

## Negotiating power and tradition: local political elites and the pursuit of sustainable rural development in Gorontalo, Indonesia

Apris Ara Tilome<sup>1\*)</sup>, Andi Asrifan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Public Administration, Universitas Muhammadiyah Gorontalo, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Department of English Education, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia

### Abstract

*Rural development in Indonesia after decentralization is influenced not only by formal state institutions but also by traditional authorities. This study aims to analyze how local political elites in Gorontalo negotiate power and legitimacy through interactions between elected officials and traditional leaders in rural development management. This research uses a qualitative approach with data collection techniques through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis in three districts in Gorontalo. The findings show that political elites strategically utilize traditional rituals and kinship networks to consolidate power and garner community support, while traditional leaders maintain their influence by mediating access to state resources. These interactions create hybrid governance that both facilitates and constrains inclusive rural growth. Empirically, this study enriches rural sociology by describing how informal institutions remain embedded in local governance, while theoretically contributing to elite studies by linking symbolic authority to development outcomes. The study concludes that effective rural development policies require not only institutional reform but also critical engagement with cultural mechanisms of legitimacy. In line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), the integration of traditional leaders into rural development governance must be accompanied by a framework of accountability to ensure the equitable distribution of resources and the protection of marginalized groups.*

**Keywords:** hybrid governance, political elites, symbolic legitimacy, rural development

\*)corresponding author

E-mail : [apristilome@umgo.ac.id](mailto:apristilome@umgo.ac.id)

### Introduction

Rural development has consistently held a pivotal role in academic discussions and policy structures, particularly in developing nations where rural areas comprise the majority of both land and people Agnoletti & Santoro (2021) Southeast Asia, the task of reconciling modernization with the preservation of traditional institutions is a significant issue (Jamilah et al., 2025). The interaction between official political frameworks and entrenched customary authorities has grown increasingly intricate. The dynamics are especially prominent in post-decentralization Indonesia, where the transfer of political authority from

the central government to local governments has transformed governance structures and community leadership paradigms in rural regions.

Political elites, whether elected or informal, exert significant influence over the direction of rural development (Cai et al., 2024). Their function encompasses more than bureaucratic decision-making; it involves gatekeeping access to resources, mediating between state and community interests, and protecting or transforming local customs and identities. Rural development often transpires not in isolation of administrative planning, but rather within a social arena characterized by conflicting interests, established traditions, and shifting power dynamics (Ferrari et al., 2022). This negotiation is particularly evident in Indonesia, a nation distinguished by heterogeneous legal systems and varied sociopolitical traditions, where customary authority (*adat*) frequently coexists with formal state government (Manse, 2024). Recent scholarship has advanced our understanding of rural governance in three major ways. First, studies on decentralization emphasize its potential to empower local governments while also exposing communities to elite capture and patronage (Wilfahrt, 2018). Second, literature on hybrid governance highlights the resilience of customary authorities and their adaptation within democratic frameworks (Motadi & Sikhwari, 2024). Third, rural sociology research stresses that development outcomes are shaped not only by institutional design but also by the symbolic and cultural legitimacy that leaders mobilize in local contexts (Alasuutari, 2015). Together, these works demonstrate that rural development is best understood as a negotiated process rather than a purely technocratic endeavor.

In Gorontalo, an Eastern Indonesian province characterized by a unique cultural legacy and intricate political dynamics, local political elites are crucial in facilitating rural development (Jufri, 2022). The rural regions of Gorontalo are characterized by a significant presence of traditional leadership frameworks, such as *Totoluwo* and *Dewan Adat*, which maintain social power despite the emergence of political democracy. Elected local officials—regents (*bupati*), village chiefs (*kepala desa*), and district legislators—have become new power centers as a result of decentralization measures initiated by Law No. 22/1999 and its following amendments (O'Reilly, 2023).

However, despite these advances, few studies have systematically examined how political elites in Eastern Indonesia strategically negotiate legitimacy by embedding themselves within both formal state structures and enduring *adat* frameworks. This gap highlights the need for a case study of Gorontalo, where the coexistence of modern democracy and traditional authority produces a distinctive form of hybrid governance. This article addresses that gap by analysing how local political elites employ symbolic practices, patronage networks, and moral authority to shape rural development trajectories.

The convergence of these actors frequently results in a hybrid political landscape where development measures are not simply executed but negotiated (Abbott & Faude, 2022). Infrastructure projects, agricultural subsidies, and land redistribution initiatives frequently require not only governmental authorization but also the informal assent of traditional chiefs or clan elders. Political elites in Gorontalo often cite customary legitimacy to bolster their authority, while customary leaders may affiliate with political parties to maintain influence over community decisions. This establishes a distinctive arrangement of

rural power dynamics, influenced by institutional authority and cultural symbolism (Facal, 2022).

Notwithstanding the significance of this dual structure, scholarly research on Gorontalo's rural development has been scant, especially within English-language academic publications. The majority of research on Indonesian rural development concentrates on Java, Bali, or Sumatra, frequently overlooking the sociopolitical dynamics of the Eastern provinces (Hinta et al., 2025). Although many Indonesian scholars have investigated local leadership in Gorontalo through historical or anthropological lenses, there is a paucity of systematic analyses of the current negotiation processes between political elites and traditional structures in influencing development results (Thalib, 2023).

Numerous significant deficiencies remain in the literature. There is a deficiency in sociological research that combines both institutional and symbolic aspects of elite authority in rural Indonesia. Political science has examined decentralization and its effects on regional autonomy, however it frequently portrays elites as uniform and neglects their integration within local cultural frameworks (Berenschot et al., 2021). In contrast, anthropological research often emphasizes ritual authority while overlooking the bureaucratic power exercised by elected officials.

Secondly, insufficient attention has been directed into the manner in which local elites in Eastern Indonesia—specifically in Gorontalo—strategically amalgamate contemporary political instruments and traditional legitimacy to navigate development trajectories (Apriliyanti, 2023). This debate is not only a contest for dominance but embodies a wider cultural-political amalgamation that affects developmental agendas, community participation, and the sustainability of initiatives.

Third, although international development agencies are progressively acknowledging the significance of "context-sensitive" methodologies, there exists a scarcity of empirical research that elucidates how power negotiations at the local level influence development in practice (Haddad & Benner, 2021). The Gorontalo milieu, characterized by its intertwined political and customary systems, serves as a pivotal location for comprehending these processes.

This study seeks to fill these gaps by analyzing how local political elites in Gorontalo navigate power and tradition within the framework of rural development. The study employs a

qualitative approach rooted in rural sociology and elite theory to examine the techniques, narratives, and interactions utilized by both formal and informal leaders in influencing development decisions. Fieldwork was performed in three rural districts—Bone Bolango, Boalemo, and Gorontalo Regency—utilizing semi-structured interviews with elected officials, traditional leaders, community members, and development practitioners.

The findings indicate that prominent figures in Gorontalo do not function independently; instead, they build strategic alliances, engage in ritual partnerships, and partake in symbolic acts to validate their positions. Village development plans are typically preceded by ceremonial consultations (*musyawarah adat*) that provide cultural validation, despite official endorsement by local government entities. Moreover, developmental resources—such as agricultural implements, livestock assistance, or infrastructure

enhancements—are often allocated in accordance with traditional obligations and familial hierarchy, illustrating the amalgamation of patronage politics with local moral economies.

By elucidating these processes, the study enhances the comprehension of rural governance in post-decentralization Indonesia. It suggests that growth in these circumstances should not be regarded solely as a technical endeavor of state planning, but rather as a socially created and culturally mediated negotiation among various power holders. Utilizing Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital and Scott's moral economy framework, the article contextualizes Gorontalo's rural development within extensive discussions regarding elite authority, social legitimacy, and institutional hybridity (Hatma Indra Jaya et al., 2024).

This study highlights the significance of localized sociological analysis in shaping both policy and philosophy. The findings underscore the necessity for policymakers to view traditional institutions not as impediments, but as integral contributors to the development of rural futures. The Gorontalo case prompts experts to reconsider rural development theories, moving from top-down frameworks to relational and culturally integrated models.

### **Research Methods**

This study employs a qualitative case study design, chosen for its appropriateness in analysing complex and context dependent phenomena, particularly the negotiation of power between local political elites and customary authorities in rural Gorontalo. Guided by an interpretivist worldview and informed by critical sociology, the case study approach enables an in depth examination of the meanings, practices, and strategies through which diverse actors navigate intersecting governance systems. Data were gathered through in depth interviews with 35 participants, including elected officials, traditional leaders, bureaucrats, and community representatives, participant observation during community rituals and meetings, and document analysis of policy papers, regulations, and local archival materials. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and, together with observation notes and documentary sources, systematically coded using NVivo 12. Thematic analysis was then conducted to identify recurring patterns of symbolic practices, kinship based patronage, and strategies of legitimacy construction. Triangulation across multiple data sources strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

### **Research Setting**

This research was undertaken in Gorontalo Province, situated in Eastern Indonesia, a region distinguished by robust traditional institutions and shifting political dynamics. Three rural regencies—Bone Bolango, Boalemo, and Gorontalo Regency—were deliberately chosen to exemplify varied combinations of political power and customary influence. These regions provide substantial environments in which traditional leadership frameworks, like *adat* councils and clanbased authority, persist in significantly influencing community decision-making. Following Indonesia's decentralization changes, local governments in Gorontalo have acquired enhanced authority over development planning and resource distribution, resulting in heightened participation of elected officials in village-level projects. These dynamics frequently converge with enduring customary norms and power

structures, resulting in a hybrid governance framework. Development projects often require negotiation through bureaucratic processes and conventional consensus methods. This intricate social landscape offers a vital context to examine how elites maneuver between formal governance and traditional responsibilities.

### Participants and Sampling

This study utilized a purposive sample method, augmented by a snowball methodology, to select participants possessing firsthand knowledge and expertise in rural development and local power dynamics. The sample comprised elected village and district officials, traditional authorities such as *Totoluwo*, members of the *Dewan Adat*, community elders, and, when applicable, NGO or development practitioners engaged in rural initiatives. The participants were chosen for their active involvement in determining development decisions and their readiness to address elite negotiations and customary governance norms. A total of 20 to 30 people were interviewed, with sampling persisting until topic saturation was attained. The involvement of varied stakeholders guaranteed equitable representation of both formal and informal power brokers. This methodology was crucial for elucidating the multifaceted and negotiated character of development in Gorontalo, where authority is decentralized and dispersed across overlapping political and cultural domains.

**Table 1.** Participant Profile

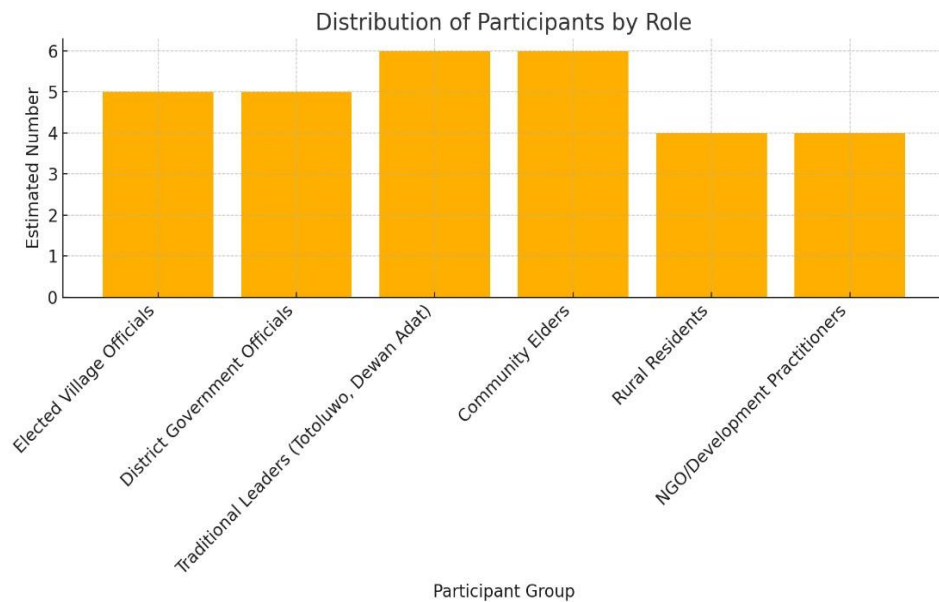
Participant Group	Estimated Number of Participants	Selection Criteria
Elected Village Officials	5	Formally involved in village-level development planning
District Government Officials	5	District-level authority in rural governance
Traditional Leaders ( <i>Totoluwo</i> , <i>Dewan Adat</i> )	6	Recognized leaders in customary governance
Community Elders	6	Long-standing community figures with influence
Rural Residents	4	Residents actively engaged in local initiatives
NGO/Development Practitioners	4	Involved in planning or implementing rural development

*Source: processed by author*

Table 1 provides a systematic summary of the principal participant groups engaged in this investigation, including estimated quantities and their corresponding selection criteria. Six categories are outlined, encompassing formal government officials at the village and district levels, traditional leaders, elders, residents, and NGO practitioners. Each organization was chosen based on its active participation and impact in rural development decision-making in Gorontalo. This intentional sampling guaranteed a varied representation of both formal and informal participants, reflecting the negotiated dynamics of development between bureaucratic institutions and customary power structures in the chosen regencies.

Figure 1 illustrates the projected distribution of participants among six principal groups involved in the rural development process in Gorontalo. Traditional leaders and community elders constitute the predominant segment, underscoring their pivotal function in reconciling formal development measures with local traditional practices. Elected authorities from village and district levels constitute substantial segments, while NGOs and engaged rural inhabitants complete the participation demographic. This distribution highlights the study's focus on capturing several layers of governance—both institutional and cultural—in comprehending elite discussions and development outcomes within a decentralized and tradition-bound rural context.

**Figure 1.** Distribution of Participants by Role



*Source: processed by author*

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Data collection was predominantly executed via semi-structured in-depth interviews, facilitating comprehensive and adaptable discussions that examined participants' experiences, perceptions, and strategies in navigating rural development. This approach allowed the researcher to investigate thoroughly the interaction between formal government and customary authority. In addition to these interviews, focus group talks were conducted with villagers and local kids to obtain comprehensive community opinions. Furthermore, participant observation during traditional rites and village assemblies offered contextual understanding of power dynamics and symbolic practices. Document analysis, encompassing village development plans, customary agreements, and policy papers, provided additional triangulation of data and facilitated the tracing of institutional narratives. All research endeavors conformed to stringent ethical standards. Participants received informed consent forms and were guaranteed anonymity and secrecy. Particular emphasis was placed on cultural sensitivity, especially regarding traditional leadership roles and social hierarchies, to ensure respectful interaction within the Gorontaloan sociocultural framework.



### **Data Analysis**

This study utilized Thematic Analysis as described by Braun & Clarke,(2006) facilitating a systematic and adaptable method for recognizing patterns within qualitative data. The procedure commenced with the exact transcription of interviews and field notes, succeeded by multiple readings to guarantee familiarity with the material. Initial codes were developed manually and, when applicable, supplemented with qualitative data analysis software like NVivo to efficiently handle and arrange the data. Subsequent themes were selected, examined, and modified to encapsulate essential concepts and connections pertinent to elite negotiation, power, and tradition in rural development. Themes were analyzed through theoretical frameworks such as Bourdieu's capital theory, Scott's moral economy idea, and rural elite theory, offering depth and sociological foundation. Triangulation was utilized by cross-referencing interview data with observations and documentary sources, so augmenting the study's trustworthiness, dependability, and analytical rigor in a culturally intricate rural context.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

To guarantee the reliability of the research, multiple strategies were implemented throughout all phases of the study. Credibility was attained by extensive field participation, enabling the researcher to cultivate rapport and acquire nuanced insights. Triangulation through interviews, observations, and documents enhanced the validity of the findings, while member checking involved sharing summaries with chosen participants for their feedback. To improve transferability, the study offered detailed descriptions of the research environment, sociocultural backdrop, and participant attributes, allowing readers to evaluate the relevance of the findings to different situations. Dependability was ensured by the maintenance of a comprehensive audit trail, encompassing notes on methodological choices and a reflective notebook chronicling the researcher's developing insights. Confirmability was achieved by utilizing direct quotations to anchor insights in participant perspectives and engaging in peer debriefing with colleagues to mitigate potential bias and improve analytical transparency.

### **Results and Discussion**

The findings indicate the existence of hybrid governance frameworks in rural Gorontalo, wherein elected officials and traditional leaders concurrently engage in village development affairs. Instead of operating in distinct domains, these players often assume overlapping positions, leading to a shared authority. For instance, village leaders (*kepala desa*) frequently seek informal consent from *Totoluwo* or *Dewan Adat* before to executing development projects, despite having obtained legal government approval. In exchange, traditional elders are occasionally invited to participate in village development committees as symbolic representations of communal agreement.

The integration of official and informal institutions has been formalized in village-level decision-making. Data-driven rituals are routinely incorporated into government-funded infrastructure initiatives, whilst community meetings (*musyawarah desa*) frequently commence with traditional blessings or are co-chaired by elected and customary officials. These linkages demonstrate a functional dependency between the two systems: formal

governance supplies administrative power, whereas traditional structures confer cultural legitimacy. The outcome is a hybrid governance model that embodies state logic and indigenous values, resulting in a unique leadership and control approach that is attuned to bureaucratic structures and local cultural expectations.

**Table 2.** Hybrid Governance Roles

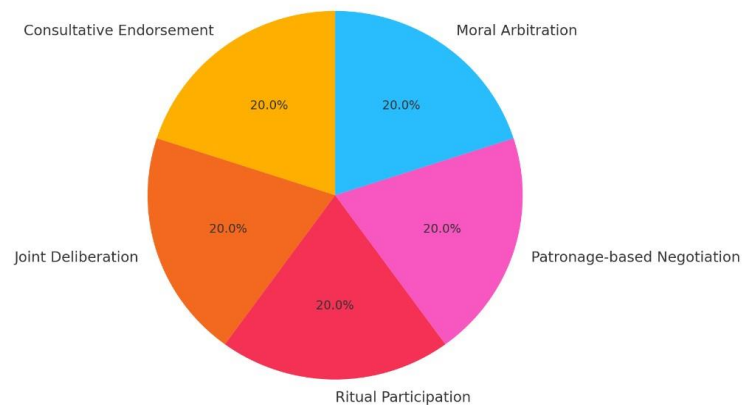
Governance Role	Formal Actor Involvement	Traditional Actor Involvement	Form of Interaction
Project Approval	Village Heads, Sub-district Officials	<i>Totoluwo, Dewan Adat</i>	Consultative Endorsement
Development Planning	Village Government, Local Parliament	Elders, Customary Council	Joint Deliberation (Musyawarah)
Ceremonial Legitimacy	Village Heads, Ministry Representatives	Clan Leaders, Religious Elders	Ritual Participation
Resource Allocation	Village Officials, Local Agencies	<i>Adat</i> Figures, Kinship Heads	Patronage-based Negotiation
Conflict Mediation	Police, District Legal Officers	<i>Totoluwo</i> , Local Elders	Moral Arbitration

*Source: processed by author*

Table 2: delineates the hybrid governance responsibilities identified in rural Gorontalo by mapping five essential governance activities—namely project approval, development planning, and conflict mediation—while illustrating the involvement of both formal and traditional players. Every role is underpinned by a distinct mode of engagement that exemplifies the negotiated essence of authority, including "consultative endorsement" and "joint deliberation." This dual involvement demonstrates a structural relationship in which administrative authority and cultural legitimacy are integrated. The table clearly illustrates the collaboration of customary and state institutions, resulting in a locally tailored kind of rural governance that integrates bureaucracy with traditional values.

**Figure 2. Types of Interaction in Hybrid Governance Structures**

Types of Interaction in Hybrid Governance Structures



*Source: processed by author*



Figure 2 visually depicts the diverse relationships that define hybrid government institutions in rural Gorontalo. Each segment of the chart represents a unique mode of cooperation—spanning from ceremonial involvement to patronage-based negotiation. Illustrating the equivalent significance and value of different activities within the rural leadership framework. This equitable distribution illustrates the complex nature of governance in the region, as formal and informal entities collaboratively influence development processes. The graphic visually illustrates the cultural integration of rural decision-making and the strategic alliances between state authorities and traditional power holders in Gorontalo.

### Symbolic Legitimacy and Political Authority

The results underscore the essential function of symbolic legitimacy in bolstering political power within the hybrid governance framework of rural Gorontalo. Elected officials often pursue ceremonial validation from the *Dewan Adat* to authenticate development projects. Prior to initiating infrastructural or agricultural projects, village officials frequently conduct ceremonial celebrations featuring customary blessings, symbolic offerings, and the formal attendance of *adat* elders. These rituals function both as communal assemblies and as performative activities that validate the ethical and cultural legitimacy of governmental actions.

Furthermore, elected politicians deliberately embrace conventional titles, attire, and vernacular linked to traditional leadership. During public events or village forums, mayors or regents commonly don traditional garb and are addressed with honorific titles normally reserved for clan chiefs. This symbolic appropriation of *adat* culture augments their perceived legitimacy and fortifies their social influence among rural inhabitants that hold profound regard for ancestral rituals. These behaviors demonstrate a calculated integration of contemporary political identity with traditional history, enabling elites to forge wider coalitions of support. The utilization of cultural performance and ritual symbolism is not superficial; it is fundamental in maintaining elite authority and promoting local acceptance of state-driven development.

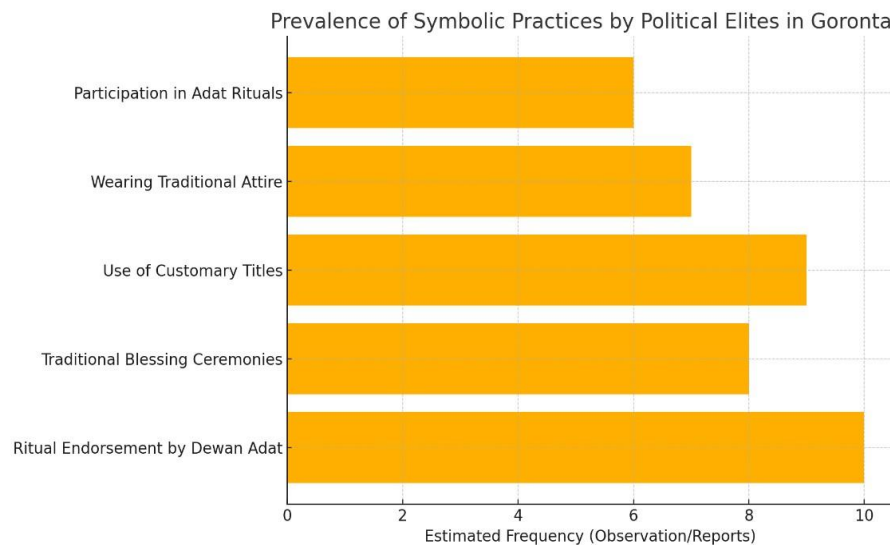
**Table 3.** Symbolic Legitimacy Practices

Symbolic Practice	Performed By	Purpose
Ritual Endorsement by <i>Dewan Adat</i>	Village Heads, Local Government	Gain cultural approval for state-led projects
Traditional Blessing Ceremonies	Elected Officials, Customary Leaders	Establish moral legitimacy of policies
Use of Customary Titles	Mayors, Regents	Symbolize continuity with traditional authority
Wearing Traditional Attire	Government Representatives	Reinforce local identity and acceptance
Participation in <i>Adat</i> Rituals	Elected Leaders, <i>Adat</i> Councils	Demonstrate respect for community norms

*Source: processed by author*

Table 3 delineates the diverse symbolic techniques utilized by political elites in rural Gorontalo to bolster their legitimacy. This encompasses ceremonial validation by the *Dewan Adat*, the utilization of customary titles, traditional garments, and involvement in *adat* ceremonies. Each practice is deliberately executed by elected authorities, frequently in conjunction with traditional leaders, to harmonize state-led development initiatives with local cultural values. The articulated objectives underscore the ingrained social role of these actions, including the acquisition of moral endorsement, the affirmation of traditional continuity, and the augmentation of public confidence. This amalgamation of tradition and modernity illustrates how symbolic authority serves as a crucial instrument in elite control.

**Figure 3.** Prevalence of Symbolic Practices by Political Elites in Gorontalo



*Source: processed by author*

Figure 3 illustrates the relative frequency of symbolic practices documented or observed in the Gorontalo research context. Ritual endorsement and the utilization of customary titles are among the most common practices, closely succeeded by traditional blessing ceremonies. Donning traditional garments and engaging in *adat* ceremonies, though somewhat less common, continue to hold significance. This distribution indicates the strategic emphasis on cultural participation by political elites aiming for popular legitimacy. The image substantiates the assertion that symbolic action—rather than being merely ceremonial—is a deliberate and significant aspect of political conduct in rural Indonesia, acting as a conduit between formal authority and customary legitimacy.

### **Strategic Alliances and Patronage**

The research indicates that rural development in Gorontalo is significantly influenced by strategic partnerships and patronage systems, rooted in familial connections and *adat*-based authority frameworks. The distribution of development resources—such as agricultural implements, infrastructure support, or social assistance—is frequently facilitated through informal networks, favoring individuals or groups affiliated with traditional leaders or political elites. Instead of being evenly allocated according to

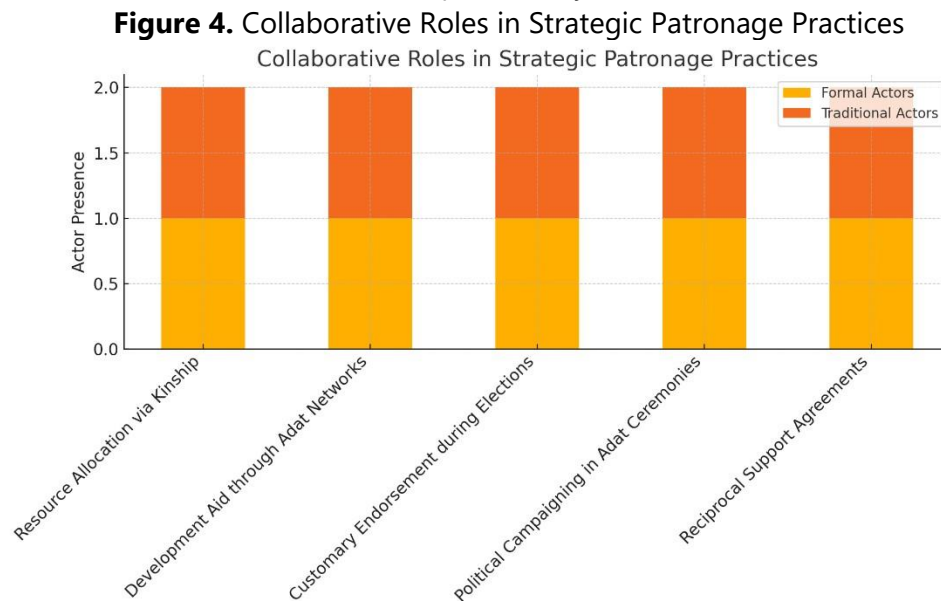
technical evaluations, these resources often adhere to familial loyalty, clan affiliation, or customary duty.

Elected officials strategically collaborate with *adat* leaders to strengthen their authority and broaden their influence, especially during electoral periods. Adat personalities provide symbolic endorsement, generate community support, and grant access to traditional forums where political campaigning occurs indirectly. These partnerships are not solely transactional; they are ingrained in moral economies characterized by social expectations of reciprocity, obligation, and devotion. Politicians that disregard *adat* procedures or overlook customary stakeholders frequently encounter opposition or reduced backing. The amalgamation of political pragmatism and traditional allegiance engenders a multifaceted patronage system wherein development serves as a mechanism for legitimizing authority and preserving elite dominance, underscoring the inherently relational and negotiated character of administration within Gorontalo's rural milieu.

**Table 4.** Strategic Alliances and Patronage

Alliance Practice	Actors Involved	Purpose/Outcome
Resource Allocation via Kinship	Village Officials, Kin Leaders	Ensure loyalty and secure votes
Development Aid through <i>Adat</i> Networks	Local Government, <i>Dewan Adat</i>	Gain cultural legitimacy and access
Customary Endorsement during Elections	Politicians, Clan Elders	Influence voter behavior through symbolic power
Political Campaigning in <i>Adat</i> Ceremonies	Candidates, Traditional Figures	Embed political message in traditional events
Reciprocal Support Agreements	Elected Leaders, Customary Authorities	Reinforce mutual obligation and elite control

Source: processed by author



Source: processed by author

Table 4 delineates five key behaviours that illustrate how strategic alliances and patronage operate within rural development processes in Gorontalo. These practices include resource distribution through kinship networks and the incorporation of political campaigning within adat ceremonies. Each practice involves collaboration between formal actors, such as elected officials and local government leaders, and traditional authorities, including the *Dewan Adat* and clan elders. The table indicates that these relationships are not merely transactional; they are culturally embedded and oriented toward sustaining political loyalty, facilitating access to communities, and reinforcing reciprocal obligations. Taken together, the evidence suggests that political legitimacy in Gorontalo is maintained through the convergence of institutional strategy and cultural authority.

Figure 4 illustrates the collaborative engagement of formal and traditional actors in five patronage related behaviours in Gorontalo. Each bar represents a distinct practice, such as resource allocation or traditional endorsements, and shows the broadly balanced and cooperative involvement of both state authorities and *adat* leaders. This pattern underscores the intricate interdependence of elite engagement in rural politics. Rather than operating independently, both groups work together to shape influence and determine development outcomes. Overall, the figure suggests that governance in Gorontalo is driven by relational dynamics and continuous negotiation, with elite collaboration embedded within customary norms as well as pragmatic political strategy.

### **Community Perceptions of Leadership**

Community opinions of leadership in rural Gorontalo exhibit clear patterns of trust and assessments of legitimacy regarding traditional and elected leaders. A significant number of villagers exhibit more faith in traditional leaders, including *Totoluwo* and members of the *Dewan Adat*, owing to their perceived moral integrity, historical authority, and alignment with community ideals. These individuals are frequently seen as guardians of equity and advocates for communal well-being, especially concerning land utilization, dispute resolution, and cultural conservation. Elected officials receive more ambiguous evaluations. Some are lauded for providing infrastructure, assistance, and administrative efficiency, while others are perceived as remote or self-serving, especially when development resources seem politically motivated or inequitably allocated. Community members frequently differentiate between leaders who "serve the populace" and those who "serve their own interests," seeing fairness, inclusion, and transparency as essential indications of effective government.

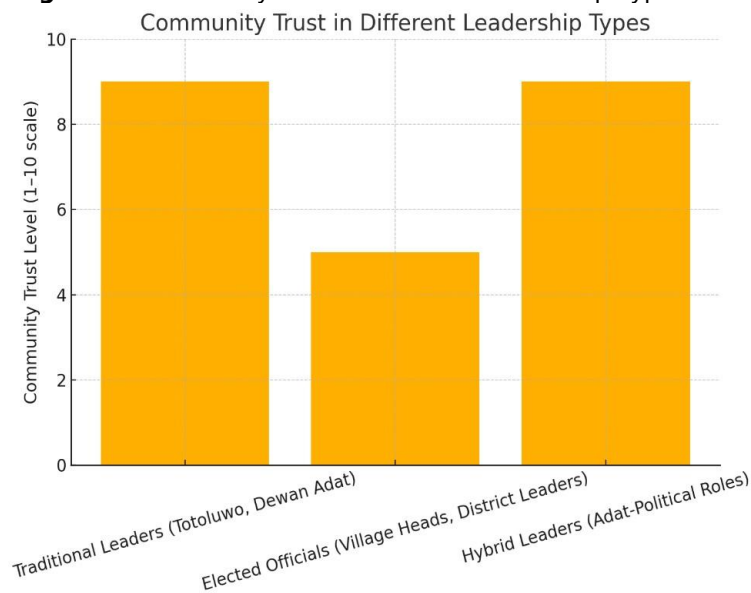
Notably, hybrid leaders, individuals who fulfil both political and cultural functions, tend to receive more favourable assessments. They are widely perceived as bridging contemporary governance with traditional ideals. The findings further suggest that community trust is fundamentally relational and culturally situated, underscoring the importance of moral legitimacy alongside formal authority in rural leadership.

**Table 5.** Community Perceptions of Leadership

Leadership Type	Trust Level (Reported)	Perceived Strengths	Common Criticisms
Traditional Leaders ( <i>Totoluwo, Dewan Adat</i> )	High	Moral integrity, cultural authority, fairness	Limited administrative authority
Elected Officials (Village Heads, District Leaders)	Moderate to Low	Infrastructure delivery, policy access	Political favoritism, lack of inclusion
Hybrid Leaders ( <i>Adat</i> Political Roles)	Consistently High	Balanced decision-making, cultural and political legitimacy	None significant; seen as integrative

Source: processed by author

Table 5 contrasts community attitudes of three leadership types in rural Gorontalo: traditional, elected, and hybrid leaders. Traditional leaders are esteemed for their moral purity and cultural alignment, although lacking formal institutional authority. Elected politicians are scrutinized more rigorously, especially regarding equity and inclusivity, but they are recognized for facilitating tangible progress. Hybrid leaders—individuals who amalgamate traditional and formal roles—are seen positively, lauded for their capacity to harmonize legitimacy with administrative function. These distinctions highlight that community trust is influenced not only by formal positions but also by perceived ethical behavior and cultural relevance.

**Figure 5.** Community Trust in Different Leadership Types

Source: processed by author

Figure 5 depicts community trust levels across various leadership types with a 1–10 scale. Traditional and hybrid leaders obtain the highest evaluations, indicating significant moral and symbolic resonance throughout the society. Elected leaders exhibit modest levels of trust, reflecting ambivalent perceptions associated with political motivations or

unequal resource allocation. This image underscores that legitimacy in rural Gorontalo is established not merely by official position but by relational and cultural credibility. The inclination towards hybrid leaders indicates a communal aspiration for governance that integrates tradition and modernity, merging ethical reliability with efficient governmental involvement.

### Challenges in Negotiation Processes

The negotiation of authority between traditional and official entities in Gorontalo's rural development context faces considerable obstacles. A significant issue cited is the conflict around land ownership and usage, where overlapping claims between traditional rights and government issued permissions generate difficulties. Numerous instances reveal that development projects launched by local governments—such as road construction or agricultural expansion—face opposition from *adat* communities asserting ancestral rights to the land. These conflicts frequently intensify due to the lack of explicit methods for reconciling customary claims with governmental legislation.

A significant concern is the consolidation of authority among local elites, sometimes termed elite capture. Development resources and decision-making power are sometimes monopolized by a select cadre of politically influential individuals, leading to the marginalization of underrepresented groups, including women, youth, and landless farmers. Community members articulated dissatisfaction with the opacity in aid distribution and the belief that public meetings are merely performative rather than meaningful. This exclusion diminishes the credibility of both formal and informal leaders, fostering societal divisions. These findings underscore the vulnerability of hybrid governance when negotiating procedures are skewed or exploited to benefit a select elite rather than the wider community.

**Table 6. Challenges in Negotiation Processes Table**

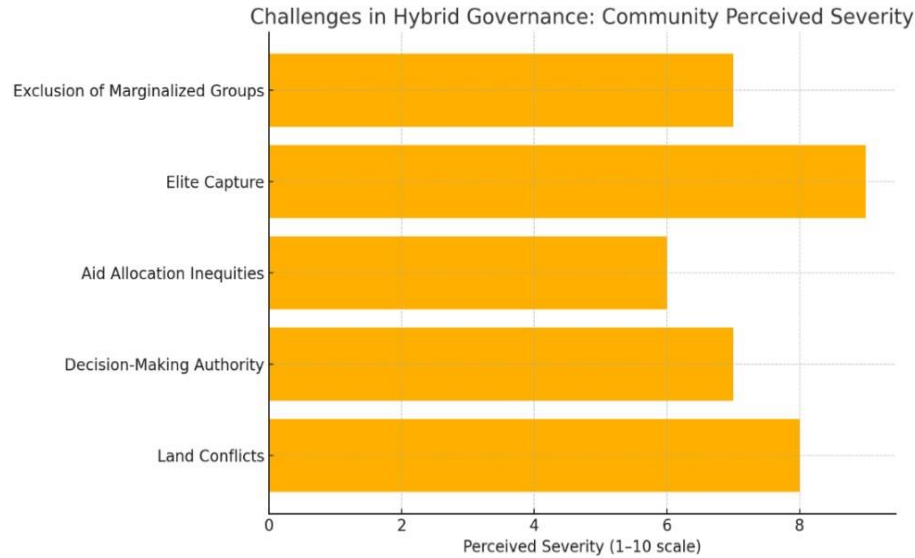
Challenge Category	Description	Community Impact
Land Conflicts	Overlapping claims between <i>adat</i> and formal land rights	Delays or cancellation of development projects
Decision-Making Authority	Disputes between traditional and elected leaders	Tensions and mistrust in governance structures
Aid Allocation Inequities	Perceived unfairness in the distribution of development resources	Increased public dissatisfaction and protest
Elite Capture	Concentration of power among politically connected elites	Reduced participation and transparency
Exclusion of Marginalized Groups	Neglect of women, youth, and landless farmers in planning	Social fragmentation and loss of legitimacy

*Source: processed by author*

Table 6 delineates five principal obstacles that arise in the negotiation of authority between traditional and official actors in rural Gorontalo. This encompasses property disputes, disputed decision-making, inequitable aid allocation, elite appropriation, and the marginalization of underrepresented populations. Every obstacle is followed by a succinct description and its associated effects on community cohesiveness, project efficacy, and

governance trust. The table demonstrates the profound interconnection of these concerns, frequently leading to developmental delays, diminished transparency, and social fragmentation. This typology is essential for comprehending the vulnerabilities of hybrid governance systems characterized by unequal power distribution and lack of inclusive exercise.

**Figure 6.** Challenges in Hybrid Governance: Community Perceived Severity



*Source: processed by author*

Figure 6 illustrates the perceived severity of five principal governance difficulties as stated by community members. Elite capture and land disputes are paramount, signifying their direct and disruptive influence on developmental results and local trust. Other concerns such as exclusion and contested authority, albeit somewhat less severe, also constitute substantial obstacles to inclusive governance. The picture emphasizes that rural development in Gorontalo encompasses not only infrastructure and resources but also political equity and social justice. Confronting these difficulties necessitates tactics that extend beyond formal legislation, encompassing inclusive negotiation, community discussion, and the acknowledgment of both customary and legal rights.

**Reframing Rural Development as a Negotiated**

This study's conclusions necessitate a thorough reevaluation of rural development in Gorontalo and, more generally, in analogous decentralized settings. This study illustrates that rural development is socially created through intricate negotiations among elites, rather than being perceived as a top-down administrative process dictated only by policy frameworks and technological interventions (Mu & Aimar, 2022). These talks transpire at the convergence of formal political frameworks and entrenched customary institutions, where power is not merely wielded, but legitimized and reshaped through culturally ingrained interactions. In Gorontalo, hybrid governance—defined by the coexistence and collaboration of elected officials and traditional leaders—demonstrates that development projects are not executed independently of local beliefs and traditions (Sulistyadi et al., 2024). Rather, they are integrated within a framework of symbolic legitimacy, patronage



relations, and negotiated authority. The ritual endorsement of development initiatives by *Dewan Adat* is not merely ceremonial; it is an essential step for securing moral approbation and community obedience. Likewise, resource distribution methods that incorporate kinship connections or *adat*-based networks illustrate how development is a relational endeavor, influenced by social obligations rather than only by bureaucratic reason.

This recontextualization corresponds with contemporary scholarship in rural sociology and political anthropology that underscores relational governance and the social embeddedness of power (Annavarapu & Levenson, 2021). It contests statecentric theories that downplay informal institutions and neglect the significance of trust, tradition, and symbolic power in influencing development results. Understanding rural development as a negotiated process not only reflects the dynamics of elite interactions but also emphasizes the significance of culturally informed policy initiatives. To achieve sustainable impact, development methods must interact with the socio-cultural logics that govern rural political life in locations such as Gorontalo, rather than circumvent them.

### **Symbolic Capital and Bourdieu's Theory**

The deliberate application of ancient rituals, garments, and titles by political elites in Gorontalo can be comprehensively analyzed through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital. Bourdieu (1986) defines symbolic capital as the prestige, honor, and legitimacy possessed by an individual or group as perceived by others, typically grounded in cultural or customary acknowledgment (Halabi & Shoshana, 2025). In Gorontalo's hybrid administration, elites do not depend exclusively on institutional power from elections or official roles; instead, they actively foster symbolic capital by aligning with *adat* traditions and community rituals.

The results indicate that elected officials consistently engage in ritual blessings, assume customary titles, and don traditional costume during village rituals, not solely as cultural performances but as calculated investments in symbolic legitimacy (Duressa, 2022). The utilization of cultural symbols enables political figures to engage with entrenched values of respect, continuity, and communal ethics. It fosters a perception of authenticity and ethical authority that formal power may frequently lack, particularly in areas where state legitimacy is often tenuous or disputed.

This symbolic aspect of power supports elite control beyond the administrative or legal structures. It allows leaders to cultivate trust within communities that perceive traditional leadership as both a governance model and an ethical framework grounded in history and collective memory. Furthermore, it enables elites to maneuver between many legitimacy frameworks, concurrently fulfilling state requirements and community principles. This illustrates Bourdieu's assertion that power is exerted not alone through force or legal mechanisms, but also through the acknowledgment of authority as legitimate within a common cultural domain.

### **Political Patronage and Scott's Moral Economy**

The allocation of development resources in rural Gorontalo is most effectively analyzed through James C. Scott's notion of the moral economy, which emphasizes that economic and political behaviors are influenced not alone by rational assessments but also

by local standards of equity, reciprocity, and duty. In Scott's (1976) seminal study on Southeast Asian peasants, he highlighted that rural communities frequently evaluate government and resource allocation via the lens of moral expectations rather than formal legality or efficiency (Douglas, 2005). This viewpoint is significantly pertinent to the identified patronage networks and strategic alliances in Gorontalo.

Political elites in Gorontalo frequently allocate aid—such as agricultural implements, subsidies, or social assistance—not exclusively based on objective necessity, but rather through familial connections, customary associations, and reciprocal relationships (Luhukay, 2024). Although these behaviors may be categorized as patronage within official policy frameworks, community members often perceive them as fulfilling moral duties that promote social cohesion. Leaders who comply with these standards are perceived as loyal and trustworthy, whereas those who breach them—by disregarding *adat* structures or preferring outsiders—encounter social censure and reduced legitimacy.

Instead of being perceived solely as corrupt or clientelistic, these patronage systems fulfill significant social roles. They maintain conventional concepts of communal welfare, strengthen the position of *adat* leaders in managing resource distribution, and affirm the legitimacy of elected officials by adhering to common standards (Großmann, 2023). This corresponds with Scott's assertion that subsistence ethics and moral responsibility are significant influences in rural existence, particularly in situations where official institutions are regarded with doubt.

Examining rural development through the perspective of the moral economy offers essential insight into the persistence of specific distribution methods and the construction of political legitimacy via culturally ingrained practices that emphasize trust, solidarity, and moral reciprocity rather than technocratic rationality.

### **Institutional Hybridity in Post-Decentralization Indonesia**

The Gorontalo scenario exemplifies institutional hybridity, where the distinctions between formal state governance and customary authority are both obscured and collaboratively shaped. Following Indonesia's decentralization changes in the early 2000s, local governments have acquired considerable autonomy in overseeing rural development (Olumekor, 2024). Instead of supplanting traditional institutions, these changes have established environments in which *adat* systems and state institutions coexist, collaborate, and occasionally compete. This dynamic contests established dichotomies that distinguish between "state" and "society" or "modern" and "traditional."

In Gorontalo, hybrid governance is evident in collaborative decision-making, the ceremonial legitimization of state activities, and the concurrent leadership responsibilities assumed by persons operating within both political and customary spheres. Village leaders confer with *Dewan Adat*, elected representatives engage in traditional ceremonies, and community members seek counsel from both bodies (Brandstedt & Emmelin, 2016). This interaction demonstrates that institutional authority is relational, dynamic, and based on regional legitimacy rather than rigid legal divisions.

This hybridity is not exclusive to Gorontalo. In post-decentralization Indonesia, especially in the eastern provinces, same patterns arise, illustrating a wider national trend where governance is mediated between formal regulations and cultural norms (Raymond

& Ward, 2023). Gorontalo presents a notably instructive example owing to the enduring robustness of its customary institutions and their official acknowledgment within local governing structures.

Comprehending institutional hybridity enables scholars and policymakers to transcend inflexible state-building frameworks and acknowledge the multiplicity of power in rural contexts. It underscores that successful development and governance necessitate both technical proficiency and an awareness of indigenous systems of authority and legitimacy (Ghio & Verona, 2022). The example of Gorontalo underscores the necessity for context-sensitive policy frameworks that recognize and interact with hybridity, rather than seeking to eradicate or circumvent it in the quest for modernization or administrative homogeneity.

### **Implications for Policy and Theory**

The results of this study have substantial significance for development policy and sociological theory, especially in environments characterized by decentralization and cultural diversity, such as rural Gorontalo. The research highlights the critical necessity of acknowledging and involving informal organizations, particularly traditional leadership systems, as legitimate and impactful participants in rural development from a policy standpoint. Traditional top-down methodologies frequently presume that advancement relies exclusively on official governing structures, neglecting the integral influence of customary authority, familial networks, and symbolic legitimacy. Disregarding these structures jeopardizes policy efficacy, fosters community opposition, or permits elite appropriation via unrecognized informal avenues.

Policymakers should adopt context-sensitive development frameworks that clearly incorporate customary institutions into planning, implementation, and accountability processes. This encompasses facilitating inclusive consultative processes, institutionalizing *adat* positions in local governance, and guaranteeing that aid distribution adheres to both formal equitable requirements and local ethical norms.

This study theoretically advances rural sociology by illustrating the co-production of development via hybrid authority structures, wherein formal and informal elites contest legitimacy, resources, and decision-making authority. It further develops elite theory by emphasizing that elites in decentralized contexts obtain power not only from formal positions but also from their ability to use symbolic capital, cultural authority, and patronage networks. The integration of different viewpoints enhances our comprehension of the operational dynamics of government in intricate rural settings.

This research advocates for a transition from technocratic and state-centric paradigms of rural development to a more relational and embedded framework, whereby policy formulation and sociological investigation acknowledge the comprehensive array of actors and norms influencing rural transformation. Gorontalo functions as both a local example and a perspective for comprehending the wider dynamics of power, culture, and development in post-decentralization Indonesia.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the intricate relationship between political power and cultural tradition within the framework of rural development in Gorontalo, Indonesia. Grounded in rural sociology and elite theory, the research analysed how local political elites manoeuvre within the intersecting realms of formal governance and customary institutions. The findings reveal that rural development in Gorontalo operates through hybrid governance, where elected officials and traditional leaders simultaneously collaborate, compete, and co-produce development outcomes. Elected officials often rely on ritual validation and symbolic acts to gain cultural legitimacy, while traditional leaders maintain influence through moral authority and community trust. Resource allocation is embedded in kinship and adat networks, which function as a moral economy that emphasizes equity, obligation, and communal reciprocity.

Nevertheless, these processes are also constrained by persistent challenges, including elite capture, land conflicts, and the marginalization of vulnerable groups, all of which hinder inclusive and equitable growth. Overall, the study concludes that rural development is not a linear administrative process but a socially negotiated practice shaped by the interplay of formal institutions and customary norms. These results underscore the importance of designing development strategies that engage traditional institutions as partners in governance while also instituting accountability mechanisms to safeguard equity and transparency. Theoretically, this research contributes by integrating rural sociology and elite theory within the context of decentralization, demonstrating that symbolic legitimacy and elite strategies are central to understanding rural power dynamics.

Future research may build on these insights by employing longitudinal or comparative approaches across different regions of Eastern Indonesia to capture how hybrid governance evolves over time and under diverse sociopolitical conditions. Such an agenda would not only enrich scholarly debates but also provide valuable policy guidance for ensuring that rural development advances the principles of social inclusion, sustainable community building, and accountable governance. In this regard, the findings strongly resonate with global development agendas, particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty) by addressing equitable access to resources, SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) through the strengthening of inclusive local governance, and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by highlighting the need for legitimacy, accountability, and protection of marginalized groups within hybrid governance structures.

## References.

- Abbott, K. W., & Faude, B. (2022). Hybrid institutional complexes in global governance. *The Review of International Organizations*, 17(2), 263–291. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-021-09431-3>
- Agnoletti, M., & Santoro, A. (2021). The Italian national register of historical rural landscapes. In *Cultural Heritage—Possibilities for Land-Centered Societal Development* (pp. 15–34). Springer.
- Alasuutari, P. (2015). The Discursive Side of New Institutionalism. *Cultural Sociology*, 9(2), 162–184. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975514561805>
- Annavarapu, S., & Levenson, Z. (2021). The Social Life of the State: Relational Ethnography

- and Political Sociology. *Qualitative Sociology*, 44(3), 337–348. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-021-09491-2>
- Apriliyanti, I. D. (2023). Continuity and complexity: A study of patronage politics in state-owned enterprises in post-authoritarian Indonesia. *Critical Asian Studies*, 55(4), 516–537.
- Berenschot, W., Capri, W., & Dhian, D. (2021). A quiet revolution? Village head elections and the democratization of rural Indonesia. *Critical Asian Studies*, 53(1), 126–146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2021.1871852>
- Brandstedt, E., & Emmelin, M. (2016). The concept of sustainable welfare. In *Sustainability and the political economy of welfare* (pp. 15–28). Routledge.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Cai, M., Zhang, Q., & Zhao, X. (2024). Social embeddedness, power balance, and local governance in China. *World Development*, 179, 106592.
- Douglas, D. J. A. (2005). The restructuring of local government in rural regions: A rural development perspective. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 21(2), 231–246. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2005.01.003>
- Duressa, G. T. (2022). Dhibaayyuu: An indigenous thanks giving ritual among the Borana Oromo, Southern Ethiopia. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.2011540>
- Facal, G. (2022). Biopolitics of Invulnerability. *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 50(147), 234–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2022.2042117>
- Ferrari, A., Bacco, M., Gaber, K., Jedlitschka, A., Hess, S., Kaipainen, J., Koltsida, P., Toli, E., & Brunori, G. (2022). Drivers, barriers and impacts of digitalisation in rural areas from the viewpoint of experts. *Information and Software Technology*, 145, 106816. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infsof.2021.106816>
- Ghio, A., & Verona, R. (2022). Unfolding institutional plurality in hybrid organizations through practices: The case of a cooperative bank. *The British Accounting Review*, 54(4), 101041. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bar.2021.101041>
- Großmann, K. (2023). Patronage networks and the hope for a better future: Coal mining in Indonesia. *The Political Economy of Extractivism: Global Perspectives on the Seduction of Rent*, 123–136.
- Haddad, C., & Benner, M. (2021). Situating innovation policy in Mediterranean Arab countries: A research agenda for context sensitivity. *Research Policy*, 50(7), 104273. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2021.104273>
- Halabi, D., & Shoshana, A. (2025). Beyond a sense of obliviousness: elite education and national identity among Palestinian students in Israel. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 28(2), 175–192.
- Hatma Indra Jaya, P., Izudin, A., & Aditya, R. (2024). The role of ecotourism in developing local communities in Indonesia. *Journal of Ecotourism*, 23(1), 20–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14724049.2022.2117368>
- Hinta, E., Yusuf, M., Ntelu, A., Muassomah, & Thalib, R. (2025). Language mixing in traditional medicine manuscripts: public access to health knowledge and practices in Indonesia. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 12(1), 2464385.

- <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2025.2464385>
- Jamilah, J., Jayadi, K., Abduh, A., & Yatim, H. (2025). Portrait of traditional dance in wedding ceremonies amidst modernization as social identity in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. *Global Knowledge, Memory and Communication*.
- Jufri, A. (2022). Islam and strengthening civil society (The portrait of the experiences of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah). *Jurnal Adabiyah*, 22(2), 252–272.
- Luhukay, R. S. (2024). Revitalizing The Regeneration System Of Political Parties In Building Pancasila Democracy. *Jurnal Legalitas*, 17(1), 81–97. <https://doi.org/10.33756/jelta.v17i1.24897>
- Manse, M. (2024). The plural legacies of legal pluralism: local practices and contestations of customary law in late colonial Indonesia. *Legal Pluralism and Critical Social Analysis*, 56(3), 328–348. <https://doi.org/10.1080/27706869.2024.2377447>
- Motadi, M. S., & Sikhware, T. (2024). Understanding hybridity governance in Africa: A theoretical framework for hybrid structures, policies, and practices. *International Journal of Business Ecosystem & Strategy* (2687-2293), 6(4), 122–136. <https://doi.org/10.36096/ijbes.v6i4.655>
- Mu, Q., & Aimar, F. (2022). How Are Historical Villages Changed? A Systematic Literature Review on European and Chinese Cultural Heritage Preservation Practices in Rural Areas. *Land*, 11(7), 982. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land11070982>
- O'Reilly, J. G. (2023). A proposal to strengthen Indonesian democracy. *Asian Politics & Policy*, 15(3), 520–547. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12705>
- Olumekor, M. (2024). Towards an evidence-based consensus on the impact of public sector entrepreneurship on public administration. *Management Review Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11301-024-00433-0>
- Raymond, C., & Ward, P. R. (2023). Fear and loathing in an Indonesian Island: An ethnographic study of community responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. In *The Emerald Handbook of the Sociology of Emotions for a Post-Pandemic World: Imagined Emotions and Emotional Futures* (pp. 257–300). Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80382-323-220231013>
- Sulistiyadi, Y., Demolingo, R. H., Latif, B. S., Indrajaya, T., Adnyana, P. P., & Wiweka, K. (2024). The Implementation of Integrated Coastal Management in the Development of Sustainability-Based Geotourism: A Case Study of Olele, Indonesia. *Sustainability*, 16(3), 1272. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16031272>
- Thalib, M. A. (2023). Unraveling Gorontalo's Local Wisdom: The Essence Of Cost Accounting Practice. *Jurnal Bisnis Dan Akuntansi*, 25(2), 327–336. <https://doi.org/10.34208/jba.v25i2.2146>
- Wilfahrt, M. (2018). The politics of local government performance: Elite cohesion and cross-village constraints in decentralized Senegal. *World Development*, 103, 149–161. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2017.09.010>