

# **HEALING MANTRAS BASED ON RIVER AND FOREST ECOLOGY IN THE NGAJU DAYAK TRIBE OF CENTRAL KALIMANTAN: A STUDY OF AESTHETICS AND MEANING FROM AN ORAL LITERATURE PERSPECTIVE**

**(Mantra Penyembuhan Berbasis Ekologi Sungai dan Hutan pada Suku Dayak Ngaju  
di Kalimantan Tengah: Kajian Estetika dan Makna dari Perspektif Sastra Lisan)**

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**Abstract:** *This study examines healing mantras rooted in river and forest ecology in the Ngaju Dayak community in Central Kalimantan. The aim of the study is to examine the aesthetic structure and layers of meaning of this oral tradition using Roland Barthes's semiotic theory (denotation, connotation, myth). A descriptive qualitative method was applied through a literature review, which included documentation of mantra texts from academic publications, previous research on traditional Dayak healing practices, and a review of literature on literary ecology and semiotic theory. The findings indicate that healing mantras function as ecological texts: rivers and forests are not only physical locations but also symbols of cleansing, protection, and cosmic continuity. As an aesthetic endeavor, the mantras utilize repetition, alliteration, ecological metaphors, and culturally rich Ngaju vocabulary. Semiotic aspects reveal layers of meaning that connect human health to environmental balance and collective moral ethics. This article proposes that the oral tradition of the Ngaju Dayak be viewed as a source of ecological knowledge relevant to sustainability discourse.*

**Keywords:** *Barthes's Semiotics; Healing Mantras; Ngaju Dayak; Oral Literature; River-Forest Ecology*

## **A. INTRODUCTION**

The oral tradition of the Ngaju Dayak people is one way to express a culture that preserves knowledge about the universe, theology, history, and the environment. Healing mantras are an important part of this tradition, functioning not only as a method for healing but also as symbolic texts demonstrating the harmonious relationship between humans and the universe, as well as being interwoven with aesthetic texts. In the Ngaju Dayak cosmology, rivers and forests are viewed as centers of life, sacred places, and sources of ritual power (Miiikka, 2012; Rahman, 2019). Furthermore, rivers also serve as markers of spatial dimensions, such as the Ngaju ngawa and ngambu liwa dimensions. Ngaju refers to the upstream region, and ngawa to the downstream. Meanwhile, ngambu refers to the land, forest, or cultural center.

From an anthropological perspective, mantras are an aspect of a belief system that reflects humans' relationship with the spiritual world and their surroundings. Foley (1995) states that oral tradition is not simply an artistic expression but also a complex system for storing knowledge. Ong (1982) added that in societies that rely on oral traditions, text structure, rhythm, and repetition play a role in influencing thought and action. This is crucial for

understanding the Dayak Ngaju's efforts to develop ecological knowledge through mantras.

Ecocritical studies consider literary works as attempts to demonstrate the relationship between humans and the environment. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) emphasize that literary works can be seen as a reflection of the environmental crisis and issues of ecological ethics. In this context, the Dayak Ngaju's healing mantras are not only rituals but also stories about the local environment that reflect principles of conservation. Research by Prastio (2023) shows that forest symbolism in traditional works serves to enhance ecological understanding within the community.

Furthermore, from an ethnobotanical perspective, Caniago and Siebert (1998) found that Dayak people possess a profound knowledge of biodiversity, often reflected in oral texts, including mantras. This knowledge encompasses not only medical aspects but also ethics in resource management. This statement reflects the close relationship between healing practices, views of nature, and environmental protection efforts.

While several studies have examined the social and ecological dimensions of Dayak oral traditions, studies of the aesthetics and meaning of Ngaju Dayak healing mantras using Roland Barthes's semiotic approach are still limited. Barthes (1977) proposed that a text can be examined at three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. This framework helps understand the work of mantras as symbolic texts that convey ecological knowledge while simultaneously reinforcing the community's cosmological myths.

In his book on mythology, Barthes explores the everyday lives of people who have often been overlooked. Barthes examined the connotations contained in mythology, which are considered common sense, essentially the result of social group construction or common sense. One important area Barthes outlined that distinguishes him from his predecessor, Saussure, is the role of the reader. Although connotation is the true essence of signs, according to Barthes, an active reader is required for these signs to function optimally.

According to Barthes, the system of reading, or the system of sign significance, cannot stop at one point but is dynamic. To implement this idea, Roland Barthes proposed the E-R-C concept as an extension of Saussure's structuralist model. Barthes's concept illustrates how a sign is dismantled using two systems of signification. In the first step, a sign is dismantled using the primary or denotative system of signification, while in the next step, a sign is dismantled using the secondary or connotative system of signification. The sign's significance in this first reading is classified as a linguistic reading, while in the second stage, the system of signification is classified as meaning beyond language or metalingual.

The E-R-C concept above is an analytical model that emphasizes the process of significance, namely the limitless creative process of creating signifiers or signifieds. Barthes further elaborates on the reading process by providing an overview of the two

stages of this process. The first stage is referred to as linguistic reading. In Barthes's view, the first-level, denotative, or primary, system of significance is literal but, he argues, remains natural. On the other hand, Barthes argues that denotation is a form of closure of meaning. Meanwhile, connotation is the second-level, or secondary, system of significance, which he considers identical to ideological operations, otherwise known as myth. Connotative meaning is also referred to as external language or metalingual meaning.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to explain how the Dayak Ngaju healing mantra incorporates elements of rivers and forests in its aesthetic structure and layers of meaning. This study aims to emphasize the role of oral traditions in shaping cultural identity, protecting the environment, and supporting the narrative of global sustainability using a semiotic approach.

## ***B. METHOD***

This research employs a qualitative descriptive method based on written documents. This method was chosen because it allows researchers to understand texts from oral traditions recorded in various academic publications. Research on written documents was conducted comprehensively, examining primary sources (mantra texts, ethnographic reports, journal articles) and supporting sources (literary theory, semiotics, and ecocritical studies). The research process consisted of the following steps: 1. Written Data Collection: Data was taken from journal articles, books, conference papers, and research reports discussing Dayak Ngaju mantra texts and their meanings. 2. Selection and Classification: Data was sorted based on ecological themes (water, forests, medicinal plants, cosmology). Only texts that met ecological criteria were subjected to further in-depth research. 3. Data Aspecting: Roland Barthes' semiotic method was applied through three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. This aspect is based on the theory of oral literature put forward by experts, including Lord (1960), Ong (1982), and Foley.

## ***C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION***

The discussion will focus on the construction of the narrative structure of the poems, namely the techniques of portrayal that refer to objective and subjective portrayals, the narration of space and time, Studies utilizing sources such as cultural aspects, flora studies, the concept of oral storytelling, and Barthes's theory of meaning reveal findings that can be divided into several main sections: text composition, linguistic aesthetics, environmental symbols, social functions, and recent developments.

### **1. Text Structure and Form of Oral Tradition**

The Dayak Ngaju healing songs demonstrate frequently repeated patterns in oral culture (Lord, 1960; Foley, 1995). The repetition of key words such as danum (water), hutan (forest), and the names of medicinal plants can enhance memorability and strengthen the

song's impact. This parallel structure creates a rhythmic atmosphere that emphasizes magical and beautiful aspects.

## **2. Language Aesthetics and Prosody**

In addition to repetition, prosody—the use of intonation, rhythm, and pace—is an important aspect of aesthetics (Ong, 1982). In cultural documentation, basir (shamans) chant songs with particular emphasis, creating a sacred atmosphere. This shows that beauty lies not only in the writing, but also in the vocal effort.

## **3. Environmental Symbolism**

According to Barthes, the meaning aspect reveals three layers of meaning:

- a. Denotation: Mentioning things related to the environment such as water flows, forests, and medicinal plants.
- b. Connotation: Rivers are seen as symbols of cleansing, forests as safe havens, and plants as aids in healing.
- c. Myth: According to Dayak Ngaju myth, humans are part of the entire universe, where harmony with nature is essential for health.

This symbolism aligns with the findings of Miikka's (2012) research on Kaharingan beliefs.

## **4. Collection of Words and Understanding of Ecology**

The language in the songs contains regional terms related to plants and animals, reflecting the community's understanding of the environment. Research by Caniago and Siebert (1998) shows that the mention of plants in songs is often closely related to their medicinal uses. Thus, these songs combine practical medical understanding with ceremonial meanings.

## **5. Social Role and Conservation**

Songs not only play a role in the healing process but also serve as a social tool to maintain environmental balance. Traditional ethics governing plant collection and river use reflect a conservation ethic based on tradition (Rahman, 2019; Wibowo, 2018). This indicates that oral traditions play a role in environmental management.

## **6. Present the Upaupaya and Function of Basir**

Basir, as cultural figures, have two roles: as healers and preservers of tradition. They gain respect by inheriting understanding and acceptance from the community. In ceremonial upaupaya, basir combine song lyrics, body movements, and natural materials, creating a holistic experience for the patient (Arnel, 2015).

## **7. Comparison with Different Dayak Communities**

Studies have shown similarities between Ngaju songs and Maanyan songs, as well as other communities in Kalimantan (Jumadi, 2019; Herrmans, 2021). The image of rivers and forests as the core of the universe is a common theme, although there are variations in word usage and processes.

## **8. Current Dynamics**

Contemporary life and environmental degradation are changing the way people sing. Some ceremonies are becoming less frequent, but academic recording and community restoration efforts continue (IIAS, 2016; Lestari, 2023). Environmental threats, such as deforestation, make song lyrics increasingly important as moral narratives for sustainability.

## **9. Research Disparities**

There is still little linguistic research that examines the prosody and meaning of the songs. Medical studies of the plants mentioned in the lyrics are also limited. A combined study that encompasses language, culture, and the environment is needed.

## **10. Summary of Results**

Overall, Dayak Ngaju healing songs possess high artistic value, complex environmental symbolism, and a social function as an effort to preserve the environment. By examining the songs using Barthes's perspective, the relationship between text, meaning, and social culture becomes clear.

## ***D. CONCLUSION***

This review of the existing writings confirms that the Dayak Ngaju healing prayers, which relate to the river and forest environment, have profound meaning and purpose, going beyond mere ritual. Here are some key points that can be elaborated on specifically:

1. **Aesthetic Quality:** These prayers use repetition, environmental comparisons, and local vocabulary, which lend them a more poetic tone. These elements make them both beautiful and religious works of literature.
2. **Semiotic Quality:** The use of Barthes' framework to analyze these prayers reveal three levels of meaning:
  - a. **Denotation:** the direct representation of rivers, forests, and healing plants.
  - b. **Connotation:** the symbolic use of water to signify purification, forests to signify protection, and plants to signify the relationship between humans and nature.
  - c. **Myth:** the retelling of cosmological stories about the importance of maintaining the balance of the universe between humans, nature, and spirits.

3. **Social and Environmental Quality:** These prayers help protect the environment, strengthen cultural identity, and create social unity. These prayers support environmental ethics through traditional rules and standards for resource use.

4. **Academic Contribution:** The Ngaju Dayak oral tradition can be seen as an important environmental text in ecocritical discussions and semiotic studies. This contribution is crucial for developing the study of local literature and culture in a global context.

5. **Practical Importance:** The environmental knowledge contained in these prayers can be incorporated into cultural education, community-based conservation plans, and environmental policies. This can strengthen sustainability strategies by valuing local wisdom.

In conclusion, the Ngaju Dayak healing prayers constitute a complex, beautiful, symbolic, and beneficial cultural treasure. Documenting and further studying them is crucial to ensure this knowledge is not lost and continues to benefit the wider community and scholars.

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