



Original Article

Martabat Tujuh in Indigenous Diplomacy: Reconstructing Buton's Hierarchical Communication System for Contemporary Conflict Resolution

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Abstract:

Martabat Tujuh, the 17th-century customary constitution of the Buton Sultanate in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia, represented a unique integration of Islamic metaphysics and indigenous political culture. While its legal authority ended after national unification, its governance philosophy continues to operate through the living moral code of Binci Binciki Kuli, particularly in indigenous conflict resolution practices. This study reconstructs Martabat Tujuh as a hierarchical communication system and examines its contemporary relevance for diplomacy and peacebuilding. A qualitative design integrating ethnography of communication and hermeneutics was applied, with data collected from customary leaders through interviews, Baruga observations, and document analysis. Findings reveal a multi-tiered mediation process rooted in relational ethics moving from Parabela to Bonto, Kenepulu, Sapati, and only exceptionally to the Sultan. Baruga serves as a deliberative space uniting rational persuasion and spiritual accountability. This study identifies Martabat Tujuh as an indigenous theoretical foundation for communicative governance in modern Indonesia.

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Introduction

Indigenous knowledge systems play a growing role in shaping peacebuilding and governance models across the Asia-Pacific region, particularly in communities that maintain long-standing socio-political traditions (Boege, 2007; Vaiioleti, 2016). One significant case is the Buton Sultanate in Southeast Sulawesi-an Islamic polity where spirituality and administrative governance were historically inseparable (Syahartijan &

Jumaidin, 2016). Its constitutional soul lies in Martabat Tujuh (Seven Dignities), derived from the Sufi theology of Wahdat al-Wujud, later adapted into a practical indigenous governance framework that directed social ethics, diplomatic relations, and conflict resolution (Purwanto, 2017; Rohmana, 2021).

Although the system's juridical function ceased after Indonesia's independence, its moral-spiritual principles remain alive within the philosophy of Binci Binciki Kuli emphasizing empathy, collective protection, and relational dignity. These values are materially expressed in Baruga, a circular deliberative space where traditional leaders mediate disputes through symbolic speech, ritual performance, and consensus-seeking.

Most existing studies focus on the metaphysical aspect of Martabat Tujuh or the normative ethics of Binci Binciki Kuli (Syahartijan et al., 2018; Purwanto, 2017). Few explore: (1) Martabat Tujuh as a hierarchical communication system structuring social diplomacy. (2) How this indigenous system can inform contemporary conflict governance in Indonesia.

This gap obscures the Sultanate's contribution to political communication and decolonial governance theory domains long dominated by Eurocentric perspectives (Connell, 2019). This study therefore aims to: (1) Reconstruct the communication hierarchy of Martabat Tujuh in conflict mediation. (2) Analyze its potential integration into today's pluralistic governance systems.

Significance of the Study-Theoretical contribution: Provides a Southern epistemology to deliberative democracy and relational peacebuilding discourse (Habermas, 1996; Lederach, 1997).- Practical contribution: Strengthens village dispute resolution practices aligned with Indonesian decentralization policy (Haryanto, 2020).

Ultimately, this study argues that Martabat Tujuh is not a historical artifact, but a living indigenous governance model offering: Morally grounded communication, culturally legitimate authority, community-centered peace processes. Well-aligned with current democratic aspirations in Indonesia.

Methods

This qualitative study applied an interpretive design that integrates ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1972) and hermeneutic analysis (Ricoeur, 1981) to examine how indigenous diplomatic structures encoded in Martabat Tujuh continue to function in conflict resolution. These approaches enabled an in-depth understanding of symbolic communication, hierarchical authority, and the relational ethics of traditional leadership.

The research took place in Kadie Sempa-Sempa of the Buton Islands, Southeast Sulawesi one of the strongest indigenous governance centers where the Baruga deliberation system and adat authority roles maintain institutional relevance.

A purposive sampling strategy targeted individuals with proven cultural legitimacy and first-hand experience in mediating local conflicts. Ten participants were involved: three Parabela, two Bonto, two Kenepulu/ Lakina, two religious-community leaders, and one youth representative. These participants granted informed consent as part of a collective commitment to preserving customary knowledge.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through four triangulated techniques:

1. In-depth semi-structured interviews
Exploring the logic and flow of indigenous conflict mediation.

2. Participant observation
Documenting communicative patterns, seating arrangements, ritual actions, and symbolic expressions in Baruga.
3. Focus Group Discussion (FGD)
Identifying current challenges and adaptation possibilities from youth perspectives.
4. Document analysis
Reviewing historical manuscripts, government records, and scholarly literature on Buton governance.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2021) thematic procedures:

- transcription and familiarization,
- open and axial coding,
- theme construction linking communication hierarchy with moral authority,
- synthesis into a reconstructed model of indigenous diplomacy.

Hermeneutic interpretation contextualized philosophy, ritual meaning, spatial design, and linguistic aesthetics within worldview logic.

Trustworthiness

To ensure rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2020):

Strategy	Application
Credibility	Member checking + triangulation
Transferability	Thick cultural description
Dependability	Reflexive analytic audit trail
Confirmability	NVivo-assisted coding + cultural safeguards

Ethical approval was provided by the Buton Cultural Council, affirming respectful handling of sacred and restricted cultural knowledge.

Results

Sub 1 Hierarchical Indigenous Diplomacy in Martabat Tujuh

Findings demonstrate that the Buton Sultanate established a multi-tiered indigenous diplomacy system. Power was not centralized in the Sultan but distributed across traditional authorities who were bound to relational ethics and spiritual accountability (Syahartijan & Jumaidin, 2016).

Authority escalation followed this pathway:

- Parabela – community-level mediator
- Bonto – inter-village mediator
- Lakina/Bobato – regional supervisor
- Sapati – national-level adjudicator
- Sultan – ultimate symbolic authority

Each stage sought resolution before escalation, demonstrating the subsidiarity principle in customary governance (Haryanto, 2020).

Table 1. Hierarchical Communication System in Butonese Conflict Mediation

Level	Actor	Jurisdiction	Primary Function
I	Parabela	Kadie (village confederation)	Resolve local disputes
II	Bonto	Multiple Kadie	Facilitate inter-village mediation
III	Lakina/Bobato	Regional & maritime areas	Oversight & enforce adat
IV	Sapati	Sultanate-wide	Resolve complex cases
V	Sultan	Spiritual state leader	Provide final legitimation

Source: Field documentation, 2025

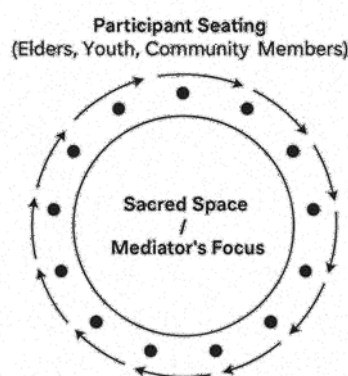
This model aligns strongly with vertical peacebuilding (Lederach, 1997) and shows that indigenous diplomacy is institutional, not informal. Moreover, justice in Buton stems from moral speech acts:

- speaking truth with clarity,
- calming conflict parties emotionally,
- foregrounding collective dignity (kuli).

Thus, communication itself becomes an instrument of ethical governance (Widianingsih & Prasetyo, 2021).

Sub 2 Baruga Deliberation as a Moral Public Sphere

Direct observations revealed that Baruga serves as the principal arena of diplomacy. It operates as a cultural public sphere, where participants sit circularly symbolizing unity and equality.



Source: Field documentation, 2025

Figure 1. Spatial Organization of Baruga Deliberation

Deliberation follows ritual sequencing:

1. Invocation prayer (integrating spirituality into truth-seeking)
2. Narrative presentation from disputants
3. Moral interpretation by elders
4. Collective consensus articulation (verbal and emotional)
5. Ritual reconciliation (podele)

This resembles deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1996), yet goes beyond it because:

- spiritual presence shapes decisions,

- emotions and metaphors (kabanti) guide persuasion,
- reconciliation transcends legal settlement.

Therefore, Baruga represents hybrid deliberation (Oishi, 2021), balancing: rational discourse + ancestral authority + emotional healing. Case evidence: A 2022 maritime boundary conflict between Kadatua and Siompu was prevented from escalating through Baruga mediation-no court intervention necessary.

Sub 3 Symbolic Ethics as a Governance Doctrine

Martabat Tujuh embeds cosmological meaning into politics. Every communicative decision is:

- performative → a moral demonstration
- accountable → before God, community, and ancestors
- restorative → repairing disrupted relationships

The Sultan’s silence in many disputes represents: maximum trust in ethical grassroots diplomacy. Thus, authority flows upward, not downward contrary to state bureaucracy. This supports decolonial governance ideas that value indigenous legitimacy over coercion (Smith & Tuck, 2019; Connell, 2019).

Sub 4 Contemporary Relevance for Indonesian Peacebuilding

Indonesia faces rising disputes due to:

- land demarcation,
- marine resource competition,
- demographic pressures,
- weakening community trust in formal institutions.

Interviews confirm that Martabat Tujuh offers scalable solutions:

Modern Challenge	Customary Solution via Martabat Tujuh
Legal distrust	Trust-based moral leadership
Violent escalation	De-escalation through hierarchical mediation
Loss of cultural respect	Restoring relational accountability
Fragmented civil society	Unity through shared traditions and ritual discourse

This meets current state policy for strengthening village-level governance (Haryanto, 2020) and supports inclusion of adat diplomacy into formal mechanisms (Asri & Rahman, 2021). Ultimately, Butonese diplomacy shows that: Peace is sustained not by force, but by communication rooted in dignity.

Conclusion

This study reconstructs Martabat Tujuh as a hierarchical indigenous diplomacy system that historically governed communication and moral authority in the Buton Sultanate. Findings confirm that conflict mediation was organized through layered customary leadership beginning at the community level through Parabela and only escalating to Sapati or the Sultan when local resolution proved insufficient.

This approach reflects a culturally embedded subsidiarity principle where governance respects local wisdom, relational proximity, and trust-based legitimacy (Haryanto, 2020). Moreover, Baruga deliberation demonstrates a hybrid form of public communication where reason, emotion, spirituality, and symbolic performance jointly

contribute to peaceful reconciliation (Oishi, 2021).

The continuity of Binci Binciki Kuli in contemporary conflicts indicates that the philosophical foundation of Martabat Tujuh remains relevant. Integrating this indigenous model into state policy can strengthen communicative governance, restore community cohesion, and enhance non-violent dispute resolution in Indonesia's multicultural society.

Therefore, Martabat Tujuh is not merely historical heritage but a viable framework for modern diplomacy grounded in dignity, ethical discourse, and collective harmony.

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