

Artistic Expression of Harvest Ceremony Ritual of Wehea Dayak Tribe

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ABSTRACT

The Lom Plai harvest ceremony ritual is an essential tradition of the Wehea Dayak tribe in East Kalimantan that combines artistic expression with spiritual and social values. However, in-depth studies on the form and meaning of artistic expression in this ritual are still limited. This study aims to describe how visual elements such as costumes, masks, colours, motifs, musical instruments, and spatial and dance movement patterns play a role in strengthening the cultural and spiritual identity of the Dayak Wehea community. The method used is a descriptive qualitative approach with a visual ethnography model through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and visual documentation in Nehas Liah Bing Village, East Kutai. Thematic analysis based on symbolic theory and cultural structure was used to interpret the symbolic meaning of artistic expression elements. The results show that artistic expression in the Lom Plai ritual functions as a medium of spiritual communication that strengthens human relationships with nature and ancestors and strengthens social solidarity and preservation of cultural values amid modernization.

KEYWORDS

Artistic Expression,
Dayak Wehea, LomPlai,
Harvest Ritual, Visual
Ethnography

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is known as an archipelago with a rich and diverse culture, where traditions have been passed down from generation to generation as a way for people to interpret life through spiritual symbols and rituals. Local culture maintains identity, strengthens social solidarity, and builds harmony between humans and nature. The Dayak tribe, especially the Wehea Dayak sub-tribe in East Kalimantan, has harvest rituals that are spiritually and artistically strong. The *Lom Plai* ritual celebrates the harvest and restores human balance with nature through prayers, dances, visual attributes and cosmological symbols. In anthropology and art studies, artistic expressions in traditional rituals reflect complex systems of knowledge and spirituality. Visual elements such as costumes, motifs, ritual devices and spatial arrangements serve as media for symbolic communication in everyday cultural practices.

Geertz (1973) asserts culture is a network of meanings realized through symbols, and Koentjaraningrat (2009) adds that culture is also reflected in non-verbal forms, including visual rituals. Mirzoeff (2009) views visual representations as shaping how people view the world and identity. Previous research, such as Andinata (2024), examined the concept of the Dayak Wehea human based on Cassirer's philosophy, highlighting symbolism in birth, marriage, and death ceremonies, but not yet in-depth on the *Lom Plai* harvest ritual. Fitria, Asril, & Anshori (2023) examined the symbolic expression of tarek pukat activity in Acehese wood crafts, showing art as a

medium for preserving social values. Sa'diyah, Fajrie, & Ardianti (2025) examined children's artistic experiences in drawing local cultural themes, showing the importance of art in cultural enculturation from an early age. However, there is no specific and in-depth study on artistic expression in Dayak Wehea harvest rituals, especially *Lom Plai*.

Previous research has focused more on the philosophical, anthropological, and general cultural preservation aspects without integrating visual and symbolic analysis as the core of artistic expression in this ritual. Therefore, this research aims to fill the void by understanding how artistic expression emerges and plays a role in the harvest ritual and how the symbolic meaning strengthens the cultural and spiritual identity of the Wehea Dayak community in the modern era. This article aims to examine and describe artistic expressions in the *Lom Plai* ritual in depth, focusing on visual elements such as colours, motifs, traditional costumes, ritual tools, and spatial layout, as well as their symbolic meanings. It is hoped that the results of this research will show that artistic expression is not just a compliment but the core of the meaning system and spirituality of the Dayak Wehea community, as well as contributing to cultural preservation and enriching insights into the role of art as a medium of communication and cultural identity amid social change and modernization.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a visual ethnography model to document and understand artistic expressions in the harvest ritual of the Dayak Wehea tribe. This approach focuses on observing visual elements such as costumes, masks, motifs, ritual tools, and spatial arrangements that reflect the symbolic and aesthetic values of the community. The research location was in Nehas Liah Bing Village, East Kutai, where the *Lom Plai* ritual is still actively performed. Data were collected through participatory observation, interviews with traditional leaders and ritual performers, and visual documentation in photos and videos. Based on previous studies, literature studies were used to strengthen symbolic analysis (Effrata, 2022; Seratinus Jong & Donatus Sermada, 2022). Data were analyzed thematically concerning Geertz's (1973) symbolic theory and Koentjaraningrat's (2009) cultural concepts. This method is expected to capture the visual meaning and socio-spiritual context of Wehea Dayak harvest rituals deeply and comprehensively.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Artistic Expression of Wehea Dayak Harvest Ceremony Rituals

Wehea Dayak community is one of the Dayak sub-tribes that inhabit East Kutai Regency, especially in Nehas Liah Bing Village, Muara Wahau District. Wehea is known to have a unique cultural wealth, with belief systems and traditions closely related to nature and ancestors. Dayak Wehea people uphold the values of spirituality, harmony with the environment, and social solidarity. Their relationship with nature is practical as a source of life and sacred as a space inhabited by ancestral spirits. One important ritual that reflects Wehea Dayak philosophy of life is *Lom Plai*, an annual ceremony that aims to restore the balance between humans, nature and the spiritual world.

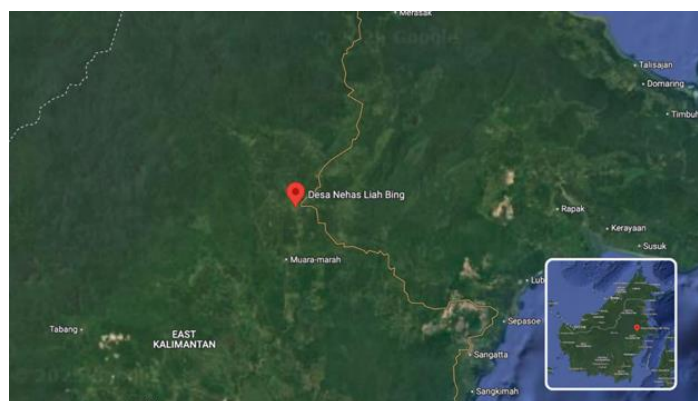


Figure 1. Location Map of Nehas Liah Bing Village
(Source: Map processed by Abdul Majid Sutaryai, 2025)

Nehas Liah Bing Village's location has an important role in implementing the *Lom Plai* ritual. The village is surrounded by dense tropical forests and fertile fields, reflecting the Wehea Dayak people's closeness to nature. The village's natural surroundings are a source of inspiration for visual elements in rituals and an integral part of their belief system. For example, using natural materials such as banana leaves, areca nut and rattan to make costumes and ritual decorations reflects sustainability principles and respect for nature. This shows that the Wehea Dayak community has a holistic view of life, where humans, nature and ancestral spirits are interconnected and influence each other.

The *Lom Plai* ritual in Nehas Liah Bing Village is held in an open field area. This location was chosen because it reflects their worldview, prioritizing simplicity and closeness to the surrounding environment. In this ritual, natural elements such as wood shavings, leaves, and umbul-umbul, characteristic of Wehea Dayak, decorate the ceremony site. One of the most prominent features of the *Lom Plai* ritual is the *Hedoq* dance, which is the centrepiece of the ceremony. Figure 2 shows the *Hedoq* dancers wearing traditional costumes, complete with Hedog Mask, a physical representation of ancestral spirits or spiritual powers.



Figure 2. *Hedoq* Dayak Wehea
(Source: Sutarya, 2024)

In addition, the *Lom Plai* ritual is also a means to strengthen social solidarity among community members. Every individual, both men and women, has an important role in implementing this ritual. Whether as *Hedoq* dancers, music players (large gong or *Gendang*), or other participants, every community member contributes to maintaining the continuity of this ritual. This shows that the *Lom Plai* ritual is not just a traditional ceremony but also a medium to strengthen cultural identity and preserve spiritual values passed down from generation to generation.

2. Ritual Equipment

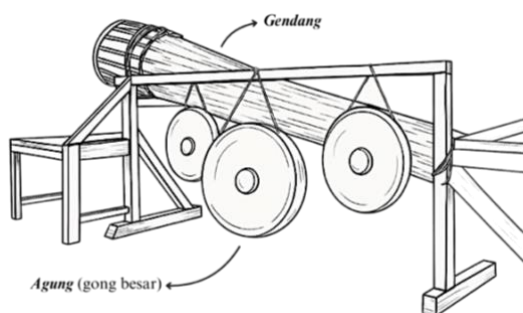


Figure 3. Typical Wehea Dayak Musical Instrument Set
(Source: Sutarya, 2025)

The main instruments of the *Lom Plai* ritual are the *Agung* (large gong) and the drum (*Gendang*), as shown in Figure 3. These two traditional musical instruments accompany the dancing and singing and have deep cosmological symbolic meanings. According to Geertz (1973), cultural symbols organize human experience and shape collective meaning; in this ritual, the sounds of gongs

and drum (*Gendang*) become a medium of connection between the real and spiritual worlds. The resonant gong symbolizes the power of the universe. It serves as a means of communication with ancestral spirits, by the concept of "*cosmic communication*" proposed by Turner & Abrahams (2017). Eliade (1961) explains that sacred sounds such as gongs create a "*sacred zone*" that separates the ritual space from the everyday world and symbolizes the stability and immortality of ancestors. The dynamic rhythm of the drum (*Gendang*) reflects the pulse of social life and the rhythm of the community, supporting Bourdieu's (1977) theory of habitus and social practice, where musical instruments strengthen solidarity and social cohesion. According to Wirandi & B. P. (2021), music in ritual ceremonies is not just an accompaniment or entertainment but also a medium that affects the spirituality of participants, bringing them to a state of solemnity and even *trance*, thus strengthening the sacred meaning of the ritual. The combination of gong and drum (*Gendang*) sounds creates a magical atmosphere that deepens the spiritual dimension of the ritual. The intensity of the musical beats enlivens the spirit of the *Hedoq* dance, which manifests the harmonious relationship between humans, nature and the supernatural world. This music functions aesthetically and sacredly as a means of communication with ancestral spirits, which is in line with Durkheim's (1912) theory of symbolic communication. Thus, the *Lom Plai* ritual set combines artistic, social and spiritual functions in a unified and integral whole.

3. Traditional Costume and Hedog Mask

One of the most striking features of the *Lom Plai* ritual is the use of very distinctive costumes and masks, especially the *Hedoq* or *Hudoq* Mask, which is the main icon of this ceremony. The *Hedoq* is not just a visual attribute but also a representation of ancestral spirits or spiritual forces present during the ritual. This mask serves as a means of disguise for the dancer and as a medium for the embodiment of supernatural entities that are respected and sacred. Through these masks, ritual participants are believed to mediate between the human and spiritual worlds, creating a deep sacred connection.

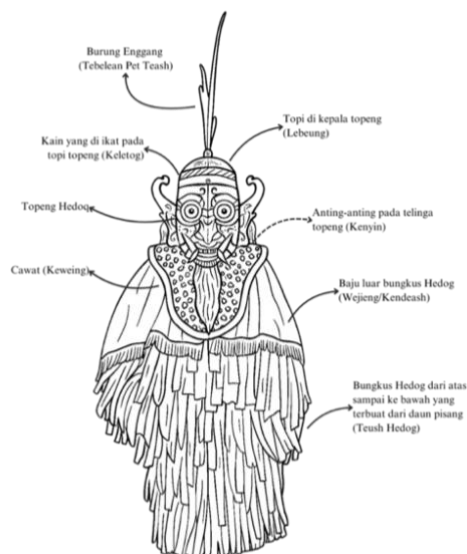


Figure 4. *Hedoq* Reconstruction of Wehea Dayak Community
(Source: Sutarya, 2025)

Figure 4 shows a reconstruction of the *Hedoq* mask of the Wehea Dayak community, which is decorated with a series of hornbill feathers called *Tebelean Pet Teash*, mounted from the front to the back of the hat. In Dayak culture, hornbills are considered sacred and symbolize wisdom, closeness to ancestral spirits, and moral strength. This symbolism is in line with Geertz's (1973) view that cultural symbols serve to organize collective meaning and social experience. In the center of the hat is the tail feather of the *Tekeung* bird called *Lejea*, representing courage, protection, and spiritual strength - core values that reflect the social and spiritual structure of the Wehea Dayak community.

The foundation of the mask, *Lebeung* is a basic hat that symbolizes the spiritual identity and readiness of ritual participants as mediums of ancestral spirits. It reflects concept of a liminal phase in ritual, where individuals transform spiritual and social status before assuming sacred roles. The head-binding cloth, *Keletog* marks purity and the process of self-cleansing, reinforcing that only those who are spiritually "*clean*" are worthy of holding sacred symbols in line with Eliade's (1961) concept of sacralization or the separation of space and individuals in sacred rites. Earrings called *Kenyin* double as aesthetic elements and symbols of respect for cultural refinement and natural beauty, reinforcing the idea that artistic expression in rituals is aesthetic, symbolic, and communicative (Mirzoeff, 2009). The banana leaf body covering *Teush Hedog* emphasizes the principle of living simply, in harmony with nature, and maintaining environmental sustainability, by Bourdieu's (1977) idea of habitus as a cultural practice that shapes identity and social relations ecologically. Thus, each element in the *Hedog* mask has an artistic function and becomes a symbolic tool that combines spiritual, social, and ecological values in Wehea Dayak harvest rituals, strengthening human relationships with nature and the spirit world.

4. Color



Figure 5. *Hedog* Reconstruction of Wehea Dayak Community
(Source: Sutarya, 2025)

Figure 5 shows a reconstruction of the *Hedog* mask of the Wehea Dayak community. In the *Lom Plai* ritual, the Wehea Dayak community uses natural colours such as green, yellow, red, white, and black, each full of symbolic meaning and rooted in their cosmology. Green symbolizes fertility and harmony between humans and nature, reflecting the fundamental values of the community's agrarian practices (Geertz, 1973). Yellow represents light, prosperity, and protection from celestial beings (*Hudoq Kayangan*), often associated with blessings from ancestral spirits, by Turner & Abrahams' (2017) concept of ritual symbolism. Red symbolizes courage, zest for life, and physical strength while also serving as protection from negative energies during the *Hedog* dance, confirming the role of colour as a medium of protection in culture (Eliade, 1961). White symbolizes purity and human connection with the spirits of the upper world, attracting the presence of good spirits who give blessings, illustrating the process of sacralization and communication with the supernatural world (Durkheim, 1912).

Black symbolizes spiritual constancy and protection against evil spirits, indicating the spiritual defence aspect of the ritual. Applying these colours to *Hedog* masks and costumes is believed to bring the "*life of rice (Jiwa Padi)*" from heaven to earth, a symbol of fertility and life. This colour system reinforces the Wehea Dayak philosophy of life that places the balance of the cosmos and the continuity of tradition at the core of their social and spiritual existence (Koentjaraningrat, 2009). Thus, colour in the *Lom Plai* ritual is a visual aesthetic and a vital means of spiritual communication between humans, nature, and ancestors.

5. Motifs

The motifs in the artistic expression of harvest rituals of the Wehea Dayak tribe reflect history, spiritual values and a strong cultural identity, rooted in nature and hereditary traditions. As an agrarian community, these motifs are not just decorations but symbolic means of connecting the community with ancestors, supernatural spirits and the universe while conveying gratitude and asking for protection for the future.



Figure 6. Dayak Wehea motif
(Source : <https://hutanlindungwehea.id>)

Figure 6 shows a typical Wehea Dayak motif often found in wood carvings, mask sculptures, and ritual decorations such as the *Lom Plai* ceremony. These motifs feature mythological creatures and forest fauna, such as hornbills, as well as anthropomorphic symbols with large eyes and striking expressions that reflect the spiritual connection between humans, nature and ancestors. According to Geertz (1973), cultural symbols are networks of meanings that organize the collective experience of society. The hornbill as a messenger of spirits and a symbol of life preservation reinforces the cosmological meaning in Wehea Dayak culture. As stated by Enjelina, Oktavia, & Efi (2022), cosmology in traditional culture reflects the community's worldview that contains symbolic meanings and strong social and spiritual functions, where visual symbols represent the relationship between humans, nature, and supernatural powers. The geometric shapes and symmetry of the motifs reflect harmony between the human and natural worlds, in line with the concept of balance in traditional cosmology (Koentjaraningrat, 2009). In the *Lom Plai* ceremony, the motifs are applied to ritual properties such as *Hedoq* masks, stage boards, and dancers' attributes, reinforcing the sacred atmosphere and bringing the mythological narrative of the community to life. In line with Turner & Abrahams (2017), ritual functions as a moment of transformation that strengthens cultural and social identity. This motif becomes an aesthetic medium and a philosophy that expresses the life of the Wehea Dayak community in the context of harvest and spirituality.

6. Spatial Layout and Movement Pattern

The spatial arrangement of the *Lom Plai* ritual is designed to create a sacred and open atmosphere for all community members. Rituals are usually held in an open field, symbolizing the direct connection between humans and nature, reflecting the simplicity and harmony of the Wehea Dayak community (Geertz, 1973). The spatial arrangement forms a circle or a specific zone that symbolizes the integrity of the community and cosmic balance through the holistic view in the Dayak Wehea belief system that integrates the physical and spiritual dimensions Koentjaraningrat (2009).

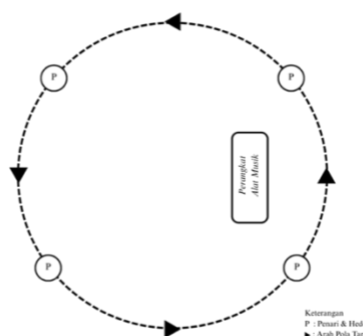


Figure 7. *Hedog* Reconstruction of Wehea Dayak Community
(Source: Sutarya, 2025)

Figure 7 shows the *Hedog* dance floor pattern rotating counterclockwise, symbolizing the cycle of life, regeneration, and cultural continuity. This movement is in harmony with the energy flow of the universe in Wehea Dayak cosmology while creating a dynamic visual display that conveys harmony between humans, nature, and ancestors. Dance movement patterns serve as a

medium that enables the symbolic presence of ancestral spirits in rituals, and open spaces support this sacred dimension (Turner & Abrahams, 2017). Overall, the spatial layout and movement patterns in the *Lom Plai* ritual are cultural expressions full of spiritual, social and cosmological values passed down through generations. Through visual symbols of space and movement, the Wehea Dayak community emphasizes their close relationship with nature, ancestors, and each other while strengthening their cultural identity amid changing times.

CONCLUSIONS

This research reveals that artistic expression in the *Lom Plai* ritual of the Wehea Dayak community is a profound manifestation of the spiritual, social, and cosmological value system that is the foundation of their lives. Elements such as *Hedog* costumes and masks adorned with hornbill symbols and distinctive motifs, natural colors with philosophical meanings, gong and drum (*Gendang*) instruments that serve as a medium of communication with ancestral spirits form a symbolic network that strengthens the relationship between humans, nature, and the supernatural world. The spatial arrangement and dance patterns that symbolize the cycle of life and cosmic balance emphasize the function of this ritual as a vehicle for preserving cultural identity and strengthening social solidarity within the community. However, this research is limited to analyzing the symbolic and aesthetic artistic expressions in Nehas Liah Bing Village without examining socio-economic aspects and the influence of modernization that can affect the implementation of rituals. Therefore, it is recommended that future research adopt a multidisciplinary approach that includes anthropology, art, and ecology and involve the younger generation to understand the dynamics of traditional continuity in the context of changing times. This broader study is expected to deepen the understanding of the role of artistic expression in cultural and environmental preservation, as well as the adaptation of the *Lom Plai* ritual to the challenges of modernization.

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