

## The Social Meaning of Rambu Solo Ceremony in Toraja (The Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism Theory)

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### Abstract

*Rambu solo* has a significantly important role within Torajanese's life cycle. The study aimed to elaborate the social meaning of *Rambu Solo* as viewed from the perspective of symbolic interactionism theory. The study was done qualitatively using case study approach. Techniques of data collection involved observation and interview. The study results show that there are two options of *Rambu Solo* ceremony types namely; *bukan rapasan* ceremony and *rapasan* ceremony. The two options of *Rambu Solo* ceremony poses social meaning in economic, cultural, solidarity, spiritual, affection and social status fields based on the aspects of imagining, interpreting and developing self-concept as viewed from the perspective of symbolic interactionism theory.

**Keywords:** Social meaning; *Rambu Solo*'; Toraja.



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### 1. Introduction

Torajanese has an exclusively unique culture called *Rambu Solo*, which is a death ceremony. *Rambu Solo* ceremony, which is still persistently carried out through generations by Torajanese, has important social meanings and roles that keep the ceremony exist. In fact, *Rambu Solo* ceremony successfully attracts the attention of many researchers to deeply study this death ceremony. Economically, *Rambu Solo* ceremony has made government and the local community of Toraja gaining income since many tourists, both domestic and international, are interested in taking part and participate in this ritual. Thus, by seeing the uniqueness and social functioning of the *Rambu Solo* ceremony, the researcher is inspired to conduct study on its social meaning.

The Information about social meaning of *Rambu Solo* ceremony were gathered from several informants who understand and have carried out this ceremony. Based on the primary data, *Makale* is the area where the leaders of Toraja community lives, those people have held this ceremony for generations. *Makale* is one of the indigenous territories of the aristocrats (*padangdipuangi*) in Toraja and they were called as *Tallu Lembangna* (Toraja, 2010).

How do Torajanese interpret *Rambu Solo* ceremony so that the ceremony stay exist in the era of digitalization that undeniably erode the existence of local culture? The question needs to be analyzed and taken as the research question. This is in accordance with some views by Michael and Celene (2015) who stated that symbolic interactionism moves from variety of perspectives as the description of various individual perspective to understand individuals as agents, who are constantly involved in society automatically and integrally creating their social life at the same time. Carter's and Celene Puller's view is a manifestation of academic interpretation from Blumer's view. To better understanding this, Nilgun *et al.* (2009) explained that (following Blumer's view), symbolic interactionism was based on three principles. Those are; first, humans develop their behavior towards something according to human purposes; second, the meaning is a manifestation of someone's interaction with their environment; and third, these meanings change in interpretive processes.

### 2. Literature Review

Several studies about *Rambu Solo* ceremonies have been conducted from 2000 to 2017. Andarias (2002), for instance, found that Toraja people performed *Rambu Solo* ceremony to show their obedience toward their tradition. Ikma (2007) found a reinterpretation of the *Rambu Solo* ceremony, which is changing from religious meaning to socio-cultural meaning. Theodoris (2008) found that nowadays, Torajanese tend to conduct *Rambu Solo* ceremony

excessively which makes this ceremony unsuitable to the tradition anymore due to the social factor. Arman (2011) found that the factor which led to the implementation of *Rambu Solo* ' ceremony is the efforts of individuals to fulfill their primary needs (survival, love, belonging, power, freedom). However, the financial needs on the ceremony was a heavy burden to be faced by those individuals. Sitti (2013) found that the motivation of the Torajanese to sacrifice buffaloes for instance, at *Rambu Tuka* ' and *Rambu Solo* ' traditional ceremony is no longer based on actual Toraja customs which requires adjustment to the social status. Robi (2014) found that *Rambu Solo* ' ceremony has a conflict potential value, however it also has a strong influence on the unity of the Torajane since *Tongkonan* values exist to unite the community and avoid any conflict. Hasbi (2017) found that the purpose of *rapasan* ceremony is purifying, elevating, and bringing the deceased spirits close to Puang Matua (God). Thus, the more complete the ceremony carried out by the family or the offspring, the more the degree of the deceased spirits will elevate.

There are also some other studies in which look into the meaning of the *rambu solo* ' ceremony, including costing for the ceremony from accounting perspectives (Tumirin and Ahim, 2015). This studies found that the Toraja community has its own perspective in giving meaning to the costs of sacrifices for the *rambu solo* ' ceremony. First, to gather the community in one ceremonial event besides sharing to bear costs together and increase family bonding ties. Secondly, the ceremony is part of showing the social strata in the community society. Thirdly, it is how to pay off the debt. In carrying out the ceremony, donations given are meaningful and it must be paid in the future. A study by Stevia (2017) about the symbolic meaning of grief in *rambu solo* ' ceremony (socio-theological review), reveals that the meaning of grief symbolizes love, brotherhood, kinship and empathy for grief that manifested in the form of giving what is in him, that can be material, ideas, thoughts, energy and time. Study of Debiyani *et al.* (2018) about the symbol system in the solo signaling ceremony (study semiotic), found that the symbols contained in the *rambu solo* ' ceremony consist of verbal symbols and also nonverbal symbols. The verbal symbols is in the form of prayers and are pronounced by *To Minaa* which means as worship, supplication, and for glorification. While the nonverbal symbols are the tools to the ceremonial equipment which are meaningful as offerings to the ancestors that also as the way of being respectful for the deceased and for the families that left behind.

From those three perspectives of the meaning of the *rambu solo* ' ceremony, it shows that the implementation of the *rambu solo* ' ceremony' costs a lot of money, including preparations for months, even years, and involves many parties. But this does not become a barrier for the Toraja community to carry out a *rambu solo* ' ceremony. This can be a reason because the *rambu solo* ' ceremony is interpreted as a form of love and respect for the deceased, appreciation for traditional leaders, religious leaders, and the government, as a social adhesiveness to their close families and the distant families and even the surrounding people within the communities.

According to the results of the study about the *Rambu Solo* ' ceremony above, none of the previous researchers examined the social meaning of *Rambu Solo* ' ceremony from the perspective of symbolic interactionism theory. How does the individual self-concept of Torajanese ethnic in interpreting *Rambu Solo* ceremony? Thus, the symbolic interactionism theory is selected to be used in this study. The study of self-concept in this study referred to the instrumentalist philosophy of John Dewey (1859-1952). This philosophy is considered as the root of the symbolic interactionism theory since human mind is not the reflection from the outside. Rather it is the result of human activities themselves. This thought then influenced the thought of George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) regarding social psychology, who then developed the self-concept *I and me*. In this matter, *I* represents individual and *me* represents individual social (Veeger, 1986).

Mead's view about human self-concept was then conceptualized by Herbert Blumer into sociology which is now well-known as the symbolic interactionism theory (Veeger, 1986). Meanwhile, Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929) stated that there are three aspects of human behavior in self-concept, they are; the process of imagining, interpreting and developing self-concept. Cooley's view is suitable to be used as the approach in studying *Rambu Solo* ' ceremony in Toraja. In this case, Torajanese individuals imagine, interpret, and develop the self-concept in conducting *Rambu Solo* ' ceremony. In the mind of each Torajanese individual, death is not just an event when the spirit leave the body, rather it is more than that, death has multiple meanings, one of those is social meaning. Based on the explanation above, it shows that the symbolic interactionism theory is suitable to be used to study the social meaning of *Rambu Solo* ' ceremony based on the Torajanese individuals perspectives.

### 3. Method of Study

The study is conducted qualitatively using case study method. Instrument of study is in depth-interview which also put the researcher as a research instrument. The study was conducted in Lemo, Tana Torajd, where the traditional *Makale* leaders, *Aluk Todolo*, Christian religious leaders and Tana Toraja community live and conduct *Rambu Solo* ceremony. The number of informants who were deeply interviewed in this study were 5 people who has participated in *Rambu Solo* ' ceremony.

## 4. Result and Discussion

### 4.1. The Ceremony of *Rambu Solo* '

According to the result of the research, *Rambu Solo* ' has two forms of ceremony: *rapasan* ceremony and non-*rapasan* ceremony. *Rambu Solo* ' *rapasan* ceremony is the ceremony of *Rambu Solo* ' which applies to the group of *tana' bulaan* and *tana' bassi*. The buffalo sacrifice involves 18 or more buffaloes, following the rules in *Annan Penanian* customary environment. The ceremonies are *rapasan layu-layu* ceremony with 18-23 buffaloes sacrificed, *rapasan sundun* ceremony with 24-50 buffaloes sacrificed, and *rapasan sapu randanan* ceremony with 51 or more buffaloes sacrificed.

Meanwhile, *rambu solo*' non-*rapasan* ceremony applies to the group of *tana' bassi* and *tana' karurung*. The buffalo sacrifice is 3-17 buffaloes according to the rules in *Annan Penanian* customary environment. The ceremonies are *ditallung bongi* with 3-5 buffaloes sacrificed, *dilimang bongi* ceremony with 6-11 buffaloes sacrificed, and *dipitung bongi* ceremony with 12-17 buffaloes sacrificed.

The group of *tana' bulaan* is the highest aristocratic group in Toraja community. In this group, the husbands and wives come from aristocratic class. The group of *tana' bassi* is a group of traditional leaders, religious leaders, educational figures, and the government. The other group is *tana' karurung*, consists of the general community. While the lowest group is *tana' kua-kua*, which consists of a group of slaves (during kingdom period). This group does not personally carry out *Rambu Solo*' ceremony, but they help in carrying out the ceremony.

The information about *Rambu Solo*' *rapasan* ceremony was obtained from informant JP. This informant stated that his family held *Rambu Solo*' ceremony four times in the form of *rapasan* and *dipitung bongi*. The ceremony for the late mother in 1986 and the late father in 1990 was in *rapasan* form. Meanwhile the ceremony for the late mother-in-law in 1996 and the late father-in-law in 1998 was in the form of *dipitung bongi*. Of the four ceremonies that have been carried out, the number of animals borne by the informant were 21 buffaloes and approximately 42 pigs.

The *Rambu Solo*' ceremony with a greater amount of animal sacrifices can be found in the explanation of informant YP. YP held *rapasan* ceremony each for her late father-in-law in 1994, the late mother-in-law in 1997, the late father in 2002, the late mother in 2006, and the late sibling in 2009. Then, she held *dipitung bongi* ceremony for her late husband in 2014. Of the six ceremonies that have been carried out, the number of animals borne by YP herself were 41 buffaloes and approximately 92 pigs.

Furthermore, the information of *Rambu Solo*' non-*rapasan* ceremony was obtained from FD who revealed that his family held *Rambu Solo*' ceremony for his late mother in 1968. The informant, together with his eight brothers and relatives of his mother, agreed to carry out *dilimang bongi* ceremony with the number of animal sacrifice involving 9 buffaloes. As the oldest child with the position of village headman (*kepala kampung*), FD claimed to have borne two buffaloes and seven pigs. Meanwhile his siblings covered six buffaloes, and relatives of his mother covered one buffalo. Another informant, TD, said that *aluk dilimang bongi* was held for his late father in 1976. Then in 1982, his family held the same ceremony for his late mother. TD covered one buffalo and four pigs for his late father's ceremony, and one buffalo and four pigs for his mother's ceremony.

## 5. The Meaning of *Rambu Solo*' Ceremony based on Self-Concept

### 5.1. Imagining

As social agents, Toraja ethnic individuals believe that there is a life after death that requires sacrifice. According to YP and JP, the sacrifice accelerates spirit to leave *Puya* (the realm of spirit) towards the realm of God. When the deceased arrives in the realm of God, the spirit of the deceased becomes *deity* (noble spirits) and gives blessing and protection to their children and grandchildren who are still living on earth.

Meanwhile, according to FD and TD who received information from their parents and family, custom orders (*aluk*) must be carried out for the welfare of family members. Therefore, FD held *rambu solo*' ceremony in the form of *dilimang bongi* for his late mother and *ditallung bongi* for his late father. Based on this information, in the process of imagining, Toraja individuals must believe that there is a life after death called *Puya*. Therefore, every family member should carry out offering for the late parents or other family members. Toraja people must also maintain family solidarity and social status as a part of honor. Likewise, maintaining *aluk* considered as important task of every Toraja individual.

### 5.2. Interpreting

Interpreting in *Rambu Solo*' ceremony has created value crystallization in the form of *belief in Puang Matua* in *Puya*; *family honor*; *family solidarity* and *maintaining aluk*, and then get influence and experience form shift without changing the meaning in the life of Toraja community. The influence, especially felt by the informant, happens because of the reality in family economic capability and religious teaching, particularly Christianity. Economic and religious factor become a reference for Toraja ethnic individuals to interpret the execution of *rambu solo*'.

Interpreting in *Rambu Solo*' ceremony may change in terms of the execution form depending on the economic capability. As stated by FD in his explanation, he held *dilimang bongi* ceremony for his late mother, and then the status of execution form drops to *ditallung bongi* for his late father. Economic capability is believed to be the reason of this changing ceremony status. The similar acknowledgment revealed by YP that the *Rambu Solo* ceremony that carried out was very financially difficult because YP claimed to still have debts. However, the family must carry out the ceremony to maintain the social status of their parents.

Likewise with the explanation of TD about the choice of the form of the *Rambu Solo* ceremony, both the ceremony held by the bongi for the late father and mother and the ceremony were held for the two brothers by following the teachings of *Aluk*. So the implementation of the ceremony was then made simpler by the only reason of fulfilling the *Aluk* teachings.

In an effort to obtain information synchronization with the key of those informants, triangulation approach was carried out to ensure the accuracy of information from the main informants. In this case, AK informants explained that the implementation of the *Rambu Solo*' ceremony had adapted the beliefs of Christianity, as a reverence to ancestors and as a social appreciation. The explanation of FD, YP, TD and AK above is a form of explanation about the ways of *Torajanese* ethnic individuals in interpreting (interpreting) the *Rambu Solo* ceremony.

### 5.3. Developing Self-Concepts

As previously described that developing self-concept is an accumulation of information and learning of actors to develop their self-image in society. This explanation is relevant to information from TD informants who say that the *Rambu Solo* ceremony is good for the late father and mother and the ceremony was held for two brothers by following the teachings of *Aluk Todolo* and the customary rules in a simple way is an explanation of family solidarity. This means that TD portrays himself and his family as part of a *Toraja* society that has high family solidarity and loyal devout of *Aluk Todolo*. Meanwhile, the JP informant stated that the amount of money he incurred for the second *Rambu Solo* ceremony signs in the form of *rapasan* was approximately Rp. 276,000,000. The two ceremonies were made in the form of *rapasan* to appreciate the deceased as to *makaka* (middle nobility). The presence built in the JP case illustrates that JP's social status is still imaged as nobility.

The same information from YP's informants, carried out a *Rambu Solo* ceremony since he had to perpetuate his parents' social status even though YP personally had to spend around Rp. 141,000,000. Overall costs incurred by YP are around Rp 1,170,600,000. For YP, that amount is in accordance with the image of his family who has high social status.

Based on the description above, it can be stated that individually (agents), the Toraja people pay more obedience to adat and aluk, family solidarity, respect for ancestors, and family social status above the economy. Looking at the interpretation of the implementation of the 'solo rambu' ceremony that has been carried out by the informants, it shows that ethnic Toraja individuals as social agents use all the resources they have to carry out the *solo* signaling ceremony. This is due to their belief that the implementation of the ceremony was a manifestation of self-respect and honor of the *Torajanes* community or individuals.

## 6. Conclusion

The implementation of the *Rambu Solo* ceremony can be assessed through self-concept, namely imagining, interpreting, and developing its self-concept. The process of imagining Toraja ethnic individuals as social agents interacts continuously with other individuals and social groups according to customary values and norms and *Aluk Todolo*, where the solo signaling ceremony considered one form of offering to *Puang Matua* to achieve the level of glory. From the economic aspects, needs and the influence of the teachings of Christianity, the implementation of solo signaling ceremony is carried out based on the economic capabilities while still fulfilling the requirements of cultural elements and social status. This is an interpreting process for Toraja ethnic individuals. After going through the interpreting process, the implementation of the *Rambu Solo* ceremony later became part of the social imaging of individuals and families who carried out the ceremony. The image formed to show the social status, ancestral respect, and social solidarity.

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