

Ritual Language as Social Action: A Case Study of *Nika Ro Neku* in The Digital Space

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Abstract

The traditional marriage ritual of *Nika Ro Neku* is one of the cultural heritages of the Bima community that is rich in symbolic, social, and spiritual meaning. In the digital age, this ritual has been documented and disseminated through online media, causing changes in its practice and linguistic structure. Social media, video recordings, and online communication have led to changes in the structure of speech, the roles of participants, and the social meanings contained within. This study aims to analyze the transformation of language and the roles of participants in the ritual using Alessandro Duranti's anthropological linguistic approach, particularly the concepts of *indexicality*, *performance*, and *participation*. The method used is a qualitative descriptive approach based on digital ethnography, with data consisting of speech excerpts from YouTube videos and online interviews. The results show that the *performative* dimension in ritual speech is the most dominant aspect, where speech not only conveys information but also shapes social realities such as *blessings*, *acceptance*, and *collective identity*. Digital transformation has led to the reinterpretation of social indices, a shift in performativity toward visual content, and the expansion of participants' roles from local communities to a global audience. This study demonstrates that digital documentation does not erase cultural meaning but rather reformulates it within a new media context.

Keywords: Cultural digitization, Indexicality, Linguistic Anthropology, *Nika Ro Neku*, Participation, Performativity, Ritual language

INTRODUCTION

The *Nika Ro Neku* traditional marriage ritual constitutes an important element of the Bima people's cultural heritage, encompassing profound symbolic, social, and spiritual dimensions. In the contemporary digital era, the documentation and dissemination of this ritual through various online media have contributed to notable shifts in its performance and linguistic expression. The integration of social media, video recordings, and digital communication platforms has altered the structure of utterances, redefined participant roles, and reshaped the social meanings conveyed within the ritual. This study seeks to explore these transformations in language use and participant dynamics by employing Alessandro Duranti's anthropological linguistics perspective, with a particular emphasis on the concepts of *indexicality*, *performance*, and *participant* roles.

Rituals are forms of cultural expression rich in symbolic meaning and have important social functions in traditional societies. One such ritual is the *Nika Ro Neku*, a traditional marriage ceremony of the Bima people in West Nusa Tenggara. In practice, this ritual not only contains ceremonial elements but also displays a complex linguistic structure, full of symbolic meaning, and containing a strong social dimension. The ritual language used is rich in metaphors, prayers, and community identity markers that have been passed down from generation to generation.

The traditional *Nika Ro Neku* marriage ritual in the Bima community is not merely ceremonial, but also rich in symbolic and social meaning. Research by Imansyah & Sirulhaq (2024) reveals that the traditional Bima marriage procession utilizes various linguistic units ritual terms, opening greetings, and even special language symbols that reinforce cultural identity and community cohesion. Additionally, Arifuddin & Indah (2024) emphasize that the use of pantun and verbal expressions like *nggahi panati* in the proposal ritual not only serves as speech but also conveys cultural values and social norms symbolically. These findings support the argument that the *Nika Ro Neku* ritual language is structurally complex and rich in meaning, consistent with the Bima community's traditional heritage.

Language in traditional marriage rituals like *Nika Ro Neku* does not just work as a communication tool, but also as a way to express cultural, spiritual, and social values that have been passed down through generations. Takwa et al (2022) reveal that the language used in *Tolaki Mekongga traditional weddings* is rich in metaphorical expressions that reflect human values such as harmony, fertility, and respect for ancestors. The use of metaphors from nature, humanity, and social relations creates a symbolic dimension that reinforces the meaning of the ceremony. This is parallel to the findings in the *Nika Ro Neku* ritual, where the

ritual language is also full of metaphors and prayers that symbolize the collective identity and hopes of the Bima community.

In addition, Thayyib et al (2020) in their study of *Bunga' Lalang*, a form of Bugis traditional speech, show that traditional linguistic practices contain ideological dimensions that reflect the value system of society, such as respect, social hierarchy, and kinship. In the context of *Nika Ro Neku*, this ideological dimension is also evident in the structure of ritual speech that reflects the social and moral order of the Bima community. Thus, in both Bugis and Bima rituals, language not only conveys ceremonial messages but also reinforces social and cultural structures through its performativity.

Contemporary linguistic research has shown that the interaction between language, culture, and digital media creates new spaces in social practices and communication. In the past five years, researchers have highlighted that digitized traditional rituals undergo not only documentation but also processes of semiotic and social transformation (Leppänen & Elo, 2022; Tagg, Seargeant, & Brown, 2021). Leppänen and Elo (2022) explain that digital language practices are multimodal and mediated by media platforms that shift cultural interaction into new forms of visualization, sound, and publicly curated symbolic actions. This is reinforced by the findings of Tagg et al. (2021) that cultural authenticity in digital spaces is no longer local and private but is discursively reconstructed through narratives and online displays that invite broad public engagement. In this context, the performativity of language in digital spaces becomes increasingly significant.

Tsiplakou (2020) demonstrates that identity and social relations within online communities are shaped through performative language practices, where individuals not only convey messages but also perform identity through the selection of codes, languages, and other modalities. The role of language as a social action aligns with Duranti's concept of performativity, where speech is not merely a tool for communication but also a mechanism for shaping social structures. In another study, Gavins et al. (2021) emphasize that digital practices such as vlogs, social media narratives, and audiovisual documentation of traditional ceremonies have reconfigured social roles, showing that ritual language in the digital space functions as a public, visual, and interactive medium of expression. Overall, these studies reinforce the argument that the transformation of language in digital rituals such as *Nika Ro Neku* is not merely a technological adaptation but a process of resemantization of cultural values, community identity, and social participation structures through digitally mediated linguistic performativity.

However, the development of digital technology has brought significant changes to cultural practices, including rituals. The documentation, dissemination, and reinterpretation of ritual practices now take place in digital spaces, such as social media and online video platforms. This has led to transformations not only in the form of delivery, but also in the structure and function of the language used. In this context, Alessandro Duranti's anthropological linguistic approach becomes relevant. Duranti (1997) explains that language is not only a means of communication but also a means of social action that reflects values, identities, and social relations within a society. He developed three main concepts, namely *indexicality* (the connection between speech and social and cultural context), *performance* (the functional role of speech in a specific context), and *participant* (the role of individuals in the process of communication and social interaction). These three concepts are important analytical tools for understanding how language transformation occurs in the context of rituals in the digital age.

The phenomenon of digitalization has caused a shift in the meaning and function of language in the *Nika Ro Neku* ritual. The ritual, which was once exclusive and conducted physically, can now be accessed by a wide audience through videos and social media. This raises questions about how ritual language transforms in the digital context, as well as how the roles of ritual participants (both those present in person and virtually) undergo changes. This study aims to address this gap by analyzing the form and role of language in the digitally documented *Nika Ro Neku* ritual, using Duranti's theory as a conceptual framework. This research also responds to Androutsopoulos' (2014) view that in the digital age, cultural communication practices undergo re-articulation through the process of 'digital textscaping', which is the reinterpretation of texts and cultural practices in online media.

Therefore, this study not only contributes to the understanding of cultural preservation in the digital age but also expands the scope of anthropological linguistic analysis of local cultural dynamics in the global ecosystem. The *Nika Ro Neku* traditional marriage ritual is one of the cultural heritages of the Bima community, rich in symbolic, social, and spiritual meanings. In the digital age, this ritual is documented and disseminated through online media, causing changes in its linguistic practices and structures. Social media, video recordings, and online communication have led to changes in speech structures, the roles of participants, and the social meanings they convey. This study aims to analyze the transformation of language and the roles of participants in the ritual, using Alessandro Duranti's anthropological linguistic approach, particularly the concepts of *indexicality*, *performance*, and *participant*.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach was chosen because it is in line with the research objective of understanding the meaning and transformation of language in a cultural context in a deep and contextual manner. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative methods are suitable for exploring symbolic meanings, social roles, and complex cultural practices, such as traditional rituals. The data in this study is qualitative in nature, consisting of speech, ritual actions, and digital documentation, which are analyzed based on social and cultural contexts. This study also applies Duranti's (1997) anthropological linguistic theoretical framework, which emphasizes the importance of viewing language in its social function through three main dimensions: *indexicality* (the relationship between speech and social context), *performativity* (speech as action), and *participation* (the role of actors in speech events). This framework allows researchers to analyze not only the content of speech in the *Nika Ro Neku* ritual, but also how speech constructs social relationships and community identity, as well as how changes in media impact the structure and meaning of these interactions. This research is a mini-ethnography that observes changes in ritual practices through digital media, including how social media functions as a new space for the symbolic and performative expression of local culture. Data validity is strengthened through triangulation between video documentation sources, in-depth interviews, and digital observation notes. Data was collected through video documentation of the *Nika Ro Neku* ritual on social media of YouTube, online observation of the virtual ceremony process, and interviews with traditional elders, the bride and groom's families, and the younger generation of Bima.

Respondents

The respondents in this study consisted of five people, they are two traditional elders, one parent of the bride, and two young participants who documented the ritual digitally. Respondents were selected purposively, taking into account their direct involvement in the implementation and documentation of the *Nika Ro Neku* ritual. Traditional elders were selected because they had in-depth knowledge of the structure and meaning of traditional speech. The parents of the bride and groom provided perspectives on contemporary practices and values that are still upheld. Meanwhile, the young participants involved in digital documentation provided important information regarding media transformation and how they represent the ritual through social media. This approach aligns with qualitative research strategies emphasizing depth of understanding within the socio-cultural context (Patton, 2015). The involvement of respondents across generations enables researchers to observe differences in perception and the dynamics of language and social role changes within the ritual, from both the perspective of traditional practitioners and younger generations adopting digital practices.

Instruments

The primary research instruments are semi-structured interview guidelines, field observation notes, and video transcripts of rituals from YouTube. The interview guidelines are designed to explore symbolic meanings, perceptions of ritual transformation, and respondents' direct experiences in performing rituals both traditionally and digitally. Interviews were conducted online using Zoom and WhatsApp Call applications. Observation notes were used to record the visual context, gestures, ritual sequence, and linguistic and non-linguistic expressions in digital documentation. Meanwhile, video transcripts taken from YouTube were used as primary data for linguistic and semiotic analysis. All these instruments were designed to accommodate Duranti's analytical framework, which emphasizes the relationship between language, social action, and cultural context.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection procedures in this study were carried out through three main stages that were systematically arranged to comprehensively describe the dynamics of language change and social roles in the *Nika Ro Neku* ritual:

1. Digital Content Observation

Researchers observed videos of the *Nika Ro Neku* ritual uploaded on YouTube. The observation focused on verbal and non-verbal aspects recorded in the videos, such as traditional speech, facial expressions, body gestures, and other visual elements that indicate the social and cultural context. This approach follows the virtual ethnography model (Pink et al., 2016), which emphasizes the importance of reading cultural practices through digital representations.

2. Online Interviews

Interviews were conducted online via Zoom and WhatsApp Call with five key informants. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing flexibility in exploring respondents' experiences and perceptions of ritual change. Data from the interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis using Duranti's framework, particularly regarding the dimensions of participation and performativity.

3. Documentation and Transcription of Traditional Discourse

Traditional discourse in the videos was documented and transcribed into text, then translated into English. Each quote was then analyzed semantically and pragmatically to identify indexical and performative elements, as well as participant involvement in the discourse structure.

Through a combination of these three methods, the research seeks to achieve strong data triangulation and deep interpretive validity regarding the transformation of ritual language in digital spaces which uploaded to YouTube. Online interviews via Zoom with cultural practitioners and families involved in the rituals. And also documentation and transcription of traditional speech quotations from the video.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using Alessandro Duranti's (1997) theoretical framework, which consists of three dimensions: *indexicality*, *performance*, and *participant*. These three aspects were used to interpret linguistic and social data in the context of the *Nika Ro Neku* ritual. First, the analysis was conducted on traditional utterances collected from video documentation. Each utterance was analyzed semantically to identify its literal and cultural meanings, as well as pragmatically to examine the social function and communicative purpose of the utterance. Indexicality is analyzed by tracing the relationship between the utterance and the social context, such as who is speaking, to whom, and in what situation. Second, the performative dimension of the utterance is examined to see how it functions as a social action, such as a prayer, a blessing, or a sign of social acceptance. This is important to see how these functions change when transferred to digital media. Third, participant analysis is conducted to understand the changing social roles between direct ritual participants (such as traditional elders and the bride and groom's families) and new participants in the form of online viewers or young people who are active in digital documentation. Researcher observes shift in the dynamics of interaction in online communication, which reveal new forms of social participation.

The analysis process was conducted using a thematic method that identified patterns of meaning, value, and role in the data. This procedure also involved triangulation techniques between data sources, namely video, interviews, and observation notes, to ensure the validity of the findings. With this approach, data is not only read as linguistic text but also as a social practice that continues to evolve in the context of cultural change due to digitalization, encompassing three dimensions: *indexicality*, *performance*, and *participant*. Data is interpreted to examine changes in the form and meaning of speech in the digital context.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Finding 1

(Research Question 1 - How has the form of language in *Nika Ro Neku* undergone transformation?): The traditional language, rich in symbols and formal structures, has been simplified in the form of captions and digital visual narratives. For example, traditional expressions have been replaced with generic phrases like "Welcome to our family." This indicates a shift in linguistic form toward greater inclusivity and universality, but at the cost of losing local contextual depth (indexicality).

Finding 2

(Research Question 2 - How has the social role of participants in rituals changed?): Rituals that once only involved physical participants such as elders and the bride and groom's families are now expanded to include online viewers. There is a shift in authority: the younger generation takes over the narrative through social media, while the role of traditional elders tends to be symbolic if not digitally present. Digitalization causes a shift in the function of social markers in ritual language, transforming the performative dimension into visual content, and expanding the role of participants from the local community to a global audience.

The following table shows traditional and digital aspects grouped according to the source of YouTube videos from the *Dompu Culture Package in Ndiha ro Ndano Nika ro Neku*.

No	Aspect	Traditional	Digital Era
1	Language form	Traditional expressions with cultural metaphors	Captions, short videos, emojis
2	Participants	Traditional elders, bride and groom, family	Younger generation, online audience
3	Performative Function	Prayers, blessings, social affirmation	Digital content, visual symbols

Analysis of Traditional Speech

The following is an analysis of traditional speech excerpts in the *Nika Ro Neku* ritual based on Duranti's theory:

No	Quotes & Translations	Indexicality	Performance	Participant
1	"Kiri mai mu ita doho kaso" May all of us have a good life.	Showing the sacred atmosphere of the opening ritual.	Acting as a collective prayer.	The host gave his blessing to all participants.
2	"Mawa'u poda ja ra mai tio rasa la mada doho" Those who have come to see our village.	Indexing arrivals and social relations.	Establishing connections and welcoming guests.	Guests as respected observers.
3	"Ma da patu ra aka" This is not good (to put it simply).	Signifying humility.	A symbol of respect for guests.	The host expresses his modesty.
4	"Tonda weamu nganton" Please stand to the side.	Position as a social index.	Welcome speech. A respectful welcome.	Guests receive permission and respect.
5	"Doho kaimu wohan" You guys sit in the middle.	The center position symbolizes honor.	Community identity markers.	Guests become the center of social relations.
6	"Nge'e mori la mada doho di wohu fu'u jago" We live in the middle of cornfields.	Showing location and connection to nature.	Declares sacred space.	Hosts introduce their identity.
7	"Dei wombo kancale hala" Under the hala tree.	Sacred nature index.	An invitation to understand noble values.	The host conveys symbolic origins.
8	"Uma ra salaja..., donga si buntu nakalau langi, dodo si sari nakalau dana" Our house, the roof looks like the sky, the floor looks like the ground.	Simplicity and spiritual connection.	Collectively confirming blessings.	The honest host explains the social situation.
9	"Kiri mai mu ita doho kaso" May all of us have a good life.	Repetition as an emphasis on the value of prayer.	A poetic prayer for a peaceful household.	All participants in the spiritual space.
10	"Usi ro kasiapu..., neo ro kabapu marada wono"	The value of beauty and purity in marriage.	A poetic invocation for a harmonious and tranquil household	The speaker gives his blessing to the bride and groom.

Clearer than water, smoother
than oil, finer than clay.

DISCUSSION

The explanation in the table above shows how the structure of speech in the *Nika Ro Neku* ritual functions not only as a means of communication, but also as a complex social and cultural instrument. From Duranti's perspective (1997), each utterance is closely related to the social context (indexicality), and it is a performative act (performance), and reflects involvement and the structure of participation in the community (participant). The results of the analysis of each quote based on Duranti's three main categories of theory, namely *indexicality*, *performance*, and *participant* and it represented in the speech ritual of *Nika ro Neku*.

The utterance "Kiri mai mu ita doho kaso" is most often repeated in rituals. Indexically, it indicated the collective moment of opening or closing prayers. Its performativity was very high because its main function was to convey good wishes to all attendees. The active participants in this statement were all members of the community. This statement served as a marker of solidarity and shared hope.

The statement "Mawa'u poda ja ra mai tio rasa la mada doho" indexes the social status of guests as honored parties who were present to witness the community. Its performance affirmed the guest's position as an important element in social recognition. The main participants were the host and the guest, where the utterance served to build closeness and recognition.

"Ma da patu ra aka" showed the humility of the host. Performatively, it was an expression of politeness that strengthens the relational ethics between the host and the guest. The main participants were the speakers (hosts) who symbolically conveyed their social position.

The utterance "Tonda weamu nganton" granted physical and symbolic permission to guests to occupy a certain space. Indexically, it symbolized social inclusion. Performatively, it expressed acceptance and honor. The participants were the guests who are given the right to join the ceremonial space.

"Doho kaimu wohan" means sitting in the centre had symbolic meaning as the recipient of the highest honor. This was an example of strong performativity, as this utterance created a social reality in which the guest became the centre of attention and appreciation. Indexicality was very prominent because the seating position indexes social status and acceptance.

The utterance "Nge'e mori la mada doho di woha fu'u jago" displayed local identity and connection to nature. Its performativity was present in the function of self-introduction and affirmation of community identity. Indexicality was shown through the symbolic location of residence.

"Dei wombo kancale hala" marked presence in a natural sacred space. Performativity emerged as a way of expressing the spiritual value of the living environment. The participants were a community that was one with nature.

The utterance "Uma ra salaja..., donga si buntu nakalau langi, dodo si sari nakalau dana" expressed the spiritual connection between heaven and earth. It was a symbolic representation of traditional values. Its performativity was very high as an invitation to understand the simplicity and grandeur of life. Indexicality was present in the image of the traditional house as a metaphor for life.

The utterance "Kiri mai mu ita doho kaso" was repetition. This repetition showed the importance of consistency in spiritual values in rituals. This utterance reinforced collective values and became a unifying tool in ceremonies.

The poetic utterance "Usi ro kasiapu..., neo ro kabapu marada wono" contained metaphors of the beauty and harmony of marriage. Indexicality pointed to the ideal quality of the relationship. Its performativity was present as a form of aesthetic blessing. The participants were the speakers, the bride and groom.

From these ten quotations, it could be concluded that the aspect of performance was the most dominant dimension in the practice of *Nika Ro Neku* ritual speech. This was because almost all speech not only conveyed information, but also performed real social actions, namely giving blessings, welcoming, confirming social status, and building community identity. The dominance of performativity indicated that ritual language was not merely communication but also an action that created and reinforced social order.

In the digital context, some utterances had undergone reinterpretation. For example, expressions such as "Doho kaimu wohan" or "Sit in the middle" which previously signified physical honor in the ritual space were now represented visually in video content such as the placement of central figures on the screen or symbolic shots. This showed how digital media had become a new space for social indices.

Digitalization had brought significant changes to how linguistic performance was mediated and understood in the context of digital culture. According to Jones (2020), this shift creates a new form of visual semiotics that emphasizes the body, facial expressions, and visual appearance as important elements in online communication. In the digital space, speech no longer relies solely on verbal aspects but is constructed

multimodally through images, movement, and deliberately curated visual design. Thus, digitalization shifts the performativity of speech toward a more visual and interactive realm, where identity and meaning are not only conveyed through words but also through how and to whom the speech is visually presented.

The role of participants had also shift from traditional actors who act directly to content producers and global audiences who engage virtually. This transformation also indicate the occurrence of a 'recontextualization' process (Bauman & Briggs, 1990) in cultural practices that expand audience boundaries and renew the social functions of ritual language.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of language and social roles in the *Nika Ro Neku* ritual demonstrated that digital media did not eliminate cultural value but shifts its representation into new forms that still carried social meaning. Based on an analysis of ten speech excerpts, it was found that the performative dimension was the most dominant aspect, it was indicating that language in rituals functions as a social action that builds solidarity, respect, and cultural legitimacy. Indexicality continued to play a role in marking social context and power relations, while the structure of participation had undergone significant changed due to the involvement of younger generations and online audiences. In this context, digital documentation opens up broader opportunities for cultural preservation, but at the same time challenges the authenticity of interactions and meanings. Therefore, cultural preservation not only needs to maintain verbal and symbolic forms, but also understand the dynamics of participation and performance in the ever-evolving digital space.

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