative approach, which not only relies on first-hand observations but also integrates secondary sources to contextualise and strengthen the analysis (Creswell, 2013; Sangasubana, 2014).

3.6 Research Ethics

In conducting this field research, the researcher adhered to fundamental ethical principles to ensure respect, transparency, and credibility throughout the study. Ethical practice was especially important in approaching community members, initiating conversations, and securing their cooperation (Creswell, 2013; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Prior to each interview, the researcher arranged a suitable time with the informants to allow them to prepare, thus ensuring mutual convenience and comfort. Each informant was first approached individually and briefed about the nature of the research, the objectives of the interview, and the intended use of the collected data.

The researcher also made clear that interviews would be audio-recorded, and photographs might be taken where necessary, with their permission. To formalize this process, consent forms were provided and signed, ensuring that participation was voluntary and informed. Informants were assured of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence, thereby safeguarding their autonomy and avoiding potential misunderstandings.

These ethical steps were particularly significant in the context of studying the *Ngayo* ritual, where sensitivity to cultural practices and the trust of the community were crucial. By upholding research ethics, the researcher was able to build rapport with the informants, foster openness during interviews, and ensure that the data collected reflected authentic voices of the Kayan community, in line with the reflexive and participatory nature of ethnographic research (Sangasubana, 2014).

3.7 Conclusion

The methodology employed in this study was carefully designed to align with the research objectives and to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the *Ngayo* ritual within its cultural context. A qualitative research approach was adopted, combining ethnographic fieldwork with performance analysis to capture both the lived experiences of the Kayan community and the symbolic dimensions of ritual practices (Sangasubana, 2014; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Fieldwork methods—including observation, interviews, and documentation—allowed the researcher to obtain first-hand insights into the preparation, enactment, and meanings of the *Ngayo* ritual, while secondary sources such as books, journals, and previous studies were used to complement and validate the findings.

Overall, the chosen methodology not only facilitated the systematic collection and organisation of data but also ensured that the findings could be meaningfully analysed and interpreted within the theoretical framework. The outcomes of this methodological process laid the foundation for the subsequent chapters, where the results of the analysis are presented and discussed in relation to the research objectives.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher presents the findings derived from the fieldwork conducted in Uma Kayan Long Amo, a Kayan settlement in Belaga. As outlined in Chapter Three, the study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach, combining observation, participation, interviews, and documentation to gather both primary and secondary data. These methods allowed the researcher to capture the lived experiences and cultural meanings embedded in the *Ngayo* ritual. The findings presented here are organised according to the objectives of the study. First, the researcher examines the relationship between the *Ngayo* ritual and the *Bungan* religion, identifying its spiritual and cultural significance for the Kayan community. Second, the researcher applies Peirce's semiotic theory to analyse the symbolic elements of the ritual, interpreting how signs and meanings are constructed and communicated through ritual practices. Finally, the study employs Schechner's performance theory to outline the structure and procedures of the ritual performance, situating the *Ngayo* as both a religious act and a cultural performance. Through this framework, the transition from methodology to findings ensures that the analytical tools established in Chapter Three are systematically applied to interpret the data presented in this chapter.

4.2 Examination of the Relationship and Significance of *Ngayo* Ritual in the *Bungan* Religion

Bungan is a tradition practiced by the Kayan people, passed down from their ancestors. This custom became their belief system prior to the arrival of Christianity, as the Kayan did not adhere to any official religion after abandoning the *Dipuy* custom. According to Rousseau (1999), *Bungan* represents a revolutionary rejection of the *Dipuy* tradition. It has always existed, even during the period when *Dipuy* was dominant. *Tenangan*, the *Bungan* goddess, was regarded as *prima inter pares*—the first among equals—during the time when *Dipuy* held authority. There are various versions of the story regarding how the *Bungan* custom was introduced to the Kayan people by a man named Jok Apui in the 1940s. According to Rousseau (1974, 1990, 1999), Jok Apui reportedly had a vision around 1940 and underwent a conversion around 1944, with the custom becoming widely practiced by 1948. However, in some of his other writings, Rousseau suggests that the conversion occurred around 1947, and the custom became popularized by 1950. E. White (1967) stated that the *Bungan* custom is an animistic practice aimed at ensuring plant fertility and the well-being of its followers, and that it has been in existence since 1946. Various sources suggest different timelines for the emergence of the *Bungan* custom. Some sources claim that the custom began as early as 1940 and spread to the Belaga region around 1949. In contrast, Baling (2002) asserts that the Kayan people had already adopted the *Bungan* practice by 1940. According to interviews conducted by the researcher, Juman, L. (personal communication, 2022) believes that the custom originated in Belaga around 1948, as he noted that the villagers of Long Amo had committed to *Bungan* by 1962. The precise timeline of the *Bungan* religious belief arrival remains unclear due to inconsistencies in the narratives. However, it is widely agreed that Jok Apui embraced the *Bungan* practice after being

promised a better life by following the teachings of *Doh Tenangan*, which aimed to restore the Kayan people's original rites, prior to the influence of *Dipuy*.

Based on the recorded years of the spread of the *Bungan* religion to Belaga, the researcher concludes that Long Amo village likely began to adopt the *Bungan* belief around 1960. The name '*Bungan*' is derived from the highest goddess, known as *Doh Tenangan*. The term "*Doh*" means woman, "*teneng*" means true or genuine, and "*tenangan*" means powerful (Rousseau, 1990), collectively signifying great power. Her full name, *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan*, translates to "the spirit that shapes and revives humans." While the Kenyah people refer to the goddess as *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan*, the Kayan people call her *Tenangan*. However, in an interview, Bato, J. (personal communication, 2022) stated that the Kenyah call her *Doh Tenangan Batung Petuman*, while they refer to the deity as *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan*. Despite these variations, the Kayan community follows the teachings of a Kenyah man which is Jok Apui, who introduced the *Bungan* belief, and continues to refer to the goddess as *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan*.

According to Rousseau (1990), the goddess is described as having pale skin, resembling a ghost, with piercing eyes that can see everything. *Doh Tenangan* is married to *Lake Tenangan*, who assists her in guiding the daily lives of humans. Both *Doh Tenangan* and *Lake Tenangan* are regarded as the highest spirits in *Bungan* religion, but *Doh Tenangan* is the central figure, as she is believed to give birth to human souls through the "Tree of Life." Following the abandonment of the *Dipuy* custom, *Bungan* underwent a reform, retaining many beliefs and preliminary rituals from the old *Dayong* custom but simplifying them. This reform eliminated the elaborate taboos, omens, periods of ritual inactivity, and costly sacrifices that the *Dipuy* tradition had previously required (Rousseau, 1989). However, the Kayan people still hold the belief that failing to observe the preliminary rituals

inherited from the *Bungan* goddess will result in misfortune, infertile crops, and unblessed harvests. To better understand these practices, the researcher visited Long Amo village in Belaga, a Kayan settlement, to observe and gather information on how they honor and please *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan*. In *Bungan* tradition, there is a festival known as *Adat Lebo Duman* or *Do Lemdoh*, which translates to "year-end ceremony" and is also recognized as the harvest festival. This ceremony takes place annually at the end of May (30th, 31st May – 1st June) and is observed on these specific dates each year. The *Do Lemdoh* festival is named after the *Bungan* goddess, as it serves as an occasion to express gratitude to *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan* for taking care of their crops and ensuring their overall well-being throughout the year. Additionally, this festival is referred to as the *year-end festival* because, as noted by Baling (2002), it marks the period when the community has completed harvesting their crops. The harvested rice is not only used for daily consumption, known as *ubek*, but also for producing rice beer, which is an essential part of the *Do Lemdoh* celebration.

Ubek is a traditional food known as *Emping Padi* in Malay, which is prepared through a series of processes. Similarly, rice beer—referred to as *Burak* by the Kayan and *Tuak* by the Dayak—is also made from the harvested crops. The preparation involves women gathering at the chief's gallery to pound the rice together. Once pounded, the rice is fermented for at least a month, with longer fermentation resulting in a stronger beer. The process of making *Burak* and *Ubek* requires significant time and effort, which is why the *Do Lemdoh* celebration is considered a moment of release and reward for their hard work. According to Among, E. (personal communication, 2022), during this festival, the community comes together to prepare traditional foods such as *Kuih Jala*, *Selupi*, *Selukong*, and *Burak*. The *Do Lemdoh* celebration also symbolizes the beginning of a new agricultural

cycle, marking the transition to the next planting season. Following the festival, the community welcomes the new year and begins preparations for cultivating fresh crops for the coming cycle (Abeh, P. & Semin, personal communication, 2022).

Furthermore, following the *Bungan* reform, numerous prohibitions and complex rituals were abolished, while several key practices were preserved. This reform, as Rousseau (1974) noted, simplified both festival celebrations and ritual ceremonies, making them more accessible for the community to perform collectively. From an ethnographic perspective, this simplification was significant, as it enabled the continuity of cultural practices while adapting to the social realities of the Kayan community in Long Amo. The preserved elements of *Bungan* rituals, such as the *Ngayo*, carried symbolic meaning that continued to connect the community to their spiritual beliefs, aligning with Peirce's view that symbols derive meaning through social convention and interpretation (Atkin, 2010; Chandler, 2007). At the same time, the structured manner in which these rituals were performed reflected Schechner's performance theory, where ritual actions were maintained as performative expressions of identity and belief, situated within the framework of time, space, and audience. The table below outlines the traditional customs that were inherited and maintained within the *Bungan* practice, demonstrating both continuity and transformation in ritual performance.

Table 3.4: List of custom inherited after the *Bungan* reform (Baling, 2002)

Ritual before opening new land/ clearing the land,
Sowing ritual,
Ritual for new rice,
Ritual after harvest at the end of the year,
<i>Ngayo</i> ritual / Headhunting ritual
Naming a baby,
Wedding ritual,
Ritual for sickness,
Small ritual,
<i>Dayong</i> ritual in rooms,
<i>Dayong</i> ritual for curing a sick people,
Ritual for cleansing the dying rice,
Ritual for cleansing the path/ land,
Ritual for the beginning of harvest

Table 11. The ritual cycle, *adat Dipuy* and *adat Bungan*

Agricultural cycle	<i>Adat Dipuy</i>		<i>Adat Bungan</i>	
	Communal rituals	Dayong	Communal rituals	Dayong
Clearing the undergrowth (April)	<i>Lemirik mati payo</i>	seeking auguries	<i>Bungan tana</i>	
Felling trees (June-July)				
Sowing (Aug.-Sept.)	<i>Lali nugan</i>		<i>Lali nugan</i>	
		<i>Nawi bluan beni</i>		<i>Nawi bluan pare</i>
Weeding (Oct.-Dec.)	<i>Pelah pare</i> <i>Lali pare hagit</i> <i>Lali ketam</i>	seeking auguries	<i>Pelah pare</i> <i>Lali ketam</i>	
Harvest (Jan.-March)		<i>Nawi bluan bulit</i>		<i>Nawi bluan ugo'</i>
	<i>Tevuko'</i>		<i>Bungan pang</i>	
	<i>Ledoh</i>	<i>Dayong lebo duman</i>	<i>Ledoh</i>	<i>Dayong lebo duman</i>
	<i>Kayo</i>		<i>Kayo</i>	

Figure 4.1: Set of custom for opening new land inherited from *Dipuy* custom after the *Bungan* reform (Image Source: Rousseau, 1974)

Table 10. The annual cycle (*adat Bungan*)

	Agricultural activities	Communal rituals	Dayong rituals ^a	Other rituals ^b
April	Clearing the undergrowth			
May	↓			
June	Felling trees	<i>Bungan tana</i>		
July	↓			
August	Repairing implements			gnomon*
	↓	<i>Lali nugan</i>		
	Burning fields			
	Building huts			
	Sowing			first sowing
September	↓			
October	Weeding	<i>Pelah pare</i>	<i>Nawi bluan pare</i>	<i>pusang navo</i>
November	(rice grains appear)			
December	↓			ritual scarecrow*
	(rice is ripe)	<i>Lali ketam</i>		
January	harvest			first harvest
	↓		<i>Nawi bluan ugo'</i>	
February				
March				end-of-harvest ritual
April		<i>Bungan pang</i> <i>Ledoh</i>	<i>Dayong duman</i> <i>lebo^c</i>	

Figure 4.2: Planting new rice process and the ritual needed for the cycle (Image Source : Rousseau, 1974)

Although the customs presented in Table 4.1 are inherited, it is important to note that some are obligatory, some are optional, and many are interrelated. According to Luhat. G (personal communication, 2022), the rituals for opening new land, sowing seeds, celebrating the arrival of new rice, and initiating the harvest are all part of an interconnected cycle, as illustrated in Image 4.1 and Image 4.2. Image 4.1 depicts the traditional agricultural cycle inherited from the *Dipuy* custom and subsequently reformed under the *Bungan* belief system, beginning with land clearing for paddy cultivation. Image 4.2 further illustrates the sequence of rituals associated with the planting and harvesting processes. Additionally, Luhat. G (personal communication, 2022) explains that rituals for illness—such as the *Dayong* performed within the longhouse and other healing ceremonies—are also part of an interrelated system. However, these healing rituals are rarely practiced today, as most of the knowledgeable elders who once performed them have either converted to Christianity or passed away.

A small ritual refers to a ceremonial practice performed when an individual intends to engage in an activity outside of their usual routine or is about to embark on a new phase in life. This may include going hunting, undertaking a long journey, starting a new job, relocating to a new place, preparing for an examination, or completing one. These rituals are generally considered optional and are carried out based on the individual's personal belief or perceived need for spiritual support. If the individual feels the need for guidance or blessing, the ritual is performed; otherwise, it may be omitted. The primary purpose of this ritual is to seek blessings and formally acknowledge a new beginning or transition. This distinction highlights the flexible nature of *Bungan* rituals, where certain ceremonies are obligatory, while others remain discretionary, depending on the context and significance of the event.

Among the various rituals performed during the harvest ceremony, the *Ngayo* ritual, also known as the head-hunting ritual, holds particular significance. It is considered a mandatory component of the *Do Lemdoh* festive day (Ding, D., personal communication, 2022). As depicted in Image 4.1, the *Ngayo* ritual is the final act in the ritual cycle. This position underscores its importance within the *Bungan* religion, as it serves both as a concluding ceremony for the agricultural rituals and as a purification rite, symbolically cleansing the community of all actions undertaken throughout the year (S. Steward, personal communication, 2022; Semin, personal communication, 2022). The following subtopics will provide a more detailed discussion of this ritual:

4.2.1 The Significance of *Ngayo* Ritual in *Bungan* Religion

The *Ngayo* ritual was an important rite deeply rooted in the *Bungan* religion (Bato, J., personal communication, 2022). It was traditionally performed by the Kayan people during the *Do Lemdoh* festive day. Historically, the ritual involved the acquisition of fresh human heads, which were believed to bring healing and prosperity by warding off illness and misfortune. These heads were taken from enemies as part of the ritualistic practice (Rousseau, 1974). However, following the Kayan community's abandonment of the *Dipuy* custom and their subsequent reform of the *Bungan* religion, the practice underwent significant transformation. Presently, previously acquired heads, which had been preserved and reused over time, were employed in the ritual instead (Rousseau, 1990). According to Juman, L. (personal communication, 2022), the current village chief of Long Amo, the use of existing heads became acceptable, as the *Doh Tenangan* no longer mandated the taking of new ones.

The structure of the ritual was also simplified, with both the ceremonial procedures and the number of ritual days reduced. Despite these changes, the *Ngayo* ritual continued to hold cultural and spiritual value and was still regarded as beneficial. Juman, L. (personal communication, 2022) further emphasized that the *Ngayo* ritual remained closely tied to *Bungan* religious customs, serving as an offering to *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan*, the supreme spirit in the *Bungan* belief system. The ritual was thus performed to remove negative forces and to request divine protection. According to Semin (personal communication, 2022), several villagers of Long Amo believed that if the ritual was not performed, the community would experience misfortune, particularly with infertile and unblessed crops. This belief reinforced the significance of the *Ngayo* ritual within the *Bungan* religion.

Bungan practice was also considered a communal gathering in which every household contributed a sacrificial animal, such as a pig or chicken, entrusted with ritual messages, and slaughtered collectively. These preliminaries complemented the *Ngayo* ritual, which acted as the culminating ceremony of the *Do Lemdoh* festival. The ritual was conducted under the guidance of the ritual leader, known as the *Guru Bungan* (Luhath, G., personal communication, 2022). The *Guru Bungan* held the authority to determine the appropriate date and time for its performance. Prior to its commencement, participants offered prayers to *Bungan*, seeking spiritual guidance and blessings.

From an ethnographic perspective, these findings highlighted not only the transformation of the *Ngayo* ritual but also its symbolic meaning, which could be interpreted through Peirce's Semiotic Theory in relation to signs and symbols embedded in ritual acts. Simultaneously, the performance framework of Schechner allowed for an understanding of how the ritual, even in its modified form, functioned as a cultural performance that

reaffirmed collective identity, belief, and continuity within the Kayan community. The following section outlines the procedures carried out before, during, and after the *Ngayo* ritual, as observed by the researcher during fieldwork.

Preparation for Ngayo Ritual During Do Lemdoh

1. Sacrifice



The ritual begins with the offering of sacrificial animals as a part of the initial preparations.

2. Tehari Dahok



The Guru Bungan, initiates the ceremonies with the Tehari Dahok.

3. Bungan Ayak



Villagers gather at the Chief Leader's gallery to perform the Bungan Ayak.

4. Bungan Amin



Subsequently, the Bungan Amin was performed for each family that continued to practice the Bungan belief.

5. Ngayo



Once the Bungan Amin was completed, the men began preparations for the Ngayo ritual.

6. Kuhong



After preparing everything they need for the ritual, the Guru Bungan brought down the Kuhong from its sacred place.

7. Riverbank



The men proceeded to the riverbank, carrying the Kuhong with them.

8. Victory Dance



After burning the Keminih, a temporary dwelling used to house the Kuhong, the participants returned to the longhouse to perform the victory dance - Ujet Bato dance.

9. Rest



The men then rested and cooked at the ruai while waiting for the next round of the Ngayo dance. After resting, they resumed the Ujet Bato dance for its final round.

10. Pusang



Final part of the ceremony is performed the next day, signifying the conclusion of the Bungan ritual.

Figure 4.3: Ngayo ritual process during *Do Lemdoh* celebration

The data indicated that the *Ngayo* ritual followed a structured sequence comprising activities performed before, during, and after the main ceremonial performance. As illustrated in Figure 4.3, the ritual did not commence without first seeking the blessing of *Bungan*. According to L. Juman (personal communication, 2022), this was achieved through a symbolic act in which a practitioner lifted an egg balanced on the blade of a machete. This gesture functioned as both a symbolic sign and a request for spiritual permission. Interpreted through Peirce's semiotic framework (Atkin, 2010; Chandler, 2017), and their combination formed a sign of intentional communication with *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan*. Only after this preliminary step could the rest of the ritual proceedings take place. Regardless of the subsequent activities, this act was regarded as essential in establishing the ritualized channel of communication with the spiritual realm.

Findings from interviews further suggested that the *Ngayo* ritual was performed at the conclusion of the *Do Lemdoh* celebration. As emphasized by Bato, J. (personal communication, 2022), *Ngayo* was not considered a separate or optional ceremony but rather an integral complement to *Do Lemdoh*, which was widely recognized as *Bungan*'s sacred day. Most informants supported the view that *Ngayo* and *Do Lemdoh* were interconnected, thereby reinforcing the role of *Ngayo* as a necessary closing ritual that completed the sacred cycle of *Bungan* worship. This interpretation aligned with Schechner's (2003) perspective that rituals functioned as "restored behaviors," repeated and contextualized actions that sustained the continuity of cultural meaning.

This relationship between *Bungan* and *Ngayo* also highlighted a broader cultural understanding: *Bungan* was perceived as the supreme spiritual being responsible for blessing and protecting human life, while *Ngayo* functioned as a ritual medium through which the community expressed devotion and sought protection from harm (Semin, personal

communication, 2022). Informants consistently described *Ngayo* as both a form of spiritual defense and a rite of renewal, closely associated with the arrival of new rice. In this sense, *Ngayo* was not only understood as a protective mechanism against misfortune but also as a symbolic preparation for entering a new phase of life, reflecting the cyclical connection between nature, agriculture, and spirituality.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the researcher conducted fieldwork in Long Amo Village to observe and document the performance of the ritual. The following section provides a detailed explanation of the ritual process, structured according to the stages observed before, during, and after the *Ngayo* ritual.



Figure 4.4: The *Guru Bungan* lift an egg for the *Bungan* spirit (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

The two individuals depicted in Image 4.3 are the remaining *Guru Bungan* practitioners in Belaga. Lato Juman, an 87-year-old *Maren Uma* (as of the year the interview

was conducted), is the chief of the village and is considered the senior *Guru Bungan*, as he is one of the first to carry the custom to Belaga. According to Mr. Lato Juman, he has practiced this tradition since its inception, as his parents also followed it. He became a *Guru Bungan* after receiving a spiritual revelation in a dream from the *Bungan* spirit. Upon assuming the role of *Guru Bungan*, the predecessor before him performed the ritual of lifting an egg to seek blessings and guidance, ensuring that Lato Juman was ready to inherit and preserve the tradition for future generations. He received blessings from *Doh Tenangan* during this process. In contrast, Domian Ding, a 68-year-old man (as of the year of the interview), only began following *Bungan's* teachings later in life, after previously identifying as a Christian. During this time, he experienced frequent disturbing dreams, often involving a girl or being chased by a girl who asked him to marry her. These nightmares caused him physical distress, including severe fever. Seeking a solution, he consulted *Ake Bayong*, a *Guru Dayong* from Uma Aging, for treatment. The elder informed him that the *Bungan* spirit had taken an interest in him and wished for him to become a devotee. Following this encounter, Domian began practicing *Bungan's* teachings, after which the troubling dreams ceased. He explained that while he followed the teachings, he considered himself merely a mediator between the *Bungan* spirit and humans, as he was unable to speak the *Dayong* language, unlike other *Guru Bungan*. Both Lato Juman and Domian Ding are called upon to perform rituals and prayers at any house or location in the area that continues to practice this tradition. During the annual *Pesta Do Lemdoh* celebration, one of them is also designated to represent the community and offer prayers for the event. As depicted in Image 4.3, both *Guru Bungan* initiate the *Do Lemdoh* activities by offering a prayer. Following this, the villagers who continue to practice the religion select the best pig and chicken for sacrifice. However,

the chosen animals must first receive approval from the *Guru Bungan* before the sacrifice can take place.



Figure 4.5: The *Guru Bungan* performing *Tehari Dahok* (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

As shown in Image 4.4, before sacrificing the pig, the *Guru Bungan* performs a ceremonial prayer known as *tehari dahok*, a prayer for the pig's soul. This prayer informs the pig that it is being sacrificed to *Bungan Semalan* and that its sacrifice is a noble act for the benefit of humans. Following this, the pig is slaughtered, and its blood is collected, as depicted in Image 4.5. During the slaughtering process, it is forbidden for those present to express pity or sympathy for the pig, as doing so is believed to result in unfortunate consequences.



Figure 4.6: The villagers hold the pig to be sacrifice and taken the blood (Researcher's Personal Image)



Figure 4.7: Bungan Ayak (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

In addition to the pig, chicken is also used as a sacrificial animal. Rousseau (1974) notes that these animals are entrusted with messages before being slaughtered. They serve as messengers between the people and the *Bungan* spirit (Juman, L., personal communication, 2022). Following this, all individuals who continue to practice the *Bungan* tradition gather in the main gallery, or the chief's gallery, to perform the *Bungan Ayak*. During

this ritual, the men sit at the front and the women at the back, as shown in Image 4.6. Family members who are unable to attend are represented by their usual shirts. The blood of the slaughtered pig, after being prayed over, is then rubbed onto the hands of each participant who follows and believes in this custom. Subsequently, the participants are sprinkled with the pig's blood and rub it onto their hands, marking the official commencement of the *Do Lemdoh* celebration.



Figure 4.8: The *Guru Bungan* putting the *Penguhut* at the main *ruai* pillar (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

After praying for the followers, the *Guru Bungan* applies the pig's blood to a pillar next to the human head used for the *Ngayo* ritual, as shown in Image 4.7. Once the *Guru Bungan* has placed the *Penguhut*, which contains blood, he announces the commencement of the *Bungan Amin* session. This allows the followers time to prepare the necessary items for the *Bungan Amin* ritual.



Figure 4.9: Bungan Amin (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)



Figure 4.10: Tray that prepare for the elderly in the house (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

The next process is the *Bungan Amin*, as shown in Images 4.8 and 4.9, which follows the sequence set by the *Guru Bungan*. However, this order may be adjusted if the house's occupants have not prepared all the necessary materials for the ritual. During the *Bungan*

Amin, the *Guru Bungan* visits each door of the house that practices the *Bungan* tradition and prays for the residents. Each household prepares chicken and three trays of eggs; two trays are mandatory, while the third is optional and depends on the household. If the household has an elderly or ill person, an additional tray of eggs is specifically prepared for them, as shown in Image 4.9. Along with the eggs, other items such as machetes, Sarawak *songket* cloth, bead necklaces, and *Penguhut* - slices of tree bark immersed in the sacrificial animal blood- for the *Guru Bungan*'s use are also presented. Among the eggs, there is one special egg, small and white, which is set aside for the *Guru Bungan* to use in prayer to the goddess. After praying for each household member, the *Guru Bungan* focuses on the elderly by picking up the specially prepared tray and offering another prayer for them. Once the egg prayer is completed, the *Guru Bungan* uses the machete to perform several stabbing motions on the floor, symbolically creating a protective barrier for the family. The final part of the procedure involves the chicken, after which the *Guru Bungan* offers a concluding prayer.

After offering a prayer and raising the chicken, the *Guru Bungan* sacrifices it and collects its blood. The blood is then applied to the family members in the household. Once every household in the village has completed the *Bungan Amin* ritual, preparations for the *Ngayo* ritual begin. This ritual is exclusive to men. According to Rousseau (1974), in the past, some men refused to participate in this ritual, viewing it as a continuation of the *Dipuy* custom. However, in the present day, their refusal is largely due to concerns that participating in the ritual may conflict with their religious beliefs, as many have converted to Christianity (Bato, J., personal communication, 2022). During the performance of the *Ngayo* ritual, the men wear traditional Kayan costumes and wait for the *Guru Bungan*'s signal to begin. While the men prepare for the ritual, the women in the household prepare a chicken for each participating man. For example, if there are two men, two chickens are provided. The

sacrificial animal must be male; if a male is unavailable, immature females are used, as adult females are believed to pose a supernatural danger, referred to as '*sekilah*' in Kayan culture (Rousseau, 1974). This belief persists to this day, with the tradition of using male chickens and pigs for sacrifices. Additionally, the sacrificial animals must be in good health and physical condition to be deemed acceptable for Bungan (Among, E., personal communication, 2022).



Figure 4.11: Costume etique for *Ngayo* ritual (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

In Image 4.10, Peter Baling is shown wearing the full regalia used in the *Ngayo* ritual performance. The traditional headgear, known as *Lavong Tepo*, *Lavong Bulok*, or *Sunung*, is worn atop the shirt, although it can also be worn without a shirt. The *Bah* refers to the traditional Kayan pants, which are paired with a machete and *Sang Kayo* (palm leaves). Once each man is fully prepared with the necessary ritual paraphernalia, they gather around the *Kuhong* pillar and await the *Guru Bungan* to retrieve it.



Figure 4.12: The *Guru Bungan* taking the *Kuhong* out from its house (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)



Figure 4.13: The *Guru Bungan* is giving *Tuak* for the *Kuhong* (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

When the *Guru Bungan* removes the human head from the pillar, as shown in Image 4.11, he recites another prayer for it, followed by a *Parap*—a form of melodic chanting or traditional singing dedicated to the head. Afterward, the *Guru Bungan* lifts a *Tuak* (rice wine)

and pours it over the head, as depicted in Image 4.12. This ritual signifies their readiness to take the *Kuhong* and celebrate with it during the day.



Figure 4.14: *Guru Bungan* assign the task to the individual (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

After the arrangements are completed, the *Guru Bungan* will hand the human head to the individual designated to carry it throughout the ritual. Only specific individuals, who meet certain criteria such as being physically and mentally strong, are allowed to hold the head and participate in the ritual. This is based on the belief that the human head possesses spiritual power, which the holder must be capable of enduring (Juman, L., personal communication, 2022). Following this, all the men will proceed to the riverbank with the *Kuhong*, bringing along several tied palm leaves, a shotgun, a bottle of *Tuak* (rice wine), and some rice.



Figure 4.15: The palm leave that they will use for the ritual (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)



Figure 4.16: The men gather at the Rejang river bank (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

At the riverbank, as shown in Image 4.15, the men will gather to construct a temporary shelter for the human head. They will collect branches, withered coconut leaves, wood, and grasses to build this structure, which is then tied together along with the *Kuhong*. This temporary shelter, referred to as *Keminih*, is shown in Image 4.16. While the men are

engaged in this task, the *Guru Bungan* will lift an egg and inform *Bungan Semalan* that they are about to begin the *Ngayo* ritual.



Figure 4.17: The head being tied with it temporary house, '*Keminih*' (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)



Figure 4.18: The *Guru Bungan* tie the palm leave (Image Resource: Researcher's Personal Image)

Afterward, the *Guru Bungan* will take the palm leaves they brought and tie them around the wrists of each man present at the riverbank. He will also give each man another palm leaf to tie around their ankle, as shown in Image 4.17. Once the leaves are tied, the *Guru Bungan* will instruct the men to drink the *Tuak* (rice wine) and eat the rice they brought, as depicted in Image 4.18 below.



Figure 4.19: The men eating the rice they brought before going back to the longhouse
(Image Source : Researcher's Personal Image)



Figure 4.20: They burning the *Keminih* (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

As the *Tuak* and rice were passed around, as shown in Image 4.18, the *Guru Bungan* prepared to burn the *Keminih*. He handed the human head to the individual assigned to carry it. Before setting the leaves and wood on fire, a man with a shotgun discharged three shots. Following this, the temporary shelter was set alight, as shown in Image 4.19. Afterward, the *Guru Bungan* explained the rules of the tradition before the men returned to the longhouse to begin the *Ngayo* by performing the *Ujet Bato* dance.



Figure 4.21: *Ujet Bato* dance along the longhouse ‘*ruai*’ (Image Source: Researcher’s Personal Image)

Afterward, they began performing the *Ujet Bato* dance, the *Ngayo* victory dance, at the longhouse, as shown in Image 4.20. The individual responsible for carrying the human head led the group, with the others following behind. They formed a single line and danced in time with the rhythms of the *Tawak* and *Gong*, accompanied by the music of the *Sape*. The dancers moved in a circle around the *ruai*. Each of the other male participants, excluding the one handling the human head, held their own *Sang Kayo* and mimicked the motion of

flapping the leaves throughout the dance. They performed this dance for four to eight rounds before taking a break. After eating, they resumed the dance in the evening.



Figure 4.22: The villager playing the *Gong* and *Tawak* (Image Source : Researcher's Personal Image)



Figure 4.23: The men who follow *Bungan* are smeared with chicken blood (Image Source : Researcher's Personal Image)

During the break, only those men who still practiced the *Bungan* religion were smeared with chicken blood, as shown in Image 4.22. According to the *Guru Bungan*,

individuals who follow Christianity or other religions were still welcome to participate in the *Ujet Bato* dance if they wished. The *Bungan* spirit did not prevent anyone from joining the celebration of the festive day. However, those not following the *Bungan* religion were not smeared with chicken or pig blood. The *Bungan* followers showed respect to individuals who had converted to other religions while still supporting the traditional custom, as there was no harm in acknowledging the traditional origins of humanity. Nevertheless, this practice depended on individual perspectives regarding the matter (Juman, L. & Bato, J., personal communication, 2022).



Figure 4.24: They are cooking and resting at the '*ruai*' (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

While waiting for the next round, as shown in Image 4.23, the men rested and waited at the *ruai*. They were prohibited from entering the house. The chicken that had been slaughtered earlier was cooked at the *ruai*. Traditionally, they used an old method of cooking: a hole was dug in the ground, and a fire was made in the hole where the chicken was cooked (Luhath, G. & Among, E., personal communication, 2022). However, in present times, they now use gas stoves. During this time, the men engaged in social activities at the *ruai*,

including *Ngajat* dance and *Parap*. Meanwhile, other villagers took turns being blessed by the *Guru Bungan* with the *Sang Kayo*. Once the cooking was completed, they ate together in the *ruai*. After finishing their meal and resting they prepared for the second round of the *Ngayo* ritual dance session. In the second round, they performed four rounds, but if they were able to continue, they could extend it to eight rounds, depending on the individual carrying the head (Juman, L., personal communication, 2022).



Figure 4.25: They about to put the *Kuhong* back to its place (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)



Figure 4.26: The *Guru Bungan* giving the last *Tuak* for the *Kuhong* before putting it back to it place (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

After completing the final rounds of the *Ngayo* dance, the men circled the pillar where the human head was placed, as depicted in Image 4.24, while making loud vocalisations to mark the finale of the ritual. They then prepared to return the head to its designated resting place. Before doing so, the *Parap*—a form of traditional melodic chanting—was performed once more. As illustrated in Image 4.25, the *Guru Bungan* offered the head a final serving of *Tuak* (rice wine). During this process, several *Sang Kayo* (palm leaves) carried by them throughout the ritual were tied together and placed alongside the head. Following this act, the head was lifted and returned to its resting position, symbolising the conclusion of the *Ngayo* ritual for that evening. The men were then allowed to re-enter their homes, and the villagers continued to celebrate until the following morning. On the next day, the villagers concluded both the *Ngayo* ritual and the *Do Lemdoh* celebration with a closing ceremony known as *Pusang*. This involved a communal gathering at the riverbank, referred to locally as *Kuman Bahek*, meaning “eating by the river.” Villagers brought remaining food and beverages to share as part of this final celebration. The *Sang Kayo* used the previous night was then tied across the river to mark the ritual bathing area. To formally close the ritual, the *Guru Bungan* lifted an egg to communicate to the *Bungan* spirit that the ceremonial proceedings had come to an end. He then bathed the male participants of the *Ngayo* dance—referred to as ritual “warriors”—and bestowed blessings upon them. The palm leaves that had been tied to their wrists were removed and placed with the *Sang Kayo* tied across the river. This act symbolised the lifting of all ritual taboos, marking the return to everyday life. The palm leaves were intentionally left to wilt naturally as a visible sign that the community was no longer bound by ceremonial restrictions and could resume normal activities.

Based on the described process, it was evident that the *Ngayo* ritual held profound significance within the *Bungan* religion. The ritual represented the central and most essential component of the *Do Lemdoh* celebration, functioning as the culminating act that completed the sacred cycle of worship. The findings indicated that the *Ngayo* ritual functioned as the culminating act of the *Do Lemdoh* celebration, serving as the final and most essential performance that completed the entire festival. Without the successful completion of *Ngayo*, the community believed that their spiritual obligations to *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan*, the supreme spirit, would remain unfulfilled (Juman, L., personal communication, 2022). The ritual thus acted as a medium through which the Kayan community expressed devotion, sought protection, and reinforced their collective identity as followers of the *Bungan* faith.

Furthermore, every element of the ritual—from clothing and ritual objects to sacrificial offerings, chants, and musical accompaniment—carried symbolic meaning that reflected the values and cosmological beliefs of the community. Interpreted through Peirce's Semiotic Theory (Atkin, 2010; Chandler, 2017), these elements functioned as signs that conveyed deeper meanings about life, fertility, renewal, and the balance between human and spiritual realms. At the same time, the collective performance of *Ngayo*, as framed by Schechner's (2003) Performance Theory, demonstrated how ritual action operated as "restored behavior," sustaining cultural memory while adapting to reform within *Bungan* practice.

Through this lens, *Ngayo* was not merely a ritual performance but a spiritual necessity. It served as a protective mechanism against misfortune, a symbolic reaffirmation of agricultural and social prosperity, and a sacred act that tied the community's survival and well-being to their continued relationship with *Bungan*. This interplay of symbolism,

performance, and belief highlighted why Ngayo remained indispensable to the Bungan religion and the lived experiences of the Kayan people.

4.3 Symbolic Analysis of the *Ngayo* Ritual Performance

After examining and identifying the symbolic elements embedded within the *Ngayo* ritual performance, Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory was applied to analyse the ritual process, focusing on both verbal and non-verbal symbols. To ensure that the analysis was systematic and contextually grounded, the researcher adopted and adapted the theoretical framework proposed by Debyani Embon (2019). Her study, which analysed the *Adat Toraja Rambu Solo* ritual, also employed Peirce's semiotic theory to examine the system of symbols in ritual practices. Embon's framework was particularly useful because it provided a structured categorization of symbolic elements, enabling a clear distinction between their forms, functions, and meanings. Although developed in the *Toraja Rambu Solo* context, the framework was relevant to this study since both *Adat Toraja Rambu Solo* and *Ngayo* were situated within agricultural and spiritual cycles, expressing renewal, protection, and communal devotion. By reconstructing Embon's model to fit the specific context of *Ngayo*, the researcher established a theoretical tool that aligned with the objectives of this study while highlighting the shared role of ritual symbols in communicating cultural and religious meaning.

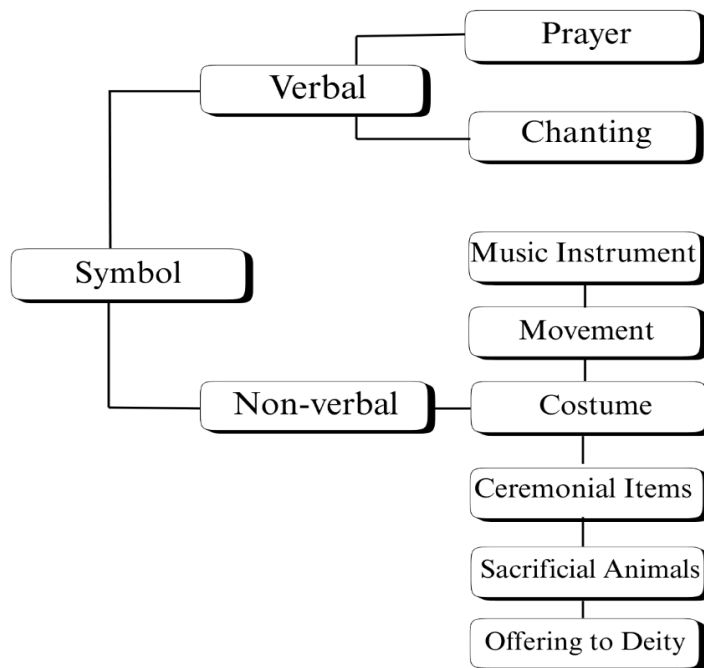


Figure 4.27: The theoretical framework based on the symbol's element breakdown
(Framework adapted from Debyani Embon's framework)

In Debyani Embon's research, Peirce's theory of symbols was applied to analyse the *Adat Toraja Rambu Solo* ceremony. She noted that Peirce defined symbols as a type of sign that is both arbitrary and conventional in nature. According to Peirce (1867, p. 82), symbols were introduced to abstract the distinction between concepts and words. A symbol, whether manifested in words or ideas, is distinguished from other types of signs by its ability to denote the character associated with it—an ability that non-symbolic signs, such as indices (e.g., pointing fingers, personal pronouns, proper names), do not possess (Bellucci, 2020). Based on this understanding of symbolic elements from Peirce's theory, symbolism can represent words, people, marks, locations, or abstract ideas—extending beyond their literal meanings (Atkin, 2006). In ritual contexts, these symbols may include clothing, objects,

rhythms, rhymes, music, or chants. Each symbol carries with it collateral information that relates to the object or concept it represents. For Peirce, a symbol is a sign that denotes by virtue of a law, typically through an association of general ideas (Peirce, 1931–58, p. 249). This symbol may represent the relationship between humans and the divine, among humans, or between humans and the environment. Therefore, Peirce’s categorization of verbal and non-verbal symbols helps explain how these elements convey meaning through shared cultural conventions. Based on this theoretical foundation, the researcher has extracted symbolic elements from the ritual and organized them according to the type of symbol, as discussed in the following sub-sections.

4.3.1 Verbal Symbol

Verbal communication refers to the transmission of messages from the communicator to the communicant through either spoken or written language (Rizma et al., 2021). Verbal symbols or messages encompass all types of symbols that utilize one or more words. According to Mulyana (2005), language can be considered a system of verbal codes—a structured set of symbols governed by specific rules for their combination, which are collectively used and understood by a particular community. In the context of this study, verbal symbols are evident in the following activities:

4.3.1.1 Prayer

Prayer was a form of structured verbal symbolism through which participants expressed praise, confession, or requests, typically within a formal and theological context. At the outset of the ritual, one of the initial actions performed by the *Guru Bungan* involved lifting an egg while reciting a prayer to the *Bungan* goddess. This act exemplified the use of verbal symbols in the ritual, serving as a medium through which spiritual intentions were communicated. The content of the prayer was documented through ethnographic observation, including detailed field notes and audio recordings, allowing the researcher to capture the exact wording, tone, and sequence of the invocation. The analysis of these verbal symbols followed Peirce's Semiotic Theory, interpreting the prayer as a symbolic sign that represented the community's spiritual beliefs. This act exemplifies the use of verbal symbols in the ritual. One such example of a prayer or spoken invocation delivered by the *Guru Bungan* is as follows:

Table 4.1: Presents the Prayer text for *Bungan Amin* as documented during fieldwork.

Bahasa Kayan	Bahasa Melayu	English
<i>Nei Sita Pui Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan,</i> <i>Lebak petula tei usun tana,</i> <i>Jinun yan tek kamek tek higem dahak,</i> <i>Hak keh ikak henyap anih,</i> <i>Kak henyap leng lekak men tana hida,</i> <i>Tei pala amin Pui Bungan Semuan,</i> <i>Anih neh ikak henyap, ikak tei belin urip,</i>	<i>Dengar ini Moyang Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan,</i> <i>Banyak petua di atas bumi ini,</i> <i>Tiada satu pun yang kami pegangi,</i> <i>Oleh itu kamu ayam ini,</i> <i>Kamu ayam yang pergi dari tanah ini,</i> <i>Pergi ke tempat Moyang Bungan Semuan, pergi menjadi pengantara hidup, Pengantara nasib kami dari pinggiran ini, dalam rumah kami ini,</i>	Listen to us, O great ancestral spirit, <i>Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan</i> . There is much guidance in this world, yet none of it belongs to us. Therefore, O chicken, You are the sacrifice, you leave this land to journey to the realm of our great ancestral spirit, <i>Bungan Semalan</i> . You act as an intermediary between us and the divine, influencing our life and destiny in this house, on this land. There is much ill omen in this house, which is why you, O chicken,

<i>Belin nasip kamek men alem lirin, alem amin kamek nih,</i> <i>Au lebak isi pali kamek halem amin anih,</i> <i>Hak neh kak nih henyap tei lebo lirin, lebo amin Pui Bungan Semalan Pesilung Luan,</i> <i>Tei akei urip, akei nasip leng sayu pegu an kamek pakei do leng ateng dhin do aleng laan,</i> <i>Mina peh ikak henyap, ayan hempit, ayan seluit,</i> <i>Ikak au kenuhak tinak tudi, tinak tugek,</i> <i>Aleng pekeba, aleng bara do bekang men balan langit,</i> <i>Avan kamek kelunan haman na hadui, na kerja, kamek tei urip kamek usun tana anih,</i> <i>Han ikak neh murip usun tana anih, tusah payah kak ilo dan, ilo kuman kak,</i> <i>Han ikak tei lebo lirin amin Pui Bungan Semuan,</i> <i>Em jam ngaja tana basa usan kak avin ikak an Pui Bungan nyelong tergong,</i> <i>Avam murip ngeriman, murip ngeturan,</i> <i>Ihak neh pukuk kak nih henyap gak higem, gak ngawing, kalok pesak,</i> <i>Ala kak tei pala lakek Batung Petuman Urip, pala Lakek Ju, mamong urip aru,</i> <i>Ala dahwak tanganak dua batung anen nemei urip, nemei nasip kalok panak aleng ngiyoh, aleng livoh adet Pui Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan.</i>	<i>Sudah terlalu banyak perkara tidak baik dalam rumah ini,</i> <i>Oleh itu kamu ayam, naik ke rumah Moyang Bungan Semalan Peilung Luan,</i> <i>Pergi memohon kehidupan, mohon nasib yang baik untuk kami pakai pada sisa hari yang mendatang,</i> <i>Walaupun kamu ayam, sebesar burung pipit, sebesar cicak,</i> <i>Kamu sudah menjadi haiwan ternakan yang pintar, bijak,</i> <i>Yang membawa khabar, memberitahu hari-hari yang tidak baik,</i> <i>Agar kami dapat melakukan pekerjaan kami dalam kehidupan di atas bumi ini,</i> <i>Jika kamu hidup di atas bumi ini, kamu akan menghadapi susah mencari nafkah dan sesuap nasi untuk diri kamu,</i> <i>Tapi jika kamu sampai ke tempat Moyang Bungan Semuan,</i> <i>Kamu tidak akan memijak tanah yang dibasahi hujan kerana kamu diangkat atas gong oleh Moyang Bungan,</i> <i>Maka kamu akan hidup senang lenang,</i> <i>Oleh itu, kamu diikat dan dimasak oleh kami ayam, Supaya kamu pergi kepada sang lelaki Batung Petuman Urip, pergi kepada Lelaki yang mengangkat membentuk kehidupan kekal,</i> <i>Supaya mereka dua beranak mengatur kehidupan, nasib kami yang mengikuti adat Moyang Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan.</i>	<i>journey to the great ancestors, Bungan Semalan Pesilung Luan, seeking a better life and a more favorable destiny for us, so that we may practice our customs for the rest of our lives.</i> <i>Although your size may resemble that of a sparrow or a lizard, you are an intelligent and noble domestic creature,</i> <i>Bringing tidings and warning us of the bad omens that surround us, so that we may carry out our work and duties in this world.</i> <i>If you were to remain on this earth, you would struggle to find sustenance or a single bite of rice. But when you go to our great ancestor, Bungan Semalan,</i> <i>You will not tread upon rain-soaked ground, for you are lifted upon the gong by our revered ancestor, Bungan.</i> <i>There, you will find joy and fulfilment.</i> <i>This is why you are taken and prepared for us—so that you may ascend to Batung Petuman Urip, the one who grants life and shapes the soul.</i> <i>Together, they will determine our destiny and fate, as we, the followers of Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan, continue our sacred practices.</i>
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The data revealed that prayers recited by the *Guru Bungan* functioned as powerful verbal symbols within the ritual context. These prayers, used during the *Bungan Amin* ceremony, were meant to bless the souls of sacrificial animals, ensuring their smooth journey to meet *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan*. In this symbolic system, the sacrificial animal served as a messenger between the *Guru Bungan* and *Bungan* goddess, and whatever message entrusted to the animal was believed to be conveyed to the deity. The community recited prayers asking for protection, blessings for their daily lives, prosperity, and health, offering animals in return as expressions of respect and gratitude towards their spiritual beliefs.

In some cases, rituals such as *Bungan Ayak* or *Bungan Hawa* substituted the sacrificial animal with an egg, referred to as *Tajo Ayak*, used as a symbolic medium to connect with the deity (Ding, D., personal communication, 2022). Although the precise meaning of *Tajo Ayak* is not documented in academic sources accessible to the researcher, the usage of egg in this context was interpreted through Peirce's Semiotic Theory as a conventional, non-verbal symbol—an item whose meaning is grounded in cultural agreement rather than resemblance.

4.3.1.2 *Parap* / Chanting

Parap is a method used to convey a story or message through a specific melody. Typically, one or two individuals perform the *Parap*, while others provide support. The supporters of the *Parap* are known as *Nyabei*, and their role is to emphasize the final word spoken by the *Parap* performer. Rhythmic repetition of words that carries symbolic meaning in cultural or spiritual context. In this context, the *Parap* is typically performed when the *Kuhong* is brought down and again when it is returned to its designated place to celebrate its

present during the ritual process. As previously mentioned, the *Parap* serves to deliver a message or story, and in this context, the performance symbolizes a song intended to soothe the *Kuhong*. For this case, this procedure aims to prevent the *Kuhong* from becoming agitated or upset by the disturbance, as it is only used once a year and is sensitive to being handled improperly. The *Parap* is presented as a way of signalling that the *Kuhong* will be taken to play, and to ensure that it does not become angry or cause misfortune for the village.

4.3.2 Non-Verbal Symbols

Non-verbal communication refers to the transmission of messages without the use of words. Non-verbal symbols are employed when messages are conveyed through means other than verbal language, including sign language, body language, facial expressions, eye contact, and physical items such as clothing, hairstyles, and accessories (Rizma et al., 2021). In the context of this ritual, non-verbal symbols can be identified and analysed in the following breakdown:

4.3.2.1 Music Instrument



Figure 4.28: The bigger size is *Gong*, the medium size is *Tawak* (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

Upon the men's return from the shore, they began playing the *Sape*, accompanied by the *Gong* and *Tawak*. These two instruments differed in size and pitch, with the *Gong* being larger and the *Tawak* of medium size. The *Sape*, a traditional instrument of the Orang Ulu people, was often featured in festivals and official ceremonies and held significant cultural value in shaping the identity of the community. The *Gong* and *Tawak*, both traditional musical instruments, were also used to honor distinguished or highly respected guests. In the context of this ritual, the *Gong* and *Tawak* functioned as symbolic instruments of victory, celebrating the warriors' successful return while simultaneously expressing honor for their bravery.

4.3.2.2 Movement



Figure 4.29: *Ujet Bato* dance second round (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

The *Ngayo* dance performed during the ritual is known as the *Ujet Bato* dance. In this dance, participants jump sideways on one leg and then switch to the other leg while advancing forward. This movement symbolizes a victory dance traditionally performed by returning warriors who, having obtained the head of an enemy in battle, would circle around the longhouse to celebrate their triumph.

4.3.2.3 Costume



Figure 4.30: Full regalia for the ritual performance (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

The clothing depicted in Image 4.28 represents the traditional attire of the Orang Ulu people, which is worn during the *Ngayo* ritual (Steward, S., 2022). The ensemble includes a vest-like top called *Tabin*, pants known as *Sunong*, and a hat referred to as *Lavong Tepo* or *Lavong Bulok*. Collectively, this costume is known as the warrior attire, originally worn in battle to signify their identity as Orang Ulu warriors. Furthermore, this dress serves as a symbol of respect, marking the individual as a respected warrior within the community.

4.3.2.4 Ceremonial Items



Figure 4.31: Item used for the ritual (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

Several items used in this ritual, as shown in Image 4.29, carry specific symbolic meanings. The machete and egg symbolize a means or a pathway through which the *Guru Bungan* communicates with the *Bungan* holy spirit. The palm leaves and *Penguhut* symbolize sacred substances used for purification, as the *Guru Bungan* uses them to smear chicken blood on their hands, while the palm leaves are used to splash water during the ritual. Additionally, the gun serves as a symbol of victory, representing a way of announcing that they have triumphed in battle.

4.3.2.5 Sacrificial Animals



Figure 4.32: The *Penguhat* that contain the sacrificial animal's blood (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

There are two types of animals used in the ceremonies. The first is a pig, typically sourced from a ranch or purchased at a local market. The primary purpose of the pig is to provide blood, which is then applied to the hands and crown of participants which only be used during the beginning of the custom which they call as *Bungan Ayak* or *Bungan Hawa Ayak*. The second sacrificial animal is a chicken or chick which they used during Ngayo ceremony, with the choice depending on the family's financial situation. However, the chicken holds less symbolic value than the pig. As a result, each chicken is typically designated as a blessing offering for a specific household within the longhouse. Unlike pig blood, which is applied to the participants' hands and crown, chicken blood is sprinkled on a group of individuals and rubbed on their hands. The belief that sacrificial animals serve as intermediaries, carrying messages between humans and the spirit world (Rousseau, 1974; Lake' Baling, 2002), continues to this day. These animals are considered to perform a noble

duty, acting as messengers on behalf of the people (Juman, L. & Bato, J., personal communication, 2022).

4.3.2.6 Offering to Deity



Figure 4.33: Offering foods for *Bungan* (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

The offerings presented to the goddess consist of various items, including an egg, palm leaves, and a *Penguhut*. In addition to these, other offerings such as *Kuih Dinu*, *Kuih Jala*, *Sirih*, folded cigars, and *Tuak* are also included. These offerings are intended for the goddess to consume and serve as symbols of gratitude.

Through the application of Embon's (2019) theoretical framework, the researcher was able to examine and interpret the symbolic meaning of each element within the *Ngayo* ritual. The analysis revealed that the *Ngayo* ritual, in its symbolic context, represented not only a spiritual offering but also a medium through which the community of Long Amo village affirmed their cultural identity, social cohesion, and relationship with the spiritual world. The symbolic meanings embedded in the chants, objects, and ritual actions carried significance that reinforced communal values and the continuity of tradition. This

understanding of the ritual's symbolic dimensions subsequently provided the basis for dividing and interpreting the *Ngayo* ritual systematically through Schechner's performance theory, thereby addressing the next stage of analysis.

4.4 Interpretation of Symbolic Meaning in *Ngayo* Ritual Performance into Performance Study

As discussed in Chapter Three, after analyzing the symbolic meaning of the *Ngayo* ritual, the researcher further elaborated on its significance through the lens of performance studies. In this context, Richard Schechner's Performance Theory was applied to interpret the ritual, as his framework enabled the exploration of performance across social, cultural, and ritual contexts (Awang Long et al., 2018). Schechner (2003) emphasized the close connection between ritual and performance, as both encompassed structured actions that carried symbolic meaning and communicated shared cultural values.

Building on the symbolic elements identified in the *Ngayo* ritual, the researcher divided its performance structure into three stages that paralleled theatre production: pre-production, production, and post-production. This approach allowed the ritual to be examined not only as a collection of symbolic acts but also as a dynamic performance that unfolded systematically. Within this framework, the concept of "The Nest" proposed by Schechner was employed to explain how ritual layers—social, cultural, and spiritual—were enacted and experienced by participants.

The analysis was grounded in ethnographic methods, including participant observation, field notes, and in-depth interviews with ritual specialists. These methods enabled the documentation of both the observable actions and the meanings attributed to

them by the community. By interpreting the ritual through performance theory, the study addressed the third research objective: to examine how the symbolic meanings of the *Ngayo* ritual were embodied, enacted, and communicated as a cultural performance.

4.4.1 Pre-Production (Before the Ritual)

The pre-production stage refers to the preparatory phase before the actual *Ngayo* ritual process, occurring on the morning of the designated day for the ritual. During this stage, the *Guru Bungan* visits each household that practices the *Bungan* religion to bless the family members and pray for the well-being of the household, as illustrated in the image below. This practice is crucial as the community is about to receive a new life with the arrival of new rice, and it is essential to ensure that no bad luck is carried into the new cycle. To conduct the ceremony, the *Guru Bungan* requires 16 eggs, a machete in each tray, four Songkets in each tray, and a chicken. Family members gather according to gender, with men seated in front and women at the back. Following this arrangement, the *Guru Bungan* performs several rituals to seek blessings from the *Bungan* goddess. The table below outlines the ceremonies carried out during this pre-production phase:



Figure 4.34: Blessing the family member during the *Bungan Amin* (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)



Figure 4.35: Surrounding the family member while poking the machete on the floor (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)



Figure 4.36: Waving the machete on top of the family member head (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

The image above illustrates the procedures followed during the *Bungan Amin* process. Based on the visual depiction, the process can be described as follows:

Table 4.2: Symbolic meaning during *Bungan Amin* procedure

Required Action in <i>Bungan Amin</i>	Description for the action
Based on Image 4.32, all family members place their hands on the machete according to age and gender, with the younger family members positioned on top and the oldest placed below. The sequence proceeds with the men first, followed by the women.	The purpose is to call their soul back to their body and bless them. They believe that their soul may wander during sleep or in dreams, and it is necessary to call it back and offer blessings to prevent bad luck from following them.

Based on Image 4.33, the <i>Guru Bungan</i> was seen poking the machete onto the floor in a circular motion.	The <i>Guru Bungan</i> formed a symbolic fence around the family members by poking the machete into the floor in a circular motion. This action represented the protection that would be provided to them, as if they were surrounded by a protective boundary created by the <i>Bungan</i> .
As shown in Image 4.34, the <i>Guru Bungan</i> waved the machete above the heads of the family members.	It was as if a shield or roof was being formed over their heads to protect the family members. This symbolized that the <i>Bungan</i> would protect them from rain and harm, completing the image as if they were building a house.

4.4.2 Production (During the Ritual)

The *Ngayo* ritual lasts a whole day, during which the dance is performed twice, while other rituals are only required in the first half of the ceremony. Based on the preceding analysis, the following table provides a summary of the symbolic meanings associated with the various sequences during the *Ngayo* ritual performance and highlights the links between cultural practices, spiritual beliefs and the expressions of respect, protection and gratitude during the ceremony:

Table 4.3: Symbolic meaning for the procedure during the *Ngayo* ritual performance

Action during ritual	Symbolic meaning for the action
Prayer	Recited by the <i>Guru Bungan</i> , symbolising asks for blessing and protection.

<i>Parap</i>	Led by the <i>Parap</i> leader to entertain the head and demonstrate respect towards it. This symbolizes gratitude for the head's protection over the village and its people.
<i>Sape</i>	Accompany the warrior dance of joy since they won the war.
<i>Gong and Tawak</i>	To welcome a highly esteemed or respected individual. This symbolizes a warning or announcement of their victorious return.
<i>Ujet Bato</i> / Ngayo dance	Symbolising celebration dance as if they won from the war / victory dance
<i>Sang Kayo</i> (Palm leave)	Symbolizing protection from the goddess and the expulsion of bad luck. The leaf is used to sweep around the village, symbolizing the removal of bad luck, and serves as a holy instrument to bless the people.
<i>Kuhong</i> (Palm leave that contains the skull)	Symbolizing a victory in battle and the return of the enemy's head, serving as a lucky charm for the warrior.
Gun	Symbolizing an announcement of their victorious return and a warning to their enemies about their presence.
Sacrificial animals (pig and chicken)	As a sacrificial offering, symbolizing a messenger between humans and the goddess.
Egg on machette (<i>Meju</i>)	Performed by the <i>Guru Bungan</i> as a conduit to call upon the deity.
The animal bloods	Symbolizing holy water is used to purify them from taboos and bestow a prosperous life after their return from war.

4.4.3 Post-Production (After the Ritual)

After performing the ritual for a whole day, the *Ngayo* ritual is concluded the next day with a *Pusang* activity. During this phase, all the leftover food from the ritual is brought

together and shared at the riverside. The men tie the *Sang Kayo* used during the ritual into a bundle and hang it over the river, as shown in Figures 4.32 and 4.33. Meanwhile, the *Guru Bungan* recites the final prayer, which marks the conclusion of the *Do Lemdoh* celebration and signals readiness to welcome the new rice. According to Lato Juman (2022), the main purpose of the *Pusang* is not only to signal the conclusion of the ceremony, but also to foster a sense of unity among the villagers. This custom is important for maintaining peaceful relations and a harmonious community within the village.



Figure 4.37: They are tying the *Sang Kayo* together (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)



Figure 4.38: They are tying the *Sang Kayo* across the Amo river (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)



Figure 4.39: The *Guru Bungan* saying his last prayer (Image source: Researcher's Personal Image)



Figure 4.40: The Long Amo villagers doing *Pusang* (Image source: Researcher's Personal Image)

Table 4.4: Symbolic Meaning of *Pusang*, Process After the *Ngayo* Ritual

Action after the ritual	Symbolic Meaning
The men tied the <i>Sang Kayo</i> into one	Symbolizes the conclusion of their contributions during the <i>Ngayo</i> activities and signifies victory.

Tie the <i>Sang Kayo</i> across the river	Symbolizes a path or sign that they are ready to accept the new year with new rice and wishes for continued protection by the <i>Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan</i> .
The <i>Guru Bungan</i> says his last prayer and gives <i>Tuak</i> for the spirits.	Symbolizes the completion of the necessary rites for the Bungan ceremonies and expresses the hope that the goddess will continue to protect them and their upcoming crops.
They finally <i>do Pusang</i> , where they eat together by the riverside.	Symbolizes unity and togetherness among the villagers. All the villagers come together with their food and <i>Tuak</i> to share a meal, strengthening their bond under the protection of the <i>Bungan</i> .

Through the application of Schechner's (2003) performance theory, the researcher was able to break down the Ngayo ritual systematically according to the theatre production process—pre-production, production, and post-production. This breakdown made it easier to interpret the ritual in a structured manner and to understand its relationship to the people of Long Amo, highlighting its cultural and spiritual importance to the community. The analysis showed that the Ngayo ritual communicated meaning not only through words and interactions but also through tools, actions, and ritual space. Supported by ethnographic methods such as participant observation, field notes, and in-depth interviews, the researcher was able to document and interpret how every action was performed and what it symbolized. This systematic analysis further allowed the identification of theoretical elements within the Ngayo ritual, demonstrating how performance theory provided a comprehensive framework for interpreting its symbolic meanings in practice.

4.4.4 Theatre Performance Element in Ngayo Ritual

Each phase of the *Ngayo* ritual — preparation, performance and conclusion — mirrors the phases of a theatrical production: pre-production, production and post-production. A closer look reveals several theatrical features in the structure and presentation of the ritual, such as staging, role-playing, audience involvement, symbolic props, music, dance and narrative progression. By analysing the symbolic elements, it can be determined that the ritual performance is also consistent with Richard Schechner's Restored Behaviour performance theory.

Schechner (2003) explains: "Restored Behaviour" is symbolic and reflexive. It is about taking behaviour apart and putting it back together again." This theory highlights the way in which rituals, such as the *Ngayo* ritual, involve the recreation and transformation of behaviours, which is consistent with the principles of performance studies. The findings of this study underscore the importance of *Ngayo* ritual in the field of performance studies and show how it transcends its religious function and becomes a cultural performance rich in symbolism, narrative and theatricality.

Ritual has long been associated with the study of performance, particularly in the context of theatre, where theatre can evolve from ritual or ritual itself can serve as the origin of theatre (Comiskey, 1989). *Ngayo* ritual is performed at a particular time and place by people trained in the custom. In this study, the researcher applies performance theory to analyse the *Ngayo* ritual. He focuses on elements such as the performers and their roles, stage and space, costumes and props, script and narrative, music and dance, and the relationship between audience and participants. This approach allows for a more thorough understanding of the performance structure of the ritual, as shown below.

i. Performer and their role

There are three key roles that play a significant part in the ritual performance, as observed by the researcher. These roles establish ritual actions imbued with symbolic meaning, reflecting the concept of restored behavior as a cultural script. These roles not only perform specific actions but also serve to re-enact and transform behaviors that hold cultural and symbolic significance, aligning with Richard Schechner's concept of restored behavior. Each role, through its actions, contributes to the reconfiguration and re-enactment of behaviors that preserve cultural practices and beliefs, reinforcing the ritual's symbolic and performative nature.

- a. The *Guru Bungan*
- b. The person in charge of the head
- c. The person who leads the *Parap* session

The Performer	Role in the ritual performance
<i>Guru Bungan</i>	 The <i>Guru Bungan</i> plays a crucial role throughout the entirety of the ritual, serving as the cornerstone of the <i>Bungan</i> ceremonies. They are responsible for orchestrating the entire ritual, providing instructions on what actions to take, when to perform them, and where each step should occur. These two individuals hold immense significance within the custom; without their guidance and leadership, the ceremony would not be able to unfold effectively. Their presence and direction ensure the proper execution of the ritual, reinforcing their central role in the tradition. Their role is like a mediator and guide for the ritual ceremony.
The person in charge of the head	

	The individual responsible for handling the head holds significant importance in this ritual performance. ensuring the continuity and integrity of the ritual performance, they entrusted to carry the sacred item throughout the ritual. Despites the head having been passed down through generations, it is still believed to possess supernatural power. Therefore, great care is taken in selecting a trusted individual to hold the head, as it plays a critical role in the ritual. This person is entrusted with the head, which will be the first to be displayed during the <i>Ujet Bato</i> dance. Due to its symbolic and spiritual significance, it is considered too risky to allow just any individual to handle the head, ensuring that only the most trusted and respected person is chosen for this important task.
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The person that leads the <i>Parap</i> session	The individual who leads the <i>Parap</i> plays a vital role in the <i>Ngayo</i> ritual performance, as this session is integral in calming the supernatural energy associated with the head. They act as the storyteller of the ritual, guiding the <i>Kuhong</i> and informing it that a journey is about to take place, and it must be brought along. It is believed that if the <i>Parap</i> is not performed and respect is not shown to the head, its protective powers will be withdrawn, potentially bringing bad luck instead. Therefore, performing the <i>Parap</i> serves to entertain and honor the spirit of the head, ensuring that its protective qualities are maintained as they proceed with the ritual.
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Table 4.5: The performer role in the Ngayo ritual performance (Source : Researcher’s Field Notes, 2022)

Summarising the table, the three key figures of the Ngayo ritual — the *Guru Bungan*, the person holding the head, and the leader of the *Parap* — form the core framework of the ceremonial performance. The ritual would be incomplete without their presence, as each carries distinct responsibilities and symbolic functions. Once the ritual commences, the *Guru Bungan* is sought first to initiate the spiritual order, followed by the person holding the head who embodies the power of victory, and finally the experienced *Parap* leader who ensures

the performance flows in accordance with custom. Collectively, their roles not only sustain the ritual's spiritual narrative but also refine and reinforce the hierarchy of the community, reflecting social status, responsibilities, and symbolic representation within the ritual. Above the table, the three key figures of the *Ngayo* ritual — *Guru Bungan*, the person holding the head, and the leader of the *Parap* — are crucial to the framework of the ceremonial performance. Their participation is essential for the proper performance of the ritual and the fulfilment of its spiritual purpose.

ii. Stage and Space

The ritual framework of the *Ngayo* ceremony comprises different spatial zones, including the longhouse, the village compound and the riverbank, each of which serve as dynamic "stages" for different sections of the ritual. These spaces serve as ritual sites where certain symbolic actions take place, similar to scene transitions in a theatrical performance (Schechner, 2003). Since the beginning of the traditional feast day, the ceremonial performance of the *Ngayo* has been tied to specific locations and the space they use most is the longhouse *ruai*.



Figure 4.41: Performing *Bungan Ayak* procedure before the *Ngayo* ritual (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

The villagers of Long Amo typically perform the traditional *Bungan* ceremony in the village *ruai*, which functions as the central space of the ritual. This location is deliberately chosen for its accessibility and visibility, enabling the entire community to witness and participate in the ceremony. Although the *ruai* does not provide a formal stage or distinct performance area, its expansive layout transforms into an ideal setting for ritual enactment. In this context, their everyday spaces could become theatrical and spiritual stage, where ritual actions are simultaneously sacred and performative. The performance usually spans from noon until night, though its duration may be adapted — for example, by reducing the number of rounds in the *Ujet Bato* dance — while always remaining under the guidance of the *Guru Bungan*.

From an analytical perspective, this use of space reflects principles of stage design, where the open environment allows unobstructed viewing similar to a traditional theatre performance. The ethnographic approach applied in this study highlights how the ritual

performance adapts fluidly to social and spatial contexts, reinforcing its dynamic and flexible character. Despite the absence of a formal stage, the ceremony follows a structured and carefully orchestrated sequence, embodying both theatrical qualities and spiritual significance within the lived environment of the community.

iii. Props and Costume

Props are integral to any performance, whether theatrical or ritualistic, as they serve to clarify actions and interactions while contributing to the atmosphere of the event. In the case of the *Ngayo* ritual performance, several specific props are utilized, each playing a vital role in the ceremonial actions and their symbolic meanings. These props include *Sang Kayo*, machete, *Penguhut*, egg, *songket* fabric, *Kuhong*, gun, sacrificial animal, and an egg tray, as outlined in the table below. Each of these items holds significant symbolic value, aiding in the communication of cultural beliefs and spiritual narratives during the ritual.

Table 4.6: Props for the ritual (Source: Researcher’s Field Notes, 2022)

List of props	Images of the props
Sang Kayo / Palm leaves	

Kuhong / Ngayo head	
Machete and eggs for <i>Guru Bungan</i>	
Tray of eggs along with <i>songket</i> cloth	
Penguhut	

Sacrificial animals (Pigs
and Chicken)



Meanwhile, costumes play a crucial role in evoking admiration and enthusiasm by shaping the perception of a person's character. In the context of rituals, however, these costumes serve a deeper purpose and function as regalia or paraphernalia. Regalia refers to the complete ensemble worn by the individual, while paraphernalia encompasses the additional equipment that complements the costume (Rousseau, 1990). These elements work together to enhance the meaning of the ritual and contribute to the ceremonial atmosphere and the symbolic identity of the participants.

Table 4.7: Type of Regalia and Paraphernalia (Source: Researcher's Field Notes, 2022)

Full costume/ Regalia	Paraphernalia to complete the look
 	 

Based on table 4.6, it is revealed that ritual objects in the Ngayo ceremony function as symbolic props, each carrying specific meanings that communicate cultural values and spiritual beliefs to the community. Items such as the *Sang Kayo*, machete, *Penguhut*, egg, *Songket* fabric, *Kuhong*, and sacrificial animals are not only practical tools but also integral to the symbolic narrative of the ritual performance. Similarly with table 4.7, costumes serve to mark the sacred identity of participants, distinguishing their roles and responsibilities within the ceremonial framework. Through ethnographic observation during the fieldwork in Long Amo village, these symbolic functions were documented and interpreted, demonstrating how props and costumes contribute to both the theatrical quality of the ritual

and its spiritual depth. This analysis thus highlights the dual role of material elements in *Ngayo*: as performative devices that structure the ritual and as sacred symbols that reinforce cultural identity and communal meaning.

iv. Script and Narrative

Unlike regular theatre performances, the *Ngayo* ritual is not guided by a written script but by an oral narrative transmitted across generations. This narrative provides a systematic sequence of acts, chants, dances, and prayers that collectively form the ritual's "script." The *Guru Bungan* functions as the main narrator and conductor of the ceremony, delivering prayers and directives that advance the "plot" of the ritual. Central to this narrative are themes of protection, gratitude, and renewal, with the *Kuhong* serving as a powerful symbol of past victory and spiritual authority. As a form of "restored behaviour" (Schechner, 2003), the ritual's repeated performance reaffirms collective identity and sustains the community's spiritual relationship with the goddess *Bungan*.

The *Ngayo* ritual also incorporates a distinct linguistic register, where the sacred form of the Kayan language differs significantly from everyday usage. This elevated language is particularly evident when the *Guru Bungan* communicates with *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan*, the spiritual deity of the *Bungan* belief system (Ding,D., personal communication, 2022). Similarly, the *Parap* sessions—chants performed to honour and awaken the spiritual essence of the *Kuhong*—rely on this traditional, poetic language. The use of such linguistic forms not only heightens the spiritual tone of the ritual but also preserves ancestral knowledge and reinforces its symbolic depth (Mulyana, 2005; Rizma et al., 2021).

From the prayers, *Parap*, and other oral components, the storyline of the ritual emerges as a connective thread linking the human, spiritual, and ancestral worlds. Documented through ethnographic observation and personal communication with key informants, this analysis highlights how verbal symbols serve as cultural tools that communicate sacred meanings, ensuring both continuity of tradition and the performative vitality of the *Ngayo* ritual.

v. Music Instrument and Movement

Music and movement played a vital role in the *Ngayo* ritual performance, shaping the atmosphere, rhythm, and emotional intensity of the ceremony. Traditional instruments such as the Gongs and *Tawak* accompanied the ritual dances and other ceremonial segments. Beyond their musical function, these instruments served as spiritual tools to summon ancestral spirits, mark transitions within the ritual, and energize participants (Among, E., personal communication, 2022). The *Ujet Bato* dance, performed twice during the ritual, was characterized by deliberate and symbolic movements that imitated warriors returning from battle. Performed in circular formations and led by the person holding the *Kuhong*, the dance emphasized both communal solidarity and symbolic representation.

The interplay of music and movement not only enhanced the theatrical and spiritual atmosphere of the ritual but also reinforced communal energy, binding the participants together in a collective cultural performance. Documented through ethnographic observation, these elements revealed how performance practices conveyed symbolic meaning, preserved ancestral memory, and sustained the ritual's sacred dimension (Schechner, 2003; Comiskey, 1989).

vi. Audience and Participants

In the context of the *Ngayo* ritual, the distinction between audience and participants was fluid. The villagers were not merely passive observers; instead, they actively engaged in various aspects of the ritual by receiving blessings, dancing, and joining the communal feast. This active involvement blurred the boundaries between performer and spectator, reinforcing the ritual's communal, spiritual, and performative essence. As Schechner (2003) highlighted, participation in performance enables transformation and fosters a sense of collective identity.

In the *Ngayo* ritual at Long Amo village, the audience comprised both local villagers and visiting spectators. While visitors observed the ritual, the villagers simultaneously assumed the roles of performers and audience, embodying the dual position of enacting and witnessing the sacred performance. This duality did not diminish but rather strengthened their collective identity, as participation and observation became inseparable dimensions of their cultural expression. The significance of this is heightened by the fact that Long Amo remains the only Kayan village known to uphold and perform the *Ngayo* ritual in its original form (Juman, L., personal communication, 2022).



Figure 4.42: The villagers and visitor watch the men performing *Ujet Bato* dance (Image Source: Researcher's Personal Image)

From the interpretation of the *Ngayo* ritual using Schechner's Performance Theory, the structure and presentation of the ritual could be clearly understood. The analysis allowed the researcher to extract and identify theatrical elements such as staging, role-playing, symbolic props, music, dance, narrative, and audience participation, all of which demonstrated that the ritual performance operated similarly to a theatrical production. Applying Schechner's theoretical framework not only helped to break down the ritual process systematically but also highlighted how symbolic meanings were communicated through words, actions, objects, and space. This approach ultimately revealed that the *Ngayo* ritual was not solely a religious practice but also a cultural performance rich in symbolism, reinforcing communal identity while preserving ancestral traditions.

4.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of the *Ngayo* ritual demonstrates its significance as both a spiritual practice and a cultural performance within the *Bungan* religious tradition of Long Amo village. By applying Peirce's Semiotic Theory, the study clarified the symbolic meanings embedded in each verbal and non-verbal element of the *Ngayo* ritual, while Schechner's Performance Theory provided a systematic framework to interpret its structure, processes, and theatrical dimensions. The combined use of these two theoretical lenses proved effective in addressing the research objectives, offering clarity on how the *Ngayo* ritual communicates layers of meaning and sustains collective identity through symbolic expression and performative practices (Schechner, 2003; Peirce, 1931–1958). This dual approach not only strengthened the symbolic interpretation of the ritual but also highlighted its relevance in understanding the intersection of belief, performance, and cultural continuity. The following chapter summarises the research findings and the challenges encountered during data collection and observation.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher presents a summary of the key findings of the study, derived from observations of the *Ngayo* ritual process as well as the challenges encountered during fieldwork. The main objective of this research was to provide a deeper understanding of the *Ngayo* ritual within the religious framework of *Bungan* and to examine its role in the cultural practices of the Kayan community. The findings of this study contribute to the broader body of knowledge on ritual and performance, highlighting the significance of the *Ngayo* ritual in sustaining the traditional Kayan belief system and reinforcing its symbolic and cultural values (Schechner, 2003; Peirce, 1931–1958). Building on these conclusions, the following section provides summary of the research findings, recommendations for future research and practical applications, particularly in preserving the cultural heritage of the Kayan people and enhancing the academic study of ritual and performance.

5.2 Summary

Based on the findings presented in the previous chapter, the study has successfully addressed the objectives outlined at the beginning of the research. Each objective has been met through careful observation, analysis, and interviews, providing a comprehensive understanding of the *Ngayo* ritual in the *Bungan* religious context. Consequently, the conclusions drawn are grounded in the results of the study, as detailed in the following objectives:

5.2.1 The Significance of *Ngayo* Ritual in *Bungan* Religious Tradition

Based on the research findings and information obtained through interviews and ethnographic observations, the *Ngayo* ritual was confirmed to be a vital component of the *Bungan* religious tradition. As part of the *Do Lemdoh* celebration, the ritual functions not only as a cultural performance but also as a purification rite intended to protect the community from misfortune and spiritual harm. Informants such as Jawing Bato explained that *Ngayo* has long been inherited as a complementary practice of the Bungan faith, performed in honour of *Bungan Malan Pesilung Luan*. Historically, *Bungan* was the principal religion of the Kayan people prior to the introduction of Christianity, and the *Ngayo* ritual continues to preserve this cultural memory by reinforcing traditional beliefs and practices.

The analysis highlighted that *Ngayo* holds dual significance: it is an expression of thanksgiving and continuity with ancestral customs, while also serving a protective function by cleansing the village of negative forces. As such, the ritual plays an indispensable role in maintaining spiritual balance and cultural identity within the community marking the end of the harvest season and providing villagers with the opportunity to express gratitude for blessings such as protection, health, and agricultural fertility. These findings, grounded in both symbolic analysis and ethnographic data collection, demonstrate that the study successfully addressed the first research objective by clarifying the central significance of the *Ngayo* ritual in the *Bungan* religious framework. Showing that the ritual is beyond its spiritual purpose, the ritual plays a crucial role in maintaining cultural continuity.

5.2.2 Charles Sanders Pierce' s Symbol Analysis of the Ngayo Ritual

Through the analysis of symbolic elements in the *Ngayo* ritual, the researcher has demonstrated how semiotics is integral to understanding the meaning behind the actions, props, and behaviours involved in the ritual. Peirce's semiotic theory has enabled the researcher to unpack the complex symbolism embedded in each ritual act, revealing deeper cultural and spiritual layers of meaning. The researcher found that every step in the ritual has its own meaning, such as the use of the *Sang Kayo*, machetes, the *Kuhong*, and other ritual objects. The study has revealed how these elements function as symbols that communicate complex cultural and spiritual messages. For instance, the *Sang Kayo*, as a central object in the ritual, operates as both an icon (representing authority and power) and an index (indicating the spiritual protection of the community). Similarly, the ceremonial use of language and the performance of dance movements have been understood as symbolic actions that mediate between the material and spiritual worlds. By using Pierce's Semiotic theory, the researcher can simply explain these symbolic actions not only convey the community's connection to the divine but also reinforce social cohesion, identity, and continuity within the Kayan people.

In conclusion, applying Peirce's semiotic theory has enabled a deeper understanding of the *Ngayo* ritual as a symbolic system that communicates essential cultural values, spiritual beliefs, and communal identity. This semiotic analysis highlights the ritual's role not only as a religious practice but also as a performative event that encapsulates the cultural richness and spiritual significance of the Kayan people's traditions. The table below summarises the meanings discovered in the *Ngayo* ceremonial procedure and what each procedure symbolised for:

Verbal Symbol	Symbolised
Prayer	Symbolises a sacred act of communication with the divine, seeking blessings, protection, purification, and guidance from Bungan spiritual entities. It reinforces the community's faith, unity, and connection between the human and spiritual worlds. ask for blessing and protection.
Parap	Symbolises respect and honour toward the <i>Kuhong</i> as a sacred object, while soothing the supernatural energy it emits. The chants express gratitude for the protection granted by the head, reinforcing the bond between the living community, ancestral spirits, and the spiritual world.

Table 5.1: Overview of the function of Verbal Symbol

Non-Verbal Symbol	Symbolised
Music (<i>Sape</i>)	To celebrate their victorious achievement in war, represents spiritual connection and embodies the Orang Ulu cultural identity, reinforcing communal pride and ancestral heritage.
Gong and Tawak	Symbolise a medium of welcome and reverence for highly respected individuals, while also serving as instruments to summon ancestral spirits. Their rhythmic sound unites participants in shared energy, reinforcing the communal and spiritual atmosphere of the ritual.
<i>Ujet Bato</i> / Ngayo dance	Symbolises the return of warriors from battle, embodying courage, unity, and protection.
Costume	Reflect cultural identity, reinforces ritual status and sacredness of the ritual.
<i>Sang Kayo</i> (Palm leave)	Symbolises authority and protection from the divine.

<i>Kuhong</i> (Palm leave that contain the skull)	Symbol of past victory, ancestral power, and spiritual protection for the community.
Machete and eggs	Medium for the <i>Guru Bungan</i> to contact the <i>Bungan</i> spirit. As their communication items to communicate with the <i>Bungan</i> spirit.
Penguhut (wood bark)	Holy substance used to purify themselves and get rid of bad luck.
A gun	Warning or announcement for their winning.
Sacrificial animals (pig and chicken)	As a messenger between the human and the sacred world.
The animal blood	As holy water to bless them from taboos and give them good life.
Offering to <i>Bungan</i> <i>Malan Pesilung Luan</i>	To show their gratitude towards the divine kindness throughout the year and to feed the spirits.

Table 5.2: Overview of the function of Non-Verbal symbol

In short, through the application of Peirce's semiotic theory, this study has successfully unpacked the symbolic meanings embedded within the Ngayo ritual. The framework enabled a deeper analysis of how each element functions as a symbol that conveys cultural values and spiritual significance. By analysing the ritual as a symbolic element, the researcher was able to reveal the layered meanings behind the ritual, such as its role in seeking blessings, ensuring protection, honoring ancestors, and reinforcing communal identity.

5.2.3 Interpretation of Symbolic Meaning in *Ngayo* Ritual Performance through Performance Study

Through the application of Richard Schechner's Performance Theory, this study has provided a clear interpretation of the symbolic meanings embedded in the *Ngayo* ritual performance. The analysis revealed that the ritual transcends its religious function, operating simultaneously as a cultural and theatrical performance that reflects the Kayan community's spirituality, traditions, and identity. By employing the concept of "restored behaviour", the research demonstrated how repeated ritual actions serve to align the community with spiritual forces, preserve collective memory, and reinforce shared values.

The study also highlighted that the *Ngayo* ritual closely mirrors the structure of a theatrical performance, unfolding in phases of preparation, performance, and conclusion. Each role—from the *Guru Bungan* to the *Parap* leader and the villagers—contributes to a cohesive narrative, while music, dance, props, costumes, and sacred language enhance both the theatrical and spiritual atmosphere. The blurring of boundaries between performer and audience further emphasizes its communal and participatory essence.

By analysing the ritual through the lens of performance studies, the researcher was able to demonstrate with clarity how the *Ngayo* ritual is a dynamic performance system, integrating religious devotion with theatrical elements. This framework has proven effective in uncovering the ritual's symbolic depth while showing its significance as both a spiritual practice and a cultural heritage of the Kayan people. The findings underscore the significance of preserving such rituals and recognizing their relevance in the broader context of performance studies and cultural heritage.

5.2.4 Recommendation

Based on the findings of the research, the researcher made the following recommendations to the future researcher, the Orang Ulu community organisation and to art activist.

a) Future research

As this research approached the *Ngayo* ritual from the perspective of performance studies, with a focus on its structure and theatrical elements, further exploration at the intersection of ritual and performance would be beneficial. Future studies could investigate how rituals such as *Ngayo* function not only as spiritual practices but also as cultural performances that shape identity, community, and social cohesion. For instance, the role of the audience as active participants offers rich potential for deeper analysis, particularly in relation to collective transformation and shared cultural experience.

Beyond performance studies, the *Ngayo* ritual can also be examined through other disciplinary lenses, such as language, anthropology, sociology, management, or within different sub-ethnic groups of the Orang Ulu. Since each sub-ethnic community may have distinct ways of preparing and performing rituals, comparative studies would highlight the diversity and shared meanings across traditions. Ethnographic approaches, in particular, could capture both the continuity and transformations of the *Ngayo* ritual over time, especially in response to contemporary influences such as the spread of Christianity within Kayan communities.

In addition, research could expand to encompass other traditions within the *Bungan* religion, examining how different ceremonies complement each other in sustaining cultural

memory and spiritual practice. Comparative studies of *Bungan* belief before and after the introduction of Christianity would also provide valuable insights into processes of adaptation, resilience, and cultural negotiation.

Overall, this study provides a foundational understanding of the *Ngayo* ritual within the framework of *Bungan* religious traditions and performance theory, but future research can broaden the scope by exploring new perspectives, methodologies, and contexts to enrich our understanding of ritual, culture, and identity among the Kayan and wider Orang Ulu communities.

b) Orang Ulu Community Organisation

The Orang Ulu community needs to strengthen their efforts in promoting and preserving their cultural heritage, particularly the *Ngayo* ritual, which represents both spiritual and cultural identity. For the younger generation, it is crucial that Orang Ulu organisations ensure continuity of knowledge by creating structured programs such as cultural education workshops, storytelling sessions, and hands-on training involving ritual practices, music, and dance. These initiatives should begin from an early age to instill pride and awareness of their heritage. Elders play a vital role here by actively transmitting their knowledge and serving as cultural mentors.

Collaboration with higher institutions and cultural bodies such as the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Sarawak Cultural Foundation, and NGOs is equally important. Such partnerships can help advocate for the recognition of the *Ngayo* ritual as an intangible cultural heritage at both the national and international levels. Recognition would ensure long-term protection, funding, and support for cultural revitalisation projects.

Community organisations such as Persatuan Kayan Sarawak and the Orang Ulu National Association (OUNA) should also organise at least three to five cultural activities annually beyond the existing *Pesta Do Lemdoh*. These could include Annual workshops on ritual knowledge and traditional crafts. Cultural festivals showcasing *Ngayo* elements alongside other Orang Ulu traditions. Youth exchange programmes where younger members visit different Orang Ulu communities to learn shared and diverse practices. Tourism-oriented events that align with YB Liwan Lagang's statement on Belaga's potential as a cultural tourism destination (Emmor, 2017).

In terms of *Pesta Do Lemdoh*, organisations may consider centralising the event in one division (either Belaga or Sungai Asap) to create a larger, more unified cultural festival rather than splitting resources. A centralised event would strengthen visibility, improve organisation, and attract a wider audience while keeping the original values intact, instead of being diluted by external influences.

In conclusion, Orang Ulu organisations must adopt a more strategic, open, and consistent approach to cultural preservation—by combining intergenerational knowledge sharing, institutional collaboration, and measurable cultural events. These efforts will not only safeguard the *Ngayo* ritual and other traditions but also reinforce cultural pride and establish the Orang Ulu heritage as a recognised and celebrated identity in Malaysia and beyond.

c) Art Activist

The researcher, who comes from an arts background, recognises that there is much more to be learned about Kayan culture and traditions, particularly as practices differ across regions and countries of origin. To address this, art activists are encouraged to play a more

active role in documenting, interpreting, and promoting the *Ngayo* ritual through artistic initiatives.

One effective approach is to organise exhibitions and performances that highlight the *Ngayo* ceremony, its symbolism, and its significance within the Orang Ulu community. These could take the form of visual art showcases, installations, photography exhibitions, video screenings, and performance reenactments. Such initiatives would provide accessible platforms for the general public to engage with and appreciate the cultural and spiritual depth of the *Ngayo* ritual.

Art activists can also develop digital storytelling and archiving projects by recording prayers, dances, and ceremonial performances in multimedia formats. These archives could be preserved in collaboration with cultural institutions or universities and made accessible online, ensuring long-term documentation and intergenerational knowledge transfer. A measurable output of this initiative could be the creation of a digital repository or online archive with a set number of documented rituals annually.

In addition, awareness campaigns through street art, public murals, or social media platforms—can extend the reach of the message, especially among younger audiences. These campaigns should not only showcase the aesthetic aspects of the *Ngayo* ritual but also communicate the challenges of cultural preservation amidst modernisation and assimilation.

Collaborations with the Orang Ulu community are essential to ensure that these artistic representations are respectful and accurate. Artists should conduct preliminary ethnographic studies and community consultations before producing any work to avoid cultural misrepresentation or offending ethnic sensitivities. This collaborative approach strengthens authenticity and builds trust between artists and the community.

In summary, art activists can significantly contribute to the preservation and promotion of the *Ngayo* ritual by combining artistic expression with cultural documentation and digital archiving, while ensuring respectful collaboration with the Orang Ulu community. These efforts would not only preserve cultural heritage but also make it accessible and relevant to future generations.

5.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the range of methodologies and perspectives available when examining an ethnic group's culture and traditions. It highlights the importance of employing appropriate data collection methods, particularly in cultural and performance-based research, where observation, interviews, and ethnographic engagement are crucial to producing valid and reliable findings. Through the study of the *Ngayo* ritual of the Kayan people, the research has successfully documented a significant cultural practice while addressing the research objectives outlined at the beginning of the study.

Firstly, the significance of the *Ngayo* ritual within the *Bungan* religion has been clearly identified through the accounts of informants and field observations, showing its role as both a spiritual practice and a communal purification ceremony. Secondly, by applying Peirce's semiotic theory, the study has unpacked the symbolic meanings of the ritual elements, demonstrating how every action, object, and gesture conveys layered cultural and spiritual messages. Thirdly, through Schechner's performance theory, the study has interpreted the ritual as a structured performance, allowing its processes to be systematically broken down and analysed within a theatrical framework. Collectively, these findings confirm that all three research objectives have been successfully addressed.

In terms of research gaps, this study has provided clarity on an under-documented ritual practice that remains central to the cultural and religious life of the Kayan people. By combining semiotic and performance theories, the study contributes to bridging the gap between ritual analysis in anthropology and its interpretation within performance studies. Furthermore, it offers a framework for future research that wishes to explore the intersection between cultural rituals, symbolic meaning, and theatrical elements.

Overall, the findings of this research contribute significantly to the broader understanding of the *Ngayo* ritual by positioning it not only as a religious ceremony but also as a cultural performance rich in symbolism, theatricality, and communal identity. Beyond heritage preservation, the insights from this study provide a valuable reference for fields such as ethnic social learning, creative production, and performance arts. The study also opens pathways for future researchers to expand upon the ideas and methodologies presented here, ensuring that the discussion of ritual and performance continues to evolve.

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GLOSSARY

Ayo

Bandit.

Ba Lo'O

River mouth.

Bungan

The Kayan's old religion before Christianity arrived.

Bungan Ayak

Ritual gathering for every household.

Bungan Amin

House blessing ritual.

Burak

Rice wine.

Dayong

Supernatural ability / Bungan preliminary ceremonies.

Dinu

Glutinous rice cake.

Do Lemdoh

Bungan festive day.

Guru Bungan

The leader for the custom.

Kelunan Tu'en

English people.

Keminih

Temporary house built for the Ngayo head.

Kuhong

Head.

Kuman Bahek

Picnic.

Leng

Deep in the forest.

Mara

Cursing.

Maren Uma

Longhouse chief / main chief.

Meju

Lifting.

Mela/Pela

Waving action, to bless or give blessing.

Napok

Poking a stick on the ground.

Ngayo

Headhunting.

Parap

Talking in melody / poetic singing / traditional chant.

Payo

Deer.

Pela Batong

Blessing someone's body.

Penguhut

Bark incision / slices of wood.

Pusang

Going picnic and eating together.

Ruai

Longhouse / village gallery.

Sang Kayo

Palm leaves.

Sirih

Betel nut.

Tehari Dahok

Starting a word.

Tuak

Rice wine.

Ubek

Rice flakes.