

Sacredness of Food Offerings for Spirits in the Spiritual Healing Practices of the Bajau Laut Ethnic

**Amsalib Pisali^{1*}, Ratna Fazlinda Jelly², Sharifuddin Zainal³, Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman⁴, Mashor Awang Long³,
Adinda Usin Muka⁵**

**Corresponding Author*

¹ Department of Performing Arts, Faculty of Music and Performing Arts, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia

² Department of Heritage Studies, Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Bachok, Kelantan, Malaysia

³ Creative Arts Program, Academy of Arts & Creative Technology, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia

⁴ Institut Seni Kreatif Nusantara (INSAN), Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

⁵ Indonesian Literature Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Mulawarman University, Samarinda, East Kalimantan, Indonesia

amsalib@fmsp.upsi.edu.my, fazlinda.aj@umk.edu.my, sharifuddin@ums.edu.my, mohdkipli@uitm.edu.my, mashorawanglong@ums.edu.my,
adindausinmuka@unukaltim.ac.id
Tel: +60198974847

Abstract

This study explores the role of food offerings in Bajau Laut's spiritual healing rituals as a medium of sacred communication. These offerings are rooted in transcendental connections with ancestral spirits and symbolize beliefs, values, and religious systems passed down through generations. Using Peirce's semiotic framework, the study classifies food as icons, indexes, and symbols, each carrying distinct meanings. Employing a qualitative, phenomenological approach, data is gathered through participatory observation and interviews. Findings reveal that sacred communication in these rituals is a dynamic interpretative process, highlighting food's role in spiritual-human interaction and contributing to the discourse on semiotics and food anthropology.

Keywords: Bajau Laut; Sacred Communication; Sacred Food; Spiritual Healing

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1.0 Introduction

The Bajau Laut ethnic group is recognized as skilled seafarers, maritime nomads, and a community with a distinct spiritual system rooted in animistic beliefs and ancestral reverence. Their syncretic belief system seamlessly integrates traditional animism with Islamic influences and continues to be practiced today (Yap, 1993). One of the most prominent manifestations of their spiritual tradition is the *Magombok* healing ritual, a ceremonial invocation of ancestral spirits to treat ailments through mystical and magical elements (Pisali et al., 2017). This ritual unfolds within a structured framework that includes food offerings, dance, music, chants, and symbolic performances for the spirits (Husin et al., 2020). According to Zainal et al. (2021), these elements collectively function as a medium for summoning ancestral spirits into the physical realm to convey healing messages.

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According to Nor and Hussin (2019), preparing food offerings for spirits follows a highly sacred customary system governed by strict taboos that must be observed to ensure their effectiveness as a spiritual medium. One of the most prominent rituals involving food offerings is the *Magpaii Bahauh* ceremony, which symbolizes the harvest of hill rice and serves as a mandatory custom within the *Magombok* ritual. This ceremony comprises three sub-rituals: (i) purification, (ii) preparation, and (iii) the summoning of spirits. Each ingredient is carefully selected for its spiritual significance. The three primary food elements used in the ritual are rice, sugarcane syrup, and coconut oil, which are traditionally prepared without modern processing.

These three ingredients hold a sacred status in ritual practices, with the preparation beginning by placing the food offerings before the ancestral altar overnight (Pisali et al., 2017). During this period, incantations are recited as a symbolic ritual initiation. According to Bajau Laut's beliefs, this process summons the ancestral spirits being invoked (Nor & Hussin, 2006). These spirits are believed to manifest within a metaphysical dimension, bestowing blessings upon the offered food despite their presence being invisible to the human eye (Rahman et al., 2023). Thus, each step in this process functions as part of food preparation and as a medium of communication between humans and the spiritual realm, aiming to secure blessings and well-being for individuals and the community (Rahman et al., 2024).

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the role of food offerings in Bajau Laut healing rituals through Peirce's semiotic approach. Specifically, it examines how food in the *Magombok* ritual functions as an icon, index, and symbol and how it serves as a communicative tool connecting humans with spirits. By applying Peirce's semiotic framework, this study seeks to explore how food operates as a sign that is not merely physical but also carries deeper spiritual meanings within the Bajau Laut belief system.

2.0 Literature Review

Occhi and Parmentier (1996) elaborate on Peirce's triadic theory, which comprises the representamen (sign), object, and interpretant (understanding). Peirce categorizes signs into three main types: icons, indexes, and symbols. Icons directly resemble their objects, indexes signify a causal or physical relationship with their objects, and symbols derive meaning from cultural conventions or agreements. Within traditional cultural and ritual systems, these sign categories are often viewed as tools for translating communication mediums that convey divine entities, spiritual concepts, or sacred cosmological principles. Eliade (2020), for instance, emphasizes that ritual symbols function as sacred communication, encapsulating a manifestation of transcendent reality and a channel of interaction between humans and the supernatural realm.

Building on Eliade's perspective, Alexander et al. (2011) argue that semiotic systems construct a "system of meaning" that guides individuals in understanding their roles within a broader existential framework. This symbolic concept carries multiple layers of meaning and can be interpreted in various ways, reinforcing the necessity for sacred communication to be decoded and comprehended within a community's cultural and spiritual context.

Previous research has extensively examined the role of food in rituals as a symbolic sign within cultural and religious communication systems. Hussin (2009) asserts that ritual food offerings are visual communication that reinforces cultural narratives. Similarly, Yakin (2017) highlights that visual elements in ritual performances—including food—can be interpreted non-verbally, serving as both direct and indirect modes of communication. This aligns with Zainal et al. (2018), who argue that food operates as a distinct linguistic system, wherein each dish conveys specific meanings comprehensible only within the context of shared cultural beliefs and practices.

From a broader perspective, Haruji (2002) posits that ritual food offerings are not merely physical presentations but contain spiritual energy capable of conveying intentions and prayers to ancestral spirits or deities. This notion is consistent with Corr (2002), who explores the concept of "reciprocity," whereby food in rituals functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a covenant between humans and supernatural forces. Brumberg-Kraus (2024) further asserts that food in religious rituals serves as a marker of religious identity while reflecting a society's social and political dynamics.

While existing studies have extensively examined ritual food as a communicative tool, there is a notable gap in research linking sacred communication with the symbolic functions of icons, indexes, and symbols. The key question remains: How does ritual food function as a communicative medium in the context of healing? This gap necessitates a deeper exploration of how iconic, indexical, and symbolic aspects of ritual food contribute to sacred communication in healing practices. Thus, this study aims to address this gap by analyzing the symbolic dimensions of ritual food as a form of sacred communication within the Bajau Laut healing ceremony. By investigating the semiotic significance of ritual food, this research contributes to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, enriching the body of knowledge on sacred communication and its role in ritual healing practices.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach utilizing phenomenological methods to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of Bajau Laut ritual healing practitioners, with a particular focus on the *Magombok* ceremony in Semporna, Sabah. Data was collected through two primary techniques: participatory observation and in-depth interviews. The participatory observation method involved direct engagement in the *Magombok* ritual, while in-depth interviews were carried out with five ritual practitioners responsible for the preparation and processing of ritual food offerings. The data obtained were subsequently analyzed using Peirce's semiotic framework, as conceptualized by Kralemann and Lattmann (2012), as depicted in Fig. 1. This analytical model facilitates the classification of ritual food as icons, indexes, and symbols, thereby elucidating how semiotic structures contribute to the sacred communication framework within the ritual's performance.

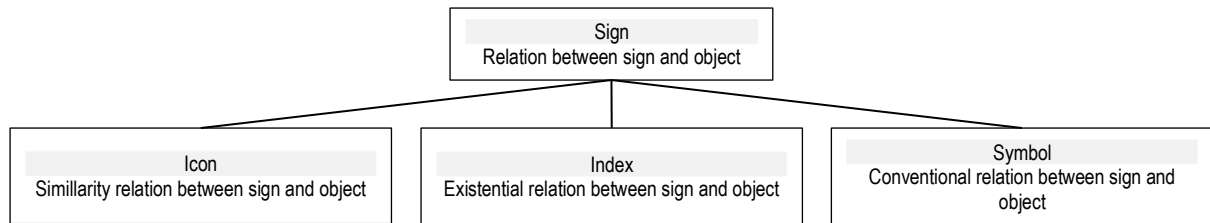


Fig. 1: Peirce's Sign System Model
(Source: Kralemann & Lattmann, 2012)

In this context, an icon refers to food that visually resembles the meaning attributed to it, often mirroring ancestral symbols or mythological representations. An index, on the other hand, signifies an existential relationship between the food and its spiritual significance. Meanwhile, a symbol in ritual food serves as a culturally constructed representation, where its meaning is not necessarily derived from direct resemblance or physical association but rather from socially agreed conventions and inherited beliefs. To ensure analytical accuracy, this study employs content analysis of oral narratives, ritual practices, and food symbolism within the Bajau Laut community. By utilizing a semiotic framework, this study elucidates how each type of food carries implicit meanings that facilitate a transcendental connection between humans and the spiritual realm.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Types of Ritual Offerings in the Magombok Ceremony

Based on the findings of this study, four main types of food offerings are presented to ancestral spirits during the Bajau Laut healing ritual, as illustrated in the Fig. 2 below. These offerings hold distinct symbolic meanings and serve as mediums of sacred communication between the human and spiritual realms. The classification of these food offerings is based on their ritual function, symbolic significance, and adherence to traditional beliefs within the *Magombok* ceremony.

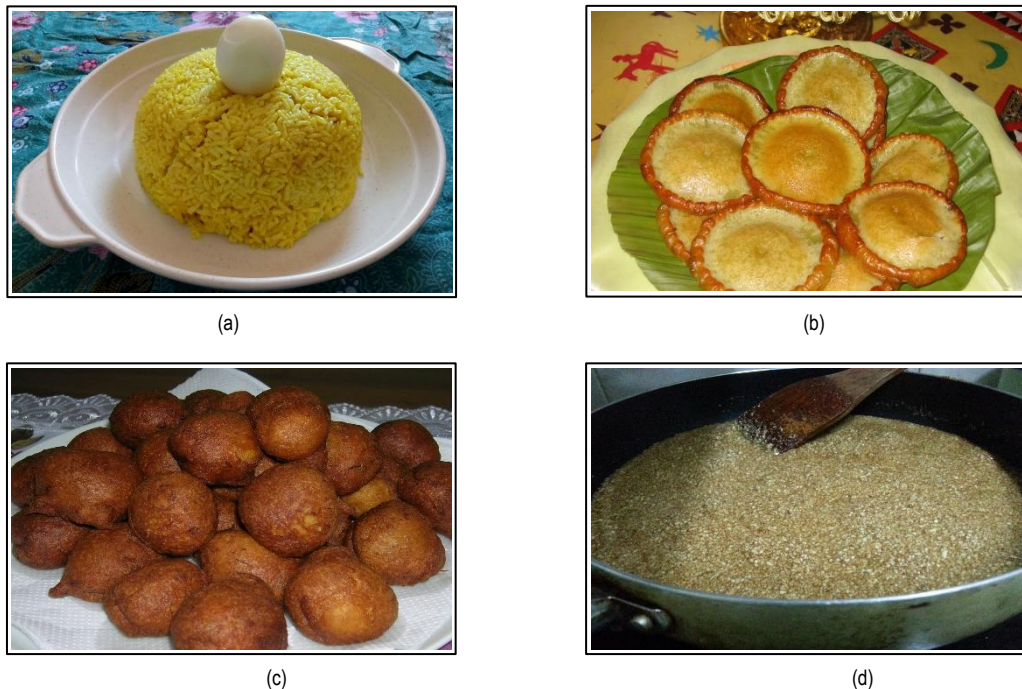


Fig. 2: (a) *Buwas Kuning*; (b) *Pannyam*; (c) *Pollo-Pollo*; (d) *Durul*
(Source: Authors)

All ritual dishes are prepared using three core ingredients: hill rice (processed into rice flour), sugarcane syrup, and coconut oil. These are then crafted into *Pannyam*, *Pollo-Pollo*, and *Durul*, while *Buwas Kuning* is cooked directly with coconut milk. The preparation follows strict ritual taboos, requiring consecrated firewood from the *Magpaii Bahauh* ceremony and exclusive preparation by *Dayang-Dayang*, selected through the *Kalamat* system. Protective incantations are recited to invoke ancestral blessings. The offerings, meticulously arranged on white plates in prescribed quantities, are then placed at the ancestral altar, marking the initiation of the spirit-summoning ritual.

4.2 Iconic Function: Physical Representation and Resemblance

In this ritual, food offerings serve as a physical representation that both visually resemble and embody the spiritual concepts being conveyed. Unlike the symbolic function, which emphasizes hidden meanings or metaphysical values behind each offering, the iconic function focuses on the visual and physical form of the food, directly representing specific entities or concepts within the Bajau Laut belief system. This iconographic role reinforces the perception that ritual food offerings are not merely material tributes to ancestral spirits but also visual manifestations of the spirits' presence and characteristics.

All four ritual dishes are highly iconic as ancestral spirit offerings. For instance, *Buwas Kuning* is an iconic food symbol due to its yellow color, which represents purity and is strongly associated with spiritual elements in Bajau Laut's beliefs. According to respondents, yellow rice should not be prepared on ordinary days outside of ritual ceremonies. It must be served on a white plate and shaped exclusively by an untouched maiden. If the rice mound is imperfectly shaped, it is believed that the maiden is not pure. Thus, *Buwas Kuning* is deeply iconic and bound by strict ritual taboos.

Similarly, *Pannyam* signifies respect and acknowledgment of the spirits' presence in the daily lives of the Bajau Laut community. *Pollo-Pollo*, on the other hand, originated as a staple snack of previous generations and was commonly consumed during farming activities. Over time, it was incorporated into ritual offerings as an iconic tribute to honor the sacrifices of ancestors. In contrast, *Durul* is prepared explicitly as an offering for spirit entities associated with jinn. In the ritual context, it serves as an icon for summoning spirits during invocations and healing ceremonies. The preparation of *Durul* highlights the role of ritual food as a communicative medium between humans and the spiritual realm, as it symbolically marks the presence of spirits.

The design and size of food offerings also reflect the iconic representation of spirits. *Buwas Kuning*, symbolizing male ancestral spirits, is shaped into a triangular or pyramid form, while offerings for female spirits take a rounded shape and are covered with a bowl. Similarly, the dimensions of *Pannyam*, *Pollo-Pollo*, and *Durul* correspond to the type of spirit being honored or summoned. Respondents noted that larger offerings represent male spirits, while smaller ones are associated with female spirits, aligning with the concept of domestic autonomy. This deliberate structuring reinforces social hierarchy, symbolizing men as leaders and women as their companions within the spiritual belief system.

4.3 Indexical Function: Physical or Causal Relationship with Spirits

The indexical function of ritual food offerings serves as an existential marker, signifying that the healing ritual is in progress. The presence of these offerings establishes a tangible and causal link with the spirits. This indexicality is manifested in three key aspects. First, the preparation of four specific ritual dishes serves as the primary indicator of the ceremony. The process involves the *Magpaii Bahauh* ritual, where essential ingredients are ritually placed at the ancestral altar, and the community collaborates in pounding rice to produce rice flour. This practice is unique to the healing ritual and is absent from other ceremonies that do not involve sacred chants or ritual taboos. Furthermore, the preparation of these offerings is restricted to individuals appointed through the *Kalamat* lineage, specifically the *Dayang-Dayang*, who hold a revered status within the community. These elements collectively function as indexical signs, confirming that the healing ritual is actively being performed.

The second indexical function signifies the community's plea for ancestral protection and healing. The presence of spirits is believed to manifest through two key indicators: the arrangement of food offerings and physical changes in the food, particularly its aroma and freshness. Offerings are placed on the altar before consumption, marking the spirits' presence. It is believed that the spirits visit this sacred site to accept the offerings. During the recitation of chants, the food's original fragrance fades, replaced by the scent of incense, signaling the spirits' arrival. Once the incantation concludes, the incense aroma dissipates, indicating that the spirits have "consumed" the offering, after which the ritual participants may partake in the meal. The sacred nature of these offerings is deeply revered, with strict adherence to customary prohibitions. Any violation of these taboos is believed to disrupt the healing process and bring misfortune to those involved.

Third, the indexical function of ritual food extends to social cohesion, as its preparation is a collective responsibility shared by the entire community. Failure to participate may result in social penalties as a form of communal enforcement. Additionally, food blessed by the spirits must not be mixed with daily meals and must be consumed according to strict ritual etiquette, including sitting cross-legged and refraining from conversation while eating. These dining customs preserve the sacredness of the offerings and demonstrate reverence for the ancestral spirits. Disregarding these practices is believed to bring personal misfortune or adverse consequences for one's family. Therefore, participation in both the preparation and consumption of ritual food functions not only as a religious observance but also as a social mechanism reinforcing communal solidarity.

4.4 Symbolic Function: Meaning Defined by Convention and Tradition

The symbolic function of food offerings in the *Magombok* ritual is shaped by two key aspects: the design of the offerings and the number of servings presented during the ceremony. These ritual foods are not merely material components of ancestral offerings but serve as sacred communication mediums that reflect the community's belief system and cosmological values. The design of each dish carries symbolic meanings associated with the gender of the venerated spirits, while the number of servings represents spiritual balance based on the inherited concept of odd and even numbers.

The shape of *Buwas Kuning* varies depending on the gender of the summoned spirit. A triangular or pyramid-like form represents male ancestral spirits, whereas a semi-circular shape, molded using a bowl, signifies female spirits. Similarly, *Pannyam*, despite its round and flat form, is distinguished by its diameter—smaller sizes (2 inches) denote female spirits, while larger sizes (3–4 inches) represent male spirits. *Pollo-Pollo*, resembling a ping-pong ball, follows the same principle: smaller sizes are associated with female spirits, while larger ones, similar to a tennis ball, represent male spirits. *Durul*, however, takes the shape of the pan in which it is cooked—

larger pans (8-inch diameter) correspond to male spirits, while smaller pans (6-inch diameter) indicate female spirits. Despite these variations, *Durul* consistently retains a round form akin to a cake.

The number of food offerings carries significant symbolic meaning. Among the Bajau Laut, odd numbers are associated with male ancestral spirits, while even numbers correspond to female spirits. For male spirits, *Buwas Kuning* is served on 33 plates, *Pannyam* consists of 99 pieces (three per plate), *Pollo-Pollo* is prepared in 165 portions (five per plate), and *Durul* is presented on a large tray. For female spirits, *Buwas Kuning* is served on 44 plates, *Pannyam* consists of 176 pieces (four per plate), *Pollo-Pollo* is prepared in 264 portions (six per plate), and *Durul* is presented on a smaller tray.

The significance of odd and even numbers in this ritual reflects the dualistic nature of Bajau Laut's cosmology. Odd numbers are associated with active elements such as the sun and sky and are traditionally linked to masculinity, whereas even numbers symbolize balance, fertility, and receptivity, making them more appropriate for female spirits. Interestingly, this numerical philosophy aligns with Islamic perspectives on odd and even numbers. The correlation between Bajau Laut beliefs and Islamic thought is evident in a hadith of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), which states:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ وَتَرُّ يُحِبُّ الْوُتْرَ

"Indeed, Allah is One (odd) and He loves that which is odd."

(Hadith narrated by Bukhari and Muslim)

The association of odd numbers with divine oneness (Tawhid) has influenced the continued use of odd-numbered offerings for male ancestral spirits. In Islam, many significant rituals emphasize odd numbers, such as Witr prayers (1, 3, 5, 7, 9 rakaat) and Lailatul Qadar, which falls on an odd night within the last ten days of Ramadan. This indirect Islamic influence reinforces the symbolic role of odd numbers in Bajau Laut rituals. Conversely, the concept of even numbers in Islam is closely linked to pairing and balance. In Surah Az-Zariyat (51:49), Allah states:

وَمِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقْنَا زَوْجَيْنِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ

"And of all things, We created [them] in pairs so that you may reflect."

(Surah Az-Zariyat: 49)

This verse suggests that women in Islamic teachings are associated with balance and harmony, aligning with the symbolic meaning of even numbers in Bajau Laut rituals. The pairing concept is also evident in marriage, where the union of a man and woman creates completeness. Thus, the influence of Islam on Bajau Laut cosmology demonstrates how traditional belief systems can evolve alongside religious teachings, reflecting a process of cultural assimilation within their syncretic ancestral offering practices.

5.0 Discussion

This study highlights that sacred communication in Bajau Laut rituals operates through three primary functions: iconic, indexical, and symbolic, each serving as a medium for conveying meaning in transcendental interactions between humans and spirits. The iconic function illustrates how food offerings visually resemble or embody the spirits being venerated, functioning as a nonverbal communicative tool that translates spiritual connections. The indexical function emphasizes that these offerings are symbolic and serve as tangible indicators of the spirits' presence, reaffirming the ritual's continuity within the community. Meanwhile, the symbolic function reveals that every aspect of the offerings, including their design and quantity, is governed by conventions and traditions, reflecting cosmological hierarchies and spiritual balance within the belief system. Thus, sacred communication in these rituals extends beyond chants and verbal interactions, forming a complex system of visual, physical, and symbolic codes that systematically connect humans with the supernatural realm.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

Overall, this study demonstrates that sacred communication is deeply embedded in the spiritual context, where interactions between humans and supernatural entities are conveyed through signs, symbols, and rituals shaped by communal beliefs and traditions. In societies that continue to practice ritualistic belief systems, sacred communication extends beyond verbal incantations and chants to encompass objects, actions, and structured arrangements that serve as mediums for transmitting meaning to the spiritual realm. These elements collectively represent the presence, desires, or acceptance of spirits, facilitating transcendental interactions between humans and ancestral entities.

However, this study is not without limitations. The research primarily relied on interpretive textual analysis and selective interview data from a limited group of ritual practitioners, which may not fully represent the wider Bajau Laut community's diverse practices and beliefs. Furthermore, the absence of live ethnographic observations in actual ritual settings limits the exploration of embodied and performative dimensions of sacred communication. These constraints suggest that the findings, while insightful, may not fully encompass the breadth and depth of ritual variability or experiential nuance.

Given these findings and limitations, further research should adopt an interdisciplinary approach by integrating the semiotics of food, culinary anthropology, and ritual ethnography to explore the relationship between the form, quantity, and arrangement of ritual food offerings within Bajau Laut's sacred communication system. Additionally, adherence to ritual taboos in the preparation and consumption

of these offerings is crucial for maintaining the efficacy of sacred communication. By preserving and understanding every aspect of sacred food offerings within the context of ritual communication, Bajau Laut's ritual heritage can continue to be valued as an authentic and significant cultural legacy.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

Local Cultural/Heritage Environment (Food included)

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