

Ethnography of Communication in the Suluk Tradition in Kubu Gadang, West Payakumbuh

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the communication process within the Suluk tradition in Kubu Gadang, West Payakumbuh, using Dell Hymes' Dell Hymes Ethnography of Communication approach. This research employed a qualitative method with an ethnographic approach through observation and in-depth interviews involving five informants and one triangulator, consisting of mursyid, khalifah, and salik. The findings reveal that communication in the Suluk tradition is systematically regulated to maintain participants' spiritual concentration during the worship process. Communication occurs through verbal forms, such as dzikir, tawajuh, and spiritual instructions delivered by the mursyid, as well as non-verbal symbols, including the use of khalwat isolation tents, tasbih, and stones as counting tools. In addition, strict norms such as limiting speech, eye contact, and social interaction function as important non-verbal communication elements. These communication patterns collectively support the spiritual objectives of Suluk, particularly in strengthening self-discipline, inner focus, and closeness to Allah.

Keywords: Dell Hymes; Ethnography of Communication; Naqsyabandiyah Order; Spiritual Communication; Suluk Tradition.

1. Introduction

The Suluk tradition is one of the most crucial forms of spiritual practice in the tarekat, especially the Naqsyabandiyah tarekat, which aims to purify the soul in order to get closer to Allah SWT. Etymologically, the term "suluk" refers to an inner journey or method of attaining closeness to God through a series of activities designed to cleanse the soul of despicable qualities and replace them with praiseworthy ones. In practice, Suluk involves intensive spiritual activities such as dhikr, sunnah fasting, and self-reflection under the guidance of a mursyid or tarekat teacher. The figure of the mursyid not only provides ritual direction, but also becomes an example of morality that determines the success of the spiritual journey of the disciples (salik).

In the Minangkabau region, the Suluk tradition has strong roots historically and socioculturally, especially through the role of the surau as a center for spiritual training. One of the institutions that until now has consistently preserved this tradition is Surau Kapalo Bonda in Kubu Gadang Village, West Payakumbuh District, which organizes routine Suluk activities every Ramadan. The practice of Suluk in Minangkabau is seen as a strategy for community adaptation in maintaining religious identity in the midst of modernization, as well as serving as a "spiritual fortress" that maintains a balance between worldly and ukhrawi life. Although Suluk is often seen as a mere religious ritual, substantively Suluk is a space of social interaction that is full of communication processes, both verbal and nonverbal.

Communication in Suluk is not just an exchange of information, but a way for the salik to interact with God and others through symbolic actions and deep dhikr. The ethnography of communication, as put forward by Dell Hymes, provides an appropriate framework for analyzing this phenomenon by looking at language and interaction in specific cultural contexts (Saville-Troike, 2003). Communication in Suluk includes a wide range of nonverbal aspects,

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such as solemnity, self-control, and inner contact, which are the main instruments in getting closer to the creator.

This study uses a communication ethnographic approach with the SPEAKING (Setting, Participants, Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, Genres) model from Dell Hymes to dissect the Suluk tradition in Kubu Gadang Village. This model allows for an in-depth analysis of the elements of ritual communication, from the situation of speech in the surau to the sequence of actions in each spiritual stage.

The main focus of the research is to understand how each stage of the Suluk ritual includes not only the spiritual dimension, but also the interaction between individuals that strengthens solidarity and collective identity within the community of the tarekat. Through the ethnographic lens of communication, the Suluk tradition can be understood as a holistic communication system, in which verbal and nonverbal codes are intertwined to create a deep spiritual meaning. Thus, this research is expected to contribute to the study of cultural communication by expanding the application of communication ethnographic theory in the realm of Islamic spirituality (Hariyanto & Dharma, 2020). In addition, this study aims to provide clearer insights for the wider community regarding the important role of communication in shaping spiritual experiences and maintaining the sustainability of religious cultural heritage in Minangkabau.

2. Literature review

Communication Ethnography

The ethnography of communication, developed by Dell Hymes, is a sociolinguistic approach used to understand how communication takes place in a particular social and cultural context. This approach departs from the assumption that the understanding of a language cannot be separated from how and why it is used by its people. Hymes argues that communication is not only limited to verbal behavior (information exchange), but also includes non-verbal, symbolic, customs, norms, and religions that exist within a group.

In examining the communication behavior of a tradition, Hymes proposes three units of interaction that are hierarchically interrelated: communicative situations (space/time context), communicative events (basic units of interaction), and communicative actions (specific actions such as prayer or dhikr).

To comprehensively dissect communicative events, Dell Hymes formulated an analysis model known as the acronym SPEAKING. This model is used to map the cultural elements that influence the communication process:

1. S - Setting and Scene: Setting refers to the specific space and time where communication takes place, while scene refers to the psychological or cultural atmosphere of the event. In the context of ritual, this includes the physical location (such as the surau) and the sacred atmosphere that surrounds it.
2. P - Participants: The parties involved in the communication process, along with their roles, social status, and relationships. In religious traditions, these participants must have a harmonious spiritual understanding, such as the roles of teachers (mursyid), assistants (caliphs), and disciples (salik).
3. E - Ends: Refers to the expected outcomes and personal goals of the participants (goals) of the communication event. The message conveyed is often conscriptive and centered on the attainment of spiritual closeness.
4. A - Act Sequence: Refers to the form of the message and the content of the message, as well as how the sequence of stages of communication is carried out. This includes a sequence of rituals that participants must go through step by step.
5. K - Key: Indicates the tone, manner, or spirit in which a message is delivered. In rituals such as suluk, the tone of communication is governed by purity of intention, solemnity, and full concentration.
6. I - Instrumentalities: Channels or channels of communication used, both oral, written, or nonverbal and symbolic forms.
7. N - Norms: Includes interaction norms (rules about how to communicate) and interpretive norms (how messages should be interpreted by the culture). This rule limits the behavior of the participants to avoid things that can interfere with concentration.
8. G - Genres: Categories or types of communication events themselves, such as prayers, dhikr, admonitions, or myths.

Through the lens of the SPEAKING model, communication ethnography helps analyze how these verbal and nonverbal elements are holistically assembled, connecting ritual, social, and cultural aspects in a spiritual context. Thus, rituals are understood not only as physical activities, but as a space of social communication that strengthens community relationships.

Communication Across Cultures and Traditions

Cross-Cultural Communication refers to the process of exchanging information, ideas, and values between individuals or groups who come from different cultural backgrounds. This form of communication not only relies on the understanding of verbal language, but also relies heavily on mastering social norms, values, and applicable cultural codes. In the context of the Suluk tradition, cross-cultural communication plays a fundamental role as a bridge of understanding. The practice of tarekat and spiritual rituals often feels foreign to the general public who are not directly involved in them. Therefore, cross-cultural communication here serves to translate the spiritual and social values in the Suluk ritual so that it can be understood by the wider community, thereby minimizing misconceptions, confusion, and doubts about religious authority.

Tradition, on the other hand, is a form of cultural communication that is passed down from generation to generation in a social and ritual context. As a product of culture, tradition acts as a medium that connects the identity of the past with the present. In the study of intercultural communication, tradition is an essential element that forms the framework of a common understanding of the messages exchanged. The practices within a tradition often not only convey the message explicitly (denotative), but also conceal a deep ideological and emotional meaning (connotative) that is generally understood only in its entirety by the community of adherents.

The integration between cross-cultural communication and tradition is very evident in the Suluk ritual. Practices such as congregational dhikr, self-seclusion (khalwat), obedience to mursyid, and inner reflection are not only considered as vertical worship, but also as forms of nonverbal communication that transmit social values horizontally. Understanding traditions correctly is crucial in cross-cultural communication to avoid misunderstandings (semantic and cultural barriers). Therefore, every ritual practice in Suluk must be placed and understood based on the cultural and spiritual context of the local community, so that its sacred meaning is maintained and can be appreciated by outsiders.

Suluk and the Naqshbandiyah Order

Sufism is a spiritual dimension in Islam that focuses on purifying the soul (tazkiyatun nafs) and strengthening morals to achieve closeness to Allah. The essential purpose of Sufism is to obtain ma'rifah, which is direct knowledge and knowledge of Allah through a series of self-control (mujahadah), dhikr, and other inner practices.

As one of the paths (thariqah) in Sufism, the Naqshbandiyah Tarekat founded by Sheikh Bahauddin Naqsyaband in the 14th century became one of the largest and most influential Sufi institutes. This order centers on the practice of dhikr, meditation, and intensive spiritual guidance under a mursyid (spiritual teacher). In contrast to some Sufi schools that advocate total seclusion from the world, the Naqshbandiyah Order has a distinctive feature that emphasizes balance; practitioners are taught to remain actively involved in social and secular life, but with a heart that is constantly oriented to God.

Suluk is a fundamental stage in the Naqshbandiyah Order. Conceptually, suluk is a spiritual journey that involves intensive spiritual learning and practice to purify the heart from worldly desires and ambitions. The ultimate goal is to attain fana fi Allah, a spiritual state in which a salik (spiritual pathologist) loses his ego and is fully immersed in the consciousness of God's presence.

In practice, the journey of suluk must be guided by a mursyid so that the salik does not get lost mentally. The main practices include khalwat (physical seclusion to worship), fasting, tawajjuh (focusing one's heart completely on Allah), and the most core is dhikr that is constantly repeated—such as *La ilaha illallah*—as the main means of emptying and purifying the soul. Thus, suluk is more than just an external ritual, but a process of transformation and a deep internal journey.

3. Proposed Method

Data Types and Sources

This research is a qualitative research based on a constructivist paradigm. This paradigm was chosen because it focuses on the understanding of individuals in constructing the meaning of their experiences in a particular social and cultural context. The specific approach applied is communication ethnography, which aims to explore and understand how communication (both verbal and non-verbal) takes place in the practice of the suluk tradition.

The types of data in this study are divided into primary and secondary data. Primary data is obtained directly from the field through two main techniques:

1. Non-participatory observation: The researcher observed and recorded the phenomenon of interaction between participants and teachers in depth in the natural context of the location of the suluk tradition, without participating in or directly involved in the ritual.
2. In-depth interview: Conducted to explore subjective views and more personal information from individuals who have direct experience related to message delivery, spiritual meaning, and inner communication during the suluk procession.

Meanwhile, secondary data is collected through document analysis techniques. The documents analyzed include relevant records, spiritual manuscripts, or literature that provide additional understanding of the historical, philosophical, and cultural contexts underlying the practice of communication in the tradition.

Informants and Research Setting

The unit of analysis that is the focus of this study includes the individual level (teachers and participants of the suluk) as well as verbal and non-verbal communication that occurs during the procession of the suluk tradition.

The research subjects were selected using the purposive sampling technique, which is the deliberate selection of informants based on their knowledge, in-depth experience, and direct involvement in the phenomenon being studied. The informant in this study is located at Surau Kapalo Bonda, Kubu Gadang Village, West Payakumbuh District. In total, there were five main informants and one triangulator participating, with the following division of roles:

1. Mursyid (Guru): As a spiritual leader who directs rituals and provides an understanding of spiritual meaning to the participants.
2. Caliph (Assistant Teacher): As an intermediary in daily communication and the technical person in charge of the participants during the exile of the Suluk.
3. Salik (Suluk Participant): As a party who internalizes and directly experiences the process of spiritual communication during rituals.

Table 1. Informant Data

Yes	Name	Age	Gender	Jobs	Remarks
1.	Mr. H. Zukni Andrianto, S.Ud	50 Years	Male	Merchant	Guru (Mursyid)
2.	Mr. Proverbs Noer	57 Years	Male	Self-employed	Teacher's Assistant/ Assistant
3.	Father Anggi Putra	36 Years	Male	Self-employed	Jama'ah Suluk (Salik)
4.	Pure Ibuk	70 Years	Women	Housewives	Jama'ah Suluk (Salik)
5.	Mr. Raidil	72 Years	Male	Merchant	Jama'ah Suluk (Salik)
6.	Buya Riswandi	70 Years	Male	Chairman of the Payakumbuh City and Regency Tarekat, Fifty Cities	Triangulator

Data Analysis and Validity

The data analysis technique in this communication ethnography approach is carried out inductively, starting from raw data to then look for patterns or themes that appear. This analysis process goes through three stages of coding:

1. Open coding: Examining interview transcripts and observation notes to find relevant units of meaning, then coding them.
2. Axial coding: Groups already coded data into larger themes or categories to see the relationships between themes.
3. Selective coding: Compile core themes and connect them with research objectives to form a comprehensive narrative about the function of verbal and non-verbal communication in strengthening inter-religious community relationships.

To ensure the validity of the data, the researcher used three testing techniques:

1. Source Triangulation: Comparing data collected from different sources, such as comparing the statements of the Murshids, Caliphs, and the Saliks.
2. Triangulation Technique: Comparing data obtained through in-depth interview methods with data from direct observation in the field.
3. Member Checking: The researcher confirms and re-verifies the findings or interpretation of the data to the participants to ensure its accuracy is in line with their experience.

4. Results and Discussion

. This study examines the practice of the suluk tradition in Surau Kapalo Bonda, Kubu Gadang Village, West Payakumbuh District. Based on in-depth interview data with Mursyid, Khalifah, and Salik, as well as triangulation of sources, communication activities in the suluk tradition were analyzed using the eight components of communication ethnography (SPEAKING) from Dell Hymes.

Results of Communication Ethnographic Analysis (SPEAKING Model. Setting and Scene

The implementation of suluk takes place in a special room (*physical setting*), namely surau. At Surau Kapalo Bonda, intensive implementation is carried out during the holy month of Ramadan. The duration of the implementation ranges from 10, 20, 30, to 40 days (for beginners only). Psychologically (*scene*), the atmosphere that was built was very sacred, silent, and private. Each *salik* (participant) occupies a *kebalwat* or mosquito net made of white cloth measuring about 80 cm x 200 cm. *This kebalwat* is symbolically likened to a narrow "graveyard" to cut off the sense of sight from external interference, thus creating an atmosphere of total isolation from the worldly.

Participants

Communication in the Shuluk tradition has a strict hierarchical structure but is based on spiritual bonds. There are three main actors:

1. Mursyid (Guru): The supreme spiritual leader who gives diplomas, guides the direction of dhikr, and monitors the spiritual condition of the participants.
2. Caliph (Assistant/Mediator): Acts as a bridge of communication between *Salik* and the outside world (including family) and with *Mursyid*. *The caliph* is also responsible for the logistical needs (food/beverages) of the participants.
3. Salik (Student/Participant): An individual who walks a spiritual path. They renounced their worldly social status and submitted to the rules of the suffrage movement. Direct interaction between crosses is severely restricted.

Ends

The main purpose (meaning) of the entire series of communication events in the suluk is summarized in the philosophy "*Ilāhī anta maqṣūdī wa riḍāka maṭlūbī*" (O Allah, You are what I mean and Your pleasure is what I seek). Specifically, this ritual communication aims to perform *tazkiyatun nafs* (cleansing of the soul), practice manners towards oneself, teachers, and Allah, and achieve *fana fi Allah* (fusion of the ego into divine consciousness).

Act Sequence

The flow of communication and rituals is systematically arranged to maintain a spiritual rhythm:

1. Preparation Phase: Inauguration, eating with family and community leaders as a form of social communication (notification).

2. Cleansing Phase: Perform repentance baths and repentance prayers before entering *khalwat*.
3. Core Phase (Transcendental): *Ambiak Kaji* or *Manambah Kaji* (direction of dhikr targets from *Murysid* every 10 days) and *Tawajub* activities (inner communication between teachers and students that is carried out three times a day: after Fajr, Zuhur, and Isha/Tarawih).
4. Continuous Activity: Dhikr continuously in *khalwat*.

Key (Tone/Delivery Method)

The key or tone of communication in suluk is seriousness, silence, and solemnity. The main rule is to minimize *qoul* (verbal speech). There are strict rules to restrain the lust for speech, where a *salik* is limited to a maximum of seven sentences a day if there is no emergency. The tone of speech when communicating with the *caliph* is also done slowly, briefly, and as necessary.

Instrumentalities (Instruments/Tools)

Suluk is very rich in the use of non-verbal instruments that function as a medium to form obedience:

1. Prayer Beads and Stones: Serves as a medium for recording the traces of communication with God. One stone represents a certain number of dhikr (e.g. 100 or 1,000) to help the *memory of the salik* without impairing concentration.
2. Turban and Mukena (Telekung): Pulled to partially cover the face when exiting the *khalwat* to limit eye view, preventing the entry of visual stimuli that can trigger worldly thoughts.
3. Lights Turned Off: During the *Tawajub session*, physical darkness is used as an instrument so that *the salik* can distinguish the light of the lamp from *the divine Nur* (light) in *the qalbu*.

Norms

There are manners ("21 adab suluk") that govern every gesture of *salik*, including:

1. Physical Norms: Maintain ablution for 24 hours. If it is canceled, it is mandatory to take a repentance bath/repentance prayer. The sleeping position is regulated according to the sunnah (tilted to the right) and it is forbidden to protrude your feet towards the qibla.
2. Consumption Norms: Food is strictly measured to prevent satiety that triggers drowsiness. The cook (*tanak*) is obliged to cook in a holy state (ablution), and the menu avoids the element of blood or meat.

Genres (Types of Communication)

The main form of communication is not interpersonal conversation, but transcendental/spiritual communication (through dhikr and utterance) and intrapersonal communication (self-reflection in *khalwat*). Interpersonal communication (instructional genre) is strictly limited only between *Salik* and *the Caliph*, or *Murysid* during *Ambiak Kaji*.

Discussion: Verbal Reduction and Symbolic Meaning

The results of *the SPEAKING* analysis show an interesting finding in the ethnographic study of communication: the suluk tradition actually practices "deconstruction of social communication" in order to build a "construction of spiritual communication". When communication between humans generally relies on intense verbal interaction, suluk deliberately reduces it to a minimum.

Silence as the Highest Communicative Act

In the context of the Minangkabau community, which generally has a strong oral speaking culture, the rule of prohibition of speaking (maximum 7 sentences) in suluk is a form of antithesis of everyday culture. Based on the perspective of non-verbal communication (Mulyana, 2014), silence is not the absence of communication, but the form of the message itself. Silence in suluk is a conscious attempt to suppress the ego and lust. By closing the door of interaction with fellow creatures, the *salik* opened their wide frequency channels to communicate with *the Khaliq*.

Phase of Liminality in Khalwat Space

The use of instruments such as *khalwat* (a narrow white mosquito net resembling a grave), a view covering dress, and a bath of repentance can be analyzed using the concept of *Liminality* from anthropologist Victor Turner (1969). The *salik* are in a state of *betwixt and between*; they give up their earthly attributes and status (symbolic death) to enter the spiritual

womb. Physical restrictions (no straightening of the legs, sleeping little, eating strictly controlled) is a non-verbal language that disciplines the physical body so that the spiritual body can take full control.

High-Context Communication

The suluk tradition is a perfect example of *High-Context Culture* as stated by Edward T. Hall (1976). In the surau, very few words are spoken explicitly. Meaning does not lie in words, but in a mutually agreed upon inner understanding. The inner connection during *the Tawajub* session, where *Mursyid* can feel whether a student's dhikr is "connected" or interrupted without the need to ask verbal questions, proves the synchronization of mental frequencies between participants.

The Role of the Caliph as the "Gatekeeper" of Communication

Structurally, the existence of the *Caliph* is vital to maintain the sterility of communication. In communication science, *the Caliph* acts as an absolute *gatekeeper* who selects messages, food, and interactions from the outside so as not to pollute *the focus of the salik*. This proves that even though it is isolated, the suluk system still has a very rational information management structure to protect its irrational/spiritual goals.

5. Comparison

. Comparison with previous research (state-of-the-art) shows the contribution and novelty of this research in the realm of communication ethnographic studies. Most previous communication ethnographic research has tended to highlight how verbal and non-verbal interactions are used to facilitate social integration, harmony, and intercultural communication in public spaces. For example, the research of Handayani (2021) and Permata (2024) focuses on how communication bridges ethnic differences in the context of trade and communal traditions (Circumcision Security) to create social cohesion. Instead, this study finds a unique anomaly in the Sukuk tradition: interpersonal communication is deliberately reduced, isolated, and strictly restricted (seclusion within *khalwat*) precisely to achieve the higher goal of communication, namely transcendental communication between the servant and his God.

Furthermore, when compared to the study of non-verbal symbols by Riskania (2023) on the *Mappadandang* (harvest festival) tradition which is communal, extroverted, and celebratory, the non-verbal symbols in the Suluk tradition are very esoteric and introverted. The use of instruments such as *khalwat mosquito* nets, dhikr counting stones, and turban blindfolds is not a tool to convey messages to other human beings, but rather an instrument to "block" worldly distractions to discipline oneself (*tazkiyatun nafs*).

In the context of religious education communication, Devinaris (2024) found that communication between Kyai and Santri is very loaded with verbal instructions, advice, and commands. However, in the Sukuk tradition, verbal instruction is greatly minimized. The relationship between *Mursyid* and *Salik* relies more on the synchronization of mental frequencies through *Tawajub*, where understanding is achieved without having to be spoken.

Overall, this comparison proves that this study expands the discourse and application of Dell Hymes' SPEAKING theory. This study confirms that in the context of Sufistic rituals, the absence of verbal interaction (silence) and physical isolation is not a "communication failure", but rather a highly meaningful communicative act to achieve spiritual enlightenment.

6. Conclusions

Based on the ethnographic analysis of communication using the SPEAKING from Dell Hymes, this study concludes that the Suluk tradition in Surau Kapalo Bonda, Kubu Gadang Village, is not just a series of passive religious rituals, but a space of interaction governed by a very strict and structured spiritual communication system. In this tradition, the most preferred forms of communication are non-verbal, intrapersonal, and transcendental communication, while earthly interpersonal communication is suppressed to a minimum.

The use of isolated spaces (*settings*) such as *khalwat*, as well as specific instruments such as stones, prayer beads, and head coverings, serve as a symbolic medium of communication to break worldly interactions and strengthen the inner connection with Allah. The strict norms that limit speech (a maximum of seven sentences) and maintain bodily purity (ablution) paradoxically form solidarity and uniformity of spiritual understanding among the *saliks*, which is facilitated by the role of *the Mursyid* as the inner guide and *the Caliph* as the *gatekeeper* of empirical information.

In the end, the Suluk tradition is a tangible manifestation of the ethnography of *high-context* communication, in which silence, physical discipline, and absolute adherence to ritual norms become the most basic language for attaining *the mortality of Allah*. This research is expected to provide enlightenment for the wider community in understanding the meaning behind the rituals of the tarekat which are often considered foreign. By understanding that seclusion and silence in Suluk are a form of communication and cleansing of the soul, people's misconceptions and doubts about this spiritual practice can be minimized.

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