

KNOCKING ON ANCESTRAL DOORS: A CULTURAL LINGUISTIC INQUIRY INTO THE *SAE TOI SANU SE'ET* RITUAL

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Abstract	Article Information
<p><i>This study explores the Sae Toi Sanu Se'et ritual practiced by the Oeleu community in South Central Timor Regency, Indonesia. As a culturally significant pre-marriage ceremony among the Amanuban ethnic group, this ritual embodies values of respect, kinship, and social legitimacy. The phrase Sae Toi Sanu Se'et, literally meaning "to climb the fence and descend the stairs," symbolizes a respectful approach and the formal initiation of marriage intentions. This qualitative descriptive research, grounded in the theoretical framework of Cultural Linguistics, examines both the ritual stages and the semantic meanings embedded in ritual speech (Hole). Data were collected through unstructured interviews, observation, and documentation involving local elders with deep cultural knowledge. The findings identify six main stages of the ritual: inquiring or seeking a match, secret engagement (Sulato), symbolic response from the bride's family, food delivery obligations, marriage proposal negotiations (Kabin), and the accompaniment ceremony (Tabalab ma Taloitan). Semantic analysis reveals three dominant types of meaning in ritual expressions: thematic, connotative, and conceptual. These meanings reflect cultural conceptualizations of marriage, gender roles, emotional bonding, and community values. This study contributes to the preservation of indigenous linguistic practices and highlights the integral role of language in maintaining cultural identity and transmitting traditional knowledge.</i></p> <p>Keywords: <i>Sae Toi Sanu Se'et, ritual speech, cultural linguistics, semantic meaning, Amanuban tradition, Oeleu community</i></p>	<p><i>Received:</i> 11/03/2025</p> <p><i>Revised:</i> 15/03/2025</p> <p><i>Accepted:</i> 17/03/2025</p>

INTRODUCTION

Rituals occupy a central role in traditional societies as structured expressions of cultural values, belief systems, and social hierarchies. Among the Amanuban ethnic group in Timor Tengah Selatan Regency, the *Sae Toi Sanu Se'et* ritual functions as a customary prerequisite for a man intending to propose marriage. Literally translated as “to climb the fence and descend the stairs”, this phrase metaphorically implies “knocking on the door”, signifying respect, humility, and permission-seeking within the kinship system. According to Victor Turner (1966), rituals are symbolic processes that mark life transitions and reinforce communal structures and values. While numerous anthropological and ethnographic studies have documented marriage rituals across diverse cultures (e.g., Geertz, 1973; Fox, 1980), most have primarily focused on symbolic, social, and functional aspects, with limited attention to the linguistic content, especially the semantic dimensions of ritual speech. This constitutes the research gap that the current study aims to fill. Despite the cultural significance of the *Sae Toi Sanu Se'et* ritual, prior research has not thoroughly examined how semantic meanings are encoded and transmitted through ritual speech.

The novelty of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining Cultural Linguistics with ritual anthropology to analyze the semantic structures of ritual expressions (*Hole*) as practiced in the Oeleu community. This linguistic analysis highlights how cultural conceptualizations are embedded in language, offering new insights into the interaction between language, culture, and social identity in a previously underrepresented ethnolinguistic group. This study not only contributes to the preservation and documentation of indigenous ritual practices but also enriches academic discussions on semantic typologies, ritual discourse, and cultural transmission through language in the context of Eastern Indonesia. Research objectives are to describe the ritual stages of the *Sae Toi Sanu Se'et* ceremony in Oeleu communities, and to analyze the types of semantic meaning embedded in ritual speech at each stage of the ritual. Where as research questions are what are the stages of the *Sae Toi Sanu Se'et* ritual in the Oeleu community? and what types of linguistic meaning (semantic categories) are present in the ritual speech?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Studies

Matau, T. N. (2021) – *The Sacredness of Tua in Sae Toi Sanu Se'at Ritual among the Amanuban Ethnic Group*

Matau (2021) investigates the *Sae Toi Sanu Se'at* ritual among the Amanuban ethnic group, a pre-marriage tradition deeply embedded in Timorese culture. The term *sae toi sanu se'at*, which literally means "going up the fence and down the stairs," symbolizes the respectful approach of a man intending to marry a woman. It is also referred to as *knocking on the door*, reflecting the symbolic entry into another family's domain. This ritual functions as a preliminary check—if the woman is already engaged, the proposal cannot proceed. However, if she is not, the process moves forward. The *Sae Toi Sanu Se'at* is indispensable in the marriage process and acts as the social gatekeeper for union approval. One integral aspect is the

presence of *tua* (palm wine), which is never absent from the ritual and symbolizes sacredness and blessing. Without it, a *su'at* (challenge or dispute) may occur, potentially affecting the marital union. Matau employs theoretical frameworks from Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* and Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* to explore the sacred role of *tua*. This study lies in its focus on *tua* as a socio-religious symbol within the ritual, a dimension often overlooked in prior studies (Matau, 2021). This research contributes to redefining the social stigma around *tua*, positioning it not merely as an intoxicant, but as a culturally sacralized substance within a ritual context.

The Concept of Culture

According to Dwicandra, N. M. O., & Setiadi, A. A. P. (2017), culture refers to a learned configuration of behaviors transmitted among community members. Koentjaraningrat (2015) further elaborates that culture comprises seven universal elements: religious systems, social organization, knowledge, language, art, livelihood systems, and tools/technology. Concrete expressions of culture include: (1). Customs: A complex of values, norms, and regulations, (2). Cultural behavior: Observable human actions within social settings, (3) Cultural artifacts: Physical objects created through communal labor.

The Concept of Cultural Linguistics

Cultural Linguistics, as conceptualized by Sharifian (2017), explores how language reflects and transmits cultural conceptualizations. This theoretical approach integrates insights from cognitive linguistics with traditions such as Boasian linguistics, ethnosemantics, and the ethnography of speaking. Sharifian emphasizes that language is not culturally neutral; rather, it embodies the values, beliefs, and knowledge systems of its speakers. The field has evolved by incorporating theories from complexity science and cognitive anthropology to understand how language use reflects cultural cognition. Notably, Cultural Linguistics has been applied in diverse domains—such as World Englishes, intercultural communication, and political discourse—offering novel insights into how language and culture co-construct meaning (Sharifian, 2017, John Benjamins Publishing Company).

The Concept of Meaning

McElvenny (2014), revisiting *The Meaning of Meaning* by Ogden and Richards, describes meaning not as a static entity but as usage-based. Wittgenstein's dictum, "Don't look for the meaning, look for the use," reflects the view that language gains meaning through function in social context rather than fixed definitions. Wodak (2014) adds that meaning is fluid and depends on relational networks among words, while Woensdregt, Smith, and Aronoff (2017) argue that meaning emerges from utterances and is shaped by cultural norms and worldviews.

The key novelty here lies in understanding that meaning is not universal, but dynamic and culturally grounded, making it a critical aspect when analyzing traditional speech acts like those in *Sae Toi Sanu Se'at*.

Types of Meaning

Yunira, S., Fradina, S., Sumbayak, M., Putri, N. S., & Derin, T. (2017) classify meaning into seven categories: (1). Conceptual Meaning; The core or dictionary meaning of a word. *Example: Water* is defined as a clear, tasteless liquid essential for life. (2) Connotative Meaning

Refers to the emotional or cultural associations beyond the dictionary definition. *Example: Rose* may connote love or romance. (3). Stylistic Meaning. Indicates social context or the speaker's status. *Example: Anda vs. kamu* in Indonesian. (4). Affective Meaning Reflects the speaker's emotions. *Example: Hurry up!* conveys urgency or impatience. (5). Reflective Meaning; A word's secondary or implied meaning due to cultural associations. *Example: Cross* may suggest religious symbolism. (6). Collocative Meaning Associations of words that frequently occur together. *Example: Fragrant* with *flowers*; *smelly* with *garbage*. (7). Thematic Meaning Highlights emphasis based on sentence structure. *Example: She completed the assignment vs. The assignment was completed by her.*

Sae Toi Sanu Se'et

Sae Toi Sanu Se'et is a term in the Amanuban tradition, which literally means “climbing the fence and descending the stairs.” This term is used to refer to the initial exploratory ritual before a marriage proposal in the customs of the tribes in the South Central Timor region of East Nusa Tenggara. Symbolically, this ritual represents: “Climbing the fence”: The bold yet respectful and polite approach of the male party toward the female family. “Descending the stairs”: A symbol of acceptance and opening access from the female family toward the male party's good intentions. This ritual serves as the initial stage and gateway to the traditional marriage process, where the man's family formally expresses their intention to propose. Additionally, the ritual also serves to: determine whether the woman being proposed to already has a suitor; establish initial communication between the families; and demonstrate values of politeness, respect, and traditional etiquette.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a **qualitative descriptive design** to explore the *Sae Toi Sanu Se'et* ritual in the Oeleu community, South Central Timor Regency. As stated by Sugiyono (2017), descriptive research aims to describe and interpret phenomena as they naturally occur. This approach is well-suited for analyzing cultural and linguistic practices within their socio-cultural context. Aligned with Denzin and Lincoln (2017) and Moleong (2018), qualitative research seeks to interpret social realities based on participants' perspectives. Therefore, this study adopts a qualitative descriptive method to examine the **implementation, semantic structure, and preservation** of the *Sae Toi Sanu Se'et* ritual, while applying the theoretical framework of **Cultural Linguistics** (Abdullah, Aftab, & Imran, 2022). The study contributes new insights into how language and culture interact to construct meaning in traditional marital discourse. The research was conducted in **Oeleu Village**, Kolbano District, South Central Timor Regency, East Nusa Tenggara.

This location was selected due to its strong cultural relevance and role as a center for ritual practice, particularly the *Sae Toi Sanu Se'et* ceremony. Data were collected through **unstructured (open-ended) interviews**, which allowed informants to freely express cultural knowledge and interpretations. Informants were selected purposively (Arif, 2019) based on the following criteria: Aged 40–60 years; Deep knowledge of *Hole* (ritual speech); Proficient in Indonesian; Physically able to participate. Data were obtained through: **Literature review** – To identify supporting theories and prior research. **Informant selection** – Two informants from Oeleu Village were chosen. **Interviews and documentation** – Used to record and interpret ritual speech and practices. Data were analyzed using a **non-statistical, interpretive approach** grounded in **Cultural Linguistics** (Abdullah et al., 2022). The analysis focused on identifying **cultural conceptualizations, linguistic structures, and symbolic meanings** embedded in the ritual discourse. The findings are presented through both: **informal method**: narrative explanation using descriptive language; **formal method**: glossed data arranged in open tables, followed by interpretation

FINDINGS

This study was conducted within the Oeleu community, Kolbano District, South Central Timor Regency. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through observation, documentation, and in-depth interviews with key informants. Based on field data, the *Sae Toi Sanu Se'at* ritual consists of six main stages as follows:

1. Inquiring or Seeking a Match

The initial stage involves the groom's family visiting the bride's family. This is expressed in the local phrase:

“Nako atoni ini'mnais enu nao neo bife ini'mnais enu”

(The groom's family goes to the bride's family to inquire)

The purpose is to formally ask whether the prospective bride (*tunasufan*, meaning 'flower bud' or unmarried young woman) is still single or already engaged:

*“Feot nai ai tunasufan le amasat an bi au somfa nanan le'i fe lumna
msona ka aimabunuk mahauno”*

If the woman is unmarried and willing to accept the proposal, the groom's family proceeds with a symbolic secret engagement called *Sulatolo*. If she is already engaged, the groom's family respectfully withdraws.

2. Secret Engagement (*Sulatolo*)

This informal engagement stage involves presenting symbolic items as signs of intent:

- *Fe puaha manus* (betel leaf and areca nut)
- *Sulat* (a letter)
- *Blua neo bife bi pasan mese ai nua* (one or two pairs of women's clothing)

- *Fe falo ai heke* (earrings or necklace)
- *Na tao loit* (money)

The bride's family is given one week to deliberate. If accepted, they notify the groom's family. Cultural protocol requires:

- The groom's family to arrive in odd numbers (3, 5, 7, or 9)
- The bride's family to respond with even numbers (4, 6, 8, or 10)

3. Response from the Bride's Family

If the proposal is accepted, the bride's family sends a symbolic response to the groom's household, including:

- *Maues* (a blanket)
- *Mau an'es* (a scarf)
- *Kain meja es* (a tablecloth)
- *Alu mama'es nok in kalat* (a pouch for betel nut and lime container)
- *Nataonain ao, puaha manus* (betel nut and ingredients inside the pouch)

This signifies confirmation of the engagement.

4. Food Delivery Obligation

Following the engagement, the groom's family is obligated to deliver food monthly to the bride's family, symbolizing commitment and responsibility before marriage.

5. Marriage Proposal Process

At this stage, both families convene to discuss and set the wedding date. There are three types of marriage proposals:

- a. ***Sulamnasi***: The groom's family brings one pig as a symbolic offering.
- b. ***Mepanain sulat***: A proposal requesting immediate marriage; if accepted, the couple marries immediately.
- c. ***Kabin (Marriage Ceremony)***:
 - *Kabin knino* (Sacred Marriage): Involves a meeting with the church council to set the wedding date; the bride's family prepares specific ceremonial items (e.g., two blankets, two belts, lime container, betel pouch, scarf).
 - *Kabin alat* (Traditional Marriage): Conducted according to ancestral customs; marriage proceeds only if both maternal sides have fulfilled traditional rites to avoid spiritual consequences.

6. *Tabalab Ma Taloitan* (Accompaniment Ceremony)

About one week after the wedding, the bride's family—parents and siblings—visit the bride at her husband's home, bringing household items as gifts. This symbolizes the bride's integration into a new household and marks the couple's official start of family life. This custom reinforces values of unity, family continuity, and mutual support within the Oeleu community.

DISCUSSION

Meaning in the *Sae Toi Sanu Se'at* ritual was analyzed using the framework proposed by Yunira et al. (2020), which views meaning as a linguistic phenomenon intrinsic to language use, rather than external. Three types of meaning were identified:

Thematic Meaning

Focuses on the roles and participants in the utterance:

- “*Nako atoni ini 'mnais enu nao neo bife ini 'mnais enu*”

Emphasizes the groom's family as the active initiator visiting the bride's family.

- “*Mepanain Sulat*”

Highlights urgency and directness in proposing immediate marriage.

Connotative Meaning

Encodes cultural symbols and emotional nuances:

- *Tunasufan* ('flower bud'): Metaphor for an unmarried woman, symbolizing purity and potential.
- *Fe puaha manus* (betel and areca nut): Represents respect and formal social bonding.
- *Blua neo bife bi pasan mese ai nua* (women's clothing): Symbolizes seriousness and goodwill.
- *Fe falo ai heke* (earrings/necklace): Denotes love and commitment.
- *Maues, Mau an'es* (blanket and scarf): Symbols of warmth and acceptance.
- *Nataonain ao, puaha manus* (betel and lime in pouch): Signifies social approval and acceptance.
- *Tabalab ma taloitan*: Marks social transition of the bride into a new family.

Conceptual (Denotative) Meaning

Literal, straightforward meanings:

- *Sulat, Sulatolo* (letter/secret letter): Formal communication tools in engagement.
- *Na tao loit* (money): Financial support indicating sincerity.
- *Kain meja es, Alu mama'es nok in kalat* (tablecloth, betel pouch): Functional household or ceremonial objects.

- *Kabin knino* (Sacred marriage): Religious wedding with church involvement.
- *Kabin alat* (Traditional marriage): Customary marriage with adherence to adat law.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the *Sae Toi Sanu Se'et* ritual among the Oeleu community of South Central Timor Regency through the lens of Cultural Linguistics and semantic analysis. The findings reveal that *Sae Toi Sanu Se'et* is a complex and deeply symbolic pre-marital ritual composed of six distinct stages: inquiring or seeking a match, secret engagement (*Sulato*), response from the bride's family, food delivery obligation, marriage proposal, and the final accompaniment ceremony (*Tabalab Ma Taloitan*). Each stage reflects a layered system of customary values, kinship structures, and symbolic exchanges that uphold social harmony, respect, and cultural continuity.

Through linguistic analysis, it is evident that ritual speech in *Sae Toi Sanu Se'et* encodes multiple layers of meaning—thematic, connotative, and conceptual—that convey both literal information and rich cultural conceptualizations. Thematic meanings emphasize the roles and social functions of participants within the ritual sequence, while connotative meanings reflect emotional and cultural associations embedded in symbolic items and metaphors (e.g., *tunasufan* as a metaphor for an unmarried woman). Conceptual meanings, in contrast, provide clear, literal interpretations of ceremonial elements and speech acts, such as the giving of money or letters as formal communication tools.

The interdisciplinary approach taken in this research addresses a significant gap in prior studies, which have largely overlooked the semantic structures of ritual language. By integrating insights from Cultural Linguistics and anthropology, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how meaning is constructed, transmitted, and preserved within traditional societies. It also highlights the crucial role of language in shaping social identity, cultural values, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. In conclusion, the *Sae Toi Sanu Se'et* ritual is not merely a sequence of customary actions, but a linguistic and cultural system that reflects the Oeleu community's worldview. The ritual's speech acts serve as both communicative tools and carriers of cultural memory. This research thus supports the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and enriches academic discourse on indigenous semantics, ritual pragmatics, and the interplay between language, culture, and social structure in Eastern Indonesia.

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