

An Inquisitive Semantic Study of Symbolism in Suluk Ethnic Attire

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ABSTRACT

Suluk ethnic attire in the state of Sabah is a form of cultural expression deeply imbued with symbolic value and historical heritage. Every element of this attire, including patterns, colors, motifs, and accessories, serves not merely as ornamentation but also conveys specific meanings related to the identity, social status, beliefs, and worldview of the Suluk community. However, the symbolic meanings contained within this attire are increasingly marginalized due to a lack of scholarly documentation, particularly from linguistic and semantic perspectives. Most studies regarding traditional Suluk attire emphasize anthropological, historical, and design aspects without deeply exploring the implicit dimensions of meaning or symbolism within. This has resulted in a knowledge gap in understanding ethnic attire as a sign system that carries cultural messages and meanings. Furthermore, inquisitive semantic research that traces underlying meanings is still rarely conducted on cultural objects such as attire. Therefore, through a qualitative approach using observation, recording, interviews, and content analysis, this study was conducted to examine the symbolism in the Suluk ethnic attire known as *Samrah*. This study sets two objectives: to identify the elements of symbolism in Suluk ethnic attire and to analyze its symbolic meanings through the application of inquisitive semantics. The findings indicate that floral symbolism is more prevalent than faunal symbolism. These symbols contain meanings regarding life, counsel, experience, and health, all of which reflect the wisdom (*akal budi*) of the Suluk community during the *Sulu Da Jolo* era. This study is vital for documenting cultural meanings that are gradually eroding, while simultaneously strengthening the understanding of the Suluk community's symbolic language, which is rich in value and implicit meaning.

Keywords: Inquisitive Semantic, symbolism, Suluk Ethnic, traditional Suluk attire, symbolic meanings

INTRODUCTION

Traditional attire serves as a cultural text laden with symbolic value. Within a semiotic framework, garments are understood not merely as physical clothing but as sign systems that convey both denotative and connotative meanings (Barthes, 1990). Elements such as patterns, colours, motifs, and accessories construct a visual narrative representing the identity, social standing, and worldview of a community. In the context of the Suluk community in Sabah, ethnic attire, particularly the *Samrah*, functions not only as traditional clothing but also as a manifestation of the collective intellect (*akal budi*) and cultural heritage inherited across generations.

Prior research on the Suluk community has been conducted across various dimensions, including socio-cultural aspects (Ramlie et al., 2020), wedding customs (Ramlie et al., 2022), and the design aesthetics of the *Samrah* costume (Jainal, Ramli & Said, 2021). Nevertheless, these studies tend to focus on anthropological, historical, or aesthetic dimensions, whereas analyses from linguistic and semantic perspectives remain highly restricted. This deficit engenders a knowledge gap in comprehending ethnic attire as a sign system embedded with implicit cultural messages.

In linguistic studies, attire can be analysed as a visual element that communicates meaning through symbolism. Halliday (1978) emphasizes that language and culture are inextricably linked in the construction of meaning; hence, the symbolism of attire can be interpreted as an integral part of a community's communication system. To uncover these implicit meanings, the framework of inquisitive semantics is highly relevant. Inquisitive

semantics prioritizes a hierarchical analysis, tracing meaning from literal and figurative levels down to the hidden implicit layers (Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin, 2014). Previous research within the contexts of proverbs (Dewek & Ali, 2022) has demonstrated the efficacy of this approach in exposing profound meanings that are not immediately apparent.

Based on this background, this paper establishes two primary objectives: first, to identify the symbolic elements contained within Suluk ethnic attire, specifically the *Samrah* and *Sawwal Kantiyu*; and second, to analyse these symbolic meanings through the application of the inquisitive semantics approach. This study is expected to contribute to the documentation of a cultural heritage that is increasingly facing erosion, while simultaneously reinforcing the comprehension of the symbolic language of the Suluk people. Broadly, it enriches academic discourse within the fields of semantics and cultural studies, reaffirming that ethnic attire is not merely a material artifact but a symbolic construct reflecting a nation's system of meaning and cognitive intellect.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Past studies in the fields of culture and linguistics have placed a significant focus on exploring visuals, traditional clothing motifs, and figurative language to comprehend the identity and philosophy of a community. The analysis of these symbols not only highlights external aesthetic beauty but also uncovers the local wisdom, history, and belief systems inherited across generations. Through diverse methodological approaches, previous researchers have endeavored to unravel the meanings underlying the physical designs of ethnic attire and the structures of language utilized in daily life. In the context of traditional attire, a study conducted by Fatmawati Ilham (2019) focused on the traditional wedding garments of the Buton community, specifically targeting the Kaomu and Walak groups. Employing a qualitative approach based on fieldwork, observations, and interviews with experienced informants, this study analyzed the variations of accessories and clothing symbols using Semiotic theory. The findings indicated that the attire shares an exceptionally close relationship with the Buton Sultanate system. The male attire symbolizes the leadership traits of a king, whereas the female attire is designed based on flora and fauna elements, functioning as aesthetic adornments to attract the attention of young men. Meanwhile, Siti Fariza Mahfar and Humin Jusilin (2017) highlighted the authenticity of patterns and symbolism in the attire of the Rungus community in Sabah, particularly the use of *pinakol* beads. This qualitative study applied the concept of intellect (*akal*) to understand how the Rungus community interprets bead designs through fieldwork and interviews. The research findings revealed that each arrangement of beads reflects aspects of their daily lives, customs, and culture. The creativity of this community is expressed through bead motifs inspired by the natural environment, encompassing representations of humans, animals, plants, spirits, geometric shapes, and even weaponry.

Furthermore, the historical dimension and evolution of dance attire can be observed in a study by Risa Maryati and Ira Miryani (2020) regarding the Visualization and Symbolic Meaning of the Turak Dance Attire. This qualitative investigation examined the dance garments, which possess a historical background related to the resistance against NICA forces. Through fieldwork and descriptive interviews, they discovered that contemporary Turak Dance fashion has undergone modernization and diversification in patterns to capture attention. Modern attire incorporates elements such as the *kebaya* or *dodot*, Malang flowers, head accessories, and the *turak* element as a symbol of support, while also drawing influence from the traditional clothing of Musi Rawas. Beyond the visual aspects of clothing, the local community's worldview toward traditional attire was also studied by Saidatul Nornis Hj. Mahali (2019) through an investigation of the *Badu Sampit Berangkit* garments of the Bajau Samah people in Kota Belud, Sabah. By conducting informal interviews with residents from various villages such as Labuan, Timbang Dayang, Sembirai, and Kota Belud, this study successfully uncovered the local wisdom and cultural values embedded within the tradition. The researcher discovered a profound diversity of meanings behind the clothing designs, demonstrating that there are seven interpretations of meaning for the "*olos*" pattern, and six meanings for the "*sampit*" pattern, alongside design motifs that resemble buffalo horns.

In addition to studies oriented toward attire, the field of cognitive linguistics also demonstrates the importance of analyzing symbols through figurative language and Malay proverbs. Aida Nurfika Mohd Sabarudin and Nurul Jamilah (2021) examined the use of the 'flower' (*bunga*) element in Malay proverbs to identify the meaning

behind such figurative language. Utilizing a qualitative method based on proverb sourcebooks, the analysis was focused through the inquisitive semantics approach and the Cross-Reference Framework (CRF) of Relevance Theory. This study proved that the 'flower' element reflects the creative and critical thinking of the ancient Malay community, which connected nature with beauty, moral values, and various human life events. In line with that approach, Siti Elmira et al. (2021) examined Malay idioms that utilize the symbolic image of the 'hand' (*tangan*). Using purposive sampling from the Dictionary of Malay Proverbs and data from the Corpus Database of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), a total of 24 idioms were analyzed using the inquisitive semantics approach. The research results classified these idioms into several semantic categories, including those related to character and actions (11 idioms), profit and luck (5 idioms), life (5 idioms), as well as aspects of knowledge, situations, and governance. This study demonstrates how the body part from the elbow to the fingertips does not merely function physically but possesses multiple layers of connotative meaning that symbolize the community's intellect and core values.

Overall, although past studies have successfully unraveled the visualization and meaning of symbols across various cultural domains, a significant research gap still exists. Most previous studies tend to describe clothing symbolism superficially or literally without utilizing profound linguistic theories to explain the literal meaning of a design, thereby lacking connection to the cognitive aspects and intellect of the community. Recognizing these methodological and theoretical gaps, this new study is designed to explore the symbolic elements of the Suluk ethnic attire more thoroughly by applying the Inquisitive Semantics approach to produce a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, focusing on the analysis of symbolic meaning within the Suluk ethnic attire. This approach was selected as it is optimal for examining cultural phenomena within their natural context and revealing implicit meanings through deep interpretation.

Data Sources & Collection

Primary data were gathered through direct observation of the *Samrah* attire used in cultural ceremonies and festivals of the Suluk community in Sabah. Observations were documented via photography, video recordings, and field notes. Secondary data were acquired through a literature review encompassing academic articles, historical texts, and cultural reports related to the Suluk community. To complement the textual and visual analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two key informants possessing specialized knowledge in the production and customs of Suluk traditional attire. The first informant is Madam Fatimah Alyssa Thoib (55 years old), a traditional boutique owner and tailor specializing in traditional Suluk bridal wear. The second informant is Madam Rohimah Panjang (50 years old), a professional cultural tailor. Both informants belong to the *Suluk Piul* lineage (pure/indigenous Suluk ancestry) residing in Kampung Likas, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

Data Analysis Procedures

The collected data were analysed through a two-stage process:

1. **Initial Coding:** Identifying and categorizing the core symbolic elements within the attire, specifically focusing on the floral motif (binahong leaf) and the faunal motif (pearl).
2. **Inquisitive Semantic Framework:** Tracing the layers of symbolic meaning based on the three interpretive tiers formulated by Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin (2014):
 - i) **Script Semantics:** Uncovering the literal, dictionary-defined data
 - ii) **Resonance Semantics:** Mapping cognitive data, contextual extensions, and oral literature (such as magluguk poetry) through a cross-reference framework.
 - iii) **Inquisitive Semantics:** Integrating biological, ecological, and sociological attributes to discover why and how the community constructed those symbols as representations of their philosophy and wisdom (akal budi).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sablayan and the Yellow Headscarf of the Samrah Attire

The *sablayan*, or shoulder scarf, in the Samrah attire of the Suluk ethnic group serves as a primary illustrative artifact demonstrating to other communities how the Suluk people utilize their skill and wisdom to transform plain fabric into a practical, multipurpose tool (Mohd Fazil, 2018). The *sablayan* is crafted using cool, durable velvet adorned with visually appealing floral symbolism. A closer examination of these visuals reveals motifs such as *binahong* leaves, fern leaves, sacred datura flowers, and butterfly pea flowers (*bunga telang*). The inclusion of these leaves and flowers stems from plants commonly cultivated by the Suluk community, which offer numerous benefits (RoZIAH Adama, 2011).

Meanwhile, the yellow headscarf carries deep significance tied to cultural symbolism and traditional values (Zubaidah Shawal, 2014). The scarf used in the Samrah attire is yellow, a color widely recognized as a symbol of high status, nobility, or leadership (Zainon Ismail, 2006). Adornments such as pearls represent high status for women, signaling an exalted position in ceremonies or celebrations (Nawayan, 2010). Wearing the yellow headscarf signifies an individual regarded as possessing wisdom or playing a vital role in preserving custom and tradition. The elements within the scarf represent a wise person capable of directing a ceremony to perfection (RoZIAH Adama, 2011).

Symbolism of the Binahong Leaf



Figure 1 Binahong Leaf Motif in the Sablayan of Samrah Attire

Script Semantics of the Binahong Leaf Symbolism

The *binahong* leaf, derived from the *Anredera cordifolia* plant, is characterized by its unique heart shape and dark green color (Fadzli, 2014).

Resonance Semantics of the Binahong Leaf Symbolism

Figure 2 below illustrates the cognitive process of Suluk speakers regarding the use of *binahong* leaf symbolism.

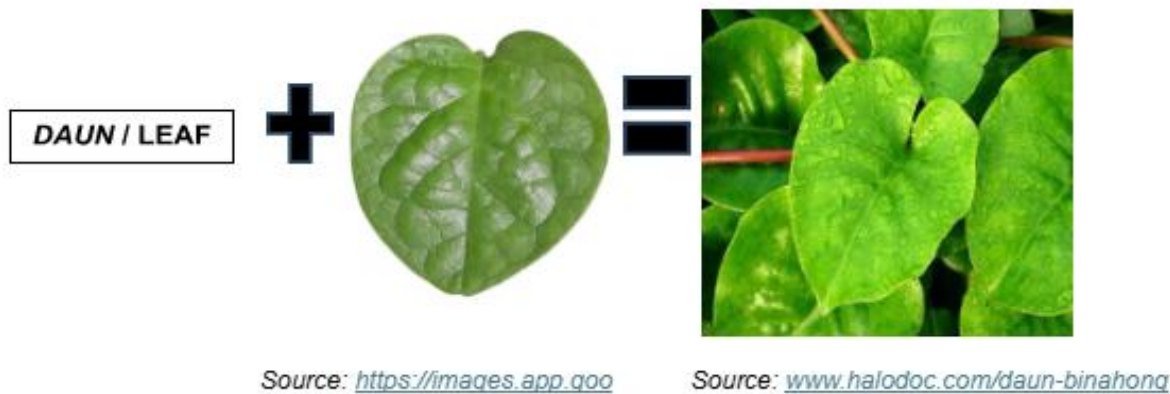


Figure 2 Cognitive Representation of Binahong Leaf Symbolism

Leaf (<i>Dahun</i>) An essential plant organ for photosynthesis, the process of producing energy (Kamus Dewan Perdana, 2023).	Binahong Leaf Frequently used for medicinal purposes. It is known for its efficacy in healing wounds, reducing inflammation, and enhancing overall health (Lim Ah Teck, 2006).	<i>Dahun Pamulih</i> Symbolizes the healing of life, reflecting a belief in a harmonious relationship between humans and nature (Rohimah Panjang, 2025).
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The leaf is a vital part of a plant responsible for photosynthesis, which generates energy. The *binahong* leaf is commonly applied in traditional medicine due to its therapeutic properties in wound healing, inflammation reduction, and health promotion. Among the Suluk people, *dahun pamulih* (the *binahong* leaf) symbolizes the restoration of life, reflecting their worldview of living in harmony with nature. The broad cultural resonance of this symbolism led to its integration as a key motif in the *sablayan*. The leaf is interpreted as a protective element that yields numerous benefits to humanity (Niwayan, 2010). According to key informants, the leaf motif in the *sablayan* references women with extraordinary abilities, such as traditional midwives (Rohimah Panjang, 2025). Thus, the symbolism of the *binahong* leaf (*dahun pamulih*) signifies life-healing and harmonious human-nature relations. It is categorized under floral elements because of its direct connection to traditional healing and medicine.

Linguistic evidence supporting this symbolism was drawn from poetic chants (*magluguk*) recorded from an informant in Kampung Likas, Sabah. This *magluguk* utterance data helps interpret the symbolism using the Cross-Reference Frame (CRF) conceptual framework within Relevance Theory (RT).

Magluguk (Poem): *Sinpati pagtabang na mayad alam dunyia, binahong dumatang san in kaharmonian para ta'u.*

Translation: Sincerity in helping through the beauty of the natural world; the **binahong leaf** brings harmony among the people.

Analysis of this *magluguk* stanza provided by informant Rohimah Panjang (2025) indicates that the line offers supplementary context, facilitating the audience's interpretation of the leaf's true symbolic nature. Phrases such as "*Sincerity in helping through the beauty of the natural world*" and "*brings harmony*" guide readers toward the underlying cultural meaning. The former phrase reflects the cooperative lifestyle of the Suluk community, where mutual aid transcends religious and ethnic boundaries. The reference to natural beauty highlights surrounding flora used as remedies in healing practices (Mohd Fazil, 2018). The Suluk community is also known for traditional healers (*makcik uli-uli*), referring to individuals—both women and men—skilled in various forms of medicine (Rohimah Panjang). This close connection between the *binahong* leaf and daily life justifies its

inclusion as a prominent motif in the *sablawayan*. The phrase "*brings harmony*" reflects the empathy and compassion inherent in Suluk social life. In instances of bereavement, illness, or hardship, community members offer assistance regardless of close personal ties. This practice persists today, fostering social cohesion and harmony across all societal strata (Atifah Ahmad Yusof, 2018). The stanza thus serves as contextual data explaining why the *binahong* motif was adopted into the *sablawayan*.

Inquisitive Semantics of the Binahong Leaf Symbolism

How does the *binahong* leaf connect to harmony and sincerity? Scientifically known as *Anredera cordifolia*, *binahong* offers various medical applications, such as managing blood pressure, healing wounds, easing stomach distress, supporting cardiovascular health, and treating acne (Rizal, 2024). Originating from mainland China—where it is known as *dheng san chi*—this climbing vine serves as a traditional medicinal herb. Morphologically, it features single, short-stalked (subsessile) leaves arranged alternately along the stem. The heart-shaped (cordate), light-green leaves typically measure 5 to 10 cm in length and 3 to 7 cm in width, with smooth surfaces, pointed tips, cordate bases, and entire or slightly wavy margins. Lim Ah Teck (2006) notes that the roots, stems, leaves, and flowers are all utilized in remedies for ailments like diabetes, typhoid, stroke, enteritis, and oral ulcers (Abdul Rahman, 2002). Informants highlight that the plant's selection stems from its therapeutic utility and ease of cultivation (Ida Dayu, 2016).

The leaf is also widely used in traditional healthcare and beauty regimens. Traditional Suluk healers frequently cultivate *binahong* to treat visiting patients. Historically, reliance on these remedies predated access to modern clinical infrastructure, partly due to a strong trust in ancestral knowledge (*kemaasan*) and, in some cases, a lack of official identification documents required at formal healthcare facilities. The non-commercial nature of these treatments—where healers generally perform services without demanding payment—fosters community trust, sincerity, and harmony. Additionally, the climbing and clinging growth habit of the *binahong* vine metaphorically mirrors the mutually supportive, complementary relationship between healers and the community. Environmental availability further solidified its selection as a primary motif in the *sablawayan*.

Symbolism of the Pearl



Figure 3 Pearl Motif in the Yellow Headscarf of Samrah Attire

Script Semantics of Pearl Symbolism

Pearls are organic gemstones formed via biomineralization—a process in which organic and inorganic material is deposited within the tissue of mollusks such as oysters and snails (Jean-Marie, 1998). A pearl consists of hard, lustrous, round or irregular secretions produced inside soft tissues as a natural defense mechanism against foreign irritants (e.g., sand grains), where the mollusk secretes consecutive layers of nacre (mother-of-pearl) to coat the foreign body.

Resonance Semantics of Pearl Symbolism

Figure 4 depicts the cognitive mapping of pearl symbolism within the yellow headscarf of Samrah attire among Suluk speakers.



Source: <https://www.grame>



Source: <https://www./2022//mutiarasabah>

Figure 4 Cognitive Representation of Pearl Symbolism

Pearl	Pearl Jewelry
A gemstone formed through biomineralization within mollusk shells (Jean-Marie, 1998).	Represents elevated status, nobility, or leadership (Zainon Ismail, 2006).

Within Suluk culture, pearls denote high social standing, nobility, and leadership (Zainon Ismail, 2006). Their inclusion in Samrah attire is closely tied to women holding high status within families or ceremonial contexts (Rohimah Panjang, 2025). This material element forms an essential component of the yellow headscarf. Linguistic validation of pearl symbolism is derived from informant accounts alongside poetic *magluguk* verses.

Magluguk (Poem): *In Babae kahantang tuan putli, sya sanjung kalna sin taas durukan nia.*

Translation: A woman, like a **pearl**, is regarded as a princess and holds the highest throne within both the family and society.

This *magluguk* verse provides additional context to clarify the symbolic association between women and pearls. The imagery of a woman as a pearl conveys grace, radiant beauty, and refined manners, qualities highly esteemed in Suluk social life. Being "*regarded as a princess*" implies that a woman is treated with supreme respect within her household, particularly first-born daughters (Rohimah Panjang, 2025). The expression "*holding the highest throne*" reflects how women are honored and held in high regard across family and community spheres, commanding deep respect akin to nobility (Rohimah Panjang, 2025).

Inquisitive Semantics of Pearl Symbolism

Natural pearls form when an foreign object enters an oyster, prompting a defense mechanism that deposits layers of calcium-carbonate-rich nacre around the irritant (Jean-Marie, 1998). This natural creation process mirrors the perceived uniqueness and resilience of women in Suluk culture. Beyond raw material origin, pearl accessories

on the yellow headscarf are evaluated based on quality, origin, and design. Deep-sea pearls are especially favored for Samrah attire due to their rarity. Typically available in three distinct shades—black, white, and peach—deep-sea pearls are prized over freshwater and shallow-water varieties for their wild origin, aesthetic appeal, and higher value (Fazliana, 2021). This exclusivity parallels the honored status of women in the community.

Pearl jewelry is widely traded in Sabah night markets, often featuring modern settings that attract both local women and visitors. Sabahan pearls are categorized into saltwater and freshwater types, with prices varying according to materials, craftsmanship, and decorative accents (Fazliana Rajam, 2021). Informants note that notable pearl harvesting occurs around Bohey Dulang Island in Semporna, where clear marine waters provide ideal conditions for high-quality pearl production (Rohimah Panjang, 2025).

Informants emphasize that integrating pearls into headscarves symbolizes women as central figures who hold respected positions within domestic and public life. Husbands are expected to show deep respect and care for their wives, a practice reinforced by cultural traditions and religious values. The strong standing of mothers within households often means children hold them in particular awe. While changing social dynamics mean these traditional customs are less universally practiced today due to shifting awareness of historical etiquette, the pearl remains a central symbol of heritage in Suluk cultural attire.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that every element within the traditional attire of the Suluk ethnic group in Sabah is not merely ornamental or utilitarian, but constitutes a complex cultural text embedded with deep symbolic meanings. The inquisitive semantic analysis confirms that the intricate patterns, colours, and motifs present in the *Samrah* and *Sawwal Kantiyu* garments reflect the social hierarchies, kinship frameworks, moral codes, and ecological philosophies of the community. Ultimately, this research enriches academic scholarship within the fields of cultural linguistics and cognitive semantics, while substantially contributing to the preservation of the Suluk heritage as an integral component of the region's national identity.

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