

## The Meaning and Process of the Semana Santa Ritual in Larantuka, East Flores

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### Abstract

*Semana Santa in Larantuka, East Flores, is a Catholic religious tradition that has lasted for more than five centuries and has become the cultural identity of the local community. This research aims to analyze the meaning and ritual process of Semana Santa, as well as explain the symbolism and values contained in it. The research method uses a qualitative approach with a case study type, through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, with phenomenology-based data analysis. The results of the study revealed that Semana Santa has a religious meaning in the form of appreciation of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ; social meaning in the form of strengthening solidarity, mutual cooperation, and tolerance between religious communities; and cultural significance in the form of acculturation of Portuguese Catholic traditions with Lamaholot customs. Processions and symbols such as Mr. Ma, Mr. Ana, candles, and purple cloth enrich the spiritual experience while strengthening the collective identity of the community. The conclusion of this study emphasizes that Semana Santa not only functions as a religious ritual, but also as a cultural heritage, a means of value education, and the potential for religious tourism that needs to be maintained in the midst of modernization.*

**Keywords:** Holy Week; Larantuka; Rituals; Meaning; Culture.

### INTRODUCTION

Ritual is one of the tangible manifestations of cultural and religious expressions that are inherited from generation to generation in society (Ola, 2022). This kind of tradition not only serves as a spiritual means, but also becomes a social media that strengthens community bonds. In the Indonesian context, rituals often hold a deep philosophical meaning, as well as represent the collective identity of the local community (Floriansus & Belen, 2024).

Indonesia is known as a country with an incredible cultural richness, encompassing thousands of traditions and traditional ceremonies from Sabang to Merauke. (Widyawati, 2022) revealed that this diversity shows how close the relationship between religion, culture, and social life is in the community. Religious rituals are not only understood as a spiritual aspect, but also integrated with the social and cultural structure of society (Keban et al., 2023).

East Flores is one of the regions that has a unique and widely known ritual tradition, namely Semana Santa in Larantuka City. This celebration has lasted for more than five centuries and is still maintained today. The people of Larantuka, especially Catholics, make Semana Santa a sacred event that involves all social strata (Malo et al., 2024).

Semana Santa comes from the Portuguese language meaning "Holy Week". This tradition is carried out every year leading up to Easter, including a series of rituals from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. In the procession, the people of Larantuka relive the story of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ with full appreciation (Noer et al., 2024).

The peculiarity of *Semana Santa* lies in the combination of Catholic liturgical elements with the local tradition of Lamaholot. Djou & Abdul (2023) reveal that this acculturation creates a different form of celebration than Catholic practice elsewhere. The presence of Portuguese culture assimilated with local traditions marked a long process of cross-cultural interaction.

The meaning of *Semana Santa* is not only limited to the religious aspect. This ritual also holds social and cultural values that strengthen community solidarity. Interfaith involvement in security and technical support shows that there is tolerance that lives in society (Larantuka et al., 2022).

The *Semana Santa* ritual procession takes place through stages that are structured and full of symbolism. Each stage of the procession has a deep spiritual meaning, ranging from regret, sacrifice, to hope for resurrection (Tokan, 2022). The symbols used, such as statues of Mr. Ma and Mr. Ana, candles, and purple cloth, became a means of visualizing faith and cultural identity.

The Larantuka people place *Semana Santa* not only as an ancestral heritage tradition, but also as a medium of faith education for the younger generation (Bugis & Riyanto, 2024). The values of love, sacrifice, and solidarity taught in the procession became the moral foundation that was relevant to daily life.

The attraction of *Semana Santa* is not only for the local community, but also for national and foreign tourists. Thousands of pilgrims come every year to take part in the procession and feel the typical religious atmosphere of Larantuka. This phenomenon makes *Semana Santa* a religious tourism destination that has an economic as well as cultural impact (Dudiantini & Narpati, 2024).

The development of the times presents its own challenges for the preservation of *Semana Santa*. Modernization and globalization have the potential to shift spiritual meaning towards the commodification of tourism (Subaniyah et al., 2023). This condition demands a balance between maintaining the sacredness of rituals and utilizing them as cultural and economic potential.

Scientific studies of *Semana Santa* are important to document the process and meaning contained in it. This research contributes to understanding how a ritual functions as a mechanism for forming a collective identity and a means of cultural acculturation (Kebingin et al., 2024). A phenomenological perspective was chosen to explore the subjective experience of the community in living *Semana Santa*.

Phenomenology as an approach allows researchers to enter into the direct experience of ritual practitioners. Every symbol, procession, and prayer is understood not only as a liturgical act, but as a meaningful existential experience (Sukmantoro & Suyitno, 2022). Phenomenological analysis helps uncover how people interpret *Semana Santa* in their lives.

The social context of the Larantuka community is an important factor that shapes the sustainability of this ritual. The people's life that is close to Catholic tradition while maintaining the local wisdom of Lamaholot makes *Semana Santa* a distinctive symbol of acculturation. The interaction between religion and local culture proves the existence of creative social dynamics (Bulqiyah & Fahrian, 2024).

The urgency of research on *Semana Santa* is also related to cultural preservation efforts. Academic documentation can help local communities understand the values contained in this tradition, as well as serve as a reference for future generations. Thus, *Semana Santa* can continue to be preserved without losing its spiritual meaning.

This paper aims to analyze the meaning and ritual process of Semana Santa in Larantuka, East Flores. The analysis focuses on the stages of the procession, the symbols used, and the values contained in it. The results of the study are expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of Semana Santa as the cultural and religious heritage of the Larantuka community.

## **METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study type, because the main purpose of the research is to understand the meaning and ritual process of Semana Santa as experienced by the Larantuka community. Case studies allow researchers to explore cultural and religious phenomena in depth in specific social contexts, as well as provide interpretive space for the symbolism that emerges in each procession.

The location of the research was determined in Larantuka District, East Flores Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, which is the center of the implementation of the Semana Santa tradition. The choice of this location was based on historical and cultural considerations, considering that Larantuka is a center of Catholic devotion that has preserved the tradition of Semana Santa for more than five centuries.

The subjects of the study include various community groups that are directly or indirectly involved in the implementation of Semana Santa. They consisted of religious leaders (priests, monks/nuns), the Semana Santa committee, Larantuka Catholics, interfaith communities who supported the procession, and pilgrims from outside the region. This diversity of informants allows for a comprehensive perspective on the meaning and process of the ritual.

The data used in this study is divided into primary data and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and field documentation. Secondary data are in the form of academic literature, Church archives, and scientific and popular writings relevant to Semana Santa in Larantuka.

Data collection is carried out through three main techniques. First, participatory observation by directly following the stages of the procession from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. Second, in-depth interviews with key informants such as religious leaders, committees, and Catholics to explore their meanings of symbols and processions. Third, documentation in the form of photos, videos, and written archives that support the understanding of the phenomenon.

The research instrument used was the researcher as the main instrument, with the help of interview guidelines and observation notes. The interview guidelines are structured in the form of open-ended questions, allowing informants to reveal their spiritual and cultural experiences in depth.

The validity of the data is maintained through triangulation of sources, techniques, and time. Information from interviews was compared with observation results and written documents to ensure data consistency. This triangulation increases the credibility of the research and avoids interpretation bias.

Data analysis was carried out with a phenomenological approach. The analysis stages include data reduction to sort out important information, presentation of data in the form of descriptive narratives, extraction of meaning through phenomenological interpretation of people's subjective experiences, and verification of findings with theories and previous research.

The ethical aspects of the research are also considered by asking for the consent of informants, maintaining identity secrecy, and respecting the sacredness of the Semana Santa procession. The documentation was carried out with the permission of the committee and was carried out without interfering with the ritual.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. History and Background of Semana Santa**

Semana Santa in Larantuka is a Catholic religious tradition that has its roots in Portuguese heritage since the 16th century. This celebration has lasted for more than five centuries and has become the cultural identity of the people of East Flores. This tradition was accepted by the Lamaholot people through the process of acculturation with local customs so that it formed a distinctive celebration that was different from Semana Santa in other places.

### **2. Stages of the Holy Week Procession**

The procession lasts for a whole week, starting from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. Each stage has a special name and is followed with appreciation.

**Table 1.**  
**Stages of the Semana Santa Procession and Its Meaning**

Stages of the Procession	Ritual Description	Religious Meaning	Socio-Cultural Meaning
<b>Palm Sunday (Palm Sunday)</b>	Palm leaf procession as a symbol of Jesus' welcome in Jerusalem	Reminding the people of Christ's humility	the Binding the initial participation of the whole community
<b>Stabbed Turo</b>	Preparation of large candles (turo) installed along the procession	Candles symbolize the light of faith	Fostering mutual cooperation in preparation
<b>Wednesday Trewa</b>	Joint prayer remembrance of the time when Jesus was betrayed by Judas	Symbol of betrayal and forgiveness	Forming a collective moral reflection
<b>Maundy Thursday</b>	The Mass of the Lord's Supper, commemorating Jesus' supper with the disciples	Emphasis on the last value of love and sacrifice	Tradition of sharing food strengthens solidarity
<b>Sesta Vera (Good Friday)</b>	A large procession carrying statues of Tuan Ma and Tuan Ana	Reflections on Christ's suffering and death	The glue of solidarity of interfaith communities
<b>Holy Saturday</b>	Silent prayer and waiting for the resurrection	Faith hope for new life	A contemplative moment that brings the community together
<b>Easter Sunday (Hallelujah Sunday)</b>	Celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ	Symbol of victory over sin and death	The peak of joy for the whole community

### 3. Symbolism in Ritual

Symbols such as Mr. Ma, Mr. Ana, candles, and purple cloth reinforce the spiritual experience of the people. Tuan Ma is seen as the mediator of love, while Tuan Ana is the symbol of sacrifice and salvation. Candles symbolize the light of faith, while purple cloth symbolizes repentance.

### 4. Cross-Religious and Social Participation

Research has found that Semana Santa does not only belong to Catholics. Muslim youth played a role in keeping the procession safe, and the non-Catholic community supported the celebration. This phenomenon shows the life of tolerance and social harmony in Larantuka.

### 5. Religious, Social, and Cultural Meaning

Semana Santa has a religious meaning as an appreciation of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection. Socially, this ritual strengthens the bond of solidarity and mutual cooperation. Culturally, Semana Santa reflects Portuguese acculturation with Lamaholot customs, resulting in distinctive traditions not found anywhere else.

### 6. Regeneration and Value Education

The younger generation is involved in various roles during the procession, such as candle bearers and prayer participants. This is a means of faith education as well as the inheritance of cultural values. Thus, Semana Santa is not only preserved, but also passed down through generations.

### **7. Economic Impact and Religious Tourism**

Semana Santa attracts thousands of pilgrims and tourists every year. Their presence brings significant economic impact to local traders and service providers. Nevertheless, the people of Larantuka try to keep the celebration from losing its sacredness.

### **8. Challenges of Preserving Traditions**

Modernization and globalization have made some of the younger generation less aware of the symbolic meaning of Semana Santa. This condition requires value education and cultural documentation so that traditions are not just a spectacle, but remain a guide for people's lives.

## **Discussion**

Semana Santa in Larantuka represents a unique phenomenon of cultural and religious acculturation. This tradition not only reflects Catholic devotion, but also absorbs elements of Lamaholot customs. The presence of local symbols in the procession confirms that religion can dynamically interact with local culture (Kebingin et al., 2024). The procession shows creative adaptation without losing the core of Catholic teaching. The cultural and religious identity of the Larantuka people was formed from this long process.

The religious meaning contained in Semana Santa is the focus of this research. The procession depicts an intense experience of faith, especially as the faithful contemplate the suffering of Jesus Christ. Rituals are a means of strengthening the spiritual relationship of the people with God. The values of sacrifice, love, and forgiveness are the moral foundations that continue to be inherited. The religious life of the community is enriched through symbolic experiences in the procession (Tokan, 2022).

Phenomenological perspectives help uncover people's subjective experiences in Semana Santa. Every symbol, prayer, and procession is understood as an existential experience (Bugis & Riyanto, 2024). Phenomenology emphasizes how individuals interpret their direct experiences. The people do not just see the procession as a formal liturgy. The procession becomes a space of spiritual appreciation that touches the deepest dimension of life.

Semana Santa also serves as a social media that strengthens solidarity. The community worked together in preparing and carrying out the entire series of events. Social bonds are closer when everyone takes part according to their roles. This participation fosters a sense of togetherness that crosses social and religious differences. The procession ultimately functions as a means of strengthening community integration (Dudiantini & Narpati, 2024).

Interfaith participation in Semana Santa shows that there is real tolerance in Larantuka. Muslim youth were actively involved in maintaining the security of the procession. Their presence confirms that Semana Santa is accepted as part of the collective identity of the community. This interfaith cooperation shows an exemplary model of harmony (Florianus & Belen, 2024). The tolerance that is established strengthens social harmony in the midst of diversity.

Symbolism is an important element that gives depth to the procession. The statues of Mr. Ma and Mr. Ana have a strong theological significance. Mr. Ma symbolizes love and comfort, while

Mr. Ana represents sacrifice and salvation. Candles symbolize the light of faith that never goes out. Purple cloth gives a message of repentance and humility (Ola, 2022).

An analysis of symbolism shows that society not only lives the liturgy, but also reinterprets the meaning of symbols. Symbols do not stand alone, but are related to the collective experience of society (Keban et al., 2023). The interpretation of symbols forms a shared awareness of religious values. The procession then becomes a space of collective reflection that strengthens identity. Symbolism plays a dual role as a religious and cultural means.

Semana Santa provides a space for faith education for the younger generation. The involvement of children and adolescents in the procession strengthens the inheritance of values (Malo et al., 2024). Hands-on experience helps the younger generation understand the meaning of sacrifice and solidarity. These values are not only taught verbally, but also lived through real actions. Tradition is a means of continuous moral and spiritual education.

The impact of Semana Santa is not only spiritual, but also economic. Thousands of pilgrims come every year and contribute to the local economy. Traders, transportation service providers, and innkeepers benefit directly. The community sees this celebration as an opportunity to develop economic potential. The existence of religious tourism increases welfare without eliminating sacred values (Sukmantoro & Suyitno, 2022).

The balance between the sacred and tourism is an important issue in the discussion. Djou & Abdul Hamid (2023) revealed that religious tourism has the potential to shift the meaning of procession if it is not managed wisely. The community and the Church are trying to keep the procession oriented to religious values. The existence of pilgrims is arranged so as not to interfere with the sacredness of the ritual. The preservation of spiritual values is a top priority in this celebration.

The challenge of preserving traditions is increasingly evident in the midst of modernization. The younger generation faces the influence of globalization that has the potential to reduce the understanding of symbolic meaning. Cultural documentation and education are important steps to maintain sustainability (Subaniyah et al., 2023). The church and society play an active role in educating the next generation. Traditions will live on if they are consciously understood and inherited.

Semana Santa can be understood as a mechanism of the collective identity of the Larantuka community. This tradition forms a sense of local togetherness and pride. Collective identity is not only religious, but also cultural (Noer et al., 2024). The procession shows how a community formulates itself through ritual. Larantuka's identity is getting stronger through this annual celebration.

Phenomenology shows that the experience of Semana Santa is both personal and communal. Individuals feel a profound spiritual experience. At the same time, these experiences are shared in a communal space. The procession becomes an arena of intersubjectivity where personal experience meets collective experience. The meaning of tradition is born from the encounter between individuals and communities (Atasoge et al, 2022).

The value of solidarity in Semana Santa shows the social function of ritual. Mutual cooperation in preparing the procession to strengthen social networks. Widyawati (2022) revealed that solidarity is not only present in the Catholic community, but also penetrates interfaith

communities. This value confirms that rituals have a real social dimension. The procession finally strengthens inclusive social relationships.

The preservation of Semana Santa requires a strategy that brings together religious, social, cultural, and economic aspects. The church plays a role in maintaining religious values, while society ensures cross-generational involvement. Local governments can support through the promotion of religious tourism that is sensitive to sacred values. Cross-sector collaboration will strengthen the sustainability of traditions. Holy Week will remain a living heritage if it is taken care of together (Bulqiyah & Fahrman, 2024).

The results of this study are in line with the theory of ritual which states that ritual functions as a social and religious mechanism. The Semana Santa procession shows this dual function very clearly. This tradition strengthens faith while strengthening social solidarity. Symbol theory also supports the analysis that meaning does not lie in the symbol itself, but in the interpretation of society. Holy Week is clear evidence of the role of ritual in shaping the meaning of life.

This research confirms that Semana Santa is a cultural heritage as well as a heritage of faith. The meanings contained in it include religious, social, cultural, educational, and economic dimensions. The procession shows the close connection between religion and culture in shaping people's identities. Phenomenology helps to reveal how people live these experiences in depth. Semana Santa finally became a tradition that unites the faith, culture, and social life of the Larantuka people.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Research on the meaning and ritual process of Semana Santa in Larantuka, East Flores shows that this tradition is a cultural and religious heritage that has a very deep religious, social, and cultural meaning. Semana Santa is not only a celebration of the Catholic liturgy, but also the result of acculturation with the local tradition of Lamaholot, thus giving birth to a distinctive and unique procession. The symbolism that appears in each stage of the procession enriches the spiritual experience of the people while strengthening the cultural identity of the community.

The results of the study revealed that Semana Santa functions as a means of appreciating faith, value education, and a mechanism for strengthening social solidarity. The procession involves all levels of society, even across religions, so as to show that there is social harmony that is maintained. This tradition also has an impact on the economic aspect through the presence of religious tourism, although the sacredness is still maintained as a top priority.

The religious, social, and cultural significance of Semana Santa shows that rituals serve a dual function in people's lives. The procession is not only a religious celebration, but also a mechanism for forming a collective identity, social glue, and the inheritance of values between generations. Semana Santa thus becomes a mirror of the creative interaction between religion, culture, and the social life of the people of Larantuka.

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