Indexing Morality: Ritual Language and the Construction of Moral Identity in the Katoba Ceremony

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how ritual language functions as a semiotic mechanism for constructing moral identity in the Katoba ceremony in Southeast Sulawesi. While previous research has explored language and morality, localized ritual practices in non-Western contexts remain underrepresented. To address this gap, this study adopts a qualitative, discourse-based approach grounded in semiotic theory, indexicality, and Systemic Functional Linguistics to analyze selected ritual utterances. The findings show that moral identity is constructed through recurring linguistic patterns that index coherence between belief, speech, and action. Triadic expressions linking heart, tongue, and behavior serve as key structures in defining moral personhood. In addition, ritual language encodes moral transformation through structured stages of repentance, establishes ethical boundaries through distinctions between lawful and unlawful conduct, and reinforces hierarchical social relations, particularly within the family. These linguistic forms operate not only as representations but also as performative and indexical signs that actively shape moral understanding and social positioning. The study demonstrates that moral identity in the Katoba ritual emerges dynamically through participation in culturally embedded discourse, reflecting the interaction between religious values and local linguistic practices

Keywords: ritual language, moral identity, indexicality, Katoba ceremony, semiotics

I. Introduction

Ritual language has long been recognized as a central medium through which communities articulate and sustain moral order. In linguistic anthropology and semiotics, language is not merely a vehicle for conveying meaning but a system of signs that actively shapes social reality (Halliday, 1978). Meaning is produced through processes of signification that link linguistic forms to wider cultural values. At the same time, the indexical nature of language allows utterances to signal social identities and moral positions. It also enables language to point to and reinforce

relations of authority within a community (Silverstein, 1976). Within this perspective, ritual discourse constitutes a privileged site for examining how language operates not only to communicate belief but also to construct socially recognizable forms of personhood.

Several researches have explored the relationship between language and morality across religious and cultural contexts. Studies on discourse have demonstrated that moral values are often encoded in recurring linguistic patterns that regulate behavior and reinforce communal norms (Hao & Hood, 2019; Puspitasari et al., 2021) . Similarly, research on ritual language has shown that formulaic expressions do not simply transmit belief systems but enact them, positioning participants within particular moral and social roles (Alvesson & Berg, 2011; Helman, 1990; Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001). Together, these studies underscore that language functions not merely as a representational system but as a moral and social practice through which communities construct, negotiate, and sustain shared values and identities across contexts.

The concept of indexicality has been particularly important in showing that linguistic forms do more than convey literal meanings. They also signal speakers' alignment with moral values, authority structures, and shared identities. In this way, language functions as a semiotic resource through which social positions and collective affiliations are continuously constructed and recognized (Silverstein, 1976). In addition, Systemic Functional Linguistics has provided analytical tools for understanding how language simultaneously represents experience, enacts interpersonal relations, and organizes discourse, making it particularly useful for analyzing the multifunctional nature of ritual speech (Halliday, 1978).

However, existing scholarship has tended to privilege institutional or large-scale religious frameworks, often giving less attention to localized ritual practices in non-Western communities (Stacey, 2024). As a result, there is still limited understanding of how global religious concepts are recontextualized within local cultural frameworks and articulated through indigenous or local languages (Hamidah & Dungcik, 2024). In the Indonesian context, particularly in Eastern Indonesia, ritual discourse continues to shape moral values, social attitudes, and communal identity, yet such discourse remains comparatively understudied in

international scholarship on language, discourse, and semiotics (Baan et al., 2022).

This gap is important because local rituals often reveal complex negotiations between religious doctrine and cultural tradition, making them rich sites for examining how moral meanings are produced, transmitted, and interpreted.

The Katoba ritual, practiced in Southeast Sulawesi, offers a compelling context for addressing this gap. Katoba is a traditional initiation ritual of the Muna people performed for boys and girls aged approximately seven to fourteen. It is understood as a ritual of repentance and moral-religious instruction through which children are guided toward proper conduct and spiritual purification (Zainal et al., 2024). As a rite of moral and spiritual initiation, Katoba involves structured forms of discourse that integrate religious teachings with locally embedded linguistic expressions (Sarmadan et al., 2020). Central to this discourse are formulations concerning the nature of sin, the process of repentance, distinctions between lawful and unlawful conduct, and ethical obligations governing social relations, particularly within the family. These formulations are not merely descriptive; rather, they function as indexical signs that guide participants in aligning their inner states (heart), verbal expressions (speech), and outward behaviors (action) with culturally sanctioned moral values.

In this study, the main question is: how does ritual language in the Katoba ceremony not only express moral values, but also help build moral identity through indexical processes? More specifically, how do certain words and expressions in the ritual show moral meanings? What language patterns are used to shape and strengthen moral identity? And how are these processes connected to wider social and cultural structures? To answer these questions, this study goes beyond simply describing ritual content. Instead, it examines language as a semiotic tool that connects belief, practice, and social order.

This study employs a qualitative discourse-based design. The data consist of selected ritual utterances from the Katoba ceremony. The utterances were examined using semiotic analysis, indexicality, and Systemic Functional Linguistics to identify recurring linguistic patterns and their moral meanings.

By bringing together insights from semiotics, indexicality, and functional approaches to language, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how moral life is linguistically constructed in local ritual contexts. It highlights the importance of examining indigenous discourse not only as a reflection of cultural values but as an active mechanism through which those values are continuously formed and negotiated.

II. Discussion

2.1 Indexing Moral Coherence through Ritual Language

The analysis shows that ritual language in the Katoba ceremony constructs moral identity by indexing coherence between internal belief and external behavior. A central formulation in the data—*Iman diyakini dalam hati, diucapkan dengan lisan, dan diwujudkan dalam perbuatan* [faith is believed in the heart, spoken through the tongue, and enacted through actions]—functions as a key semiotic structure through which moral personhood is articulated. Rather than merely restating religious doctrine, this triadic formulation operates indexically by linking inner states, linguistic expression, and observable conduct into a unified moral framework. In linguistic anthropology, indexicality is central to explaining how linguistic forms point to broader social meanings, while discourse-based studies of morality show that moral identities are accomplished through language and through the indexical invocation of culturally recognizable models of personhood and action (Moore, 2020) .

A parallel structure is evident in the classification of moral failure as originating from the heart, the tongue, and actions. This tripartite pattern is consistent with the Katoba framework (Zainal et al., 2024) where repentance and moral accountability are linked to the heart, speech, and deeds, and where ritual teachings emphasize purification, honesty, proper conduct, and social responsibility.

Taken together, these recurring triadic formulations show that Katoba ritual discourse constructs moral personhood through the indexical alignment of inward belief, spoken language, and outward conduct.

2.2 Ritual Language as a Mechanism of Moral Transformation

Ritual language in the Katoba ceremony also indexes moral transformation through structured formulations of repentance. The *sequence "Penyesalan, pengakuan, dan menjauhkan diri dari perbuatan salah (regret, confession, and withdrawal from wrongdoing)"* presents repentance as a staged process, linguistically encoding a pathway from moral failure to moral restoration. Each stage is not only conceptually defined but also socially recognized through its articulation in ritual discourse.

The repentance formula in Katoba does not merely represent moral repair. It enacts a publicly recognizable trajectory of moral reorientation. By being recited, heard, and ratified in ritual interaction, the sequence positions participants within a path from wrongdoing to restoration and guides them toward becoming ethically accountable subjects. Katoba ritual discourse therefore reconstructs moral identity as an ongoing alignment of remorse, discipline, submission, and future conduct rather than as a fixed attribute possessed in advance.

2.3 Constructing Moral Boundaries: Halal, Haram, and Social Ethics

Another significant finding concerns the role of ritual language in establishing moral boundaries. The formulation *bahwa sesuatu harus halal dari zatnya, halal dari cara memperolehnya, dan halal dalam proses pengolahannya* [that something must be lawful in substance, lawful in the way it is obtained, and lawful in its preparation] shows that moral evaluation is directed not only toward objects themselves but also toward the processes and actions through which they are acquired and handled. In this sense, ritual language does not merely describe ethical standards. It helps communicate and reinforce socially recognized norms, since language framing plays an important role in shaping how norms are perceived and understood (Kuang & Bicchieri, 2024).

Similarly, the prohibition against taking another person's property without permission indexes a broader ethical principle concerning respect for social rights and interpersonal responsibility. Such formulations function as boundary-making devices that distinguish acceptable from unacceptable conduct within the community. This interpretation is consistent with studies showing that discourse

can operate as a form of moral order and social control (Björkenfeldt & Gustafsson, 2023) and with Indonesian research demonstrating that ritual discourse and local cultural expressions carry values that shape identity, social attitudes, and communal behavior (Gede Agung et al., 2024).

2.4 Indexing Moral Hierarchy and Social Relations

Ritual language in the Katoba ceremony further constructs moral identity by indexing hierarchical social relations within the family. The *statement Ridho Tuhan bergantung pada ridho orang tua* [God's approval depends on the approval of one's parents] positions parental authority as central to moral evaluation and frames obedience and respect toward parents as primary indicators of ethical conduct. This interpretation is consistent with recent research showing that filial piety emphasizes respect, obedience, and honor toward parents as moral norms governing family relations (Zheng et al., 2024)). The discourse also elevates the mother through narratives of pregnancy, childbirth, and caregiving, which function as moral signs that justify special ethical weight being assigned to maternal authority; this is in line with recent scholarship showing that motherhood is discursively constructed through caregiving expectations and self-sacrifice (Jilani, 2025).

At the same time, the obligation to respect older siblings and care for younger ones extends this moral hierarchy horizontally, organizing family relations into a structured network of duties and affections. It is supported by research showing that sibling relations are important sites of socialization, and by Indonesian studies demonstrating that ritual discourse carries values, shapes social attitudes, and contributes to character formation. Seen in this way, Katoba ritual discourse does not merely describe family roles but transforms them into binding moral obligations, so that moral identity emerges as relationally enacted through authority, care, obligation, and respect rather than as a purely individual attribute (Titz-Mohácsi & Széll, 2025).

2.5 Indexical Mediation of Moral Identity

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that ritual language in the Katoba ceremony functions as a system of indexical mediation through which moral identity

is constructed. Linguistic forms do not operate in isolation. They point to broader cultural values, religious beliefs, and social structures. The repeated use of triadic formulations, sequential processes, boundary-defining expressions, and hierarchical directives creates a dense network of signs that guide individuals in understanding and performing moral behavior (Kuang & Bicchieri, 2024).

Importantly, this process reflects an interaction between global and local elements. While many of the moral concepts, such as sin, repentance, and lawful conduct, are derived from religious teachings, their expression in locally embedded linguistic forms situates them within the cultural context of the Muna community. This demonstrates that moral identity is not simply transmitted from religious doctrine but is recontextualized and rearticulated through ritual language (Baan et al., 2022).

In this sense, the Katoba ritual exemplifies how language mediates the relationship between belief, practice, and social identity. Moral identity is not pre-existing but emerges through participation in semiotic processes that align individuals with culturally defined norms.

III. Conclusion

This study shows that ritual language in the Katoba ceremony functions as a key semiotic resource for constructing moral identity. The findings indicate that recurring linguistic patterns such as the alignment of belief, speech, and action; structured expressions of repentance; boundary-making concepts of lawful and unlawful conduct; and hierarchical formulations in family relations—do not merely represent moral values but actively shape them. Through these indexical processes, individuals are positioned within a coherent moral framework that connects personal conduct with broader cultural and religious norms. Thus, moral identity emerges dynamically through participation in ritual discourse rather than as a fixed attribute. This study highlights the importance of examining indigenous ritual language as an active mechanism of meaning-making and contributes to a deeper understanding of how moral life is linguistically constructed within local cultural contexts.

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