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## Whispers of Wisdom: Exploring the Essence of *Partandaan* in the Suluk Indigenous Mediation

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### Abstract

The *Orang Suluk*, who call themselves Tausug, have a deep history in the sea areas and are known for their strong cultural and political independence. Residing in the Sulu Archipelago and the northeastern coast of Borneo, they identify themselves by names such as Suluk, Anak Negeri, coastal people, sea people, indigenous maritime group, and Orang Asal Pesisir. Symbols are a part of the Suluk Indigenous Mediation (SIM) approach, which is still practiced on the east coast of Sabah, Malaysia. The techniques mentioned are organic to the *Adat* (customs) of the Suluk passed down from their forefathers. This study discusses the essence of *partandaan* (symbols) found in SIM practices of the Suluk mediators in the said geographical area. Five expert informants in Semporna, Lahad Datu, and Sandakan shared their wisdom, experience, and interpretation of the SIM during the in-depth interviews as empirical data. The researchers also did library work to collect secondary data. Employing Hewitt's Symbolic Interactionism (2002), findings revealed that objects, social acts, and language carry symbols that are meaningful to the life of the Suluk. They influence the thinking of the Suluk, maintain the balance and harmony of their day-to-day life, and crystallize the vision of peace, understanding, and forgiveness. Indeed, symbols are fruitful tools for successful culturally and religiously sensitive mediation. The study highlights the significance of symbols in Suluk Indigenous Mediation, suggesting further exploration of cultural variations and the potential integration of symbolic elements into conflict resolution mechanisms.

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The *Suluk* or Tausug, known as unconquered (Hedjazi & Hedjazi, 2002; Ingilan, 2018), amphibian warrior, passionate religionist (Mayo, 1925), navigator (Warren, 1981), and friendly and hospitable (Bruno, 1973), have a deep history in the sea areas and are known for their reputation on cultural and political independence. They are inhabitants of the Sulu Archipelago and the northeastern shoreline of Borneo, and they recognize themselves as *Suluk*, *Anak Negeri*, coastal people, sea people, indigenous maritime group, and *Orang Asal Pesisir* (Joeman et al., 2021; Musa et al., 2018; Somiah, 2022;). Originating from Sulu, Sabah (Haji Omar, 1983), and Kalimantan (Hidayah, 2005), the *Orang Suluk* exhibit a strong presence in Sabah, particularly in Kota Kinabalu, Penampang, Tuaran, and Kudat (Kee Sabariah & Asmiaty; Moody, 1988). Preceding Sabah's integration into Malaysia in 1963, the *Suluk* people engaged in extensive trade across the Sulu and Sulawesi Seas, taking their culture and art with them (Dino et al., 2023).

*Suluk* culture resembles other Malay groups in Nusantara (Malay Archipelago). As Muslims are their strongest identity marker (Jubilado et al., 2015, p. 148), the *Suluk* people follow *shari'ah* as the ideal law and *adat* (custom) as the primary law (Rasul, 2009). These two codes are tightly woven into the life of the *Suluk* people (Mayo, 1925; Kiefer, 1969; Tan, 2010) and are used for solving problems (Bently, 1992) and leadership.

The *Suluk* practice their indigenous leadership called *pagtaumaas*, based on *datuship* (Tan, 2010). In *Suluk* tradition, the *taumaas* (headman) is described as intelligent and skillful in rhetoric and speech, and above all, these warrior people love to resolve conflict. In *Suluk* tradition, the primary *kawajiban* (obligation) of the *taumaas* is *pagpatiut* (mediation). According to recorded history, the *Suluk* identity goes beyond political borders, as seen in their language and culture (Dino et al., 2021; Haji Omar, 1983), especially when they talk in their unique language and use symbols in their indigenous mediation.

Indigenous mediation is crucial to the *Suluk* culture, making the *Suluk* culture distinct with its language and symbols. It works as a way of communicating within the community and represents their culture (Lamle & Aigbovbioisa, 2019). This method helps share teachings, values, and norms, conveying thoughts and actions to its members. According to Dino et al. (2023), it acts like a translator for human values, attitudes, and ways of thinking, showing how people see and believe in their world. The primary focus in symbol discussion is on how meaning is attributed, as indigenous groups use symbols to convey particular ideas or interests.

Additionally, Lamle and Aigbovbioisa (2019) demonstrated the use of symbols by mediators in ancient times, which are still prevalent among indigenous communities today. Hewitt (2002) suggested that objects hold intrinsic value and purpose as their presence is often associated with communal practices. Interpreting these customs through assigned meanings leads to individuals' comprehensive engagement in social interactions.

Despite these concerns, this study finds it essential to explore the symbols found in the *Suluk* Indigenous Mediation (SIM) practices as objects, social acts, and language, forming part of the techniques utilized since time immemorial. Mediators learn not from the established educational institution but from the experienced elders in the context of their societal orientation. The basic mediation principles are purely from the wisdom of the ancient elders. However, this indigenous practice is still relevant and effective at present. Further, it notices that every mediation with symbols is considered complete. The researchers investigated the importance of symbolism in SIM as practiced by the *taumaas* in the *Suluk* community, particularly in Semporna, Lahad Datu, and Sandakan, Sabah Malaysia.

## Materials and Methods

The qualitative research method was chosen for this paper to investigate the essence of the symbols in the Suluk Indigenous Mediation in the Suluk community in Semporna, Lahad Datu, and Sandakan, Sabah Malaysia. This study employed primary and secondary data collection methods to better understand the symbols in SIM. Primary data was collected utilizing in-depth interviews with five Suluk expert elders to understand the steps involved in SIM, explore perspectives from the participants, and uncover new aspects of SIM not previously documented in secondary sources. The informants are credible and known mediators with over five years of experience handling mediation, and all are active in the Suluk community activities in Sabah. Each informant had ample time to discuss the subject matter. During the interviews from August 14 to 25, 2020, primary information was obtained using research tools such as audio recorders and note-taking.

Additionally, sourcing contextual background and existing knowledge about the SIM from relevant books and journals in libraries constituted the collection of secondary data. With the secondary data, researchers supported the findings by analyzing the data collected and comparing it to the interview results. Also, it helped researchers identify areas with limited information about SIM. The research methodology adhered to ethical interview protocols by sending a formal letter requesting participants' permission before proceeding with the study. Participants could abstain from answering difficult questions as their participation was voluntary. Throughout interviews, meticulous attention was paid to preserving participant privacy while documenting responses accurately. To maintain the integrity and moral principles throughout this study, obtaining informed consent, fostering open communication channels, and prioritizing participant comfort while ensuring confidentiality at all stages of the investigation were imperative for enhancing reliability and credibility within our findings.

The collected data was sorted into pre-established categories. Then, a thematic review and analysis were conducted using Hewitt's Symbolic Interactionism (2002). The approach suggested that mediators use symbols, shape their behavior toward objects rather than just reacting to them, and act based on interpretations rather than predetermined meanings. The study identified and defined critical symbols, investigated their integration into SIM, used Symbolic Interactionism analysis to understand complex interpretation levels, and examined how different entities influence the mediation process. Finally, it examined the meanings of words and their role in building social reality within SIM.

In order to fulfill ethical obligations towards the informants throughout all stages of research, their identities remained confidential. This ensured that moral responsibilities toward them were upheld with utmost care.

## Results and Discussion

Indigenous dispute resolution methods, such as mediation in Suluk, involve a wise *taumaas* (headman) balancing rights and establishing *karayawan*. This method effectively prevents, manages, and resolves conflicts, requiring a high-profile mediator. In this section, researchers delve into the unique aspects of Suluk mediation in Sabah, Malaysia.

### Mediation Dynamics: Goals and Processes in Suluk Indigenous Mediation

Indigenous methods of resolving disputes have long been a focus of study by legal and political social scientists. As defined by the United Nations in 2012, "mediation is a process where an impartial third party helps two or more parties with their consent to manage, prevent or resolve conflict together." Merry (1988) states that mediators may propose agreement terms while encouraging parties to express their personal feelings toward each other's behavior. Moreover, they urge individuals to

see others' behaviors, such as the mediation in Suluk, from unique perspectives within communal societies worldwide instead of Western justice systems, which center on individual achievement. These differences highlight diverse approaches among indigenous communities compared to Western society's pursuit of truth and universal versus contextual application laws.

The essential goal of mediation is to reach a win-win solution that mutually satisfies both parties' most important interests and leaves both parties satisfied with the agreement and the mediation process (Zubek et al., 1992). Hategan (2020) agrees with Zubek et al. (1992), stating that mediation is a process based on communication between parties that is part of a collaborative strategy for resolving a conflict and can result in both parties winning when the mediation process concludes with a mutually beneficial agreement—“win-win.”

Mediation in Suluk is known as *pagpatiu*t (Abduraji et al., 2010; Virola-Gardiola, 2012) or *pagsalassay* (Jundam, 2005). Kiefer (1969) and Jundam (2005) explain that the goal of *pagpatiu*t is not necessary to arrive at the *kasabunnalan* (truth) but rather to find *karayanan* (goodness, peace, tranquility, right, happiness, or pleasure). Hence, a wise *taumaas* (headman) as *tau ha uw*t (mediator) may declare *tabla* (evenness) so that no one will be disappointed or degraded (Jundam, 2005). It shows that the prioritizes Suluk Indigenous Mediation, the *maruwa* (dignity), and *martabbat* (honor and self-respect).

According to former United Nations Secretary Ban Ki-moon, mediation effectively prevents, manages, and resolves conflict. However, there is a need for a high-profile mediator to mediate (United Nations, 2012). The mediator is partial (Merry, 1988; Abdu Rahman, 2012; United Nations, 2012; Khan et al., 2015), not forcing the conflicting parties but deciding independently (Lestari, 2013). In other words, he does not exercise decision control (Goldman et al., 2008). Moreover, the mediator should play different tasks to find the best solution (Jundam, 2005; Mohd. Zaina & Ahmadi, 2016).

Literature provides that in the Suluk tradition, Sultan and *taumaas* have the same relation to private feuds. Both of them mediate the conflict. The former will take over the mediation only when the *taumaas* cannot control the situation. They both possess a right to enforce peace (Kiefer, 1969). The role of the *taumaas* as a *tau ha ut* (mediator) in the ground is empirical. An amicable settlement will be impossible and will not be taken off without him (Durante et al., 2004). Fortunately, according to Kiefer (1969), the Suluk mediator is wise. He can balance the rights and establish *karayanan*. *Taumaas* is ideally *bangsawan* (noble), *hartawan* (wealthy), *ilmawan* (knowledgeable), *harimawan* (courageous), and *rupawan* (good-looking) (Absari, 2021; Bara, 2021 & 2009). Jundam (2005) added that he possesses *karamat* (charismatic grace) as well as supernatural abilities (i.e., spiritual foresight), and *kauman* (community) bestows integrity on *taumaas*.

### **Partandaan (Symbols) and Rituals in Suluk Indigenous Mediation**

A symbol is commonly an image or object that refers to something else that matters to people's beliefs (Lamle & Aigbovbioisa, 2019). Symbols are an imperative quality that gives people the humanness that separates them from other animals (Redmond, 2015). Hewitt (2002) wrote about symbols such as objects, social acts, and language. According to Hewitt (2002), objects have value and direction, and things come into existence due to social acts. People will thoroughly engage in social interaction by interpreting the assigned meanings of the acts. Moreover, language comprises words with each meaning per the standard rules. Lamle and Aigbovbioisa (2019) show that mediators used symbols in ancient times, and this practice still applies to indigenous people today.

In *A Semiotic Approach to Conflict Transformation: Can Signs and Symbols Help Make Peace*, Sarpiya (2018) explains the significance of the signs and symbols. According to Sarpiya, the dove and olive branches symbolize peace in religion. The church symbolizes reconciliation between

humans and Gods and humans with other humans. Understanding the signs would help the conflict transformation. Hence, he said that the symbols found in the Abrahamic religions, like the cross, crescent moon, and stars, show that they are “peace-loving people and conflict transforming religion.”

Symbols are popular in different ethnic mediation. For instance, Dayak Iban in Sarawak conflict resolution usually shifts from mediation to arbitration and adapts fines for wrongful acts toward fellow or against nature (prohibition or *pemali*). A fine is a form of “money” that symbolizes a meaningful objective. According to Jawan (1996), the fine (*meri pemali*) aims to “restore the balance between the temporal and spiritual worlds.” Another symbol in this ethnic group is a “special ceremony” to appease angered spirits and seek their continued blessing and good fortune.

Some object symbols in the Sama Dilaut are *bangun* and *diat*— “blood money” symbolizes an apology (Jundam, 2005; Sather, 2004). During the turnover of the *diat*, Sama Dilaut (in Semporna, Sabah Malaysia) brought a *lay* (dish) filled with water to wash the wounds of the *diniatan* (injured) (Sather, 2004). The “water” represents the sincerity of the other party asking for an apology. According to Sather (2004), it would heal the wound. Further, other than Sama Dilaut, the Maguindanao, Maranao in Mindanao, and Yakan and Suluk in Sulu also practice blood money (Durante et al., 2014).

Social acts symbols like *doa salamat* of Sama Dilaut, *duwaa salamat* of Suluk, and *Kanduli* of Maranao are prayers at the closure phase of the mediation process. The objective is to ask God for forgiveness for the fault committed by both parties and to ask for protection from misfortune (Durante, 2014; Sather, 2004).

Literature provides different kinds of *partandaan* (symbols) adapted by Suluk. According to Kiefer (1969), since the aim of Suluk indigenous mediation is to find out *karayawan*, he observes that the effective mediator is a “skilled liar and diplomat.” Kiefer refers to the *parail* (narrative metaphor) used by *taumaas* (as mediator), a symbolic way to win the mediation. Aside from using language, the social act is also a symbol of the Suluk in mediation. According to Jundam (2005), a symbolic animal sacrifice known as *pagsugsug taubat* (ritual of repentance) is traditionally offered. As a result, the offenders can resume their lives on earth in preparation for the *adlau mahuli* (life after).

Scholars also found objects as symbols in the Suluk Indigenous Mediation (SIM). They are *langgal* (a gathering place for prayer and other communal activities) (Jundam, 2005; Kiefer, 1969), *bangun* (blood-money) (Virola-Gardiola, 2012; Jundam, 2005; Durante, 2004; Kiefer, 1969), Holy Qur’an (Abduraji et al., 2010; Durante, 2004), agreement paper (Virola-Gardiola, 2012; Abduraji et al., 2010; Durante, 2014), marriage (Durante, 2014), and among others. Face-to-face *pagpatiut* meetings are usually held at a *langgal* or in the *taumaas’* residence (Jundam, 2005). *Langgal* is an informal hamlet institution of the Suluk (Kiefer, 1969) and also serves as an avenue for social gatherings and *maulud* (celebration of the prophet’s birthday), among others. *Langgal*, as a house of worship, symbolizes peace and calmness.

Durante et al. (2014) explain that blood money occurs when there is an involvement in the death. The amount of money depends on the type of conflict, death, and economic status. Indeed, blood money symbolizes water that washes the blood had spilled. After the turnover of the blood money, the signing of the agreement is as follows. However, Kiefer (1969) and Durante et al. (2014) observed that Suluk mediation does not have a formal written agreement; instead, verbal contracts followed. Durante et al. (2014) emphasize that “this rite symbolically binds” the disputing parties. The signing of the agreement letters usually happens when the authority involves or witnesses the mediation process. Abduraji et al. (2010) stress that mediation is proven settled when the parties sign the covenant. However, without a formal written agreement, swearing upon the Holy Quran is sometimes administered (Kiefer, 1969). Kiefer also witnesses that *pagsapa* or oath-taking between

parties was observed after the settlement as a sign of *pagtaimanghud* (brotherhood). After the mutual agreements, the community traditionally witnesses the *kasulutan* (settlement) for community celebration.

### Navigating Suluk Indigenous Mediation: Object, Social Acts and Language

Suluk, as peace-loving people (Bara, 2009), conceptualizes their *pagpatriut* (mediation) as to seeks *kahanungan* (inner peace) by restoring each disputant's *marua* (dignity) and *martabbat* (honor and self-respect) through the re-establishment of *pangandul* (trust) and *kasilasa* (affectionate love) between disputing parties. Suluk believes that tensions and emotions healed after a successful mediation, and the disputants embraced forgiveness and camaraderie.

Symbols in the Suluk Indigenous Mediation (SIM) are part of the *adat* (customs). Mediators used them as a strategy or technique to mediate the different disputes in the Suluk community in Sabah. Symbols express in-depth thoughts that are significant to the life of the Suluk in general and for the mediation process in particular, contributing to the success of the mediation effort. Among the symbols found in Suluk Indigenous Mediation are objects, social acts, and language use, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

#### Interpretation of Symbols Found in the Suluk Indigenous Mediation (SIM)

Category	Symbol	Interpretation
Object	<i>Langgal</i> (mosque)	Presence of God, impartiality, purification, and calmness. forgiveness, reconciliation
	<i>Dulang</i> (tray)	Food of mercy, repentance, calmness, healing, honor, and forgiveness
	<i>Tambang</i> (blood money)	Sincerity, reconciliation, honor, and brotherhood.
	<i>Tampam Maru</i> (shield of honor)	Honor, forgiveness, and blessing
Social Act	<i>Hari Raya</i> (Islamic fest)	Fest of forgiveness, harmony, and social solidarity
	<i>Pagpikit</i> (Intermarriage)	Bridging gap, mutual union, weaving hearts, coalition, peacebuilding
	<i>Pagsapa</i> (Blood compact)	Seal of agreement, brotherhood
Language	<i>Parail</i> (narrative metaphor)	Honor, respect, sensitivity, care

### Object

According to Hewitt (2002), in the Symbolic Interactionist theory, the object has numerous implications. Human society lives and is surrounded by the entity that bears symbolic designation and acts purposefully. For example, *Langgal*, *dulang* (traditional food arrangement in a tray), and *tambang* (blood money) are objects and institutes in the Suluk Indigenous Mediation.

#### *Langgal and Masjid, the House that Fixes the Broken Ties*

In the local Suluk language or Sinug, *langgal* is a prayer gathering place. The mosque, on the other hand, is called a masjid. Ingilan and Abdurajak (2021) observe that the Suluk are known for their bravery in defending their faith, Islam. In the Suluk tradition, a masjid is a spiritual place and center for administration. It shows that separating the church's affairs from the state is not applicable in the Suluk indigenous leadership. Aside from political welfare and education, the mosque provides conflict resolution services for disputing parties, families, couples, and individuals (Al-Krenawi,

2016). Traditionally, mediation is held at the *taumaas'* residence. *Langgal* or the mosque is still the most appropriate place to fix the broken ties. *Langgal* means a meeting place of the *Tagiypun iban iypun* (the Master, meaning God and his servant). Bilal calls the worshipers from the *langgal* five times a day to meet Allah. It starts with an obligatory response to the call till it goes deep into a devoutness of love. The Suluk then organized themselves and prayed together to face the Qiblah (direction to Mecca). They recite the names of God like Ar-Rahman (The Most Gracious) and Ar-Rahim (The Most Merciful) and ask forgiveness to the Almighty Allah. While praying, Suluk feels calmness, peace of mind, tranquility, and love in front of Him. Sometimes, they cannot hold back their tears, a mixed feeling of joy and guilt about their sins. They repeatedly ask for the Mercy of Allah and forgiveness.

Informant 1 explained:

"In *langgal* tempat *sussi*. Way makagaus magkalaknaan mangi' halawum niya. In bay sin Tuhan ini, bay kahanungan. Magbalik-balik in tau maglanu' sin sakit (sin atay). Kananaman nila in kahanungan satiyap sila mangayu' kaampunan pa Maha Baying Ulungun Tuhan. Way san Muslim iban Tausug di' magaddat ha *langgal*, iban di' san magaayau tumabuk sin kahanungan."

[TRANSLATION]

*Langgal* is a holy place. No one will dare to do violent acts inside. This house of God is a house of peace. People keep coming to cure their disease (heart) so that they will feel calm every time they ask forgiveness from the Most Merciful God. No Muslim and Suluk disrespect the *langgal*. Neither would they disrespect the peace offering.

*Langgal* is a neutral ground for the disputants to meet and forgive. The call for peace from the mediator at the house of Most Merciful Allah puts each heart at ease. The *inasil* (instinct) of the inner self impatiently replies to the invitation of the As-Salam (The Peaceful) God to embrace the *kahanungan* (calmness). Every step towards the *langgal* leaves the hatred burning in their heart. Before entering the *langgal*, disputants are required to perform ablution, which spiritually washes their sins and undesirable emotions. On the first step to entering the *langgal*, they feel the door of forgiveness flung open for them to stay a lifetime. When they sit down together in a circular form headed by the *taumaas* as moderators, they start to love the presence of Allah. Harmony, forgiveness, sympathy, love, and new hope dominate their minds and hearts. Later, the tears of repentance fall from their eyes as they recall the violence that might have even resulted in the bloodshed yesterday. Ali (1991) interprets the Quran chapter 3, verse 194, Allah says, "A reward from the presence of Allah, and His presence is the best of rewards." They cannot wait to embrace their adversary, replacing hatred with love. At the end of the call, they cherish the bond of newly born brothers, witnessed by The Most Forgiving Allah.

This study realizes that *langgal* is a place of great significance. It goes beyond mere worship, serving as a beacon of hope for those seeking a resolution to their disputes. It is a place where the presence of God can be felt and where impartiality, calmness, purification, forgiveness, and reconciliation reign supreme. Indeed, it is a testament to the power of faith and the ability of humanity to overcome its differences and come together in peace.

### **Dulang, the Food of Reconnection**

Informant 4 explained:

"In *dulang* tunggalan siya pagsauhan sin katan, piyabarakat daying ha duwaa iban pagtaubat. Nagdara siya rahmat."

[TRANSLATION]

*Dulang* is a single tray for all, blessed by the prayer for repentance. It bears rahmat (mercy).

*Dulang* is a tray loaded with native foods from the sea and the farm. *Dulang* serves as the end of the mediation process. A tray decorated with seafood, *kiyuning* (yellow rice), *panyam* (native fried rice cake), and water. The food comes from the two distinct worlds put together for a blessing. *Kiyuning* symbolizes honor and forgiveness. *Panyam* is served only on special occasions. It shows

that mediation is an empirical process that benefits the parties and communities. Water represents the calmness and purity of the intention to restore trust. There is no reconciliation without the *dulang*. The disputing parties, with the *taumaas* and witnesses, sit down, facing the colorful dishes in a circle. Imam blesses the *dulang* with the *pagsugsug kiparat* (prayer for repentance) while burning the *kamanyan* (incense).

The heart of disputants slowly melts together with anger and exasperation while listening to the recitation of the Qur'an and *pagsugsug kiparat* by the officiating imam. *Pagsugsug kiparat* put out the fire in their hearts. The aroma of *kamanyan* calms their mind. Parties and the community silently follow the prayer with their hearts. Both parties are considered sinners on account of the anger that they kept for so long. Every recited verse washes the sin and takes off the dirty spots of every heart of those involved. Tears speak of their repentance. The blood of his fellow brother in humanity is supposed to be bitter in their tongue.

Informant 3 shared:

"*Bang tumangis in bata'-bata', dihili siya kakaun, tumunung san. Bang in nagsagga' yan makakinamna sin kakaun, kalupahan niya in katan.*"

[TRANSLATION]

Once the little child cries, give him food; eventually, he will stop crying. Once the disputants taste the food, he forgets everything.

After the prayer, the disputing parties sit in a circular union around the delicious *dulang* decorated with colorful recipes. They eat together as a family, like children eating after fighting. The bonding starts with the sharing of blessings. After a while, camaraderie will develop among the parties.

The water from the *dulang* absorbs into their body as if it washes the fire burning inside. A bite of food is a taste of Rahma (Mercy) of God given to His servant to manifest His love. The sharing of food is the first initiative of rewiring trust. The *dulang* reconnects the hearts of the disputing parties. The Suluk proverb says: "Misan in ista' iban sin tongkang nagbakda, manusiya'pa isab in di," (the fish and the cooking pot had met, why mankind would not forgive).

Food has always been synonymous with blessing (in the local word *barakat*), which fascinates the spirit of forgiveness and healing. Allah is Ar-Razzaq (The Provider) who sustains His servant regardless of culture and belief and guides whom He will. "But Allah doth call to the Home of Peace: He doth guide whom He pleaseth to a straight way," a Holy Quran chapter 10, verses 25, translated by Ali (1991).

This study sheds light on the profound significance of *dulang*, a traditional dish from Suluk culture served during the mediation celebration that goes beyond its deliciousness. It was a powerful symbol of mercy that invited disputants and communities to embrace repentance, find calmness, facilitate healing, uphold honor, and foster forgiveness. It is a tangible representation of values deeply rooted in Suluk cultures and traditions. Through sharing the *dulang*, people come together to connect, heal, and strengthen their relationships.

### ***Tambang, the Valor of Reconciliation***

Blood money, or in Suluk, *tambang*, has two kinds. They are *bangun* and *diat*. *Bangun* comes in cash and or the weapon used that caused the death, given to the deceased's family. *Diat* is the money given to the wounded or injured person.

In Suluk tradition, the mourning and the wounds do not hurt, for they are a part of manhood. The real man is he who fights and never walks out. The loss of *martabbat* (honor) is what hurts. Only



revenge will be the pleasure that would take back the pride. A curse will not end unless fresh blood is from the enemy's flesh. Martabab shall protect until the last breath. If you fail to take revenge, face value will be lost forever. It takes a new generation to regain the lost martabab.

Informant 2 explained:

"In siyn, laung ta milyun, di'da yan makabayad sin halga' sin kabuhi'. Sumagawa, bang siya timukbalna bangun, in kamaksuran niya namunnakunna siya sin dusa niya. Amun aini in waktu hiluku' niyana in tuud niya pa ginlupaan miki sulut. Sarta', makmasudda isab, nanghinguli'na siya sin martabab."

[TRANSLATION]

Money, even in millions, cannot pay the value of life. Life begets life. However, he acknowledged his fault once he offered blood money as if he had put his knees down to earth for reconciliation. That also means that he brings back the martabab. Hence, martabab is more than anything else.

The value of the *tambang* is not in the money or any material things. It will be presented during the face-to-face meeting. The life of our loved ones is everything. However, *tambang* shows the willingness to *sulut* (reconcile) and humility to build trust, which does not mean forgetting the past. Nevertheless, a bad experience becomes an excellent lesson for a brave man. The blood money shows honor and offers a new page of relationships to establish a bond. This new relationship may have the same value as blood ties. For the Suluk, the brave man is not he who fights without mercy. The brave man accepts the reconciliation of his enemy and makes him his brother.

Informant 1 discussed:

"Bang in kasulutan humantapna, ka'patan tagupat katurunan humugut in pagtaimanghud sin ha antara' sin duwa pihak. Di' manjari pasakitan niya in taimanghud niya."

[TRANSLATION]

Once reconciliation materialized, forty-four generations of genuine brotherhood between parties were necessary. No one is allowed to hurt the new brother.

The study illuminates the role of *tambang* in mediation; it has the power to transform the hearts of parties. It instills sincerity and submissiveness, fosters reconciliation, and upholds honor and brotherhood. The essence of *tambang* is genuinely inspiring, as it guides disputants toward peaceful resolutions, imbuing them with these virtues along the way. It inspires Suluk communities to place forgiveness above revenge, fostering a culture of compassion and healing.

### **Tampam Maru, Honor and Blessing**

Pagdakup (elopement) is highly discouraged in the Suluk tradition. The said act triggers a conflict between two families. It is considered a shameful act on the side of the female party. The couple who submits to *taumaas* (as mediators) will be protected and subject to reconciliation.

Informant 3 explained:

"In tampam maru unud siyn atawa sing-sing bulawan hipara pa maumaas sin babai."

[TRANSLATION]

*Tampam Maru* comes in the form of money or a golden ring sent to the family of the female party.

*Taumaas* will immediately send *Tampam maru* from the male party to the female party without delay. It should be presented to the female eloper parents when the elopers reach the *taumaas*. *Tampam maru* is a form of money or gold that owes forgiveness and seeks the blessings of the *wali* (legal guardian) for the couple. When there will no *wali* granted, no *pagtiyaun* (wedding) will happen. Therefore, *tampam maru* shall be sent immediately. As part of the *adat*, the female party wholeheartedly accepts the *tampam maru* as an acceptance of honor to their family. It heals their hurt feelings, prompting them to send *wali* (the consent of the parents or guardian) immediately. When the *tampam maru* is received, the *taumaas* automatically inform the imam to administer the *pagkawin*

(wedding).

This study emphasizes the genuinely remarkable symbolic value of Tampan Maru. It represents the virtues of honor, forgiveness, and blessings for those who elope. Despite the small value of the money or ring and seemingly insignificant appearance, it carries immense power to bring about successful mediation.

### Social Acts

Hewitt (2002) explains that social acts involve cooperation with others. People interpret one another's actions and assign meaning to them in social interaction. Among the social acts in the Suluk Indigenous Mediation are the Hari Raya celebration, marriage, and blood compact.

#### *Hari Raya, the Feast of Forgiveness*

Ramadan, the fasting month, comforts the anxiety of the worshippers. At its culmination, the Hari Raya, or the *Eid'l Fitri* (Feast of Breaking of the Fast), is welcomed with a prayer (Ingilan, 2017, p. 143) and is celebrated with forgiveness—every little child in the playground showers with love and happiness. The colorful new clothes make them feel like they were born again. Leaving the gates open for everyone is becoming a traditional practice for the rich and poor. Everyone is invited to come, embrace each other, and forget every hurt feeling in the past. Forgiveness is the king of the day.

Informant 5 stated:

*"Hari raya in sarayau-rayau waktu hipaghalulay. Sa'bu makug in manga tau. In adlau yan, adlau hipagmaap-miyaapi."*

[TRANSLATION]

Hari Raya is the best time to resolve. Everyone was happy that day. It is a day that opens forgiveness.

Informant 1 shared:

*"In kaputtihan sin Hari Raya katu' Muslim amuna in kasi lasa pa pagkahi. Magtaimanghud daman kita niyu ha agama. Awn barakat niya."*

[TRANSLATION]

The spirit of Hari Raya gives us (Muslims) the feeling of loving our fellow. After all, we are brothers in faith. It has a baraka (charismatic grace).

The *taumaas* take the opportunity to resolve even century-old conflicts during this Islamic feast. No parties will say no to this call. It is in line with the objective of the indigenous approach to peacebuilding, which is to establish a connection between families and communities (Zartman, 2000). Through the said objective, social harmony and solidarity will be restored. Indeed, the indigenous approach to peacebuilding establishes social solidarity (Murithi, 2006; Issifu & Assante, 2016). They cannot afford to spoil the big day. This time, everybody drinks the medicine of forgetfulness. Hari Raya is the right time to delete all bad memories, anomalies, junk grievances, and pride. This day deserves to celebrate the reunion of brothers. Parties wearing the clothes of mercy— wash away the century-old grudge and terror with amity and calmness. Mediator successfully takes the right time when hearts are open for forgiveness and reconnection. The former enemy is now a brother celebrating the feast. Indeed, Hari Raya is a new morning to all.

It implies that Hari Raya, a festival of forgiveness, boosts unity among people and fosters harmony and social solidarity among disputing parties. The success of Suluk Indigenous Mediation further highlights the importance of spirituality in promoting a peaceful and just society, of which every Suluk should be proud.

#### *Intermarriage, the Antidote to Blood*

Marriage is getting more complex and contentious among couples, especially when it comes to

polygamy (Jumlail, 2023). On the contrary, Suluk believes marriage gives *kahinnukan* (calmness) to parties' conflicts. Nevertheless, marriage resolved conflict (Durante et al., 2004). In a local practice, marriage is synonymous with *maggpikit*, which means affinity. The Suluk concept of affinity anchors at *pagbauwbug* (instinctual solidarity); it starts with the married couple and expands to family and relatives.

Informant 5 explained:

"In pagpamikit bukun hadja ha gimpaisan. Kabuhi' kamatay in magpamikit."

[TRANSLATION]

To affiliate goes beyond the surface level. It is life and death.

Marriage weaves the hearts of two families and relatives. However, the relationship between the father and son-in-law is exceedingly tight (Kiefer, 1968). Their offspring sustain this mutual relationship incredibly. Eventually, the two families build their common fate together for better or worse. *Pagbauwbug* (Instinctual solidarity) manifests in the day-to-day life. At this point, the warring clans are forced to end the centuries-long dispute as their offspring celebrate their shared destiny before the solemnizing imam.

Informant 5 discussed:

"In pagtiyaun mabiya' siya tubig makapapas sin kayu simusunug ha atay sin antara' duwa pihak. Di' nila yan kagausan hitulak in lasa nila manga apu' nila. Bang nasulutna in duwa pihak nagkalu, nahinang adat in pagpakawin ha manga anak nila."

[TRANSLATION]

Marriage functions similarly to water, removing the embers from each clan's heart. They cannot afford to disregard their grandchildren's affection. After the conflict was resolved, it was customary for the feuding clan to arrange marriages for their offspring.

The parties took advantage of marriage for their *pagbauwbug*. They are becoming powerful alliances, broader influences, and greater integrity. At the same time, the alliance could extend more outstanding service to their communities. Their solidarity ignites unification with other clans. They will eventually be able to resolve the other rival clans' conflicts. Hence, marriage is mercy as enlightened in the Holy Quran 30:31, interpreted by Yusuf Ali: "And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily in that are Signs for those who reflect."

Furthermore, *pagdakup* (elopement) of the young couple from the known feuding clans is challenging to the *taumaas'* mediation. However, it builds a new bridge of reconciliation between both families. Although thoroughly healing the wound takes months or years, the hope is more significant than expected. The couple's future child became the foundation of forgiveness and reconciliation between feuding clans.

Informant 5 explained:

"Awn kiyasakupan ku nagpangasawa pa baka banta, ha atas maksud magpahugut sin pagsulut iban taimanghud. Timagna' daying ha adlau yadtu, waina pagkalu-kalu sin duwa pihak."

[TRANSLATION]

I encountered a marriage proposal of the former feuding clan to the former enemy. The aim is to strengthen the foundation of their reconciliation and blood ties. From that day, there were no conflict attempts from both clans.

Indeed, marriage is *rahmah*, mercy (Quran 30:21). Inter-marriage plants offspring and a fountain of love. It blends the blood of different families and clans, raising new hope and dancing to the music of understanding and appreciating differences. The mutual union of the married couple has resulted in a coalition of the two clans.

Informant 3 enlightened:

*"Awn kaajaiban sin pagpikit. Makapasugpat jantung sin satiyap tau, magtali-anak, ibanna sin kauman.*

[TRANSLATION]

There is a magical connection to intermarriage. It connects the heart of each person, family, and community. It is not that easy to kill your blood. Your former enemy is a brother and parent of your blood.

This study sheds light on the power of symbolism in intermarriage mediation. It illustrates the significant role that intermarriage can play in fostering unity, empathy, and collaboration. By embracing this symbolism, parties can build deeper emotional connections, form strong alliances, and work towards peaceful resolutions of conflicts.

### **Blood Compact, a Seal of Agreement**

The blood compact is needed to seal an agreement when the blood spills. Indeed, scholars attest to the crucial rule of blood money in the Suluk Indigenous Mediation (Virola-Gardiola, 2021; Durante et al., 2014; Kiefer, 1969). *Pagbanta* (feud) between Suluk clans often results in life sacrifices and a vicious cycle of revenge. Sometimes, it takes one generation to the other before reconciliation is reached. Moral and physical damage usually become the target of the game. Those who cannot take revenge are considered shameful to the clan— degrading the clan's *martabbat* (dignity). The entire family firmly unites to protect the *martabbat* of the family. The relatives come together to help morally and physically; pouring wealth due to bloodshed becomes the tradition to regain the *martabbat*.

When the blood money is given and accepted, the *martabbat* blooms again, and the door of reconciliation is open. Eventually, the blood washes with acceptance and forgiveness. Disputants ultimately get that every situation is within the *qadar* of Allah (divine pre-ordainment).

Informant 4 stated:

*"In kamatay yan hakikat. Way mapakaguy kaniya. Bang tiyakdil kaimu kumapang kau ha dugu', na' way makapinda ha kabayaan sin Tuhan. In sarayau-rayau hinangun mu tumaima'na hadja kau sin kasabunnalan. Gantii in dugu' pa tubig kasilasa dagdara bunga kaimu, pa ahli mu, iban pa pihak hansipak. Taimaa in pagmaap-miyaapi iban pagtaimanghud. In kasulutan apdal daying sin pamauli. In ganarul siyana in makaagpang sin bungsi niya."*

[TRANSLATION]

Death is real. No one can escape from it. When your fate is lying in the blood, you cannot change the Will of God. The best thing you can do is to accept reality. Exchange the blood into the water of love that bears fruits to you, your family, and the other party. Embrace forgiveness and brotherhood among them. Reconciliation is better than revenge. The great warrior is the one who can hold on to his anger.

Informant 3 shared:

*"Ha tatkala' in hansipak pihak nangayu'na kungsi' sin kasulutan, waina patut magsintak sin panji pula. In dugu' subaina pindahan sin pagmaap-miyaapi. Bangunna in manaimbabau, ampa magsapa bang kalagihan."*

[TRANSLATION]

When the other party begs the key to reconciliation, there is no reason to raise the red flag. Automatically, blood is replaced by forgiveness. First, the blood money will be followed by the blood compact if necessary.

The verbal agreement is known as *magbaggut ha dila'*, a part of the living tradition of the Suluk. Though written agreements are still adopted, oral agreements are the best practice. Sometimes, after the reconciliation, the blood compact will act as a seal of the agreement. No one dares to breach the contract because the consequence is a *busung* (curse) (Kiefer, 1969). For the Suluk, a blood compact means an oath of brotherhood and an agreement to forbid bloodshed. After the blood compact, the former enemy becomes a brother. Today, blood compact is not necessary to drink blood; it was

replaced by the verbal commitment to an oath for brotherhood in the name of Allah. After the blood compact, the former enemy becomes a brother.

This study shows that through participating in a blood compact, former adversaries are transformed into brothers, united by a shared desire to avoid violence and build a better future. A blood compact genuinely seals the genuine agreement between parties. For the Suluk, a blood compact means an oath of brotherhood and an agreement to forbid bloodshed.

### Language

According to Hewitt (2002), language is considered “the most powerful reality shaping set of symbols employed by a human being” composed of words that have each meaning guided by established rules. The expert Suluk mediator uses a narrative metaphor known as *parail* as a tool to mediate the conflict.

### *Parail, Caring Rhetoric*

Informant 2 discussed:

“In martabbat landu’ in halga’ ha adat ta. Bang awn hadja hambuuk kasakitan, wairuun dugaing jawaban daying sin magayad tuud in tau-ha-uwat ha satiyap himumungan niya. Wajib tuud in parail.

[TRANSLATION]

Martabbat is essential in our culture. Once one gets hurt, he can take no better solution than for the tau ha uwat to be careful of his words. *Parail* is a must.

*Parail* is an art of dialogue that uses indirect remarks explaining sensitive issues—technically adopted in the Suluk indigenous mediation, in Winslade and Monk’s (2000) words called narrative metaphor. The objective of the *parail* is to avoid unhealthy notions that may embarrass the conflicting parties. Therefore, offensive statements are strictly discouraged. On the contrary, sensitivity is so much appreciated. Hence, the mediator ensures that they will speak to one another in a degrading manner because frank words might cause another conflict. Therefore, the mediator will use similes and metaphors in the paragraph to explain what must be addressed. A mediator wisely uses an object for reflection and storytelling to express the situation and other similar examples. Scholars like Winslade and Monk (2000) and Straub (1997) agree to be careful and respectful during mediation. Indeed, Straub (1997) adds that it contributes to the mediation’s success. *Parail* conveys positive messages that influence negative emotions and turn them into a productive direction.

Informant 4 explained:

“In manga kabtangan lamma lambut maluhay sumubsub pa pikilan iban atay nila. Mataima’ sin nagsagga’ in kabtangan mu marayau.”

[TRANSLATION]

*Lamma lambut* (gentle) words easily absorb their minds and hearts. Parties appreciate your descent word.

Informant 5 discussed:

“Bang mu makawa’na in pikilan nila sin kabtangan mu, di’na sila makari’ ha kasulutan.”

[TRANSLATION]

Once you capture their mind with your words, they will not say no to reconciliation

A soft-spoken word *parail* cares about the feelings of the disputant. Sensitivity has always been the guideline of each statement. *Parail* value appreciation conveys positive messages that are easy to understand and accept. Through the *parail*, parties admit their weaknesses and take the reconciliation proposal. According to the Suluk proverb, “salaggu’-laggu’ dusa, malaggu’ in ampun” means *forgiveness is always greater no matter the offense’s grave*.

Informant 4 stated:

“Pamung sin manga kamaasan, in satiyap bunga mampallam daying ha puunan niyara ra. Daying ha sabab yadtu hangka liuran kitaniyu. Misan isab in ista’ iban sin tungkang magbakda sila karuwa, kitapa isab.”

[TRANSLATION]

Our ancestors said, “Every mango fruit comes from one root.” Therefore, all of us (human beings) are family. Moreover, while even the fish and cooking pot reach each other, so do we. So let us forget the past and embrace love and forgiveness.

This study posits that certain symbols, such as language, can effectively mediate dispute resolution. The *parail*, a narrative metaphor employed in the Suluk Indigenous Mediation (SIM) approach, is particularly efficacious. By delivering honor, respect, and care to all parties involved, the *parail* can facilitate productive communication and promote peaceful conflict resolution.

## Conclusion

*Partandaan* (symbols) in Suluk Indigenous Mediation (SIM) are imperative strategies to resolve conflicts effectively. As whispers of wisdom, symbolism is significant to the lifestyle of the Suluk people. It influences their thinking and inspires them to maintain life’s balance and harmony. For Suluk people, the object, social act, and language in the symbols are more complex approaches used in mediation. It is beyond conflict resolution. Symbols are the lights that spark in the middle of the darkness and clear the vision of peace, understanding, forgiveness, and love for God and humanity. The blood compact or an oath of brotherhood as the seal of the agreement genuinely binds the new brotherhood of both parties.

Symbolism paints crucial colors to the success of each Suluk Indigenous Mediation (SIM). For instance, the house of Allah— *langgal* or *masjid* is a neutral venue to fix broken ties. *Dulang* of the delicious amphibian foods reconnects the disconnected relationship. Inter-marriage is an antidote of blood that reconciles the century clans’ feud. The blood money, known as *tambang* or *bangun* to the locals, badges the valor to the heart of the disputants. The *tampun maru* presents the shield of honor to the eloper girl’s party in the form of gold or money. The spirit of Hari Raya bears the blessings of fasting, open forgiveness, and genuine reconciliation. The *parail*, a caring rhetoric, hides the embarrassment in each conversation. Moreover, the blood compact as the seal of the agreement genuinely binds the new brotherhood of both parties.

The importance of symbols in Suluk Indigenous Mediation suggests a need to explore further the specific cultural variations in the meanings of these symbols across different Suluk regions. Considering a comparative analysis of SIM’s symbolic practices with other indigenous mediation processes in Southeast Asia or beyond could provide insights into the universality or particularly of symbolic elements in conflict resolution.

The research findings suggest that policymakers could consider developing programs that acknowledge and potentially integrate elements of SIM, particularly its symbol aspects, into the formal conflict resolution mechanism in the region. Integrating cultural sensitivity training that emphasizes symbolic elements can enhance the efficacy of mediators and legal professionals working with the Suluk community.

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