

# Unlocking Mysteries: What Do Symbols Reveal About Manggarai Birth Rituals?

Komunitas: International Journal of  
Indonesian Society and Culture  
15(2) (2023): 245-254  
DOI:10.15294/komunitas.v15i2.43064  
© 2023 Semarang State University, Indonesia  
p-ISSN 2086 - 5465 | e-ISSN 2460-7320  
<https://journal.unnes.ac.id/nju/index.php/komunitas>

UNNES JOURNALS

Erna Mena Niman<sup>1</sup> and Hieronimus Canggung Darong<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus, Nusa Tenggara Timur, Indonesia

Received: March 4, 2022; Accepted: August 8, 2023; Published: September 30, 2023

## Abstract

This qualitative study explores the deep meanings associated with symbols found in the birth ceremony of the Manggarai culture. The study used participant observation and interviews with traditional leaders as its main data gathering techniques, with a qualitative design based in symbolic interactionism. Using semiotics and pragmatics theory in conjunction with the data analysis spiral technique, the analysis offers a thorough examination of the meanings of the symbols used in the ceremony in question. The findings highlighted the functions of symbols in the birth rite and the profound social and religious significance they have. As such, the meanings of the symbols serve to communicate religious views and form social relationships. Additionally, the findings shows gender characteristics in these symbolic activities, emphasizing gender-specific roles or representations throughout the birth rite. The results provide insightful information on the cultural diversity and symbolic relationships appear in Manggarai birth customs.

## Keywords

Meaning; Manggarai; birth ritual; symbols

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### Corresponding author

Jl. Ahmad Yani 10 Manggarai NTT Tenda, Watu, Kec.  
Ruteng, Manggarai, Nusa Tenggara Tim. 86511, Indo-  
nesia

### Email

[hieronimusdarong@gmail.com](mailto:hieronimusdarong@gmail.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

Symbols have a significant impact on how society functions and how it is reflected. Symbols, that can be concrete or intangible, possess multiple levels of significance that exceed their actual existence. Within a society, these symbolic representations act as a common language, containing identities, cultural values, and beliefs (Darong et al., 2023b; Tektigul et al., 2023). Symbols have the capacity to elicit strong feelings and ideas, fostering a sense of unity or division among individual. Flags, religious symbols, national anthems, and even commonplace objects can serve as unifying symbols, creating a coherent framework for social interaction. On the other hand, symbols may also be a source of conflict since various groups may interpret them differently, which can result in disagreements about representation and meaning (Gibbs, 2020). Symbols are essentially threads that are sewn into the fabric of society, influencing how people react to one another and their surroundings and binding together collective narratives.

Symbols are effective representational and communication tools that can transmit meaning beyond their literal forms. These textual or visual components become meaningful based on cultural, social, or contextual relations; they function as a common language among members of a community or group (Raru, 2016). Whatever their forms, symbols are full with emotional, cultural, or historical connotations that help individuals communicate concepts, identities, and beliefs in a clear, concise, and understandable way.

An essential function of cultural symbols is to define and maintain the identity of a community. They frequently capture shared experiences, societal ideas, and historical narratives. A national flag, for instance, is more than just a piece of colorful cloth; it is a representation of the history, values, and unity of a nation. Religious symbols like the crescent and cross are visual representations of faith and belief systems that have great spiritual meaning (District et al., 2022). In this way, symbols take on the role of a visu-

al shorthand for the many details of a society or culture. Moreover, symbols allow for layers of meaning to change throughout time because they are dynamic and open to interpretation. They can fill in gaps in communication and transform ideas or feelings that might be difficult to articulate clearly. Symbols in literature and art frequently have metaphorical connotations that give the pieces depth and complexity (Bustan et al., 2021). Taken together, symbols are powerful instruments of human communication that help people grasp one another in a variety of social and cultural contexts by covering deep meaning level.

Undoubtedly, symbols are considered a type of language because they function as a means of communication and carry meanings (Hashash et al., 2018; Hendro, 2020; Setiawan et al., 2021). This idea holds culture and symbols are inextricably linked since they are essentially languages in and of themselves. The meaning of symbols, words, things or behaviors used in various cultural contexts reflects something significant and is interpreted according to the cultural framework of the community. Changing the context can cause misconceptions and change their meanings (Grice, 1975; Levinson, Stephen, 1983; Green, 1989; Yule, 1996). As a result, the user's cultural background influences the meaning of symbols.

Furthermore, symbols are essential for maintaining and advancing local culture since they serve as repositories of customs, meaning, and group identification. Symbols, whether they be expressed through rituals, artwork, or daily activities, are powerful mediums for transferring cultural values and norms to future generations (Niman, 2022). These symbols, which represent a community's history, values, and distinctive expressions, frequently capture the core of that legacy. Community members actively contribute to the preservation of cultural practices by acknowledging and engaging in these symbolic aspects, which guarantees the traditions' continued existence over time. Symbols serve as live connections to the past, encouraging a feeling of community and offering a stable foundation for

navigating the present while preserving the community's unique cultural heritage.

Symbols and supernatural are closely related because symbols are frequently used to depict the intangible and transcendent parts of the supernatural in concrete ways (District et al., 2022; Raru, 2016; Sanjaya, 2021) with two problems that should be researched. Those problems are (1. Symbols become the universal language that gives the supernatural context and significance for the human experience. Sacred imagery, religious icons, and ritualistic symbols serve as links between the spiritual and material worlds, providing a visual language for expressing beliefs in cosmic forces, higher powers, or deities. Communities interact with the supernatural through these symbols, giving commonplace items or actions a deep spiritual significance. Essentially, symbols become the tangible manifestations of the intangible, enabling a cultural and spiritual comprehension of the "something beyond" that surpasses the boundaries of language. As such, the interaction between symbols and words takes on a new level when the sacred is accessed through symbols. In this context, symbols serve as a language that links people to the holiness. In this respect, Darong et al's., (2023a) most recent study examines how spirituality and symbolism interact in indigenous societies. Moreover, Darong et al., (2023a) and Kuczok (2020) highlight symbols in indigenous societies are used to keep ancestral norms in addition to conveying meaning. Therefore, it is crucial to preserve indigenous symbols in order to protect traditional knowledge.

Although previous research provides insightful analyses of the symbolism found in customary practices, there is a conspicuous dearth of comprehensive research that focuses on the symbols utilized in traditional birth ceremonies practiced by the Manggarai people. More focused research on the symbols utilized in delivery rites is necessary given the distinctive cultural setting of the Manggarai people in Flores, Indonesia. The extant body of literature frequently offers broad viewpoints on cultural symbols, failing to sufficiently address the subtleties

and cultural uniqueness present in Manggarai community's birth ceremonies. Understanding the particular symbols used in Manggarai community's traditional birth rites and their cultural, social, and spiritual importance within this unique society is thus lacking in research to a considerable extent. By filling in these gaps with empirical studies and community outreach, the body of knowledge about traditional birth rituals practiced by the Manggarai people can be greatly expanded. This research has the potential to promote cross-cultural understanding and respect for the special significance inside Manggarai delivery ceremonies in addition to documenting and preserving cultural heritage.

### Traditional Rituals

Traditional ritual are essential to maintaining cultural identity and social cohesiveness because they offer a framework for groups to express their common histories, values, and beliefs. These customs frequently work as effective means of passing on cultural heritage to the future generation, encouraging a feeling of continuity and kinship with the past. Birth, marriage, and death are all major life events that are marked by rituals in many countries, giving these occasions great cultural and spiritual significance. Traditional rituals establish a communal experience that fortifies social ties and a sense of shared belonging through predetermined activities, symbolic gestures, and group participation (Darong, 2022; Darong & Menggo, 2021; Lon, 2019; Niman et al., 2020).

Moreover, traditional rites often have deeper spiritual meanings and dimensions, serving as a means of communication between people and the divine or the metaphysical world. These rituals give a holy space where people can express and explore their spirituality, whether through prayer, symbolic offerings, or ceremonial rites. This fosters a sense of transcendence and connection to something bigger than oneself (Kuczok, 2020). This spiritual component frequently strengthens moral cohesion and a community's feeling of purpose by direc-

ting conduct within social norms and ethical standards. Besides, traditional rites frequently demonstrate a dynamic interaction between the surrounding environment and cultural norms (Darong et al., 2021; District et al., 2022; Niman & Wahyu, 2023). As such, Niman (2022) adds that many rituals are closely related to agricultural cycles, seasonal shifts, or natural occurrences, demonstrating a society's strong ties to and reliance on its environment. These customs show how traditional activities mesh with the cycles of the natural world by acting as expressions of thankfulness, prayer, or adjustment to a changing environment.

In fact, many traditional rituals still exist in current times, but others have changed or disappeared as a result of modernization, globalization, and shifting social dynamics. Traditional rituals, on the other hand, retain value despite the changing nature of civilizations (*Bridging Cultures through Symbols*, 2021; Dongxiang, 2018). They serve as a bridge between the past and present and add to the rich fabric of global cultural diversity. Integral to the statement in question, traditional rituals are intricately linked to regional culture, functioning as lively manifestations of a community's principles, traditions, and shared identity. These rituals serve as dynamic representations of cultural legacy, encapsulating the distinct stories, values, and ways of life that characterize a given community. The local way of life is shaped and reflected by the aspects of traditional rituals, which range from the precise movements to the symbol selection. These nuances are frequently anchored in the historical and cultural context of the community.

Essentially, rituals serve as a kind of cultural archive, capturing and passing down the core values of a group's identity from one generation to the next. Through these rituals, people get knowledge about shared wisdom, values and historical experiences of their cultural ancestors in addition to norms (Ndiung & Bayu, 2019). The local culture is strengthened by this transfer of cultural information, which promotes a sense of continuity and belonging. Furthermo-

re, the rituals serve as dynamic manifestations of societal norms and regional values. They frequently reflect the gender norms, family dynamics, and social hierarchy of a community. Rituals connected to rites of passage, for instance, may represent changes in life phases and reinforce the cultural obligations and expectations that come with them. The performative elements of rituals further help to embody the culture of the area and produce experiences that are meaningful to both participants and onlookers.

Beyond the symbolic and performative components, traditional rituals and local culture are linked through broader social purposes (Paulus et al., 2023). Numerous rituals are essential for developing a sense of shared duty, cooperation, and communal cohesion. In particular, they offer times for group togetherness that strengthen ties amongst locals and strengthen their sense of community. These rituals frequently serve as identity markers, setting one community apart from another and adding to the rich of cultural diversity around the world.

Traditional rituals function as enduring manifestations of cultural identity, serving as a link between the past, present, and future even as the dynamics of local culture change throughout time. The conservation and modification of traditional rituals continue to be essential in maintaining the distinctive qualities and resiliency of regional cultures across the globe as societies negotiate the challenges posed by modernity and globalization.

### **Manggarai Culture**

The Manggarai people are an ethnic group that lives in the western region of Flores, Indonesia. Their rich history and peculiar customs are reflected in their distinct cultural identity. The Manggarai people, who make up a sizable section of Flores's population, are renowned for their rich cultural traditions, close-knit communities, and peaceful coexistence with the verdant surroundings (Darong & Niman, 2023; Lon & Widyawati, 2018). In addition, Manggarai community places a high value on spirituality, which combines native animist beliefs with, occa-

sionally, Christian doctrine. The Manggarai people frequently take part in group rituals that include, aside from others, offerings in order to pay respect to the spirits of their ancestors and ask for blessings for the welfare of their society.

The indigenous Manggarai people of Flores, Indonesia, have a distinctive and culturally significant birth ritual that symbolizes their strong sense of community and spirituality. The Manggarai birth ritual is a complex ceremony that incorporates a number of traditions and rituals intended to protect the baby, establish their identity in the society, and elicit blessings from ancestors (Kame, 2020). A traditional healer or spiritual guide will often lead a sequence of prayers and offerings to start the Manggarai community's birth ceremony. The purpose of these ceremonies is to ask for blessings for the health and future of the infant and to call upon the protection of ancestor spirits. The spiritual leader is vital in helping the family go through the ritualistic process; they are often quite knowledgeable about Manggarai cosmology.

One of the main components of the Manggarai community's birth rite is the naming ceremony. Choosing a name is a thoughtful and culturally significant process that is frequently affected by spiritual direction, family history, and the name's auspicious connotations. The child's unique identity is established during this naming ceremony, which also ties them to their ancestry. Besides, Manggarai birth rituals often include feasting and group festivities. Members of the extended family and the community gather to celebrate the happy occasion, bringing symbols and taking part in such cultural events. These group festivities strengthen social ties and foster a sense of collective accountability for the baby's and their family's welfare (Haryanto et al., 2021).

Furthermore, In addition to being a celebration of life, the Manggarai birth ceremony is an important way to transmit traditional values and information. During these rites, community elders frequently serve as mentors, imparting knowledge on paren-

ting techniques, customs, and the larger cultural legacy. Thus, within the Manggarai community, the birth ceremony takes on a dynamic representation of cultural continuity and intergenerational transmission. Taken together, the Manggarai birth ritual is a complex event that includes spiritual exercises, naming customs, group festivities, and the transmission of cultural knowledge. The Manggarai people express their cultural identity, strengthen ties within the group, and ask for blessings for the well-being and prosperity of the baby in the future.

## METHOD

As it explores Manggarai community's birth ritual, this study delves into the subtle interactions between community members and symbols, using the Symbolic Interactionism Framework. This inquiry's comprehensive design recognizes the evolving function of symbols in the cultural tapestry and explores the dynamic nature of symbol creation, sharing, and interpretation during the ritual in question. The identification of symbols, knowledge of their sociocultural context, and appreciation of the significant influence of traditional leaders in forming the complex interpretations assigned to these symbols over time are fundamental components of this methodology.

Two closely related ways are used in the data collection technique. Initially, in-depth interviews with important informants, ritual leaders, provide a special perspective into the complex views of symbolic meanings. Three traditional elders were actively engaged in interviews as a crucial component of this investigation, offering priceless insights into the symbolic context of Manggarai community's birth ritual. Through in-depth interviews, these powerful people provide their viewpoints on the employment of symbols and the cultural nuanced aspects that are incorporated into each component. Second, in order to capture the essence of symbolic communication, the study actively participates in the observation and engagement during three different Manggarai community's birth ceremonies. By ob-

servicing this participatory method seeks to provide a comprehensive knowledge of how symbols are brought to life within a cultural context. Essentially, the goal of this multi-pronged method is to provide a comprehensive and accurate representation of Manggarai community's birth rituals by combining direct observation with interviews

The researchers used *Creswell & Poth (2018)* data analysis spiral in conjunction with *Mey's (1993)* semiotics and pragmatics theory to analyze the data. Six steps made up this methodology: data organization, concept identification, code grouping into themes, interpretation assessment, data visualization, and reporting. This way of analysis ensured a methodical examination and interpretation of the gathered data and enabled a thorough analysis that was in line with the theoretical framework. During the initial stage of the study, the researchers translated the Manggarai language interviews into English and gathered supporting documentation, such as transcripts of the interviews. In the second stage, transcripts were reexamined, and new ideas were noted. The third phase used content analysis based on *Krippendorff's* methodology (2004) to examine participant narratives from the transcriptions of the interviews. In the fourth step of the methodological triangulation process, individual notes and codes were compared to verify the analysis. Potential coder bias was addressed by independent coding and subsequent agreement talks. The second researcher functioned as an impartial reviewer and was not involved in the collection of data. The goal of this procedure was to increase the analysis's dependability. Three recurring themes were found in the fifth phase, and pertinent excerpts were chosen to bolster the accounts provided by the participants.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The importance of the symbols employed in the Manggarai community's birth ceremony was investigated in this study. The table below provides an overview of the interview's findings. Three themes, eight codes, and

thirty-five excerpts were retrieved by the researchers.

The information offers a thematic study of a cultural event that took place in the Manggarai community's birth ritual. Emphasizing major ideas, related codes, and passages. Power is a prevalent concept throughout the world, highlighting the importance of making offerings for the infant in order to ensure their eternal existence. Another aspect to consider is the symbol choices. Misusing symbols might have disastrous effects. Gender stereotype was also revealed, as distinct symbols are employed according to the sex of the newborn, but the basic idea of making requests is always there. In terms of structure, the introduction establishes the scene by outlining the speech event's objectives and highlighting the social ties within the Manggarai community. The final segment highlights hopes for the newborn's future life, while the content/body concentrates on the primary event, bringing together hopes, prayers, and delight in the offered symbols. In terms of local meaning, semantics is important, where symbols always match meanings based on context. Conveying meaning requires precise sentence and phrase building, which is why syntax is also essential. Word choice, diction, tone, and accentuation all have a stylistic role in highlighting the significance of the event.

The information delineates several phases of a cultural occurrence, classifying symbols into pre-, whilst, and post-stages, each linked to particular kinds, lexical interpretations, contextual interpretations, and meaning categories. Pre-stage symbolism include questions about the newborn's sex, cuddling the infant, explaining to the audience the purpose of the speaking event, offering a custom drink as a gesture of goodwill and unity, and naming the child according to custom as a way of acknowledgment with social and religious meanings. The whilst stage incorporates concrete and animal symbols, all of which have religious or honorific purposes, such as a white rooster, betel nut, traditional drink, and lyrical local utterances. Symbols such as looking into the

**Table 1.** Theme, Code, and Excerpts

| Theme(s)         | Code(s)         | Sample of the excerpt(s)  |
|------------------|-----------------|---|
| Global structure | Power           | “...Our actions involve presenting offerings with the intention of securing everlasting existence of the new-baby born<br>“...We need to be cautious when talking with the supernatural power. Misuse of the symbols might cause disaster |
|                  | Gender serotype | The symbol used is different following the sex of new baby born. Although it is different, the essence is similar that is still a request.  |
|                  | Introduction    | The steps use some forewords. In this context, the spokesperson informs the goals of the speech event. This stage so-called <i>wewa</i> highlight the Manggarai community social relationship bonds.                                      |
|                  | Content/body    | “...This is the man event. Hopes, prayers, joy are united in the symbol being offered.  |
| Local            | Closing         | “... This stage emphasizes the hopes for future life of the new-baby born.  |
|                  | Semantics       | Generally, the symbols used are consistent with the context as they have different meaning in context. The meaning is context-based.  |
|                  | Syntax          | “...integral to meaning, sentence structure and phrase are essential. They have to be constructed in such a way that they support the meaning of symbols.   |
|                  | Stylistic       | ... words choice, the stylistic manner ( <i>durit</i> ) or diction, accentuation and intonation are essential to make the event more glorious   |
|                  |                 |   |

**Table 2.** The Birth Ritual

| Stages | Symbols      | Types | Lexical Meaning | Contextual meaning                         | Category                                       |
|--------|--------------|-------|-----------------|--|--|
| Pre    | Ongga        | Wan-  | Action          | Questioning sex of the new baby            | Gender Social meaning                          |
|        | Likang       |       | Action          | Warming the baby                           | Health consideration Social Meaning            |
|        | Wewa         |       | action          | To inform                                  | Stating the goal of speech even Social meaning |
|        | Tu’ak/Robo   |       | Thing           | Traditional drink                          | Politeness and Solidarity Social Meaning       |
|        | Tegi ngasang |       | Action          | Naming the baby traditionally              | Acknowledgment Social and religious meaning    |
| Whilst | Manuk bakok  |       | Animal          | White roaster                              | Holiness Religious Meaning                     |
|        | Sirih Pinang |       | Thing           | Betel nut                                  | respect and honor Religious Meaning            |
|        | Tu’ak        |       | Thing           | Traditional drink                          | respect and honor Religious Meaning            |
|        | Tudak        |       | Action          | Poetic- local utterances                   | Prayer and request Religious Meaning           |
| Post   | Toto urat    |       | Action          | Examine the colon of the slaughter roaster | expectation Religious meaning                  |
|        | Wali urat    |       | Action          | Respond to the colon                       | Acknowledgement Social meaning                 |

butchered rooster's colon and reacting to it in the post-stage communicate religious connotations and recognition, respectively. The information depicts the diversity of cultural perspectives and deep significance that are ingrained in every symbolic gesture, combining social, religious, and health concerns all at once during the event.

The cultural of Manggarai, Flores, Indonesia is richly woven with customs that go beyond simple rituals. Within this group, birth rites are very symbolic and meaningful manifestations that are essential to the formation and maintenance of gender roles and identities. The goal of this article to provide readers with a deep understanding of the complex relationship between symbols and meanings by delving into the symbolic landscape of Manggarain birth ceremonies and attempting to understand how these symbols both represent and impact perspectives. The birth ritual of the Mangarai community are a cultural mosaic in which each symbol has deeper significance than only its outward form. These symbols are more than just decorations; they serve as entry points to the intricate of the Manggarai community. They function as visual indicators that convey and strengthen societal norms surrounding the specific roles that mothers and dads in the Manggarai community.

With regard to the data, there are some important point to cope with. First, symbols are deeply ingrained in social and religious contexts, acting as potent symbols that convey ideas, ideologies, and common beliefs through visual representations. Symbols take on the role in social contexts, serving as visual representations of cultural identity and knowledge that express a community's unique views. This corroborates the findings of ( Chennells, 2013; Haryanto et al., 2021; Kame, 2020 Mungmachon, 2012) saying that these symbols, are essential for encouraging a feeling of solidarity and belonging among members of a particular social group. Symbols are culturally significant not only because of how they are represented but also because of how well they capture the social mores and historical narratives that define a group.

Second, symbols assume a holy function in the religious sphere, permeating ceremonies and rituals with deep spiritual significance. Religious symbols establish concrete connections between the worshipper and the divine, even beyond their aesthetic value (District et al., 2022; Kamajaya, 2011; Sanjaya, 2021; Setiawan et al., 2021). During rituals, they act as focus points, heightening the religious experience and making it easier to make a transcendental connection. The symbols represent spiritual ideas and provide Manggarai community with a visual language through which to express and understand their faith. Within Manggarai community, the ritualistic use of these symbols helps to create a shared sacred space while also reinforcing religious ideas.

Furthermore, symbols are dynamic messengers of moral and ethical instruction that mold society norms and individual conduct rather than being static representations. Symbols serve as a visual aid for moral behavior and frequently contain moral concepts in both social and religious contexts (Niman, 2022). As such, symbols used in birth ritual represent Manggarai community's moral precepts or other principles that direct the, in their day-to-day decisions and relationships with others in the society. Conversely, social symbols can communicate norms that specify appropriate conduct, encouraging accountability and unity among a community.

To sum up, the provided data essentially highlight symbols as tools of communicating meanings, cultural identities, and spiritual experiences, bridging the gap between the material and immaterial worlds. In this regard, symbols in Manggarai community's birth ritual are essential for passing along values and maintaining the continuation of customs, whether they are part of religious or cultural traditions. They are sensed not just in daily life but also in communal rituals, where symbols strengthen common narratives, enhance collective experiences, and promote togetherness and hopes. The way symbols interact dynamically in social and religious contexts reveals the



depth of human culture by offering a visual language that is beyond words and enables people to feel a connection to their spiritual and socio-cultural heritage.

Integral to the above statement, another interesting aspect to highlight to the data (Table 1 and Table 2) is a gender. In this context, gender identities are actively reinforced through symbolic gestures infused into the ritual in question. The Manggrai community adopt gender-specific behaviors and obligations, whether intentionally or unintentionally, representing their norms around family dynamics and parenting (Darong et al., 2022; Lon, 2019). As such, the societal norms around the responsibilities of dad and motherhood are reinforced by these rituals, which turn into performative representations of gender roles.

The symbols used in Manggarai community's birth ceremonies are dynamic transmitters of cultural expectations surrounding gender roles rather than static representations. Gender-related cultural values are transmitted and upheld through these symbols. In addition to communicating more general cultural standards about parenting, caring for others, and family duties, the symbolism becomes a potent channel that determines participants' immediate roles during the ritual. Moreover, the symbols used in Manggarai birth rite also represent gender-related life stages, representing the transforming effects of delivery and the responsibilities that follow in the family and communal framework. In addition to ushering people into parenthood or motherhood, these symbols capture the cultural significance of gender transformations after childbirth. Thus, among other rituals, gender equality or disparity within the Manggarai community might be inferred from the examination of gender-related symbols in Manggarai community's birth ceremonies. However, more importantly, recognizing the kinship system of the Manggarai community, historical foundations, effects on gender norms are all necessary to comprehend the gender treatment.

## CONCLUSION

A cultural tapestry richly woven with tradition and meaning is revealed via the examination of symbols in Manggarai birth ceremonies. Every symbols represents the identity and values of the Manggarai people. The rituals, which are ingrained in the symbols, are a living representation of legacy, and elders are essential in passing on not just the rituals but also the deep meanings that are represented by each symbols in question. The significance of Manggarai birth rites becomes clear when we explore their symbolic richness. These rituals serve as more than just ceremonial actions; they are links between generations that promote continuity and common cultural narratives.

The study is limited, nevertheless, by the scope of analysis. Since the study was concerned with the meaning, further investigations may examine the effects of contemporary influences on symbolic interpretations and dive into the complex interactions between modernity and tradition, revealing the fluid character of Manggarai cultural identity. Besides, it might be more interesting to dig deeper the gender aspects of the birth rites or other Manggarai community's rituals.

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