

Conference Paper

Buffalo Head Cutting in the Procession of *Ngunduh Swallow's Nest*

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ORCID:Karen Hardini: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6245-5690>**Abstract**

Ngunduh is a tradition followed by the communities in Karangbolong, Kebumen. There are several kinds of *Ngunduh*, and one of them is *Ngunduh sarang burung walet* (swallow's nest). One of the processions includes cutting the buffalo's head, since the communities believe that buffalo can be a strength for them, and that cutting its head can transfer the buffalo's power to them as well as reinforce the community to face the problems in conducting *Ngunduh sarang burung walet* (swallow's nest). The meat is also considered helpful in preventing disasters or dreadful things (known as *Tolak Bala*). The *carameat* (buffalo meat) is edible and cooked before consumption.

Keywords: buffalo head, *Ngunduh swallow's nest*, Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory

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Published: 1 March 2021

Publishing services provided by

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Selection and Peer-review under

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1. Introduction

Tradition is a heritage passed down by the ancestors and conducted continuously from generation to generation. It is adjusted to the societies' behaviour and environmental condition, especially for the Javanese people (Farela, 2017: 105; Yudoseputro, 2008: 12). In the coastal area of Kebumen Regency, there is a tradition called *Selamatan* (a communal feast that symbolizes the social unity of those participating in it) conducted before doing *Ngunduh*. *Ngunduh* is defined by the local people as harvesting the swallow nests, or also called as *Ngunduh sarang burung walet* (swallow's nest). This tradition is conducted by the societies in Karang Bolong, Buayan District, Kebumen Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. Karang Bolong is located near the Javanese's Southern Sea, where thousands of swallows can be found in the caves near the beaches. The societies believe that someone's destiny is determined by efforts, prays, and actions, that will affect their good and bad luck (obtained from the interview with the foreman). *Ngunduh* was conducted in extreme place, and the Javanese people's belief becomes the main background in preserving this tradition.

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The processes of *Ngunduh sarang burung walet* (swallow's nest) cannot be separated with the power of natures. Since the societies believe that they have to respect and preserve the natures, every tradition process should be conducted within its permission, and the societies conducted buffalo head cutting as a form of respect and permission request to the God and Queen of the Southern Sea. When the societies have conducted buffalo head cutting as a *Ngunduh* procession, the societies must conduct another requirement, such as giving ritual offering. Ritual offering is manifested as a form of grateful expression and willingly presented to the God (Wahyana Giri, 2009). The ritual of buffalo head cutting is a form of syncretism, built with animism and dynamism by the Muslim, Hindus, and Buddhists. Meanwhile, there is another procession called *Selamatan*, a communal feast that symbolize the social unity of those participating in it. *Selamatan* is an acculturation of Islam, Hindu, and Buddha; even though it was an acculturation of Islam, but it has obtained several influences from Hindu and Buddha.

As the development of several religions in Indonesia, the cultures are developed as well, including the cultures in the coastal area of Kebumen Regency. One of the cultures is *selamatan*. *Selamatan* is originated from the word *selamat* and the Javanese people believe that everything happens for a reason, so do the societies in Karang Bolong (KBBI; Soehardi, 1986: 38). *Selamatan* is a local tradition in Java that has a special procession called *Ngunduh sarang walet* (swallow nest), by conducting buffalo head cutting. It has been being conducted since the ancient time, since the Javanese people believe in Animism, or a belief that all inanimate objects have spirit and soul; while Dynamism refers to a belief in the magic powers possessed by humans, plants, animals, and amulets (Budiono cited in Farela (2017: 59). The societies in Karangbolong keep preserving this tradition since they believe that Karangbolong beach is kept by a Queen of South Sea. Hence, the societies give a high respect to the Queen of the Southern Sea (supernatural being).

This ritual aims to invite the spirits in order to reinforce the societies by conducting the ceremony and giving ritual offering. One of the main processions in giving ritual offering is by conducting buffalo head cutting. In the ancient time, buffalo was an animal that helps the humans and has a great strength. Hence, those who are responsible with the *Ngunduh* procession tradition should take care of themselves, since this tradition is conducted in the Southern Sea that has big waves and cliffs. When *Ngunduh* and ritual offering procession are conducted, the societies believe that the spirits of the ancestors are also attending the procession in order to make the procession run well (Paramithawati, 2010; Farela 2017).

In line with the Javanese philosophy, it is stated that God is considered as *Sangkan Paraning Dumadi* and *manungso*, or efforts to be back to the God, either physically or spiritually (Sardjono, 1995: 24; Purwadi, 2005). In order to learn the religious life deeply, the Javanese people usually conduct various rituals. Every important event is celebrated by conducting a traditional ceremony, without differentiating the religion in order to be blessed by *Gusti* (Lord), and buffalo head cutting is a form of the societies' effort in order to be faithful to God's blessing.

In *Ngunduh* ritual, animal (buffalo) is considered as the main and irreplaceable offering, since it has a strong historical and spiritual power, especially in the buffalo's head and legs. Therefore, the study was began by explaining buffalo head cutting in *Ngunduh* procession based on semiology approach proposed by Roland Barthes. This research aims to analyse the meanings contained in the visual signs of the ritual, by using semiotics analysis method proposed by Roland Barthes.

1.1. Buffalo head cutting and Ronald Barthes' theory

The procession of buffalo head cutting is analysed based on Roland Barthes' theory, by analysing the visual signs of *Ngunduh sarang burung walet* (swallow nest) tradition conducted by the societies in Karang Bolong (Sobur, 2013: 63, cited by Nurhayati and Kusuma). The researcher aimed to examine the denotative and connotative levels of meanings, and myth contained in the visual signs of the tradition. The first level of meaning is called as Denotation, while the second level of meaning is called as Connotation. Denotation is a literal or direct meaning, while connotation is an implied or indirect meaning contained in the signs. The explanation is as follows (See Figure 1).

Buffalo head (<i>signifier</i>)	The concept of buffalo head cutting shows that the head is cut and separated from its head, body, and legs; and the prayers are recited (<i>signified</i>)
The process of buffalo head cutting (<i>denotative sign</i>)	
When the buffalo's head is cut off, its brain is taken and the sense has been lost. After that, other parts of buffalo's body can be taken. Those parts can be shared to the committees, in order to be cooked. Buffalo's legs are used to keep its great strength that controls the buffalo's body and head. (<i>signifier</i>)	A symbol of strength, prosperity, and gratitude at the same time, as well as asking for God and Queen of the Southern Sea's permission before conducting <i>Ngunduh</i> procession (<i>signified</i>)
The meaning of buffalo head cutting process (<i>connotative sign</i>)	

Figure 1: Roland Barthes' map of sign.

Barthes' third theory is about myth. In this case, the myth refers to *Ngunduh* ritual conducted continuously by the societies in Karang Bolong, and in the societies' mind, it has been passed from the ancestors to the next generation. In addition, it is caused by social and cultural influences given by the societies, and they believe that the spirits of the ancestors help them in conducting *Ngunduh*, by analysing the correlation between what signs that can be directly seen (denotative) and what signs are implied (connotative) in the procession of *Ngunduh sarang burung walet (swallow nest)*. Furthermore, this tradition is developed as a myth in understanding the natures, and when conducting the ritual, the societies are calm and safe (Sunardi, 2004:89). As a result, the myths reveal the religious ideology possessed by the societies in conducting buffalo head cutting as one of *Ngunduh* processions in Karang Bolong, Kebumen Regency, Indonesia.

1.2. Buffalo in Javanese civilization

Buffalo is considered as the most valuable animal and raised by Indonesian people. This animal has very significant social and cultural values. Buffalo is also believed as a noble animal, especially by the societies in certain regions, such as Java and Tana Toraja, Sulawesi Selatan. In traditional Javanese's rites, buffalo is considered as an asset for the farmers, since buffalo reflects the power of agriculture as a symbol of persistence and prosperity. Thus, buffalo can be called as a 'sign of movement' in Javanese civilization.

Buffalo is a breed of Bovidae family, and it was bred in India, Malaysia, and Egypt. A docile buffalo called *Bubalus bubalis* was originating in Indus valley around 4,500 years ago, before it was bred to China (about 3,500 years ago). One of the kinds of docile buffalos is called Water Buffalo, which lives in tropical and sub-tropical areas. The names are also different in several countries, such as: *Bhains* in India, *Karabue* or *Kwai* in Thailand, *Carabao* in Philippine, *Karbo* in Malaysia, and *Buffalo* in Indonesia (Wiradnyana, 2011: 203). Development of religions (Hindu-Buddhist-Islam) and Javanese people's belief have made buffalo as a sacred animal are part of the history of the use of buffalo as a ritual offering. The buffalo is also framed in the old reliefs in Borobudur Temple and wall paintings in Sulawesi. This indicates that buffalo's roles in hunting, farming, and agriculture civilization has existed since ancient time. In the ancient time, buffalo is a role model in teaching moral lesson and character, especially for the Indonesian society. Buffalo is also told in many folk tales as the role model in teaching moral values.

Brian, et al (2017) stated that the societies then views buffalo from two aspects, which are physical and non-physical aspects. Regarding the physical aspect, buffalo has more

socio-economic meaning, while on the non-physical aspect, buffalo has a symbolic meaning. Hence, buffalo gives significant contributions in various aspects, including socio-economic, law, religious, and so on. Thus, those concepts has made buffalo a holy animal and a source of magical power in order to expel any evil and bad spirits since buffalo it is used as the sacrifice (known as *kurban*) in ritual offering and death ceremonies (Wiradnyana, 2011: 209).

2. Method

The researcher implemented a qualitative method by documenting the procession of *Ngunduh* and ritual offering as well as the locations. Audio-visual recordings as the results of the interviews with Mr. Samsir and Mr. Parsimin (the foreman) and Mrs. Saltiah (the locksmith) are also used. It aimed to find out the historical phenomena in choosing buffalo as a holy animal in ritual offering and *Ngunduh sarang burung walet* (swallows' nest) (Sachari, 2005: 135, Moleong, 2012: 6).

Furthermore, the discussion is elaborated through a description of how a buffalo has been considered sacred by the Javanese (such as in *Ngunduh* procession), the procedures of buffalo head cutting ceremony, ritual offering, and *Selamatan*. The discussions are conducted systematically to describe the ritual process based on Ronald Barthes' approach about level of meanings: denotative and connotative meaning, and the myths believed by the societies in Karangbolong (Suryabrata: 2008, Prastowo: 2012, Sunardi: 2004). *Ngunduh* is a subject of this research, while the material object is buffalo head ritual offering, and the formal object is the meaning contained in the buffalo head cutting procession.

3. Findings and Discussions

3.1. The analysis of buffalo head cutting based on Barthes' theory

TABLE 1: Parts of the buffalo's cut procession.

Code		The visual sign of buffalo's cutting
K1	Head	Its eyes, nose, tongue, horns, and head bones were separated and crashed in order to be given to the foreman.
B1, B2	Body	Cutting off the carameat and buffalo's tail in order to be shared to the societies.
K2,K3	Legs	1 buffalo's front leg and 1 buffalo's hind legs as the ritual offering presented to the Queen of the Southern Sea (<i>Ratu Kidul</i>).

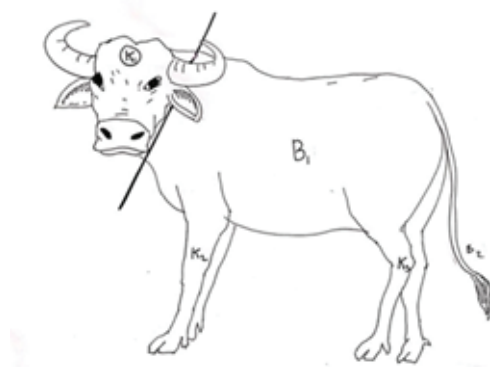


Figure 2: A sketch of buffalo head cutting process (Karen, 2020).

This tradition is conducted based on Javanese spirituality, by offering buffalo in sacrifices and other holy days. This is conducted as a form of harmony between nature, human, and God. *Ngunduh* is conducted four times a year based on the event of: 4 *tumangsa karo* (dry season), in the first 120 days of the first month, 60 days after *mangsa kapapat*, 60 days after *mangsa kapitu*, and 120 days after *mangsa kasanga* (Javanese people's beliefs). Those are the seasons where swallows fly away from their nests and they can be harvested easily. In addition, based on Javanese cultures and low tide, dry season is an appropriate time to conduct *Ngunduh* ritual.

Buffalo head cutting as the ritual offering is a very important aspect in the *Ngunduh* procession. Each part of the buffalo's body has its own function, such as head (K1), body (B1, B2), and legs (K2, K3), containing denotative and connotative symbols that make the buffalo irreplaceable (See Figure 2).

3.1.1. Denotative meaning

This procedure is conducted in the Friday morning by the slaughter and several committees. The buffalo chosen for this tradition is a bull (male buffalo), especially the healthy ones. Male is a symbol of courage and strength, since *Ngunduh* procession took place in steep cliffs at Karang Bolong. The denotative meaning of buffalo in the procession includes Head (K1); eyes, nose, tongue, ears were cut into small pieces and the bones of the head were crushed and distributed to foreman. The bodies (B1, B2); in form of carameat and cooked with spices as the main menu in *Selamatan*, and its tail and head is cooked as the offering for the Queen of the Southern Sea. Meanwhile, buffalo's legs (K2, K3); (front and back) is another important offering for the keeper.

3.1.2. Connotative meaning

The buffalo is considered a symbol of the great strength possessed by the small community. Buffalo is also considered as a symbol of prosperity, strength, and persistence by the farmers, since the buffalo helps them to plough fields, as the assets, and part of Javanese culture. In addition, buffalo is also offered in a sacrifice, as one of the obligations or faiths to the God. Each part of buffalo's body has its own sacred symbol that form the religious system of the societies in Karang Bolong, in order to be united systematically (Geertz, 1995: 53).

Meanwhile, the connotative meanings of buffalo head cutting are as follows: (1) The head (K1) is cut off first, since its brain is taken and the sense will be lost. After that, other parts of buffalo's body can be taken. In addition, since the head is on top, it should be given to the elders or the committees. Since the head contains a brain that controls the animal's body, the people believe that it is a place for God and the ancestral spirits that will bring great strength and avoid disasters or dreadful things (called as *tolak bala*) when conducting *Ngunduh*. (2) Bodies (B1, B2) for all societies that help the procession of *Ngunduh*, while the carameat is cooked in order to obtain the blessings. (3) Legs (K2, K3), 1 front leg and 1 hind leg as the symbols of strength that control the body and head. Since they are considered as the symbols of strength, it reinforces the societies in climbing the cliffs and facing the waves when conducting *Ngunduh* swallow nest in order to avoid any danger.

Since buffalo's head is used for the ritual offering, it aimed to invite the spirits of the ancestors in order to help the societies. The buffalo also becomes a symbol of the relationship between humans and God, the harmony between humans, and all elements in the universe that are maintained by giving the ritual offering.

4. Conclusion

The societies in Karang Bolong believe that buffalo head cutting ritual will give them virtue and safety. Since the buffalo is sacrificed in ritual offering, it symbolizes the strength of their ancestors that can help the societies in conducting *Ngunduh* procession and prevent disasters or dreadful things. Thus, the societies can enjoy the harvests of the swallow nest, which are valuable and beneficial for their lives.

The denotative meaning of buffalo head cutting is a form of offering to God and a form of human's faith to Him. The separation of buffalo's head and body is conducted by reciting a prayer, and the bodies are cut into pieces in order to be cooked and served

as the main dish in *Selamatan*. Meanwhile, the connotative meaning of the buffalo head cutting procession symbolizes the harmony between the God's creatures, humans, and all elements in the universe, maintained by conducting a ritual offering.

This myth is believed since they have faith to the supernatural being and universe. Meanwhile, the ideology conveyed in *Ngunduh* ritual is a religious ideology to reinforce the human's faith, safety, blessings, and gratitude expression to the God.

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