

# The SPEAKING of the Earth: Ethnography of Cultural Communication in the Sedekah Bumi Ritual in Jetak Hamlet, Bogorejo Subdistrict, Blora Regency

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## ABSTRACT

The Sedekah Bumi ritual (Earth Almsgiving) is a traditional cultural practice deeply rooted in the agricultural communities of Nglarik Village, Bogorejo Subdistrict, Blora Regency, Indonesia. This study explores the cultural communication embedded within the ritual, focusing on how the community symbolically and verbally expresses its relationship with the earth and ancestral spirits. The objective of this paper is to provide an ethnographic analysis of how cultural meanings are constructed and conveyed during the Sedekah Bumi ritual. Using qualitative methods, particularly participant observation and in-depth interviews with local villagers, this study employs Dell Hymes' SPEAKING model to uncover the layers of communication that reflect the community's values, beliefs, and social cohesion. The findings indicate that the ritual functions not only as an act of thanksgiving for agricultural abundance but also as a means of reinforcing communal identity and transmitting cultural knowledge across generations. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of ritual communication as a mechanism for preserving cultural heritage in rural Indonesian communities.

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## 1. Introduction

Environmental degradation, climate instability, and cultural homogenization have prompted renewed scholarly attention to traditional ecological knowledge systems. Among these, indigenous rituals continue to serve as vital socio-ecological mechanisms, particularly within agrarian societies. In Indonesia, *Sedekah Bumi* an annual agrarian ritual widely practiced in Javanese villages embodies a local cosmology that emphasizes reciprocity between humans and nature (Supriatna & Nugraha, 2020). Rather than viewing nature as a passive resource, (Trisnasyah, 2023) said that the ritual affirms a worldview where ecological balance and spiritual harmony are maintained through relational ethics. Rooted in collective memory and intergenerational practices, *Sedekah Bumi* functions not only as a symbolic celebration of fertility and abundance but also as a medium for transmitting environmental values and cultural resilience (Fatimah, 2019).

Several scholars have analyzed *Sedekah Bumi* through the lenses of religious education, cultural preservation, and community psychology. (Siregar et al., 2021) highlight its role in fostering Islamic

values and social solidarity, while (Rachmawati et al., 2021) interpret the ritual as a psychosocial coping mechanism that promotes collective resilience in the face of socio-economic pressures. (Holina & Wahyuni, 2023) employ semiotic analysis to decode the ritual's symbols as transmitters of moral transformation and ancestral continuity. These studies affirm the ritual's cultural richness, showing how it preserves moral and spiritual teachings while resisting the disruptive forces of modernization (Hengki Hendra Pradana, Yaoma Tertibi, 2024). However, most of this literature concentrates on the thematic and symbolic content of the ritual, often overlooking the structure and function of communication as a performative and interactive process.

This study responds to that gap by examining *Sedekah Bumi* not merely as a cultural object, but as a communicative event. Specifically, it applies Dell Hymes' SPEAKING model an ethnographic framework for analyzing speech events through eight interrelated components: Setting, Participants, Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre (Reyaz & Tripathi, 2021) By using this model, the study moves beyond content analysis to investigate how meanings are produced, negotiated, and transmitted through verbal and non-verbal forms within the ritual. It positions *Sedekah Bumi* as a site of symbolic environmental discourse, where the communicative process itself plays a crucial role in sustaining ecological knowledge and social cohesion. According (Yusanto, 2020), this communicative perspective also reveals how the ritual organizes social roles, manages affect, and reinforces local norms about the human–nature relationship.

The ethnographic focus of this study is the *Sedekah Bumi* ritual practiced in Jetak Hamlet, Nglekir Village, Central Java, where a sacred spring Sendang Jetak serves as the spiritual center of the ceremony. Local practices such as the preparation of *gunungan* (a towering structure of agricultural offerings) and the tradition of *rebutan* (sharing and scrambling for food) reflect not only symbolic richness but also communicative intentionality. These acts function as performative strategies that reinforce ecological ethics through embodied participation and community interaction. The study aims to unpack how speech, gesture, spatial arrangement, and ritual sequence collectively create a communicative system that embeds environmental values into daily life, particularly in contexts where formal environmental education is limited or inaccessible.

Ultimately, this research contributes to ritual communication studies and environmental humanities by offering an interdisciplinary methodological lens. It adapts a classical linguistic model to a non-Western, spiritually embedded context and highlights how local traditions such as *Sedekah Bumi* can offer alternative epistemologies for sustainability. As (Asare, 2015) notes, bridging traditional ecological knowledge with global environmental frameworks is essential for shaping more inclusive and grounded responses to climate change. In this view, *Sedekah Bumi* is not simply a cultural artifact of the past it is a living, evolving discourse that performs, communicates, and reproduces ecological awareness across generations (Suci Prasasti, 2020).

## 2. Research Method

This research adopted a qualitative ethnographic approach to investigate the communicative functions and cultural meanings inherent in the *Sedekah Bumi* ritual held in Jetak hamlet, Nglekir Village, located in Bogorejo Subdistrict, Blora Regency. Ethnography, as both method and theoretical lens, is particularly apt for capturing cultural phenomena as they are experienced, enacted, and communicated within particular sociocultural contexts (Muriel Saville-Troike, 2008). The ethnographic framework enabled the researcher to explore the symbolic structures, ecological ethics, and interpersonal dynamics that materialize through ritual performance. By embedding themselves in the field, the researcher was able to access nuanced interpretations of the ritual's communicative content and its environmental symbolism (Ari Suryawati Secio Caesar, Andayani, 2025).

## 2.1. Type of Study

This investigation is a descriptive-interpretive study grounded in cultural and communication studies. The focus was on interpreting Sedekah Bumi as both a performative cultural act and a mode of ecological discourse through the lens of Dell Hymes' ethnography of communication. Specifically, the SPEAKING model was applied to dissect the ritual into eight core elements: Setting and Scene, Participants, Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre (Ray & Biswas, 2011). This model facilitates a detailed understanding of how ritualized communication constructs and conveys cultural and ecological meanings (Setyawati, 2022),

## 2.2. Data Sources

Primary data were gathered during fieldwork in Nglarik Village surrounding the Sedekah Bumi celebration. The data collection utilized three primary techniques: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The researcher was physically present during the ritual to observe spatial dynamics, event sequences, and communicative symbols. Detailed field notes were recorded to capture gestures, spatial arrangements, and verbal and non-verbal interactions. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were held with local figures such as the village head, religious leaders, youth participants, and ritual. The purpose was to uncover their perspectives on the meaning, function, and intentions of the ritual (Lange, 1988). Supporting data such as photos, videos, flyers, and historical records were collected to aid triangulation and deepen contextual understanding (Sari et al., 2023).

## 2.3. Analytical Method

The analysis was conducted thematically and structurally using Hymes' SPEAKING model to interpret each communicative element of the ritual (Ray & Biswas, 2011). This included analyzing the physical setting of *Sendang Jetak*, participant roles, the symbolic meaning of offerings, speech sequences, and the tone and norms of interaction. Triangulation was employed by comparing findings from observation, interviews, and documentation to enhance credibility. Reflexivity was also maintained throughout the study to remain critically aware of the researcher's positionality and interpretive lens (Sugiyono, 2018).

As a culturally embedded observer, the researcher's familiarity with Javanese rituals facilitated deeper engagement and trust but also posed risks of bias in interpreting symbolic meanings. To minimize this, member-checking and validation with key informants were conducted. The researcher's presence may have subtly influenced participant behavior, particularly during performative acts. Challenges included navigating local hierarchies and interpreting non-verbal cues in sacred settings. While the single-case focus limits generalizability, it offers rich, context-specific insights. These limitations are seen as inherent to ethnographic research, which values depth and meaning over broad generalization. Reflexivity was maintained through fieldnotes and continuous self-awareness to ensure interpretive rigor.

By presenting the methodology in this way, the study emphasizes transparency, reliability, and rigor in data collection and interpretation. According to (Mahendra et al, 2024), it further reinforces the value of studying traditional rituals as culturally embedded communicative acts with ecological significance. Section should provide a detailed description of the research approach, including the type of study, data sources, and analytical methods employed. This information aims to equip the reader with a clear understanding of how the legal issue was investigated. The methodology should be presented in a clear and concise manner, highlighting the key steps taken to analyze the problem at hand. This section is essential for establishing the rigor and validity of the research, particularly in the context of an original study (Usop, 2019).

## 3. Results and Discussion

This section is organized into three analytical parts, each aligned with a central research question and examined through the use of Dell Hymes' SPEAKING model to systematically explore the communicative dimensions of the Sedekah Bumi ritual in Jetak hamlet. The model which includes Setting, Participants, Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genreserves as a

comprehensive tool for unpacking the structure and meaning of ritual communication (Setyawati, 2022). By utilizing this framework, the study reveals how the ritual acts as a form of communication that conveys local cosmological beliefs, reinforces social norms, and transmits ecological knowledge. These components are not merely observed as performances, but are interpreted as evolving cultural expressions that shape the community's relationship with the environment (Reyaz & Tripathi, 2021).

Table 1. Key Communicative Elements of the Sedekah Bumi Ritual

| No. | SPEAKING Element  | Description                                      |
|-----|-------------------|--|
| 1   | Setting and Scene | Sendang Jetak, sacred spring with symbolic decor |
| 2   | Participants      | Village leaders, religious figures, 200+ locals  |
| 3   | Ends              | Gratitude to Earth, prosperity, social unity     |
| 4   | Act Sequence      | Prayers → Offering → Rebutan (scramble)          |
| 5   | Key               | Reverent, festive                                |
| 6   | Instrumentalities | Oral speech, traditional music, symbolic acts    |
| 7   | Norms             | Cooperation, respect, communal participation     |
| 8   | Genre             | Javanese ritual with religious-cultural blend    |

### 3.1. Identification of Communicative Elements in the Ritual (SPEAKING Model)

This subsection addresses the first research question by analyzing the communicative elements of the Sedekah Bumi ritual through Dell Hymes' SPEAKING model. Drawing on ethnographic observation in Jetak hamlet, the ritual occurs at *sendang Jetak*, a sacred water spring surrounded by forest and agricultural land. The spatial setting carries both environmental and spiritual significance, symbolizing fertility, purity, and life in Javanese cosmological (Geertz, 1973). Approximately more 300 individuals participate in the event, including community leaders, traditional elders, youth, and religious figures. Key components of the act sequence include prayer recitations, public addresses, offerings of a symbolic *gunungan* made of food and harvest goods, and a lively communal scramble (*rebutan*) to retrieve them. The mood, or Key, shifts between sacred solemnity and festive joy, expressed through traditional musical performances, body movements, and oral narration.

Orality remains the dominant communication medium, supported by meaningful visual symbols and performative rituals. As Pak Sardi, a local cultural figure, explained: "*Gunungan itu bukan cuma makanan, tapi lambang berkah lan rasa syukur. Sapa sing entuk, dipercaya bakal makmur*" ("The *gunungan* is not merely food, but a symbol of blessing and gratitude. Whoever gets it is believed to prosper") highlighting the embedded cultural meanings.

According to (Reyaz & Tripathi, 2021), the community upholds behavioral norms that emphasize cooperation, respect, and shared responsibility. Instances of improper conduct, such as pushing during *rebutan*, are addressed through informal social correction, reinforcing ethical communal behavior. The ritual genre represents a synthesis of religious devotion, agrarian tradition, and indigenous cosmology performed as a public spectacle. Thus, Sedekah Bumi functions not as an arbitrary tradition but as a culturally encoded communicative act. It articulates ecological consciousness, social values, and spiritual beliefs through a structured and shared ritual language (Fatimah, 2019).

### 3.2. Interpretation of Sedekah Bumi as Environmental Discourse

This part of the study addresses the second research question: in what ways does Sedekah Bumi serve as a mode of environmental communication? Although the ritual does not employ formal environmental terminology, it embodies ecological wisdom through symbolic acts and sequences rooted in traditional farming cycles and seasonal awareness. By presenting the first harvest yields as offerings to the Earth, participants express a worldview of reciprocal dependence and reverence for nature central to indigenous ecological ethics.

As Mbah Karmin, a village elder, explains: "*Sedekah Bumi iku cara wong desa ngelingi menawa kita urip gumantung bumi. Bumi kudu diopeni, ora mung dipetik*" ("Sedekah Bumi is how villagers remind themselves that life depends on the Earth. It must be cared for, not just harvested")—highlighting the ritual's role in promoting sustainability. The *rebutan*, a communal scramble for blessings, conveys an ethic of shared abundance, symbolizing communal access to resources rather than individual competition. According (Holina & Wahyuni, 2023) the crops used rice, bananas, cassava, and peanuts are locally grown, organic, and seasonal, reinforcing sustainable agricultural practices.

According to cultural observers, *Sedekah Bumi* offers a sharp contrast to dominant development models that prioritize exploitation and expansion. Instead, it promotes a worldview based on ecological balance, moderation, and reverence for the natural world. For example, local practitioners emphasize that the ritual serves as a counter-narrative to consumerist values, elevating principles of harmony and environmental care. Through songs, dances, and symbolic offerings, *Sedekah Bumi* communicates a cultural language of ecological consciousness that is deeply felt and performed (Ristiani et al., 2024).

Furthermore, community leaders have expressed that *Sedekah Bumi* frames environmental ethics not as technical knowledge to be taught, but as a spiritual tradition that is lived and transmitted from one generation to the next. Rather than viewing sustainability as an external solution, this ritual demonstrates that caring for nature is already embedded in local belief systems and expressed through shared ritual actions.

### 3.3. Role of the Ritual in Cultural Resilience and Adaptation

This section examines how the *Sedekah Bumi* ritual contributes to cultural continuity and community resilience. In Jetak hamlet, the ritual serves not only as a ceremonial expression but also as a living mechanism for intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and collective identity. Despite ongoing challenges such as modernization, migration, and the digital shift, *Sedekah Bumi* remains a vital communal anchor. It provides a meaningful platform where elders impart values, stories, and ethical teachings to younger generations through active engagement. As shared by a local student named Rina, participating in the *gunungan* parade with her school friends helped her better understand ancestral traditions a sign of how the ritual functions as informal cultural education. Recent efforts to involve schools, document the event through media, and include wider community planning demonstrate how the ritual evolves to stay relevant. For example, the replacement of animal offerings with symbolic forms illustrates a shift in spiritual and ethical considerations, without undermining its cultural essence.

Rather than diminishing in significance, the ritual has embraced contemporary tools like social media livestreams and structured educational programs while staying grounded in Javanese cosmology and local ecological values. In doing so, *Sedekah Bumi* in Jetak hamlet emerges as both a symbol of cultural resilience and a medium for community renewal. Communicative elements such as sacred settings, symbolic gestures, and inclusive participation shape a rich tapestry of shared meaning. These ritual components serve not only spiritual and social purposes but also embody a



tacit ecological ethic. (Ainiyyah & Mardani, 2019) said that, through the use of local produce and cooperative practices, the ritual quietly promotes sustainability, autonomy, and environmental stewardship. Ultimately, *Sedekah Bumi* is not simply a relic of tradition, it is a dynamic cultural discourse that integrates environmental ethics, spiritual belief, and social solidarity into a cohesive and ongoing way of life.

### 3.4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that *Sedekah Bumi* operates as a deeply embedded communicative system, encoding layers of meaning related to nature, spirituality, social order, and cultural resilience. Through the application of Dell Hymes' SPEAKING model (Setyawati, 2022), the ritual can be understood not merely as tradition, but as a form of ecological discourse a performative way through which environmental ethics are transmitted, enacted, and sustained.

Each component of the model provides specific insights into how ecological values are embedded in cultural expression. For instance, the setting *Sendang Jetak*, a sacred spring surrounded by forest underscores the spiritual sanctity of nature, suggesting an ontological relationship between land and community. The Participants, ranging from elders to children, reflect intergenerational transmission of ecological knowledge and collective memory. The Ends of the ritual go beyond thanksgiving; they aim to preserve balance between humans and nature, rooted in a cosmology that views the Earth as both provider and sacred entity.

The Act Sequence, such as the procession, prayer, offering of the *gunungan*, and the *rebutan*, embodies a moral economy where agricultural abundance is seen as communal rather than individual wealth. The *gunungan* a towering arrangement of crops, functions symbolically to teach principles of generosity, sustainability, and mutual dependence, while *rebutan* dramatizes the philosophy of equitable access to nature's bounty. These acts are not merely performative but encode specific ecological ethics within cultural norms.

The Key, or affective tone, of the ritual marked by solemnity, reverence, and communal joy establishes the seriousness of human-nature relations while affirming a collective sense of gratitude. This emotional framing reinforces care-based values that underlie traditional ecological knowledge. The Instrumentalities, including traditional Javanese language, chants (*tembang*), and symbolic gestures, act as culturally resonant vehicles for transmitting ecological messages. These mediums carry embedded meanings that would not be effectively conveyed through formal or external channels, demonstrating the power of local communicative genres in sustaining environmental worldviews.

The Norms of interaction such as respect for elders, silence during prayers, and collective participation reinforce social harmony as an ecological principle, while the Genre of the ritual itself blends spiritual ceremony, oral tradition, and communal celebration into a cohesive communicative event. This layering of speech acts, symbols, and embodied practices illustrates how culture functions as an adaptive strategy in maintaining both ecological and social balance.

Conceptually, this study broadens the scope of ethnographic communication studies by integrating structural-linguistic analysis into the examination of rituals often approached through religious or sociological frames. It shows that traditional rituals like *Sedekah Bumi* are not static folklore but living discourses performative spaces where environmental ethics, cosmological beliefs, and communal resilience are actively negotiated.

Practically, the findings point to the potential integration of such cultural practices into local environmental education and community-based development policies. Rather than introducing externally imposed sustainability frameworks, policy-makers and educators could recognize and

support rituals like Sedekah Bumi as informal ecological curricula that already promote environmental stewardship, intergenerational learning, and social equity in locally grounded ways.

Nevertheless, this study acknowledges certain limitations. Focusing on a single site and event may not capture the full diversity of Sedekah Bumi practices across different regions. Moreover, the presence of the researcher may have introduced subtle shifts in ritual behavior, especially in how participants performed for documentation or dialogue. To address this, triangulation across interviews, fieldnotes, and participant observation was applied, and reflexive practices were maintained throughout the research process.

Future research could explore comparative studies of Sedekah Bumi in different ecological or socio-political contexts, investigating how its meanings adapt in response to modernization or climate change. Additionally, it would be valuable to examine the extent to which ritual participation leads to concrete environmental actions, such as sustainable farming or local conservation initiatives. Such studies could further elucidate the tangible contributions of cultural traditions to ecological resilience and sustainable development.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study explores the Sedekah Bumi ritual in Jetak Hamlet through the lens of ethnography of communication, employing Dell Hymes' SPEAKING model as an analytical framework. The findings indicate that the ritual functions as a structured communicative practice encoding values related to ecology, spirituality, and social cohesion. By examining elements such as setting, participants, acts, key, and norms, the research reveals how expressions of gratitude toward nature and ancestral spirits are deeply embedded in communal ethics (Mahendra et al, 2024). For instance, the *gunungan* a pyramid-shaped offering made from agricultural produce embodies meanings of prosperity, thankfulness, and ecological harmony between humans and nature. This ritualistic structure reveals a multi-layered symbolic system that reflects the intertwined spiritual and ecological relationships (Fatimah, 2019).

The practice of *rebutan*, where villagers scramble for food offerings, signifies more than mere festivity; it represents symbolic access to shared resources and a rejection of individualistic accumulation (Hamida et al., 2022). This act reflects a worldview centered on communal abundance and cooperation, challenging scarcity-driven mindsets. Within this framework, Sedekah Bumi becomes a performative expression of ecological ethics, portraying human-nature relations as reciprocal and morally bound. By engaging participants across generations, the ritual serves as a medium for cultural transmission and ecological messaging. This demonstrates how ritual language and embodied action function as tools of indigenous environmental pedagogy, sustaining both cultural continuity and environmental awareness (Pranoto et al., 2024).

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