

# The *Plaho* Ritual: Cultural Study on Siulak Community, Kerinci Regency

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## ABSTRACT

The *Plaho* ritual is a tradition tribute to the spirits of ancestors who have died long ago by providing food offerings such as white rice, yellow rice, black rice, brown rice, chicken eggs, duck eggs, roasted sticky rice called *lemang*, roasted chicken, orange juice, various flowers, betel leaves and etc. This ritual is carried out when people in the community suffer from misfortune, illness, have no offspring or no sustenance, or when they want to make a pledge in order to avoid misfortune, have success in trading, produced a lot of agricultural products, and so on. This ethnographic research was using an interpretive theoretical analysis proposed by Clifford Geertz and was conducted in the Siulak community, Kerinci Regency. Informant selection technique was carried out by using a deliberate selection of informant namely purposive sampling technique. Data collected through observation and in-depth interviews were then analyzed using interpretive analysis with steps as follows: data hermeneutic, data interpretation, and interpretative representation. This research results reveals that the *Plaho* ritual is still carried out by Siulak community since they believe that by carrying out this ritual, they will be protected from all disasters and dangers threatening their social life and that not all diseases can be treated medically. *Plaho* ritual to Siulak community also has a separate function which indirectly is a form of respect for their ancestors, as a cultural inheritance, as a form of retreat, a reminder of death, and a means of social integration, which purpose is none other than to get oneself closer to The Almighty God.

Keywords: *Plaho Ritual; Spirits of Ancestors; Food Offerings; Siulak Community*

## 1. Introduction

The development of human civilization is progressing along modern era as it is today. The development of technology and human knowledge in big cities, for example, has caused our

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way of thinking to change from what was originally traditional into modern. One characteristic of modern human is the tendency to think systematically and critically towards everything.

Culture is a behavioral pattern that is packaged in a symbolical system and then historically transmitted to others. This system is a legacy of native concepts which were expressed through meaningful symbols in order to be communicated (Koentjaraningrat, 1972). Since culture could function as a mean to channel ideas or knowledge possessed by someone to other members of the community from generation to generation, ideas or knowledge must then be found in order to be inherited. Thus, culture is considered as a vessel that carries meaning to be transmitted to the community. It also means that the meaning of culture must also be understood in its various forms, not only as ideas, but also as patterns of behavior and objects.

Geertz defines culture as: (1) an ordered system of meanings and symbols that individuals define, express feelings and make judgments; (2) a pattern of historically transmitted meanings contained in these symbolic forms, humans communicate, strengthen, and develop their knowledge about and attitude toward their lives; (3) a symbolic behavior to control behavior, extrasomatic sources of information; and (4) because culture is a system of symbols, cultural processes must be understood, translated, and interpreted (Saifuddin, 2005).

Geertz further argues that interpretive theory emphasizes the importance of the particularity of a culture and holds that the central goal of social studies is the meaningful interpretation of human practices. Symbols according to Geertz are objects, events, sounds, sounds, or written forms that are given meaning by humans (Saifuddin, 2005).

Siulak community of Kerinci Regency, which is classified as a modern society, still carrying out ancestral spirit worshipping rituals, namely the *Plaho ritual*. The word *Plaho* originates from the word *peliharo* which means to maintain or preserve. This word has a very deep meaning, i.e., ancestors or forefather ordered their descendants to maintain all of their previous traditions (Ramadani & Qommanecici, 2018).

*Plaho* ritual is carried out by certain people called *belian* in Siulak community. Due to the influence of Islam religion, this *belian* is sometimes called a pious *belian* which refers to people who are obedient to religious practices. Pious *belian* is usually a woman, but sometimes could be a man. Not only as an intermediary for communication with ancestral spirits, pious *belian* also functions as saman or healer and presides over various rituals in order to worship the ancestral spirits.

*Plaho* ritual is one of the cultural heritages of Siulak community which is still carried out up until now. In this ritual, people use black Kampong chicken as offerings. These black chickens were cleaned then cooked into a curry. The chickens were not cutted into pieces, but immediately wrapped in banana leaves and served as a whole to the ancestral spirits together with rice during the *Plaho* ritual. In the implementation of this ritual, there are mantras spoken by pious *belian* to summon the spirits of their ancestors to help them in the procession. Since ancient time, the *Plaho* ritual has often been carried out in the context of treating sick people (Ramadani, 2020).

Since the *Plaho* rituals use certain cultural symbols which are meaningful to the society of Siulak, we are interested to observed and analyse using interpretative theory mentioned earlier by Geerts. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to study the symbolic meaning of *Plaho* ritual in the Siulak community, Kerinci Regency.

## 2. Literature Review

In this study, researchers were using cultural approach through interpretative theory by Clifford Geertz. According to Geertz, humans are creatures that depend on the culture they produce themselves, but the analysis on them was not experimental science to search for laws, it was rather an interpretative science to seek meaning. Interpretative theory emphasizes the importance of the particularity of a culture and believes that the central goal of social studies is interpretation of human practices which means an event or social practice in a particular social context (Geertz, 1992).

Interpretive theory emphasizes the particular importance of a culture, and argues that the central goal of social studies is the meaningful interpretation of human practices (Geertz, 1977). Human-produced culture has a meaning that originates from people's interpretation of the culture they believe in and is reflected in various forms of activity or activities that they carry out.

The *Plaho* ritual performed by the Siulak community is a tradition that has its own meaning. In practice, of course, it starts with the interpretation of the supporting community, and is reflected through practices or activities related to this tradition. Geertz clearly defines it. Culture is an organized system of meanings and symbols, in the sense in which individuals define their world, express their feelings and give their judgments; a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbolic forms through the means by which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge and attitudes toward life; a collection of symbolic tools for regulating behavior, an extrasomatic source of information." Because culture is a symbolic system, cultural processes must be read, translated, and interpreted (Ramadani & Qommaneecei, 2020).

Clifford Geertz, (1992) gives the notion of culture into two elements, firstly culture as a cognitive and meaning system, secondly culture as a value system. Cognitive and meaning system are the representation of the patterns of (model of), while value system is the representation of the patterns for (model for). Connection between "patterns of and patterns for" or cognitive systems with value systems, in other words, the link between translating knowledge and meaning system, lies in the symbol system, said Geertz. So, patterns for cultural action is a set of human knowledge that contains models that are selectively used to interpret, encourage and create action or in another sense as a guidance for action. While the pattern of cultural action is what is done and can be seen by humans everyday as something that is real or in another sense as a form of action.

*Plaho* ritual carried out by the Siulak community is a ritual that has its own meaning. Its implementation begins with the interpretation of the supporting community, and is reflected through practices or activities related to the ritual. *Plaho* ritual is a representation of the pattern of (model of) as a manifestation of actions taken to respect the ancestral spirits, while the meaning and values contained in the ritual which were believed by the community are a representation of the pattern for (model for) that were used to interpret, encourage, and create action or in another sense as a guidance for actions (Alimin, 2006).

According to Geertz, symbols are objects, events, speech sounds, or written forms that human gave meanings. Humans also communicate with each other using signs and symbols in painting, dance, music, architecture, facial expressions, gestures, body postures, jewelry, clothing, rites, religion, kinship, nationality, spatial planning, property ownership, and etc. In the process of implementing *Plaho* ritual in Siulak community, they relate to the spirits of their ancestors using ritual ceremonies in the form of dancing and worshipping .

Every activity and human behaviors were manifested in cultural actions which have their own characteristics. These behaviors are a reflection of the meaning that comes from individual thoughts that can be seen from the cultural background in which individuals carry out their actions. This is in accordance with the concept of cultural relativism which states that each culture is a unique configuration having its own distinctive taste, style, and ability.

Clifford Geertz further argues that culture is (1) as an ordered system of meanings and symbols, by means of which individuals define their world, express their feelings, and make their judgments; (2) a pattern of historically transmitted meanings embodied in these forms of human communication, consolidating and developing their knowledge and attitudes towards life (3) a symbolic apparatus for controlling behavior, extrasomatic sources and information, and (4) since culture is a symbol, then cultural process must be understood, translated, and interpreted.

From the above definition, culture was based on interpretation. Through this interpretation, humans control their attitudes and actions, carry out habits and beliefs that are acquired by individuals and society as an inheritance that must be carried out and interpreted in their lives. In every activity carried out by every society that contains meaning, this meaning was interpreted by various forms of human activities and activities (Keesing, 2014).

### 3. Method

This research departs from the post-positivistic paradigm with a qualitative approach. Through this qualitative approach, researchers can obtain more extensive and in-depth information about the *Plaho* ritual in the Siulak community, Kerinci Regency. In this study, researchers seek to understand events/symptoms that occur objectively.

This research was conducted on the Siulak community, Kerinci Regency. Data were collected in this study using observation and in-depth interviews. Informants who became the research subjects were traditional leaders, religious leaders, and bereaved families.

Data analysis was carried out since the beginning of this research, as our study were about both the process and the product of the process. For this reason, when collecting data, we also make field notes aiming to record information from interviews and observations related to research problems. Data analysis used in this research is ethnographic analysis of Clifford Geertz, data hermeneutics, data interpretation, and representation interpretation (Rietjens, 2015).

#### **4. Result and Discussion**

##### **4.1. Equipment Used in the *Plaho* Ritual**

When carrying out the *Plaho* ritual, the community will use several offerings according to the purpose of the *Plaho* ritual to be carried out. Offerings are a means of communication by the community to the highest power that has given life and which is the center of hope for various positive wishes of the community or a means of communication by the community to supernatural forces which, according to the community's understanding, have protected them so far. eating, called culinary offerings, some of the offerings are in the form of special objects that are believed to be favored by the highest power, especially those that occur around people who still contain very strong customs. Offerings means giving offerings as a sign of respect or gratitude for everything that happens in society according to supernatural whispers that come from normal people or advice. Offerings are a cultural heritage of Hindus and Buddhists that can be made to worship the gods, certain spirits or guardians of places (trees, rocks, intersections,) and others.

In preparing the materials when carrying out the *Plaho* ritual offerings, it is a must because each material and equipment prepared has a strong meaning for the Siulak people because each material means the customs of the ancestors that have been passed down and also contains a kind of request to the ancestors such as apologizing to the ancestors. ancestors of mistakes and what has been done so far.

Apart from the offerings, there are a number of equipment and other equipment needed to suit the purpose of carrying out the *Plaho* ritual. This equipment is prepared by the people who have the intention to carry out the *Plaho* ritual.

##### **4.2. *Plaho* Ritual Schedule**

The schedule of the *Plaho* Ritual cannot be determined by the community. The *Plaho* ritual is carried out when a member of the community suffers from a disease and so on. When people experience a disaster or something else, they can immediately prepare everything for the ritual without having a specific time for its implementation. The *Plaho* ritual can be carried out at night and during the day.

##### **4.3. Execution Place**

The *Plaho* ritual is carried out in a spacious place, be it in a house or an open yard. Currently, the *Plaho* ritual is mostly carried out in places far from the crowds, such as in the homes of community members who are far from the crowds or in people's homes who have hajad.

##### **4.4. Implementation of the *Plaho* Ritual in the Siulak Community**

The *Plaho* ritual consists of ten (10) forms and implementation objectives, including (a) *Plaho* nganjak uhang taman, which is carried out when there is a request from a sick host and still cannot recover after being treated medically. This *Plaho* is held in a place believed by pious belian to be a resting place for supernatural beings live in the house that feel disturbed by the arrival of new people in that house. Usually after transferring this supernatural creature, the house will feel comfortable and there will be no sense of anxiety experienced by the new housekeeper, and family members who were sick will be recover. (b) *Plaho* magih salih makan, which is done only once at home but was carried out within three days from preparation time, to cooking lemag, until finally cooking curry for children and grandchildren who are also present to witness the *Plaho* event. (c) *Plaho* ngambi penyakit/ngambi alin, which done in the Siulak community when there are sick people by preparing offerings such as ikat, incense, jamba, witchcraft and other ingredients. Usually, this *Plaho* is done at the house of pious belian. (d) *Plaho* turun mandi, which is the same as going down to bathing normally, but the difference is that during *Plaho*, only baby girls going down to bathing. The baby girl will be circumcised by applying a blunt knife and not hurting the baby girl's genitals, only as a sign that the baby was circumcised. Initially, in ancient times, people would take babies to take bath in the river, but unlike male babies in Kerinci region, baby girls were required to do

*Plaho* to be circumcised, after that the *belian* who circumcised the baby girl will eat betel and apply the red betel water to the baby's forehead, palms, and soles of her feet as a sign that she has been circumcised and is ready to live a good life in the future.

(e) *Plaho palimo siahi*, implemented by rubbing *ayi palimo* from the mortar of *belian* to pregnant women from head to toe. After that, remaining water in the mortar is transferred into reed and brought to the river. After arriving at the river, the pregnant woman then stood in the shallow water and rubbed *ayi palimo* in the reed by herself three times from head to toe. She then sat down and dived her head into the water accompanied by throwing the reed which was still filled with *ayi palimo* to her back. (f) *Plaho mintak tanah*, which is almost the same as *Plaho nganjak uhang taman*. First of all, pious *belian* recites a spell on the ingredients and serving utensils used during *Plaho*. After casting the spell, pious *belian* then sprinkled witchcraft in every corner of the vacant land while praying so that the ancestral spirits would always protect the descendants from harm.

(g) *Plaho ngejang aman/ ngulang aso/janem*, which held to call out the ancestral spirits to strengthen the family they have left behind. Firstly, the family left behind by their predecessor called *belian salih* who is also a member of their family in order to find out the details of their ancestral lineage, then one of the families lay down and pious *belian* began chanting a spell. This *Plaho* will make the spirit of the recently deceased family to enter the body of the person who was sleeping to speak and tell how he died and convey words to make the family they've left behind to become stronger. (h) *Plaho ngayun luci* which was carried out in two stages. Firstly, the participants of the ceremony will prepare the tools, read spells and prayers and do special *asyeik* dance at home. Secondly, *luci* was brought to the field or rice fields and participants perform chanting of spells and prayers as well as dancing *asyeik* surrounding *luci* as a party dedicated to their ancestors.

Arrival of the ancestral spirits were marked by the presence of participant who were in trance, after which the fun is stopped and pious *belian* awakens the participant with spell while carrying incense. Participants then took the *luci* one by one and hang them in their respective fields. After *luci* is hanged, there will be children who come and take bananas, *jadah*, and *lemang* which were hung under *luci* to eat, but *luci* must not be damaged or taken. (i) *Plaho naik niti mahligai*, which held for the coronation of the *adat sko* or pious title. There are two stages in this *Plaho*. The first stage is preparation of offerings, and second is the peak event. At the peak event, *niti mahligai* dance will be performed accompanied by musical instruments and chanting of spells to bring forth the ancestral spirits. Their attendance were marked by the presence of a dancer who is in a trance. (j) *Plaho tulak blah*, which is usually done in the corner of football field in *Siulak* community. Pious *belian* will lead the *Plaho* event performing rituals at the graves of the ancestors who handed him the knowledge.

Each purpose of carrying out the *Plaho* ritual is equipped with offerings in the form of *lemang* (food from sticky rice called *pulut* given coconut milk, roasted in bamboo), *ikat* (rope to tie things together), *ikat sicupak* (a container filled with rice), *jadah* (food made from raw flour wrapped in banana leaves then boiled), bananas, *benang sepuluh* (threads of different colors and of the same type cutted into 10m each has one meter long strands, then rolled into one), *sajin* (a dish of food such as rice and black *kampong* chicken especially its right thigh, right wing, right breast, and head that has been cooked with curry).

By carrying out the *Plaho* ritual, people could meet the spirits of their ancestors whom they believed will help them cleanse their body and soul and make them devoted for welfare. There was a relationship between posterity and ancestral spirits intertwined through *Plaho* ritual. Every activity carried out in *Plaho* ritual can be understood through interpretation. We could find out the meaning of the activity using interpretation. In the process of ritual activities, *Plaho* has symbols that are interpreted, which from these symbols its meaning could be known.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. The Meaning of the *Plaho* Ritual in the *Siulak* Society

Geertz argues that culture is a pattern of meaning that is interpreted/transmitted historically which is manifested in symbolic forms, through which humans communicate, preserve, and develop their knowledge and attitude about life. Geertz describes culture as an arrangement of meanings carried by symbols, where people pass on their knowledge about life and express attitudes.

*Plaho* ritual for *Siulak* community has a meaning that originates from their interpretation of culture which was reflected in the various activities they carry out. Norms, customary

values, habits, and traditions of today's society were the result of creation by previous generations which then enforced and maintained from generation to generation.

*Plaho* ritual carried out by the community was a representation of the pattern of (model of) as a manifestation of actions taken when affected by disaster or the hope of getting sustenance, while the meaning and values contained in the *Plaho* ritual that are believed by the local community were a representation of the pattern for (model for) used to interpret, encourage, and create action or in another sense as a guidance for action.

*Plaho* ritual performed by the siulak community is not something new. *Plaho* is a habit that has long lived and become a tradition in which people define their world, express feelings, give judgments, and interpret their actions.

Furthermore, Clifford Geertz, (1992) argues that culture (1) is an ordered system of meanings and symbols, by means of which individuals define their world, express their feelings, and make their judgments; (2) a pattern of historically transmitted meanings embodied in the forms in which humans communicate, establish and develop their knowledge and attitudes toward life (3) a symbolic tool for controlling behavior, extrasomatic sources and information, and (4) because culture is a symbol, cultural processes must be understood, translated and interpreted.

From the definition above, culture is based on interpretation and through this interpretation humans control their attitudes and actions, carrying out habits and beliefs that are acquired by individuals and society as a legacy that must be carried out and interpreted in their lives, in every activity carried out by every society. which has meaning. This meaning is interpreted in various forms of human activities and activities (Kaplan, 1999).

The *Plaho* ritual by the Siulak people, especially in this study, which often holds this ritual, originated from the community's interpretation of conception as a ceremony of asking for medical instructions for an illness or disaster that is being experienced by their children and grandchildren. From this interpretation, a community idea emerged to carry out a activities that are considered capable of connecting the profane world with the supernatural world. It is from this interpretation that the Siulak people carry out religious activities as a medium to seek guidance from the spirits of their ancestors who have preceded them. In these rituals there are ritual activities that contain symbols, and from the symbols the meaning of these activities is known.

Geertz describes culture as an arrangement of meanings carried by symbols, where people pass on their knowledge about life and express attitudes. The symbol system is anything that carries and conveys an idea to people or is just an action without words. Such as gestures of pity, or objects related to thoughts, ideas and emotions. In this *Plaho* Ritual research, in the process of its implementation, there are various forms of acts of giving speeches, reciting spells, beating with sticks, praying, eating together and sprinkling blood. The activity has a symbol that can be interpreted its meaning. The *Plaho* Ritual is a ceremony based on Islamic religious beliefs, because in its activities there is a request to be given safety in living life.

The Siulak people still adhere to the inherited values of their ancestors. The meaning of the *Plaho* Ritual is still conceptualized as something sacred, where human existence is greatly influenced by something supernatural in nature, so that the ritual is carried out as a bond between the Creator and the spirits of the ancestors. Apart from being responsible for the Siulak people themselves, they are also responsible for the Creator and the spirits of their ancestors.

## 5.2. The Existence of *Plaho* Ritual

The persistence of *Plaho* ritual in various implementation purposes carried out by Siulak community as their part of the life up to this day is also inseparable from public awareness to maintain this tradition so that it does not fade and be eroded as the time goes by. Awareness that exists in Siulak community that this custom is part of the unique and distinctive identity of Siulak people, and is rarely possessed by other regional communities. In addition, community understands that *Plaho* ritual has its own ancestral values and symbolic meanings which are part of the strategy for assembling their needs of life and maintaining social order that could be destroyed due to times.

Siulak community has special motivation in performing *Plaho* ritual, including for economic improvement, seeking prosperity in life in the form of protection from the unseen, being successful in family trade, seeking healing, and seeking guidance in dealing with one's life problems. In addition, *Plaho* ritual carried out by Siulak community also has its own

function which indirectly is a form of respect for ancestors, cultural inheritance, a form of tirakatan, a reminder of death, and a means of social integration, while the purpose of the ritual is none other than to approach oneself to the Almighty God.

Etymologically, ritual ceremonies can be divided into two words, namely ceremony and ritual. A ceremony is an activity carried out by a group of people and has stages that have been arranged according to the purpose of the event, while a ritual is an activity related to spiritual beliefs and beliefs with a specific purpose (Muzadi, Sudarto, Alim, & Setiono, 2021).

According to Purba & Pasaribu, (2006), ritual ceremonies can be interpreted as the role played by a community that supports a religion, customs, beliefs or principles in order to fulfill the need for teachings or cultural and spiritual values passed down from generation to generation by their ancestors.

Ritual is religion in the form of action. Although expressions of faith can be categorized as part of a ritual or even the ritual itself, religious faith seeks to explain the meaning of the ritual and provides interpretation and directs the vitality of the ritual. Based on the investigation, in essence myths and rituals are related. Even if there is an institutionalized ritual, it is only slightly before some mystical underpinning is introduced as the foundation. Myth is actually a statement of a higher and more important truth about the original reality which is still understood as the pattern and foundation of primitive life (Ferdianto & Setiyani, 2018).

The impact of a tradition is very strong for people's mindsets where it is known that traditional teachings are ingrained in people who follow this tradition with traditions that can strengthen people's beliefs about life in an environment where most teachings are known to have a positive value that can maintain people's beliefs so that they can survive. So far, the development of technology has something to do with the decline of existing customs in Indonesia. Even so far, many children do not know the customs of their region because so far many people have viewed negatively the condition of the customs or traditions of an area where. Currently, many children are affected by the understanding of outsiders who view negatively customs or traditions in Indonesia.

## 6. Conclusions

Based on the results of this research, *Plaho* ritual is still carried out by the village community, namely Siulak community of Kerinci Regency. There are ten (10) types of *Plaho* that are still exist and carried out by the community with at least five tools and materials in each one of the *Plaho*. The *Plaho* ritual is a legacy from our ancestors that is still being carried out to this day. The *Plaho* ritual has two functions, namely a religious function and a social function. The function of religion is because it has magical powers to better organize the mindset and life of the people; while socially as a symbol of togetherness, courtesy, mutual respect and order. There are several functions of *Plaho* with their respective advantages such as cooling the house, gratitude, respect for ancestors, treatment, protection from distress, and maintaining hospitality.

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## 8. Conflicts of Interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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