

The Religious Meaning of “*Kulut Kaet*” (Mourning Lament) in *Dawan* Ethnic in Nusa Village In East Nusa Tenggara: An Ethnographic Perspective Study

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Abstract

Kulut kaet, or mourning lament, is an important tradition in the *Dawan* ethnic community in South Central Timor District, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), which carries deep religious significance. It is more than just an expression of grief over loss, but also a means of honoring the spirit of the deceased and maintaining the connection between the living world and the spiritual world. This article aims to explore the religious significance of the *Kulut kaet* emphasizing the spiritual dimension of the mourning ritual. Through a qualitative and ethnographic approach, this study analyses how *Kulut kaet* functions as a form of respect for the spirits of the deceased, as a way of maintaining relationships with ancestors, as well as a collective healing mechanism for the *Dawan* community. The results show that *Kulut kaet* is not only an expression of personal grief, but also a ritual that involves the community in the process of grieving together. This lament becomes important in strengthening social solidarity, preserving traditions, and carrying out religious obligations as a tribute to the spirits of the deceased.

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INTRODUCTION

Mourning (*Kulut kaet*) is an emotional expression that arises in response to the loss of someone or something very precious. In many cultures, mourning is seen as one way to express grief and the process of deep mourning. This process is not only individual, but also involves social and cultural dimensions that play an important role in how a person copes with loss. Mourning can take various forms, from uncontrollable crying to social behavior that shows sadness. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969), John Bowlby, J. William Worden, and Arnold Van Gennep have developed theories explaining how the grieving process works and why expressions such as wailing are so important in this context. However, there are cultural and individual differences in how each person experiences and expresses their grief.

The *Dawan* community, as one of the main ethnic groups on Timor Island, has a belief system closely connected to nature and the spiritual world. They inhabit the inland region of South Central Timor and are known for their strong traditions and deeply rooted values toward ancestors (*nitu*) and the supreme God (*Uis Neno*). The *Dawan* way of life is based on the principle of collective solidarity, where the relationship between the living and the deceased is not an absolute separation but a spiritual and ritualistic connection. The tradition of *Kulut kaet* or mourning lament arises within the cultural structure of the *Dawan* society as a form of emotional transcendence toward spiritual

communication. In many ways, this lament also functions as a cultural bridge that maintains continuity between customary values and the evolving religious system in the modern context, including interactions with Christianity brought by missionaries in the early 20th century. Historically, this tradition is closely related to religious practices in the form of oral tradition such as boin nitu, a sacred chant accompanying death ceremonies. These oral expressions not only accompany the deceased but also serve as a cosmological narrative of death from the Dawan perspective: describing how the soul journeys to the 'other land,' the spirit realm or the domain inhabited by the ancestors.

Kulut kaet or what is known as mourning lamentation, is a very important tradition in the Dawan ethnic community in Nusa Village, Amanuban Barat Subdistrict, South Central Timor Regency, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). This tradition holds deep religious significance, where mourning lamentations are not merely expressions of sorrow over loss but also serve as a means to honor the spirit of the deceased. For the Dawan community, *Kulut kaet* or mourning lamentations are an integral part of religious rituals with spiritual dimensions, aimed at maintaining the connection between the physical and spiritual worlds.

"*Kulut kaet*" or mourning involves not only the bereaved family, but also the community, which provides emotional and spiritual support. This process is regulated by rituals that connect the life of the deceased with the life of the living, and help those left behind to go through the grieving process. "*Kulut kaet*" or mourning serves as a way to convey prayers, respect, and hopes for the soul of the deceased to find peace in the afterlife.

This research offers a new contribution to the study of culture and religiosity in Indonesia, particularly in relation to the *Dawan* ethnic community in Nusa Village, West Amanuban District, South Central Timor Regency, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). *Kulut kaet* (mourning lamentation) as a religious ritual involving deep expressions of sorrow has not been extensively explored in the context of its religious and spiritual meanings. The uniqueness of this research lies in its emphasis that *Kulut kaet* (mourning lamentation) is not merely a form of emotional expression but also a means through which individuals and communities interact with the spiritual world to maintain connections with the spirits of the deceased. Additionally, this study reveals a broader dimension of collective healing within the *Dawan* community in Nusa Village, Amanuban Barat Sub-district, South Central Timor Regency, through the *Kulut kaet* (mourning lamentation) ritual, where not only the grieving individual but the entire community plays a role in providing emotional and spiritual support. In this context, this article introduces the understanding that mourning in the context of *Kulut kaet* or mourning lamentations is not solely focused on personal grief but also reflects social solidarity and the importance of inter-community relationships in preserving existing traditions and religious values. By examining *Kulut kaet* or mourning rituals through the lens of religious and spiritual rituals, this research offers a new perspective on how the *Dawan* community copes with loss and undergoes the mourning process, as well as highlighting the relevance of local culture in preserving traditional wisdom in the modern era.

Previous structural approaches to research have not sufficiently addressed the religious and emotional aspects of rituals. Changes in tradition and how the "*Kulut kaet*" ritual adapts or survives amid the influence of modernity and major religions. Individual emotional experiences in the context of mourning have not been sufficiently explored. The influence of religion and religious beliefs can be part of an in-depth study of these rituals. The novelty of this topic lies in how the (*Kulut kaet*) mourning ritual in the *Dawan* community in Nusa Village is not only seen as a cultural practice but also as a social, religious, emotional, and psychological phenomenon that binds the community in the context of local religious power, tradition, and modernity. This research offers new insights into how this ritual adapts to changing times and how the *Dawan* community maintains their cultural identity in the face of various social and religious challenges. This paper aims to explore and explain the religious meaning of *Kulut kaet* (mourning lamentation) in the *Dawan* ethnic group in Nusa Village, West Amanuban District, South Central Timor Regency, which includes: (1) Explaining how *Kulut kaet* or mourning lamentations

function as part of religious rituals that honor the spirits of the deceased, (2) Examining the spiritual dimensions contained in the tradition of *Kulut kaet* or mourning lamentations in the Dawan community, (3) Presenting an understanding of how this tradition strengthens the relationship between the living and the deceased within the spiritual framework of the Dawan community. The structural approach is an objective approach that emphasizes that literary works are autonomous objects. Therefore, to obtain objective analysis results, literary works should be treated as target objects without involving other factors outside the work. The concept of structure is explained by Lane (1970: 24) as follows: "A structure is any elements between which or between certain subsets of which, relations are defined." Rene Welles and Austin Warren (1962: 141) explain the concept of structure as follows: Structure is a concept including both content and form as far as they are organized for aesthetic purposes. The work of art is then considered a whole system of signs, or structure of signs, serving a specific aesthetic purpose. Within this framework, *Kulut kaet* becomes more than just an emotional crying lament. It serves as a performative space where spiritual meaning, social relations, and cultural expression converge. This lamentation is not only for the deceased but also for the living-for healing and for maintaining harmony between the mortal world and the supernatural realm.

METHOD

The method used in this study is qualitative with an ethnographic approach. This study focuses on direct observation of the implementation of *Kulut kaet* or mourning rituals in the lives of the *Dawan* people in Nusa Village, West Amanuban District, South Central Timor Regency. The participants in this study consisted of traditional leaders, religious leaders, and community members involved in the morning ritual.

The data was obtained through in-depth interviews with traditional leaders, religious leaders, and community members involved in the morning ritual. In addition, observations of the ritual in the field and literature reviews were also conducted to explore the religious meaning contained in this tradition in greater depth.

The results of these observations and interviews were analyzed descriptively to provide a comprehensive picture of the religious meaning of *Kulut kaet* or mourning lamentations in Dawan society. The analysis technique used in this study was thematic analysis. Data analysis was based on four open-ended questions shared with 10 participants. Data from the open-ended questions were analyzed using a six-step thematic analysis approach (Nowell et al., 2017). First, all transcripts were read to ensure familiarity with the data set. Second, a list of different codes identified across the data set was developed. Third, we sorted and organized all relevant coded data into themes.

RESULT

The results of qualitative data analysis have coded several themes that continue to emerge throughout the questions regardless of the order of the questions. This section of the article presents qualitative findings based on the following themes: 1) Religious meaning of *Kulut kaet* (mourning lament); 2) Spiritual dimensions in *Kulut kaet* (mourning lament), 3). The Role of the Community in *Kulut kaet* or mourning lamentations, and 4). *Kulut kaet* (mourning lamentations) as a Tribute to Ancestors.

This study shows that the words spoken have supernatural power. Therefore, even in modern times, the oral literature of the *Dawan* people continues to be solemnly recited. Oral recitations that take place in a ritualistic atmosphere full of solemnity and reverence are songs of praise recited during traditional death ceremonies. This type of oral literature of praise in death is called *boin nitu*. *Nitu* roughly means 'corpse'. It is said to be approximate because *nitu* has its own ritual value in the primitive belief system of the *Dawan*. When a person dies, their spirit leaves their body (their palace)

to gather with the spirits of their ancestors. The most sacred place is in the middle of the ocean.

However, there are also places behind hills, trees, large rocks, and so on. These spirits are more or less identical to demons. Based on this view, they adhere to a belief in dynamism, which considers certain objects, plants, or animals to be shelters for ancestral spirits. They believe that these spirits can be asked for help to bring blessings. There are also spirits that often come to disturb their relatives. There are four types of praise in this traditional ceremony, namely (1) lamentation in mourning, (2) accompanying the corpse, (3) releasing the corpse, and (4) burying the corpse. Before being buried, the body is usually kept in the funeral home for several days and offerings are given as provisions for the spirit's journey. The spirit is not said to go to heaven or hell, but to another lake or region, as lamented in the following manner.

*Ho mubelak maen kai yen
mubelak maen kat talan poi me
ho mbi pahes ma nifu besen
ho mbi habe biane⁸*

You have left us
you have left us forever
you have moved to another region
you have moved to another lake

The burial of the body for several days is intended to convey offerings as provisions for the journey to another region and also as an offering to the ancestors who have preceded him, as described below.

*Au u 'bone u 'fani ho aluk
au aumbok neo ho sisi ho maka
ne ho puah ho manus
neo ho tu 'sam ho flolo
mus nan nen bes fe ma fayes fa'
mu ten bom nen bes fe' ma fayes fe'
halu hae mi loiten ho sisi ho*

I hang it, I keep it in your pocket.
I have worked hard for your food,
for your betel and areca nuts,
for your food.
Rest first for one day and one night,
wait patiently for one day
and one night, because we have prepared food for you.

In addition to believing in and worshipping *nitu* (the spirits of the dead), they also believe that above all else there is a more powerful being, namely *Uis Neno* (God). This can be read in the story of *Feot Hutun*. In the story, *Uis Neno* is described as a king who reigns above the sky and has seven children (seven angels). Oral literature has religious values that are deeply rooted in the lives of the Dawan people. Many of these values support development, but quite a few also hinder it. In Dawan mythology, for example, in the village of Boti, South Central Timor Regency, which still has strong primitive beliefs, there is virtually no crime. In the Boti community, on a specific day (the ninth day),

there is a traditional ceremony to test the purity of its members. Anyone who has committed a crime, even if unknown to others or even unnoticed by themselves, will be exposed in this test. Anyone who cannot pass the red thread in the ritual ceremony means that the person has committed a mistake or is still impure. To be able to participate in the next traditional activity, the person must repent and purify themselves. From the value of rituals, there are many oral traditions that can support development. However, there are also ritual values that can hinder development. The belief in *nitu* (the spirits of the dead) sometimes overshadows modern thinking, hindering progress. In the field of health, for example, people often refuse to take their sick family members to the doctor because they place more trust in traditional treatments performed by shamans in a mystical, religious manner.

The Religious Significance of *Kulut kaet* (Mourning Lament)

Kulut kaet or mourning lament, is not merely an expression of sadness for the Dawan people in South Central Timor Regency, but also a deeply religious ritual. The Dawan people believe that every death is a spiritual journey that must be respected. In this context, *Kulut kaet* serves primarily as a means to honor the spirit of the deceased. The mourning ritual is a way for the living to call upon and pay respects to the spirit of the departed, so that the spirit may rest in peace and be well-received by the spiritual world.

In addition, *Kulut kaet* (mourning lamentations) are also a form of prayer and hope for the spirits of the deceased. The Dawan people believe that through these lamentations, they can help the spirits of the deceased on their journey to the afterlife. Therefore, mourning lamentations are not only an emotional expression, but also a form of spiritual communication between the living and the deceased. This ritual has a transcendental dimension, which allows them to maintain a connection with the spirits of the deceased.

The Spiritual Dimension of *Kulut kaet* (Mourning Lament)

Mourning lament in the Dawan tradition is more than just an expression of grief. It is a form of very strong spiritual attachment between the living and the deceased. In the beliefs of the Dawan people, the deceased are not completely separated from the community they left behind. Instead, they believe that the spirits of the deceased continue to play a spiritual role in the lives of those left behind. Thus, *Kulut kaet* is a ritual to maintain the continuity of this spiritual relationship.

This ritual also serves as a guide for the spirits of the deceased to make their spiritual journey in peace. The Dawan people believe that without adequate respect, the spirits of the deceased will be disturbed and unable to achieve peace. Therefore, mourning rituals are important as part of the spiritual purification process for the spirits of the deceased and as a way to acknowledge that the deceased have an important place in the lives of those who remain.

The Role of the Community in *Kulut kaet* or Mourning Lamentations

Although *Kulut kaet* (mourning lamentations) have deep religious significance, they also reflect the close relationship between individuals and the community. In Dawan society, mourning lamentations are not only performed by the bereaved family, but also involve the entire community. The community plays a role in providing spiritual support to the bereaved family through their presence and participation in the ritual. This shows that mourning is not only a personal matter, but also a collective experience that strengthens social bonds and deepens relationships between community members. Mourning together shows that the Dawan community believes that sadness and loss are shared experiences, and therefore, the healing process must also be done collectively.

Kulut kaet (mourning lamentations) as a form of respect for ancestors

In addition to honoring the spirit of the recently deceased, *Kulut kaet* (mourning lamentations) are also a form of respect for ancestors as a whole. The Dawan community believes that the spirits of their ancestors play an important role in their daily lives. Therefore, *Kulut kaet* mourning lamentations are not only seen as a tribute to the deceased individual, but also as a way to maintain a connection with the broader ancestral lineage. This ritual serves as a means to strengthen the bond with ancestors who are believed to still exert influence in the lives of the community.

Interview results indicate that *Kulut kaet* is not seen merely as an expression of grief but also as a form of collective prayer. The majority of informants stated that the lamentation is a “voice channel of the soul” to the spirits of the deceased. Within the context of Dawan local spirituality, the words spoken in the lament are believed to have the power to soothe the spirits, as well as serve as prayers for a smooth journey to the spirit world. Some traditional elders even stated that “the sound of crying is not just crying, but words that guide.” Thus, *Kulut kaet* becomes a transcendental medium that strengthens the connection between the human world and the spirit world. This aligns with Rappaport’s concept that ritual is not an empty symbol but a “message conveyed to the sacred.”

In practice, *Kulut kaet* involves the participation of nearly the entire community. The procession can last for several days, with people coming from other villages to join in the lamentation and prayers. Such moments create a social space where the grieving individual does not feel alone. Rather, the community becomes a container for grief, a spiritual supporter, and a means of emotional healing. This collective participation demonstrates a high value of social cohesion. One informant, a community leader, stated: “If we cry together, then the feeling of loss does not hurt just one person. We share that pain.” This statement illustrates that *Kulut kaet* is not only spiritual therapy for the individual but also a collective healing mechanism. The tradition strengthens the community’s function as an entity that absorbs suffering together.

DISCUSSION

Linguistically and symbolically, the lamentations used in *Kulut kaet* contain many cosmological metaphors. For example, phrases such as “*ho mubelak maen kai yen*” (you have left us forever) or “*neo ho tu ‘sam ho flolo*” (for your food on the journey) indicate that death is viewed as a journey, not a total disappearance. In Dawan belief, there is no concept of hell or heaven in the Abrahamic sense. Instead, there is a realm where spirits gather, depicted as a great lake or a place beyond the hills. Therefore, the narratives in the lament are filled with spiritual topography reflecting the local community’s theology. These lamentations are performative: when spoken during death rites, they activate a transcendental meaning. Thus, *Kulut kaet* also becomes an expression of folk theology that reflects the community’s understanding of the life and death cycle.

Despite its strength within traditional contexts, *Kulut kaet* also faces challenges from modernization and the influence of Christianity. Some church leaders consider this ritual to contain animistic elements and see it as incompatible with modern Christian values. However, most Dawan people do not see the two as mutually exclusive. Instead, an adaptation process occurs where *Kulut kaet* is performed alongside church funerals or rosary prayers. One young informant mentioned: “We still perform *Kulut kaet*, but we also attend Mass at church. That is our way of respecting two worlds: the customary world and the world of faith.” This statement shows cultural continuity with adaptation among the Dawan people. The tradition continues but is harmonized with contemporary demands and the values of the majority religion.

The *Kulut kaet* tradition, deeply rooted in the spiritual life of the Dawan people, has not been immune to the influence of modernization. Formal education, globalization, and the spread of Christianity have introduced challenges to traditional mourning practices. However, rather than being

completely replaced, *Kulut kaet* has undergone a dynamic process of cultural adaptation.

Younger informants often expressed that *Kulut kaet* holds emotional and spiritual meanings that cannot be replaced by church liturgy. Lamentations in their native tongue resonate more deeply with their sense of loss and provide a culturally grounded form of grief expression. Thus, even among devout Christians, the practice continues as a way of honoring both faith and identity. This phenomenon aligns with what anthropologists refer to as "active syncretism"—a conscious effort by local communities to merge external influences with internal value systems, preserving the original spirit of the tradition. In this light, *Kulut kaet* becomes a symbol of cultural resilience, a space where ancestral worldviews and modern beliefs can coexist.

Furthermore, this ongoing practice can be seen as a form of cultural assertion. In the face of homogenizing forces brought on by globalization, *Kulut kaet* reaffirms Dawan identity and spiritual heritage. It maintains the community's connection to values such as solidarity, collectivity, and reverence for the cycle of life and death. Therefore, *Kulut kaet* is not merely a mourning ritual but a cultural expression of deep spiritual wisdom. It adapts and endures—not by resisting change, but by reinterpreting it. In doing so, it illustrates that tradition and modernity need not be in opposition but can exist in meaningful dialogue.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that *Kulut kaet* or mourning lamentations are not just ordinary cultural practices, but have deep religious significance in the lives of the Dawan people in Nusa Village, West Amanuban District, South Central Timor Regency. This tradition represents a rich and complex local spirituality, in which lamentations are not merely expressions of sadness, but also a form of spiritual communication with ancestral spirits. Specifically, this study found that *Kulut kaet* as a religious ritual: This tradition is part of the separation ritual within the structure of the rite of passage. It guides the spirit to the spirit world and ensures cosmological order in the beliefs of the Dawan community. The lament is performed in a sacred manner with rhythm, metaphorical language, and deep symbolic meaning.

Collective spirituality: Grief in Dawan society is never individual. It is fused into a communal experience. *Kulut kaet* serves as a means of spiritual healing for families and communities, and strengthens social solidarity in the face of loss. Relationship with ancestors: *Kulut kaet* plays a role in maintaining the spiritual connection between the living and the deceased. Through lamentation, the Dawan community expresses respect, offers symbolic offerings, and conveys important messages to the spirit world. Cultural and religious syncretism: Despite facing pressures from modernization and the dominant religion like Christianity *Kulut kaet* is not abandoned. Instead, it adapts within new religious spaces, reflecting a fluid and tolerant religious identity. This research contributes to the understanding that grief and spirituality are inseparable in the local cultural context. *Kulut kaet* is a tangible manifestation of the system of values, beliefs, and how the local community interprets life, death, and the continuity of spirituality.

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