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Cultural Values In The Marilonga Heroic Folk Story Semiotic Study

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Abstract

The folklore of Hero Marilonga is an oral tradition of the Ende-Lio community in East Nusa Tenggara, which records the struggle against Dutch colonial expansion while preserving the local cultural value system. This study aims to deconstruct the structure of semiotic signification and articulate the Ende-Lio cultural values embedded within the narrative. A descriptive qualitative method was employed using Roland Barthes' hermeneutic-semiotic approach. The primary data were gathered through in-depth interviews with Mosalaki (traditional leaders) and oral storytellers, as well as transcriptions of the oral narrative. The findings reveal three main domains of signification across the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth: (1) the motifs of physical invulnerability and sacred weapons (topo) represent transcendental spirituality and obedience to customary law (Pire/Nua) under the grace of Du'a Ngga'e and Embu Kajo; (2) the mountainous guerrilla battlefield and the rejection of colonial taxes (belasting) represent ecological patriotism and bravery (Kamba Cawa) in defending ancestral land sovereignty (Tana Walo Watu Peda); and (3) the ritual council scenes at Tubo Musu represent communal togetherness, customary democracy, and the spirit of brotherhood (Are pa'e nuka ata). This study concludes that the folklore of Marilonga is not merely a heroic historical tale, but a cultural encryption system serving as a moral compass and social guide relevant to the modern generation amidst globalization.

Keywords: Cultural Values; Ende-Lio; Folklore; Marilonga; Roland Barthes' Semiotics.

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INTRODUCTION

Oral literature and folklore are the primary vehicles for collective memory, identity, and the philosophical system of a civilization (Danandjaja, 2002). In the era before the widespread adoption of literacy, the people of the Indonesian archipelago recorded their history, ethical norms, and worldview through interwoven narratives that were gradually passed down from generation to generation (Ferando et al., 2025). In the Ende-Lio region of Flores, East Nusa Tenggara, one of the oral narratives most deeply ingrained in the community's historical and cultural memory is the story of the struggle of the Marilonga Heroes.

Marilonga was a local warrior from the interior of Ende who led armed resistance against Dutch colonial expansion in the early 20th century, around 1907–1914. His struggle was fueled by his strong opposition to the colonial government's implementation of the head tax (belasting) and forced labor (rodi) system. These colonial policies were considered to have trampled on customary rights, customary law, and the human dignity of the Ende-Lio people (Prioharyono, 2012).

Throughout its history, Marilonga's historical events transcended the boundaries of positivistic historical reconstruction. The story of his struggle underwent a process of mythologization and metamorphosis into a folktale rich with symbolic, allegorical, and transcendental elements (Mbura, 2025). In the oral tradition, Marilonga is not simply depicted as a military strategist, but as a figure endowed with supernatural powers, possessing magical resilience, and receiving full protection from the ancestors and the rulers of the universe.

The presence of Marilonga folktales is often viewed superficially by modern literary appreciators, merely as interwoven plots of heroic action or time-killing entertainment. This narrow interpretation risks diminishing the philosophical substance and cultural messages contained within. Every narrative thread, motive for resistance, weaponry, and even geographical space mentioned in Marilonga tales is actually a cultural textualization filled with symbolic codes (Djakariah et al., 2022).

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Figure 1. Historical Reconstruction of Marilonga

Purpose of Writing

The main objectives of writing this comprehensive article are:

1. Dissecting the structure of signification in the folktale of the Marilonga Heroes using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework in depth.
2. Identifying, categorizing, and reconstructing the Ende-Lio cultural values contained behind the folklore text.
3. Provides a critical analysis of how local wisdom in the Marilonga narrative can be drawn into relevance as an instrument for character education and upholding cultural identity in the modern era.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Roland Barthes' Semiotics and Multilevel Meaning

Semiotics is fundamentally defined as the study of sign systems (semiotic systems), how signs work, and how meaning is constructed and interpreted in social life (Noth, 2006; Sobur, 2013). In this study of oral literature, the applied framework explicitly refers to Roland Barthes's semiotic theory (1988, 1977). Barthes expanded the Saussurean concept of linear signification into a staggered signification system.

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Figure 2. Outline of Roland Barthes' Semiotic Thought and Multi-Layered Meaning

1. First Level Signification (Denotation):

It is an objective, direct, and explicit relationship between a signifier (physical form, word, or narrative image) and a signified (concept or literal meaning). Denotation produces an explicit meaning that is free from subjective or cultural interpretation (Barthes, 1988).

2. Second Level Signification (Connotation & Myth):

This occurs when the denotative sign at the first level (Sign 1) becomes a new signifier (Signifier 2) that interacts with the social conceptualizations, emotions, beliefs, and value systems of the reader's community. This connotation reflects cultural and ideological meanings.

When this connotative meaning becomes institutionalized, widely rooted, and accepted as an unquestionable natural truth in a culture, Barthes (1972) calls it a Myth. Myth in the Barthesian framework is not a false tale, but rather an ideological system that transforms history into something that appears "natural."

In this article, the characters, actions, and objects in the Marilonga Hero folktale are treated as Signifier 1 which produces Sign 1 (Denotation), to then be dissected towards Signifier 2 and Signified 2 in order to discover the myths and value systems of Ende-Lio culture.

Concept of Cultural Values and Oral Literature of Ende-Lio

According to Koentjaraningrat (2009), a cultural value system is the most abstract and profound level within a system of customs. Cultural values consist of conceptions of what a community deems highly valuable, good, and important, thus serving as guidelines for the

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thinking, attitudes, and actions of its members.

Oral literature in Ende-Lio culture is not just a vocal performance, but a cultural encryption system that contains three main philosophical pillars:

1. *Theological Pillars (Transcendental Spirituality): The cosmic relationship between humans and the Supreme Ruler, who in Ende-Lio cosmology is called Du'a Ngga'e (God Almighty and Almighty Creator) and respect for Embu Kajo (the spirits of the ancestors who act as intermediaries).*
2. *Ecological-Territorial Pillar (Patriotism/Sovereignty): Respect and protection of Tana Walo Watu Peda (ancestral land and water) which is sacred and may not be transferred or controlled by external entities.*
3. *Sociological Pillars (Togetherness/Mutual Cooperation): The principle of customary fellowship through the pillars of Are pa'e nuka ata (spirit of brotherhood, solidarity, equality, and togetherness without barriers).*

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To ensure the validity of the analysis, this study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a hermeneutic-semiotic exposition approach (Endraswara, 2013 ; Moleong, 2017).



Figure 3. Matrix of Research Methods

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Primary data comes from transcriptions of recorded accounts of the Marilonga Hero folktale collected from traditional figures (Mosalaki) and oral tradition speakers in the Ende-Lio region. The data were analyzed through three methodological stages:

1. *Textual Data Reduction:* Identify narrative fragments, symbols, and heroic actions that have the potential to contain signs.
2. *Multilevel Semiotic Analysis:* Breaking down the data into a Barthesian matrix of denotation, connotation, and myth.
3. *Cultural Hermeneutics:* Linking the results of semiotic readings with the context of cultural values and worldviews of the Ende-Lio community in a holistic manner.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through a multilevel semiotic reading of the folktale text of the Marilonga Heroes, three main signification domains were found that transmit Ende-Lio cultural values in a structured manner.



Figure 4. Semiotic Significance Matrix

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A. Sacred Weapons and the Characters' Immunity: Representation of Spiritual Values and Customary Obedience

In his narrative, Marilonga is consistently depicted as having a body impenetrable to bullets or bayonets of Dutch colonial troops. He is also depicted carrying traditional weapons, including a sacred machete (topo) and a spear specially forged through a series of traditional rituals (Say, 2014).

1. Multilevel Semiotic Analysis

a. *Signifier I (Signifier 1):* Marilonga's body was unharmed by bullets and the machete blade (topo) he carried during the war.
b. *Signified I (Signified 1 - Denotation):* Superhuman physical strength and the use of iron cutting tools as combat weapons.
c. *Signifier II (Signifier 2 - Denotative Sign):* A warrior whose body is invulnerable and whose weapons are highly effective on the battlefield.
d. *Signified II (Signified 2 - Connotation):* In the Ende-Lio cultural sphere, immunity is not interpreted as a supernatural power exhibiting personal egotism or black magic. Immunity is a sign of protection (Pire/Nua) passed down by Du'a Ngga'e (God) and Embu Kajo (ancestors) to individuals who act honestly and defend the truth (Rato, 2016). Sacred weapons are instruments of cosmological justice that only function if preceded by a purification ritual (Roko Kema).
e. *Myths / Cultural Values:* Spiritual Values and Customary Obedience.

2. Exploration of Cultural Philosophy

Semiotically, the myth of Marilonga's invulnerability is not designed to promote blind mysticism or irrationality (Sunaryo, 2006). Within the Ende-Lio cultural construct, this invulnerability symbolizes spiritual dignity. Someone who fights for justice and the integrity of the community is seen as radiating sacred (sakti) energy capable of crippling the evil intentions of opponents.

Interestingly, the folktale also includes a clause stating that Marilonga's immunity will be forfeited immediately if he violates a traditional taboo or acts arrogantly (Awe, 2003).This narrative structure conveys a powerful moral message: human physical strength and supreme skill are meaningless if separated from ethical integrity and obedience to the Creator.

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B. Mountain Guerrilla Battlefield: Representation of Patriotism and Territorial Sovereignty (Kamba Cawa)

Marilonga's story centers on his resistance against the Dutch colonial government's obligation to pay taxes (belasting) and forced labor (rodi). To carry out his actions, Marilonga exploited the hilly, steep, and densely forested topography of the Ende hinterland as a base for guerrilla warfare.

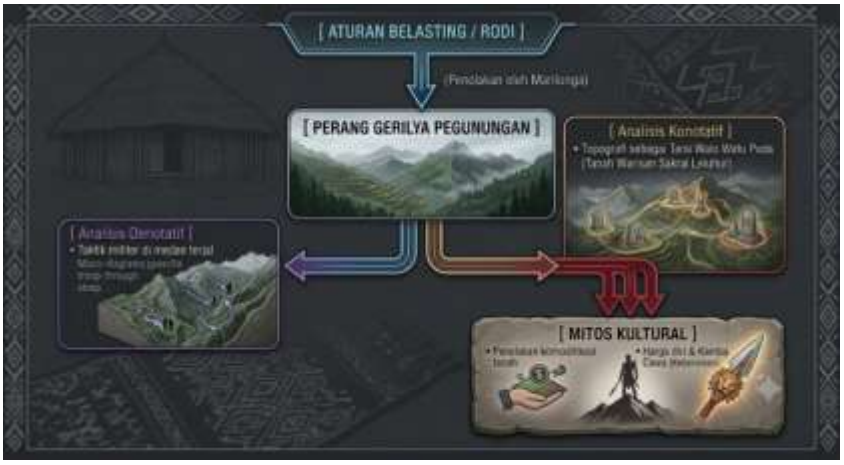


Figure 5. War Strategy Matrix Images

1. Multilevel Semiotic Analysis

a. *Signifier I (Signifier 1):* The steep hill/forest topography served as a defensive fortress and an act of resistance against the colonial tax regulations.
b. *Signified I (Signified 1 - Denotation):* Military strategy for defending mountainous areas to overcome the imbalance in modern Dutch weapons technology.
c. *Signifier II (Signifier 2 - Denotative Sign):* Exploitation of local geographic conditions in actions to oppose foreign legal rules.
d. *Signified II (Signified 2 - Connotation):* In Ende-Lio philosophy, the land and mountains are referred to as Tana Walo Watu Peda. Mountains are not simply piles of rocks and soil, but sacred entities that symbolize the mother who nurtures life and the abode of ancestral spirits. Allowing foreigners to forcibly control, tax, and exploit customary land is interpreted as a violation of the dignity and dehumanization of indigenous communities.
e. *Myths / Cultural Values:* The Values of Ecological Patriotism and True Courage (Kamba Cawa).

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2. Exploration of Cultural Philosophy

Marilonga's resistance demonstrates a concept of patriotism based on cultural ecology. In the Ende-Lio worldview, land is never treated solely as an economic commodity to be sold, taxed, or bargained with by external powers (Awe, 2003). Marilonga's rejection of the belasting system symbolizes defiance against the commodification of life.

The unyielding spirit displayed amidst the Dutch siege reflects the Kamba Cawa ethos: the courage to defend the truth without considering personal gain or loss (Batu & Nggoro, 2019). Patriotism in this narrative is not oriented toward political power, but rather toward safeguarding the community's dignity, honor, and sovereignty over its living space.

C. Mosalaki Consolidation and Musyawarah Rituals: Representation of the Values of Togetherness and Mutual Cooperation

Although Marilonga is positioned as a central hero figure in the narrative, this narrative always includes an important stage where Marilonga consults with traditional leaders (Mosalaki) and asks for blessings from ordinary people before launching an act of resistance (Awe, 2003 ; Say, 2014).

1. Multilevel Semiotic Analysis

a. *Signifier I (Signifier 1):* The scene of the gathering of Marilonga, Mosalaki (traditional elders), and the community in the Tubo Musu area (ritual unity stone) to divide the roles of resistance.
b. *Signified I (Signified 1 - Denotation):* Coordination meeting and preparation of division of war strategy tasks.
c. *Signifier II (Signifier 2 - Denotative Sign):* Joint deliberation activities with all elements of the social strata of indigenous communities before military action is carried out.
d. *Signified II (Signified 2 - Connotation):* The tradition of gathering in Tubo Musu symbolizes that legitimate leadership must be rooted in collective consensus (customary deliberation), not the authoritarian dictates of individuals (Rato, 2016). This reflects the view that a threat to one person is a threat to the entire customary community.
e. *Myths / Cultural Values:* Values of Togetherness, Traditional Democracy, and Are Pa'e Nuka Ata.

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2. Exploration of Cultural Philosophy

Through a semiotic lens, the presence of this scene of deliberative consolidation serves to dismantle the myth of heroic individualism (the lone hero) that often dominates Western literature. Marilonga is not depicted as a selfish superhero walking alone. Instead, his strength stems from the bonds of unity within his community (Batu & Nggoro, 2019).

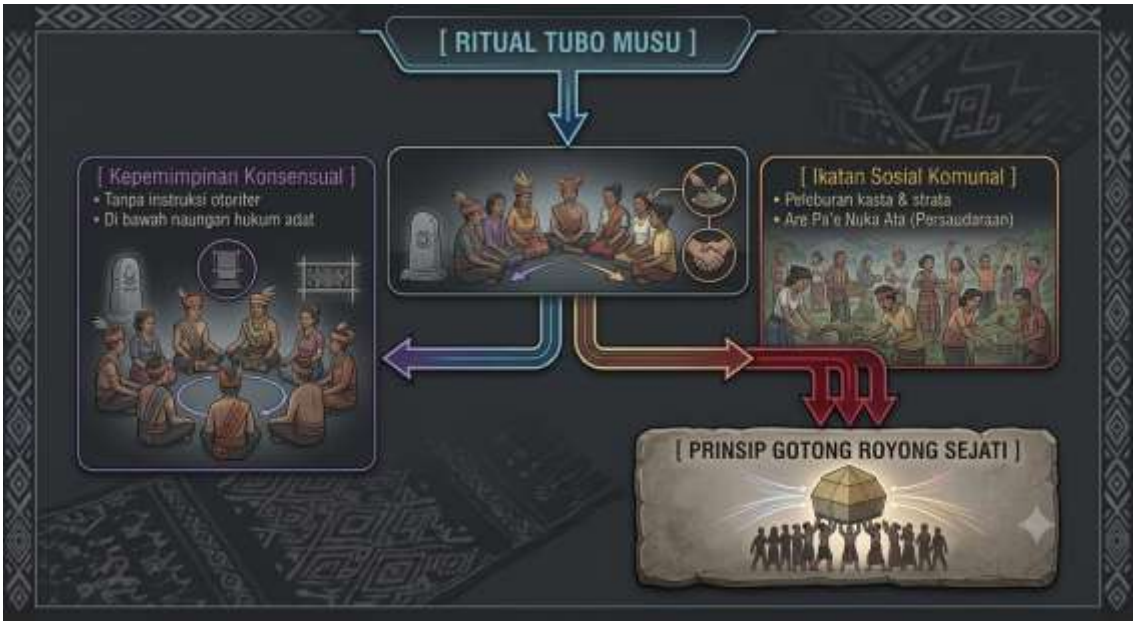


Figure 6. Tubu Ritual Matrix

The principle of Are pa'e nuka ata (a sense of close brotherhood and mutual support) is the most fundamental social capital in this folktale. Marilonga's legitimacy as a leader stems from his willingness to listen to Mosalaki's advice and put communal safety above his own personal interests. The resistance against the Dutch transformed into a cultural work of mutual cooperation.

RELEVANCE AND CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS

The semiotic study of the Marilonga Hero folktale does not stop at structural mapping on paper, but has practical utility in addressing the identity crisis and moral erosion in the era of modern information disruption (Rema et al., 2021).

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Figure 7. Marilonga Folklore Transformation Matrix

1. Moral Integrity in the Midst of Materialism

In an era where the values of success are often measured by material things and superficial popularity, the myth of Marilonga's invulnerability, which is conditional on ethical obedience, provides a lesson that true strength lies in honesty and attachment to the values of spiritualism (Reba et al., 2022).

2. Contemporary Ecological Awareness

Marilonga's patriotic values in defending Tana Walo Watu Peda can be transformed into a modern ecological awareness movement. The contemporary Ende-Lio community is called upon to defend their land and nature from environmental destruction, uncontrolled exploitation, and cultural alienation (Batu & Nggoro, 2019).

3. Social Reconciliation and Participatory Democracy

The principle of deliberation in Tubo Musu and the spirit of Are pa'e nuka ata provide a relevant antidote to rampant social polarization and individualism. Marilonga's consensual leadership model provides a concrete example of the importance of listening to communal voices and prioritizing togetherness over group interests.

CONCLUSION

Based on a multilevel semiotic analysis of the Marilonga Hero folk tale, several basic conclusions can be drawn:

1. *Effectiveness of Semiotic Text:* The Marilonga Heroes folktale is a cultural discourse

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construction rich in multi-layered signifiers (denotation, connotation, and myth). The narrative elements within it serve as a medium for encrypting the ethical values of the Ende-Lio people.

2. *Main Cultural Values Categories:*
   a. *Transcendental Spirituality:* Characterized by motifs of immunity and sacred weapons, indicating that physical struggle requires the blessing of Du'a Ngga'e and respect for Embu Kajo.
   b. *Ecological Patriotism (Kamba Cawa):* Marked by mountain guerrilla warfare and the rejection of colonial taxes, which asserted that customary land (Tana Walo) is a personal honor that must be protected from all forms of oppression.
   c. *Communal Togetherness (Are Pa'e Nuka Ata):* Marked by a scene of deliberation with Mosalaki, which teaches the importance of egalitarian, participatory, and mutual cooperation-based leadership.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Local Education Curriculum Development

The semiotic interpretation of the Marilonga folktale should be integrated into the Local Content (Mulok) and Literature subjects in schools in the East Nusa Tenggara region to build student character based on local wisdom.

2. Creative Media Transfer

Marilonga folklore needs to be transformed into various modern media formats such as digital comics, historical novels, documentary films, and even theatrical performances without losing the substance of the meaning and cultural codes contained within.

3. Advanced Oral Literature Research

Cultural researchers are advised to continue to document and conduct hermeneutic studies on variations of other local folk tales in East Nusa Tenggara so that the richness of Nusantara's traditional knowledge remains preserved.

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