

## **Anthropolinguistic Study of The Ngantukang Ajang Ritual**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the local ritual of “Ngantukang ajang” conducted in Bila Bajang, Buleleng, Bali from the anthropolinguistics and semiotics perspective whereas meaning is produced, structured, and communicated through non-verbal semiotic resources. Unlike previous studies that focused on religious and cultural values, this research emphasized on the ritual as semiotic system like objects, movements, and arrangements. The qualitative method was applied by noting down the ritual sequences, material objects, and patterns of participation. The finding showed that “ngantukang ajang” is a process which semiotically redistributes ritual entitlements (rice and “sesari”, a monetary offerings) received by the former “kelihan subak” (the head of water distribution). Three stages were done namely “matur piuning”, “ngeragaang”, and the peak ceremony. It reflects a transformation of social identity and detachment shown from reconfiguration of the deceased from an active socio-political leader into ancestral presence. The semiotic resources form a non-verbal discourse communicating principles of reciprocity, and obligation.*

**Keywords:** *Anthropolinguistics, Semiotics, Balinese Social System, Ngantukang Ajang, Returning Rights*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Balinese rituals do not only function as religious practice, but also as a medium to maintain and transform social and spiritual relation. In the context of agrarian culture, the ritual is a part of central interaction among humans, ancestors, and environment. Some Balinese rituals show prayers, mantras, symbolic acts, material things, and community involvement.

One of the rituals which still exists today in Bila Bajang, Buleleng, Bali is “Ngantukang Ajang”. has become a regular practice by the local people and is also known as a unique tradition performed for a deceased former “Kelihan subak” ( the head of water irrigation) who had received ritual offerings during his devotion to the organization. They could be in the form of rice, sugar, fruits, and money called “sesari”). After the cremation (Ngaben) was done, this ritual is done to return all these entitlements; therefore, the deceased is no longer the recipient within the ritual economy. It is a system made by the community as a status transformation clearance. The returned things are given by the deceased’ families.

This phenomena shows that there is a complex cultural system to understand relationship between rights, obligation, social reciprocity, and transition after death. However, the ritual “Ngantukang Ajang” is still under-explored and documented especially when seen from anthropolinguistics perspective. Majority of Balinese rituals focus on the religious aspect, Balinese Hindu Philosophy.

From interpretative anthropolinguistic study, Culture is a system which has meaning and realized through symbols (Geertz, 1973). Ritual is not only ceremonial acts, but also a cultural text which can be read to understand how the society arrange social and spiritual condition. Moreover, ritual is also a social transformation as the symbols can move status shifts, collective emotion and social relation. Symbols do not only represent meaning, but also produce a new social reality (Turner, 1967). In the context of “Ngantukang ajang”, the ritual is a status reposition from social figure to be ancestor. Furthermore, ritual is also said as a performative act (Tambiah, 1985). It is a structured activities that are accepted collectively. From anthropolinguistic study,

language is not understood mainly as verbal discourse, but also as a wider social practice. Meaning can be built through actions, contexts, and social participations. Therefore, communication can be happening through gesture, actions, and the use of material things. Daily culture, as long as it has structure, rules, and meaning, is also ritual (Foley, 1997).

Contemporary linguistic study also emphasizes how important materiality in producing meaning. All material objects appear from social relation and the cultural interpretation and a system of sign (Keane, 2003). Furthermore, multimodal meaning can also be built from many semiotic mode apart from verbal language such as visual, space, colour, movement, and materiality. In term of Ngantukang Ajang, the composition of material things along with their direction form a unity that can be understood collectively by the society (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). The visual and sensorics matters are important to understand in cultural research (Pink, 2013).

Specifically, there are still limited studies discussing about the ritual of returning rights in the context of former leader and Subak leader who has passed away where the ritual like “Ngantukang Ajang” shows how Balinese society negotiates relation between the past respect, social responsibility, and spiritual repositioned through social practice. For instance, research conducted by Brahmandika (2025) analysing how ritual practice plays an important role in transmitting cultural values and local identity across generation. The finding shows that ritual language functions as a means of inherited norms and social legitimation, however, it has not specifically discussed how meaning is built through ritual things, spatial matters and non-verbal acts. Another research conducted by Putra et.al (2023) regarding “Ngaturang Idangan” showed offering, agricultural products, and acts of offering have spiritual function and religious value. Nevertheless, the focus of the study is still limited in term of theological dimension and religion. There was no analysis in the relationship between ritual object, social acts, and the construction of cultural value semiotically. In addition, in the context of ritual from North Bali, the study about “Nguliang Ajang” written by Suarsana, et.al.(2025) has shown that the ritual of symbolic returning has an important role in maintaining good relationship among families, ancestors and indigenous community. The gap lies in an absence of the construction of ritual stages and material things as cultural communication. Another semiotic study by Faizah (2025) who analysed the “Rudat” tradition in Bali has shown that movement, costumes, and performance in ritual are understood as a cultural sign. The focus was in the ritual artistic performance and has not touched the after-death ritual or the transition of social status after the decease. Another study conducted by Leny Sri Wahyuni (2025) entitled “Unveiling symbolic meaning: A Semiotic Analysis of ritual objects in the “Munggah Suwunan” tradition which analysed denotation, connotation, and mythology whereas it did not connect the relation between object, social participation, and non-verbal communication which would be the gap of this study. Similarly, Haydee D, et.al. (2023) examined ritual for honor to God to protection and prosperity while it did not specifically analyse how meaning is contrasted through rituals and how the stages of the ritual constructing meaning. Furthermore, a research done by Thonas Azagsiba Agana (2026) highlighted multimodal communication which can lead to knowledge transmission and also included performance during ritual, silence, and interaction with the nature. However, this focus was in the healing practices and the transmission of traditional knowledge without analyses on materials, rituals, and collective participation.

Accordingly, the gap becomes the main contribution of this research; to explain how “Ngantukang Ajang” functions as semiotic system of returning rights which is realized through object, acts, and collective participation. This study focuses on how linguistic signs through semiotic systems can construct meaning through the presence of ritual objects in the practice of “Ngantukang Ajang” which are addressed through material exchange such as rice, money, incense, sugar and 3 ritual stagings namely “Matur piuning”, “ngeragaang”, and “Peak

ceremony". The gap lies in connecting the cultural meanings through explicit verbalization and communication. The meaning is constructed through ritual practices and material objects revealed during the practice. Furthermore, this study also aims at examining three stages of representational phases as social and spiritual transformation. There is also an exploration of non-verbal communication within the community. Practically, this research will bring contribution to documentation of local knowledge in North Bali which is still underexplored

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study applied qualitative method with observational ethnographic to interpret how cultural meaning is constructed through ritual practice of ngantukang ajang in Bila Bajang, Buleleng, Bali. The focus was in the meaning interpretation, symbol, acts, and social interaction in cultural context. It aims at understanding meaning built by the individuals or communities (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This research was conducted in Bila Bajang, Buleleng, Bali as it has a unique practice of returning rights the former "Kelihan" subak. The main locations of the ritual include Desa Temple, Dalem Temple, Family temple, Subak temple, and the family's house. In qualitative research, the main instrument is in the data collection and data interpretation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this research, direct observation was done during the entire process without interrupting the ritual. Reflexivity was maintained so that the interpretation was not too subjective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The primary data was received by observation, note-taking, documentation, and informal dialogues with the ritual participants. Documentation was used to record the sequence of the offerings, position, ritual settings, and participant interaction. Visual ethnography helps capturing material and sensoric dimension which cannot usually caught by text (Pink, 2013). The informal dialogues were done naturally using structured questioner. It was picked to get a contextual data while at the same time, do not disturb the ritual itself. Ethnographic interview can help researcher to understand meaning through a natural interaction (Spradley, 1980). Then the secondary data was taken from Balinese literature, anthropolinguistic study, and semiotic study.

Data analyses was done thematically and interpretatively (Miles, Huberman, Saldana, 2014). Firstly, there was a selection of the relevant data including ritual stages, symbol, objects, and social acts. Then the data was arranged narratively, descriptively based on the theme categorization, and semiotic interpretation. Lastly, The analysis was done by using anthropological approach and cultural semiotics in order to see how ritual can create a system of returning rights.

The validity was achieved by data triangulation, prolonged engagement, thick description, and reflexivity. In the data triangulation, the observation was compared with the visual documentation, and informal interviews. The presence of the researcher in the entire process can lead to a deep context understanding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The thick description is used to make the reader understand the whole culture. While reflexivity is to reflect position and experience of the researcher.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

The "Ngantukang Ajang" ritual is regularly conducted by the Community of Bila Bajang, Buleleng, Bali when the former of "Kelihan Subak" has passed away and has been passed through

cremation (Ngaben) ceremony. The deceased is no longer an active leader in Subak (water irrigation system). Since during his lifetime, he had received ritual entitlements (agricultural products) such as rice, sugar, incense, meat, and sesari (money), this ritual is the process of returning the rights.

In holding the ritual of “Ngantukang Ajang”, there are three stages conducted started from “Matur Piuning”, “ngeragaang”, ended with “Peak ritual” whereas each stage encode a different phase of social and spiritual transition together hold a sequential transformation of meaning. Some materials or objects are involved throughout the ritual which was said to be non-verbal communication or communication without dialogues. They are rice, money, incense sticks, traditional plate, and even holy water, suckling pig, and offerings.

## Discussion

### Semiotic Systems of Returning Rights



Figure 1. Family Procession to Subak Temple

The observation shows that “ngantukang ajang” is a sequence of actions done by community of Subak to respect ancestor and to communicate the process of returning rights socially, spiritually, and symbolically. From the anthropolinguistics perspective, ritual is known as a cultural communication form whose meaning is built through harmony of acts, materials, spaces, and participants, not merely from verbal discourse (Duranti, 1997).

From the semiotic view, ritual meaning is not only attached inherently on the object or acts, but also is born through their correlation as understood collectively. In the context of “ngantukang ajang”, all stages (“matur piuning”, “ngeragaang”, and peak ceremony) form a sign which is collectively understood by the Subak community as a process of completion of rights of the deceased (Geertz, 1973).

The meaning is not explicitly mentioned, but constructed through the calling of the deceased soul, the arrangements of the offerings, the handover of rights, and the returning of the symbolic soul to the family temple. It rises a status transition; from social figure to ancestor who has been released from his material matters and rights.

In addition, the returning rights concept is also a symbolic exchange and has three moral obligation (giving, accepting, and returning) whereas giving will create a social relation tying the giver and the receiver (Mauss, 1967). Ngantukang Ajang is a cultural mechanism to close reciprocal cycle.



Figure 2. “Banten Ajang” (The Offerings)

### The Construction of Meanings in the Three Stages

There are three stages in the “Ngantukang Ajang” ritual namely “Matur Piuning”, “ngeragaang”, ended with “Peak ritual”. “Matur Piuning” in Balinese words means “asking for permission” that Balinese people do in the temple before conducting an activity and ask for blessing. This is the first stage of “Ngantukang Ajang” which is performed in the family temple,

and “Kahyangan Tiga” temples (Desa, Dalem, and Puseh temple). During this stage, the closest family members are involved and communicate their intention to the ancestors and Gods to perform the ritual. It is a ritual act of authorization establishing ritual legitimacy. The communication is done through offerings (flowers, water, fruits, incense, meats, coconuts) in front of the temple by the trusted holy person (Jro Mangku) in the village. This act indicates that legitimation is distributed across spiritual domains which can be seen from repetitive acts in different location. The absence of verbal negotiation highlights that the intention, values, and meanings are conveyed through ritual movement and spatial sequencing as a collective acknowledgement of the ritual.

“Ngeragaang”, the second phase of Ngantukang Ajang” is derived from word “raga” which means body. Nge-ang is Balinese infixation to form a verb. Therefore, the meaning of “ngeragaang” itself means to form a body. During this step, the deceased soul which is previously worshipped in “sanggah” (Family temple), is brought back by a decorated “bokor” (traditional big bowl) as a symbol of the deceased body. Besides, it semiotically indicates that the deceased is placed and positioned one more time in the community network. The decorated “bokor” is placed on a table mainly called “Bale banten” for one full day. The villagers, community member of Subak Temple, the families then come approaching the deceased , offer ritual materials and items such as rice, incense, eggs, sugar, and “sesari” (money).



Figure 3. Offerings from the Villagers in Front of the Decorated Bokor  
They are representation of a temporary materialization of the deceased within the social space. Some of them greet the deceased as if he still alive and treated like human-beings served with coffee, tea, water, fruits, cakes, snacks, cigarettes, and flowers. Then they perform prayer.



Figure 4. Villagers Participating in the Ritual

This collective participation is an act of acknowledgement of past social ties and reaffirmation of spiritual connection. During this stage, the engagement among the people involved arises. Together it creates harmony suggesting that the practice is held both spiritually and socially.

The peak ceremony is the final redistribution and spiritual repositioning held one day after “ngeragaang” and on the day when “Subak Temple” holds an annual ceremony. From the Anthropolinguistics perspective, it is the peak of the collective semiotic practice where social, spiritual, and cultural meaning are constructed through ritual acts, materials, spaces, and community participation. Meaning is not verbally presence; instead, there is a repeated social act (Duranti, 1997). The first part is when the holy person (Pemangku) offers the offerings (Ajang). In this context, it is a semiotic media representing the return of ritual rights of the deceased. Ritual things have meaning because of its position in the cultural practice (Geertz, 1973). The offering (Banten ajang) in this ritual functions as representation of reciprocal relationship between the individu and community and it is also a symbol that the social rights have been

completed. “Pemangku” is the legitimate actor that connect spiritual beings with human beings. This presence is collectively recognized by the Balinese people (Tambiah, 1985). Bokor, held by the family member, is then placed at the front of the Ajang offering, and as the center of the ritual because it is a representation of the deceased.



Figure 5. “Banten Ajang” (The Offerings”) at Subak Temple

In anthropological perspective, ritual materials like bokor is the form of material discourse and an object which conveys meaning through position, function, and relation (Foley, 1997). It is a sign that the deceased is the subject in this social process as he is greeted, respected, and repositioned. Most importantly, it is the center of communication between families, community, and ancestor. Another important part of the ritual is pendet dance followed by the handing over of “tirta” (holy water) given by the male dancer to the female dancer. It is symbol of duality and fertility. Pendet dance is known as a welcome dance representing to welcome a new status and leave the old one. Meanwhile, the handing over of “tirta” symbolically means that there is a balance between masculinity and femininity. In Bali cosmology, it is a living continuity. Water also represents a regeneration cycle. The peak stage happens when the handover procession done between the family of the deceased and the present “Kelihan subak” (head of Subak). The family handovers offerings, agricultural products, suckling pig, and “sesari” (money). This is an institutional communication formed by a thing and an act, not by a verbal discourse and a sign of transfer of rights and obligation.



Figure 6. The Handover Procession

The community also accept the status shift and accept the continuity of the status. It is also known as a non-verbal speech act (Duranti, 1997). The offering of agricultural products and suckling pig represents the agrarian significance of the ritual as subak community is linked to land, harvest, and agriculture. Hence, these objects are not only offerings, but rather symbols representing the deceased connection to the Subak socio-ecological system. The last stage is prayer and placement of the “bokor” into the family temple. It is a model of reality (Geertz, 1973) as it is a mechanism of a new social reality which states that the deceased is formally shifted into ancestor. He was given back to its former spiritual space.

### **Linguistics Sign Represented Through Material Objects**

Through the observation, it is found that there are some ritual objects involved in the practice as a form of non-verbal language. They are rice, “sesari”, incense sticks, “bokor”, “banten ajang”, “tirta”, agricultural products, and “be guling”. In agrarian culture, rice is a symbol of continuity and fertility. In term of “ngantukang ajang” ceremony held by “Subak” temple, it is the main representation of collective works. Then, “sesari” or money is a form of

respect and a recognition of service done by the deceased during his life. Another material object is incense sticks and “bokor”. From anthropolinguistic perspective, incense sticks are form of indexical sign whereas the smoke and the fragrance are clues to the presence of invisible spirits. “Bokor” can be seen as a form of symbolic embodiment where this object represents meaning visually as family members will focus on it as it is a medium to place the soul of the deceased. It is the central communicative medium. Furthermore, the most central object is “banten ajang”. Semiotically, “banten” is understood by the community even when it is not explained verbally. It is interpreted by the shape, color, combination, and the placement. Besides, coconut leaves, fruits, cookies, flowers, and many elements in banten is a representation of harmony and equality. As a complement, “Tirta” is a medium to transfer sacred energy. The water itself is used to purification. While some other agricultural products are offered to Subak community as a symbol of collective work and gratitude. Lastly, The suckling pig is used to complete the offering and the highest offering.



Figure 7. Material Objects

## CONCLUSION

The “Ngantukang Ajang” ritual shows that cultural meaning is not merely built through verbal discourse, but also through ritual acts, material objects, spatial objects, and collective participation. As a returning rights, “Ngantukang Ajang” functions as semiotic system which rearranges the social and spiritual relation among the deceased, families, and subak community. It is a mark of how the deceased who was once an active holder of social authority became an ancestral figure whose presence is symbolically remembered through materials and objects. Moreover, the “ngantukang ajang” ritual proposes distributional unattachment of the former “Kelihan Subak” (head of water irrigation system organisation) which is realised through symbolic exchanges of ritual objects and materials. Through three stages- “matur pinuning”, “ngeragaang”, and The peak ceremony, there is a symbolic process which sequentially releases the ritual rights of the deceased as the former Head of Subak and repositions his status as ancestor. This study confirms that ritual objects such as “bokor” (a ritual bowl), rice, “sesari”, “banten” (offering), and “tirta” (holy water) are not only as complement of the ritual, but also as the media of communication to express respect, reciprocal relation, meaning-making, and the completion of social responsibilities. In addition, reciprocal relation, duty, and responsibility are not communicated through spoken languages but through non-verbal ones using semiotic resources, where the community participation throughout the process indicate validation of the symbolic transfer and solidarity

Theoretically, this study widens the anthropolinguistic study by showing the ritual practice which can be understood by the non-verbal discourse structurally arranged. Practically, this study contributes to the documentation of Balinese local knowledge, especially the ritual tradition of Subak, as an important part of cultural heritage which is still alive in the society.

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