

## Denotation and Connotation of Mandau, A Weapon of Kanayatn Dayak Tribe in West Kalimantan

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### ABSTRACT

*The culture and the cultural product itself that develop in today's society cannot be separated from the recognition and agreement of some community groups, the philosophical values, or the natural signs that are embedded in everyday life, or usually called myths. One of them is Mandau, a weapon of the Kanayatn Dayak tribe, in Sebetuk village, Ngabang sub-district, Landak district, West Kalimantan. The Mandau is a weapon owned by the Kanayatn Dayak people and is often used for many purposes such as cutting the grass, chopping the wood, cutting the meat from hunted animals, protecting themselves from wild animals, conducting traditional rituals and as weapons of war. This Mandau is differentiated into two categories, the one that has sacred value and another one that does not. In this study, the object of research was the one with a sacred value. The Mandau that developed in the Kanayatn Dayak community has its own a message and meaning. The denotation and connotation of the Mandau were discussed in this study based on semiotic of Roland Barthes's thought. By employing a qualitative approach, the fine art elements of the Mandau such as the decorative motifs, colors, and shapes became the main discussion. Each of them has its own meaning and thus it is trusted by the local community.*

**Keywords:** *Mandau, Dayak Kanayatn, Denotation, Connotation, Semiotic.*

## INTRODUCTION

The diversity of a cultural product is formed by human development and that receives a recognition by the local community. Indonesia, a country that has various cultural diversity, ranging from language, customs, arts such as traditional music, dance, drama and fine art is set as the example. This diversity is part of the culture embodied by the community, with social views that develop in their lives. Culture and the cultural products that develop in a society cannot be separated from the recognition and agreement of some community groups, philosophical values, or natural signs that are embodied in everyday life, or usually called myths. There are many cultural products that exist in Indonesia. One of which is a work of art made by Kalimantan people, namely Mandau. A Mandau, used by the Dayak community for weapons, has messages that are considered sacred by the community. This weapon also has myths that are associated with the locals' lives. They are in the form of oral stories or signs that has been agreed upon by the locals as stated by (Roland, 2012), "myth is a communication system in the form of a message, myth is a way of interpreting a form.

The Dayak tribe is a tribe that lives and settles on Borneo Island. One of

them is the Kanayatn Dayak who lives in Landak district, West Kalimantan. Dayak Kanayatn tribe cannot live away from the nature. Therefore, their activities like gardening, farming, and hunting are still carried out. They have a strong bond of kinship and togetherness which can be seen in everyday life. For example, the provision of Mandau weapons given by each family to other family group members who will travel overseas, go to war and go hunting.

Mandau is a weapon owned by the Kanayatn Dayak people and is often used for some purposes such as cutting grass, chopping wood, cutting meat from hunted animals, protecting from wild animals, conducting traditional rituals and as weapons of war. This Mandau is differentiated into two categories, the one that has sacred value and another one that does not. In this study, the object of research was the one with a sacred value. The Mandau which is considered sacred is believed by the Kanayatn Dayak people to be used in a special war and ritual. It is believed to contain the spirits of ancestors or warlords, and when used for war this weapon can give magical powers to its owners, such as invulnerable from enemy's weapon, dexterity in battle, and others. It also can cure people, by carrying out shamanic ritual activities, where a

shaman will recite certain incantations. The message contained in the Mandau weapon of the Kanayatn Dayak tribe is in its shape starting from the handle, ornaments, cloth, color, and sheath. All of these parts are believed by the locals and have crucial roles in their lives. As stated in (Roland, 2012), myth is not something random but it requires special conditions to see something as a myth, from the opinion expressed by the Dayak. Kanayatn people have a way to believe the myth that is by holding fast to the messages conveyed by their ancestors. From some of the messages contained in the Mandau, the researcher conducted an analysis by using semiotic theory of Roland Barthes' framework.

The previous discussion is a form of semiotics, which talks about myths, with Roland Barthes's thinking concept that is more concerned with a form of denotation and connotation in an object. In this study, the researcher discussed these thoughts by analyzing a Mandau, a weapon of the Dayak tribe Kanayatn in Ngabang District, Landak Regency, West Kalimantan. With the existence of the myths in the local community, the denotation and connotation aspect will provide a new insight about the object being discussed.

The myth's existences in society

are seen by the presence of signs that have been agreed upon and this phenomenon has a connection with objects containing myths. As stated by Mircea Eliade that myths have a definite truth and establish an absolute truth that cannot be contested (H, 1987). The myth of Mandau is a description of the power of a Kanayatn Dayak tribe commander in protecting the locals from enemy threats. The development of the myth about the Mandau weapon for the Dayak Kanayatn community in Sebetuk village, Ngabang sub-district, Landak district, West Kalimantan became the problem that were examined and discussed by using the semiotic approach of Roland Barthes' thought.

This study was done by employing qualitative research. It is a type of research that produces findings that cannot be achieved by using statistical procedures or other methods of quantification (measurement). It uses several data collection techniques to answer each problem raised in a study as stated by (Sugiyono, 2009). The data collection technique used in this study was observation.

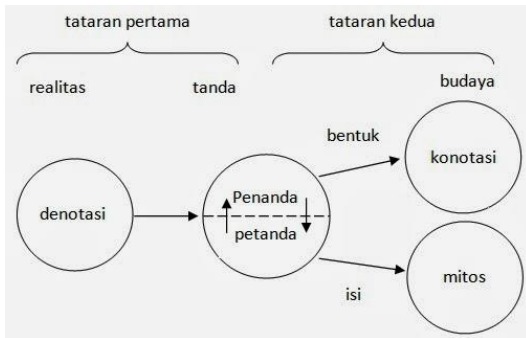


Figure 1. Source: [www.semiotika-roland-barthes.html/Akses 10/09/2016](http://www.semiotika-roland-barthes.html/Akses_10/09/2016)

(Kriyantono, 2007) conveys prayers or requests to the almighty. They really love their nature, as seen in the process of opening farming land, the occurrence of disasters, wars, and the healing process of those who are sick. These activities are carried out to ask permission from nature and God. In that process, the locals carry out prayer ritual activities and prepare some offerings like food, handicraft objects (woven and ceramics), and iron in the form of machetes or swords. Each item used for these offerings has a certain meaning in the Kanayatn Dayak people's life. All of the mentioned activities can be found in Kanayatn Dayak community in Sebetuk village, Ngabang sub-district, Landak Regency, West Kalimantan in which several artistic products have also developed with certain meanings.

## METHODOLOGY

### a. The Art Product of Dayak *Kanayatn* tribe.

Dayak is a tribe that lives and settles on Kalimantan Island. One of them is the Kanayatn Dayak, which lives in West Kalimantan and spreads over several cities and districts such as Pontianak, Kubu Raya, Sambas, Mempawah, Bengkayang and Landak. They have a living habit that cannot be separated from the nature. They are also very concerned about the nature where they live and are inseparable from their ancestral traditions. Especially the activities like gardening, farming and hunting for fulfilling their daily needs. They have a very strong kinship value and a bond of friendship so togetherness become part of them. This is done to make it easier for each group to live their

daily lives as in the opening fields activities (*bahuma*).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Dayak Kanayatn tribe has various kinds of cultural products, ranging from language, dance, crafts, music, architecture as well as some ancestral remains in the form of messages to their generation such as

prayers or requests to the almighty. They really love their nature, as seen in the process of opening farming land, the occurrence of disasters, wars, and the healing process of those who are sick. These activities are carried out to ask permission from nature and God. In that process, the locals carry out prayer ritual activities and prepare some offerings like food, handicraft objects (woven and ceramics), and iron in the form of machetes or swords. Each item used for these offerings has a certain meaning in the Kanayatn Dayak people's life. All of the mentioned activities can be found in Kanayatn Dayak community in Sebetuk village, Ngabang sub-district, Landak Regency, West Kalimantan in which several artistic products have also developed with certain meanings.

The development of an area creates a culture that is influenced by particular groups and the occurrence of collective agreements. As in Sebetuk Village, Ngabang District, Landak Regency, West Kalimantan, with several handicraft

products, this village area consists of 110 heads of families with various professions and educational background. The habit's creation that is inherent in the local community's life was found in their daily. Most of them become farmers, breeders, the private sector, and plantations. These activities are influenced by their parents/ancestors who relied on local natural resources. The *Ape'e* language is used in this area as the vehicle of communication.

This area has a lot of forest so many plants grow freely here, starting from the smallest to the biggest plant species, such as durian, *tengkawang*, teak, *bengkirai*, jackfruit, bamboo and others. The locals utilize these natural wealth for their daily needs, such as making houses where the dominant raw materials are from natural materials, making works of arts and crafts, making fences, hut/*dango* walls and wicker from bamboo plants. These bamboos are also used for cooking lamang (glutinous rice is put inside the bamboo). The locals usually utilize the organic and non-organic materials into works of applied arts such as making woven bamboo, plastic and other crafts made of iron materials like machetes, hoes, Mandau, *ansaut*/knife sharpeners, *taja* (to loosen the soil), and *piso'*/iron to tap rubber. Crafts made by the locals have

uniqueness along with certain meanings that are adapted to their function to fulfill everyday life, from those that do not have sacred elements to those that are believed to have sacred elements. Some of these products developed in this community have sacred values, one of which is the Mandau, where this weapon is considered to have spiritual values from the ancestors. However, before making this craft sacred, several special ritual activities are carried out, then it will be stored in a sacred place and so on it will be handed down to their descendants who are worthy of passing on this sacred object. The traditional Mandau is used by the Kanayatn Dayak people as a weapon for hunting and as a means of self-defense in disputes and shamanistic activities. By the time, some Mandau were used as decoration and equipment used for dancing. Meanwhile, those which are considered to have sacred values are still maintained as it is by carrying out some rituals.

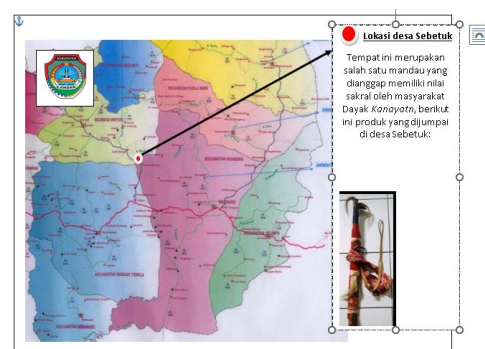


Figure 1. The map above shows the location of Sebetuk village, Ngabang sub-district, Landak district, West

Kalimantan. Source: Ngabang subdistrict's monograph (2015).

**b. Mandau Dayak *Kanayatn***

Mandau is a traditional weapon of the Kanayatn Dayak group in Sebetuk village, Ngabang sub-district, Landak district, West Kalimantan. It is a hereditary heirloom which is considered to have sacred values. It has been around for a long time in the Dayak community and various types of them were created based on the craftsmen's creativity. Since it is a work of art that has become a hereditary weapon, the place for saving it must be sacred as it has a connection with the Kanayatn Dayak tribe's traditional beliefs.

The Mandau consists of several important parts that become a single unit. Each of which has its own role, whether in terms of spiritual power and functional. Here are some parts of the Mandau of the Dayak Kanayatn tribe in Sebetuk village, Ngabang sub-district, Landak district, West Kalimantan.

**a. Mandau blade / eye**

The blade of the Mandau is the surface part made of iron which is forged thoroughly by the craftsman. Each part of it has different shapes according to the needs, ranging from rough to smooth surfaces. This part of the Mandau is made

with several indentations at its end to be sharp and it is believed to contain the ancestral spirits who have supernatural powers. Its tip shaped like a bird's beak to a point, while the base is made smaller to attach the hilt/handle of the Mandau. On the right side, holes are made and then decorated with metal. These holes are a sign of the number of victims of the Mandau and this part also contains poison which is considered deadly if it is cut into human skin.

**b. *Hulu*/ Mandau handle**

The Mandau handle is made of selected wood which is finely and beautifully carved and decorated with human hair. The lower part of the handle is decorated with woven rattan, while the upper part of the head is decorated with a size in the shape of a head, consisting of eyes and mouth. This part is associated with the ancestral spirits of the Kanayatn Dayak tribe who lives in the Mandau so that it helps during the war against the enemies.

**c. The hair on the Mandau handle**

The hair on the Mandau handle comes from the hair of the victim of this weapon. This hair is said to have the power to summon the spirits of the previous victims and to help facing the enemy. The hair is attached above and below the carving of the mouth on the Mandau handle.

## d. Simpe

Simpe is woven made of rattan, which is circular to compact the surface of the part where the handle and the Mandau iron meet. This woven is made very tightly and is usually a place to store amulets to increase spiritual strength so those who use it has more strength and courage to face the enemies.

## e. Cloth

A cloth that is attached by tying it to the Mandau Sheath, predominately red cloth or black cloth, are used to tie amulets so they will not fall off and are stored on the Mandau. This cloth is also used to tie the Mandau Sheath to keep it in the right position and avoid damage.

## f. Waist Strap

This strap is made of woven rattan and is made lengthwise to the size of the Mandau user's waist. It is attached to the upper part of the Mandau to make it easier for the Mandau users to tie it. This strap is thought to play the role of ancestral spirits in protecting the life of the Mandau owner.

## g. Sarong

The Mandau sarong is made of two wooden slats in the middle of which it is dredged so that it becomes a basin where the Mandau enters. It is usually made of wood with straight fibers. The wood used to make this is the middle part of the tree which is then split. Each surface of the

Mandau has carved such as fern motifs, hornbill motifs, and *hudog* motifs. These motifs have supernatural powers meaning, that is between the human world, the heavenly world (*jubata*), the underworld.

## h. The Sheath Feathers

The feathers on the Mandau Sheath comes from the four-legged animals, such as the tail of an antelope, bear, wild boar. These feathers are said to have the power to counteract the occult possessed by the opponent. They are tied to the Mandau Sheath and can protect those who use it during the war.

## i. Ornament

The motif on the Mandau is placed on the upstream/handle of the Mandau. It has a connection with ancestral spirits which are considered sacred so they can protect and give supernatural powers to the Mandau user. The motifs on the Mandau Sheath also have a connection with the human world, the underworld, and the afterlife. Meanwhile, the circle motif at the end of the Mandau linked to the number of victims who have been killed by it. That part of the circle also contains a poison that can be deadly if it is cut into human skin.

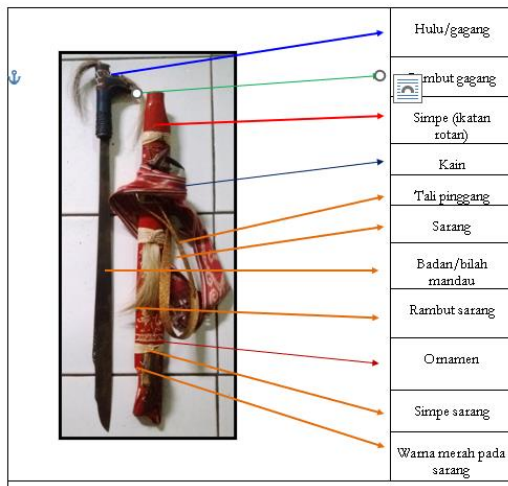
## j. Simpe Sheath

Simpe Sheath is a plait made of rattan which is then used to tie the Mandau Sheath so the Mandau's surface is tight and the Mandau's blades can be stored in the

Sheath. It is very strong to become the key to bind the Mandau Sheath.

k. Sheath color

Red is the color that adorns the surface of the Mandau sheath. This color is associated with courage and also



considered the color of supernatural powers. The oil paint is used to make this color. Figure 1. Mandau, Dayak Kanayatn tribe, Sebetuk village, Ngabang District, Landak Regency, West Kalimantan

| Subject       | Denotation   | Connotation   |
|---------------|--|---|
| Mandau handle | It is made of selected wood which is refined, then shaped like a fishing rod as a hand support. The hair is placed at the end of the handle. At the base of the handle, it is wrapped around using rattan. | It is connoted as a form of loyalty and responsibility of the Dayak community in protecting fellow humans and nature. They will never let go of the responsibility given until the end of life/death. |
| Mandau Body   | It is made of iron which is  | It is connoted as the five  |

|                           |  |  |
|---------------------------|--|--|
|                           | then forged to become smooth. There are three different parts; the sharp one, the blunt one and the pointed one. parts that are not sharp, sharp parts and sharp parts.  | characteristics of Dayak community's life.<br>1. Be friendly with each other.<br>2. Do not hurt other people's feelings and take care of each other's feelings when seeing each other.<br>3. Silent is better than keep talking.<br>4. Never start a violence / fight.<br>5. Will repay the actions of people who have hurt or harmed them physically, emotionally, socially and economically. |
| Mandau Sheath             | The wood material is formed by making elongated cavities on the inside. While, on the outside, the surface is smoothed in an elongated shape. Each part is bound with rattan and cloth, and then is decorated with fern, <i>hudog</i> and hornbill motifs. | It is connoted that every Kanayatn Dayak community must believe in God Almighty ( <i>Jubata</i> ) to get the blessings, health, and protection from all harms. They also need to protect the nature where they live, not destroying it, always share what they get, and protect each other.  |
| Circle Ornament on Mandau | The <i>terawangan</i> motif is made with the basic   | It is connoted as a form of mutual respect for   |



|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
|   | shape of a circle on the Mandau body.                            | human being, where the initial human presence on this earth came from a hole and will return to the hole because nothing will last forever.  |
| The red color on the sheath             | Elongated wood that has been smoothed and decorated in red.      | It is connoted that every Kanayatn Dayak community must be honest, firm and courageous in facing life's problems.  |
| The red cloth                           | Part of the holder   | It is connoted that every Kanayatn Dayak community must be compact and solid in dealing with life, like works, joys, and sorrows that occur in family groups or individuals.                   |
| Hair on the handle                      | Strands of human hair attached to the hilt/handle of the Mandau. | It is connoted that every human should help each other despite the physical forms, thinking, and social status differences. They will help each other in any cases, which is deemed necessary. |
| <i>Simpe</i> / rattan tie on the handle | Rattan that has been refined and then tightly                    | It connotes how the Kanayatn Dayak   |

|              |   |   |
|--------------|---|---|
|              | woven in a circular shape.  | community has a strong bond of togetherness and solidarity.   |
| Waist strap  | Woven from rattan material that is made to extend the waist size of an adult. | It is connoted about how the Kanayatn Dayak community's grateful to nature and <i>jubata</i> . Every human being has a life rope / sting rope, and they must be ready if the life rope is finally cut or taken by the God almighty. |
| Simpe Sheath | The tightly woven rattan is the size of a Mandau sheath.                      | It connotes how the Kanayatn Dayak people protect and care for their environment and everything they have such as offspring, partners, and sources of life.   |

## CONCLUSION

There are various kinds of messages conveyed through the meanings on the Mandau as a weapon of the Kanayatn Dayak tribe in West Kalimantan. On this occasion, the author examined these meanings in Mandau by using the semiotics of Roland Barthes. Mandau is a traditional weapon found in Kanayatn Dayak group in Sebetuk village, Ngabang sub-district, Landak district, West

Kalimantan. This weapon is a hereditary heritage that is considered to have a sacred value. It has been around for a long time in the Dayak community and various types of sabers have been created according to the craftsman's creativity. The traditional Mandau is used as a weapon for hunting and as a means of self-defense during the conflict and shamanism. However, over time, some Mandau was used as mere decoration and as instruments used for dancing. While the Mandau which is considered to have sacred value is still maintained its sacredness.

Mandau is an ancestral heritage that is passed on to their descendants who are considered capable of protecting it. This is done so that the Mandau's sacredness can protect its offspring and make their life easier. The existence of the Kanayatn Dayak tribe is a communicative phenomenon that can be used a means of communication between society and nature and among others. The denotation of the Mandau is described as a weapon of the Kanayatn Dayak tribe. As seen in the picture, it is a tool to fight against enemies who disturb their lives. It has several parts, that are handle (upstream/head), body, (sword eye/sharp surface), ornament, sheath, red color on the sheath, and red cloth.

Connotations, according to Barthes, are cultural meanings that arise due to cultural construction so that there is a shift but remains attached to the symbol or sign as found in the Mandau Kanayatn Dayak tribe in West Kalimantan. For the Dayak Kanayatn tribe, Mandau is a sacred weapon since it can protect every human being and the local community from enemy attacks or interference from the evil creatures.

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