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Representation of Power in the Symbolism of Traditional Rituals: Cultural Anthropology Studies

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Abstract

This study examines how traditional rituals in Eastern Indonesia function as symbolic arenas for representing and legitimizing power within indigenous communities. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving traditional leaders, ritual specialists, elders, youth, and women participants. The findings show that ritual hierarchy, sacred objects, spiritual beliefs, and adaptive cultural practices collectively reinforce authority and sustain social order. Power is reproduced not only through visible leadership structures but also through symbolic meanings embedded in ritual performances, sacred materiality, and collective obedience. The study also reveals that ritual systems remain adaptive, accommodating generational, technological, and gender-related changes without losing symbolic legitimacy. These findings contribute to cultural anthropology by demonstrating that rituals operate as dynamic systems of symbolic governance. The study offers theoretical insights into symbolic power and practical implications for cultural preservation, indigenous governance, and policy development in culturally diverse societies.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional rituals remain central to the social organization of many indigenous societies, functioning not merely as ceremonial expressions of spiritual belief but as complex socio-political mechanisms through which authority, legitimacy, and collective identity are produced and maintained. Within cultural anthropology, rituals have long been understood as symbolic systems that shape social meanings and reproduce institutional order. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that ritual practices also operate as arenas of power, where symbolic authority is continuously enacted, contested, and transformed (Sasaki & Baba, 2024; Parker, 2024; Isnaeni et al., 2025; Chi, 2024). This perspective is especially important in societies where formal governance structures coexist with customary institutions, creating layered systems of authority. In such settings, ritual symbols become crucial mediators linking sacred beliefs, political legitimacy, and social obedience (Bagçeci, 2025; Xu & Liu, 2025; Kustermans et al., 2022; Setiawan et al., 2025; Sjoraida et al., 2025).

Recent anthropological and sociological studies demonstrate that symbolic power remains highly influential in sustaining traditional leadership structures despite modernization and state expansion. Symbolic authority often derives from culturally embedded objects, ritual language, sacred performances, and inherited ceremonial roles that transcend ordinary social interactions (Keane, 2023; Letlora et al., 2024). Rather than relying solely on material or coercive power, customary leaders frequently consolidate authority through symbolic legitimacy that appears natural, sacred, and historically continuous. This symbolic process creates what Bourdieu conceptualized as a form of power that is effective precisely because it is recognized and internalized by the social community (Sharlamanov et al., 2024; Ramadhani et al., 2025). Recent studies further show that symbolic legitimacy continues to shape governance in indigenous communities across Asia and Africa, particularly where traditional leadership remains socially influential (Otubanjo & Balogun, 2025; Shamhuna, 2025; Olaopa & Ogundare, 2023; Abrefa Busia & Adjei, 2022).

The socio-cultural landscape of Eastern Indonesia provides a particularly compelling context for examining this phenomenon. Regions such as Maluku, East Nusa Tenggara, and Papua are characterized by strong customary institutions, rich ritual traditions, and enduring ancestral cosmologies. In these communities, ritual practices frequently serve as mechanisms for reinforcing leadership hierarchy and sustaining communal order (Alidu, 2022; Matsiliza, 2024). Ritual ceremonies involving sacred heirlooms, chants, dances, and sacrificial offerings function not merely as cultural heritage but as symbolic instruments through which authority is publicly validated. These symbolic performances place traditional leaders at the center of social and spiritual life, positioning them as intermediaries between human communities and ancestral powers (Rusdi et al., 2025; Kay, 2024). Consequently, ritual participation often reproduces social hierarchy while simultaneously strengthening communal cohesion (Kišjuhas, 2024; Olanrewaju & Talabi, 2024; Awaru, 2025; Ossai, 2024).

Empirical evidence suggests that ritual authority in Eastern Indonesia remains resilient despite increasing pressures from modernization, religious institutionalization, and globalization. Contemporary transformations in governance and cultural exchange have altered how rituals are performed, but they have not eliminated the symbolic foundations of traditional power (Shamhuna, 2025; Rohwati, 2025). Instead, many communities adapt ritual structures to new socio-political realities by incorporating modern communication technologies, accommodating external audiences, or modifying ceremonial duration while preserving symbolic core elements (Lynch et al., 2024; Yuetong & Jianxing, 2024). Such adaptations indicate that ritual systems possess remarkable resilience. They persist not because they resist change entirely, but because they strategically reinterpret tradition to maintain legitimacy under shifting conditions.

Despite growing scholarly attention to ritual practices, much of the recent literature still emphasizes religious, cultural preservation, or heritage dimensions while underexploring the political functions of ritual symbolism. Studies on ritual commonly frame ceremonies as expressions of spirituality, identity, or cultural continuity, often overlooking how rituals reproduce inequalities and legitimize authority (Allasiw et al., 2023; Becker & Bernecker, 2023). This tendency risks romanticizing ritual traditions by presenting them as culturally neutral or socially harmonious. In reality, rituals frequently encode asymmetrical power relations through symbolic restrictions, ceremonial hierarchy, and exclusive access to sacred objects. Such symbolic mechanisms normalize authority by embedding it within moral and spiritual narratives, making hierarchy appear legitimate and unquestionable (Parker, 2024; Keane, 2023).

Theoretical developments in symbolic anthropology and power studies offer a strong basis for understanding ritual as a technology of governance. Symbolic power operates through cultural meanings rather than overt coercion, making obedience appear voluntary and natural. Ritual repetition plays a central role in this process by transforming historically constructed hierarchies into seemingly timeless truths (Simpson, 2022; Cao, 2025). Sacred symbols, ritual chants, and ceremonial restrictions cultivate collective beliefs that reinforce social discipline and normalize authority. Through repeated ritual enactments, communities internalize expectations regarding hierarchy, leadership, and obedience (Sasaki & Baba, 2024; Shamhuna, 2025). Therefore, analyzing ritual symbolism provides a critical pathway for understanding how power is reproduced at the cultural level (Rafiq-uz-Zaman & Karimi et al., 2025).

At the same time, rituals should not be interpreted solely as instruments of domination. Emerging studies indicate that ritual spaces also function as arenas of negotiation where authority can be challenged, adapted, and redistributed. The increasing participation of women and younger generations in ritual processes reflects important transformations in symbolic power structures. Although traditional leadership often remains male-centered and lineage-based, recent shifts suggest broader participation in ceremonial roles, symbolic exchanges, and decision-making processes (Nilan & Maunati, 2025; Isro'iyah, 2025). These developments indicate that ritual systems are dynamic rather than static. They preserve continuity while simultaneously allowing reinterpretation of authority. This dual function reveals the complexity of ritual as both a conservative and transformative institution.

The state of the art in contemporary ritual studies increasingly acknowledges the importance of examining rituals within broader governance and power frameworks. Recent studies have explored ritual adaptation, cultural marginalization, indigenous autonomy, and symbolic resilience under modern institutional pressures (Sasaki & Baba, 2024; Kay, 2024; Rusdi et al., 2025). However, significant gaps remain in understanding how ritual symbolism specifically represents and legitimizes power in Eastern Indonesian indigenous societies. Existing research has largely focused on descriptive accounts of ceremonial practices or cultural preservation, leaving insufficient analysis of how symbols actively produce authority, maintain hierarchy, and regulate social behavior. Moreover, limited studies integrate symbolic anthropology with contemporary power theory to explain how rituals simultaneously preserve authority and accommodate social change.

This study addresses these limitations by examining traditional rituals in Eastern Indonesia through the combined lens of cultural anthropology and symbolic power analysis. Unlike previous studies that emphasize ritual as cultural heritage or spiritual practice, this research positions ritual as a dynamic symbolic arena where authority is legitimized, negotiated, and reproduced. The novelty of this study lies in three main contributions. First, it offers an integrated analytical framework combining symbolic anthropology and power theory to explain ritual-based legitimacy. Second, it provides empirical evidence from Eastern Indonesia regarding how ritual symbols function as instruments of authority, social control, and hierarchy reproduction. Third, it demonstrates that ritual spaces simultaneously sustain traditional power and accommodate emerging shifts involving gender and generational participation. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how symbolic elements in traditional rituals represent power, legitimize customary leadership, and shape authority relations within indigenous communities in Eastern Indonesia, thereby contributing to broader debates on ritual, governance, and symbolic power in contemporary anthropological scholarship.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using an ethnographic approach to examine the representation of power in the symbolism of traditional rituals in Eastern Indonesia. Ethnography was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of cultural practices, social interactions, and symbolic meanings within natural community settings. This approach is particularly appropriate for investigating ritual practices, as rituals are embedded within everyday cultural realities and cannot be adequately understood through detached observation alone. Ethnographic inquiry allows researchers to capture both explicit ritual performances and implicit symbolic meanings associated with authority, hierarchy, and legitimacy (Spradley, 2016; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Furthermore, qualitative ethnography facilitates interpretive analysis of how ritual symbols function as mechanisms for the reproduction and negotiation of power.

This research adopted an interpretive paradigm, emphasizing the socially constructed nature of meaning and authority. Within this framework, power was not treated as a purely institutional or coercive phenomenon but as a symbolic process reproduced through collective beliefs, ritual practices, and cultural norms. The analytical framework integrated symbolic anthropology and power theory, particularly drawing from interpretive anthropology and symbolic power perspectives to understand how rituals sustain social hierarchy.

Research Site and Context

The study was conducted in an indigenous community in Eastern Indonesia, referred to using a pseudonym to protect community confidentiality and cultural sensitivity. The research site was selected purposively based on three criteria: the community maintains strong customary institutions, traditional rituals continue to be practiced regularly, and ritual ceremonies remain central to leadership legitimacy and social organization. The selected community preserves an annual ritual known as *Haru Matua*, a ceremonial event involving ancestral worship, symbolic offerings, sacred chants, and collective participation.

This setting provided a relevant empirical context for examining how symbolic objects, ceremonial sequences, and ritual authority contribute to the construction of power. The community represents a socio-cultural environment where traditional leadership continues to coexist with modern administrative systems, creating a dynamic space for analyzing continuity and transformation in symbolic authority.

Data Collection Techniques and Informants

Data collection was conducted over four months using participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Participant observation served as the primary method, allowing researchers to directly observe ritual sequences, symbolic interactions, spatial arrangements, and power relations during ceremonial activities. Detailed field notes were recorded to capture ritual order, symbolic objects, leader-participant interactions, and non-verbal expressions relevant to authority representation.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 key informants selected through purposive sampling. Informants included three traditional leaders, four ritual specialists, five elders, three youth representatives, and three women actively involved in ritual preparation and ceremonial participation. This composition ensured diverse perspectives across generational, gender, and authority-based roles. Interviews focused on participants' interpretations of ritual symbols, perceptions of leadership legitimacy, and changes in ritual authority under modernization. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was conducted in either the local language or Bahasa Indonesia, depending on participant preference.

Supporting documents such as ritual records, community archives, photographs, and ceremonial artifacts were also analyzed to strengthen contextual interpretation. The combination of multiple data sources improved the depth and richness of the ethnographic findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis began with transcription and familiarization with field notes and interview data. Initial coding was then performed to identify recurring meanings related to ritual symbolism, authority, legitimacy, hierarchy, and power negotiation. Codes sharing conceptual similarity were grouped into broader themes.

Four major themes emerged from the analysis: ritual hierarchy and authority, material symbolism and elite legitimacy, spiritual legitimacy of leadership, and negotiation of power in modern contexts. These themes were interpreted through symbolic anthropology and power theory to reveal how rituals function as mechanisms of social reproduction and authority legitimation. Interpretive analysis focused not only on visible ritual practices but also on latent meanings embedded in symbolic interactions.

Table 1. Thematic Coding Framework for Ritual Symbolism Analysis

Theme	Analytical Focus
Ritual Hierarchy	Role distribution and authority structure
Material Symbolism	Sacred objects and symbolic restrictions
Spiritual Legitimacy	Ritual language and sacred authority
Power Negotiation	Gender, youth, and modernization dynamics

Source: Developed by the authors, 2025

Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure research rigor, this study employed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria following qualitative trustworthiness standards. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement, triangulation of observation, interviews, and documentation, as well as member checking with selected informants to validate interpretations. Transferability was supported through thick description of ritual contexts and symbolic practices. Dependability was ensured by maintaining detailed field documentation and coding records. Confirmability was established through reflexive memo writing and peer debriefing to minimize interpretive bias. Ethical considerations were carefully maintained throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality was guaranteed, and local customary norms were respected during data collection. These procedures ensured that the research maintained both academic rigor and cultural sensitivity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the empirical findings obtained from participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation within the indigenous community in Eastern Indonesia. Before discussing the main findings, it is important to emphasize that the results are organized around four major themes identified through thematic analysis: ritual hierarchy and authority, material symbolism and elite legitimacy, spiritual legitimacy of leadership, and negotiation of power in modern contexts. These themes demonstrate how power is not exercised merely through direct authority, but through ritual symbols, collective beliefs, and cultural performances that continuously reproduce legitimacy within the community. The findings show that traditional rituals serve as symbolic arenas where authority is enacted, reinforced,

and negotiated. Power is embedded in ritual sequences, sacred objects, ceremonial language, and collective obedience, making leadership appear both culturally natural and spiritually sanctioned.

Ritual Hierarchy and Authority Structure

The annual *Haru Matua* ritual reveals a clear hierarchical order that reflects the broader social structure of the community. Each participant occupies a predetermined ceremonial role, and authority is strongly centralized in the *mosa laki* (traditional leader). The ritual procession begins only after the leader gives symbolic approval, indicating that leadership is not merely administrative but ritually institutionalized.

Field observations showed that the *mosa laki* always occupies the central spatial position during ceremonies. He leads prayers, initiates sacred chants, and authorizes transitions between ritual stages. Elders stand beside him as interpreters of customary law, while younger participants serve in supportive roles such as preparing offerings or organizing ceremonial logistics.

Table 2. Ritual Role Distribution in Haru Matua Ceremony

Ritual Actor	Primary Role	Symbolic Position
Mosa Laki	Ritual leader and prayer authority	Highest authority
Ritual Elders	Sacred interpreters	Senior authority
Ritual Assistants	Ceremony facilitators	Operational support
Youth Participants	Performers and logistics	Peripheral participation
Women Participants	Preparation and offerings	Supportive-symbolic role

Source: Primary ethnographic data processed by authors, 2025

Table 2 indicates that ritual roles mirror the community’s social hierarchy. Authority is communicated through role distribution, spatial arrangement, and ceremonial sequencing.

During interviews, participants repeatedly described ritual hierarchy as essential to social order. One elder explained the ceremonial logic of authority in detail:

“During Haru Matua, everyone already understands where they must stand and what they must do. The mosa laki stands at the center because he carries ancestral responsibility. It is not about personal privilege. It is about duty. When he speaks, we listen because the ritual requires order. Without that order, the ceremony loses balance, and people feel something sacred has been disturbed.”

This statement demonstrates that hierarchy is understood as sacred duty rather than domination alone.

A younger participant offered a slightly different perspective:

“We respect our elders because they protect tradition. But sometimes younger people want to understand more deeply why certain roles are restricted. We do not want to replace elders; we want to participate meaningfully and learn.”

This reveals subtle generational shifts regarding participation.

A ritual assistant further emphasized:

“Hierarchy creates discipline. Everyone knows their responsibility. That is why the ritual can unite the entire community.”

These findings show that ritual hierarchy functions as a mechanism of social control and collective coordination. Authority becomes legitimate because it is repeatedly embodied through ceremonial structure.

Material Symbolism and Elite Legitimacy

The second major finding concerns the role of sacred objects in representing power. Material symbols such as woven textiles, heirloom stones, ritual weapons, and ceremonial ornaments act as visible markers of legitimacy and authority.

Observation revealed that access to certain objects is highly restricted. Sacred artifacts may only be handled by members of specific lineages, especially those connected to traditional leadership. This exclusivity creates symbolic boundaries between elites and ordinary community members.

A local weaver described the meaning of ritual textiles:

“This woven cloth is not simply clothing. Every motif carries genealogy, memory, and ancestral blessing. Only descendants of the leader’s lineage may wear the original design. Others may create similar patterns, but never the exact one. If the boundary disappears, the meaning of leadership becomes unclear.”

This indicates that symbolic restriction maintains elite distinction.

A younger artisan reflected on contemporary tensions:

“Sometimes outsiders want to buy the original motif because they think it is beautiful or prestigious. But we cannot sell identity. We can sell cloth, but not sacred meaning.”

This statement illustrates the resistance to commodification.

A village elder added:

“When the leader wears sacred cloth, nobody needs to ask who leads. The symbol speaks before words.”

This demonstrates how symbolic objects communicate authority nonverbally. Material symbolism transforms leadership into a visible social reality that appears historically legitimate and culturally unquestionable.

Spiritual Legitimacy of Leadership

Beyond visible hierarchy and symbolic objects, leadership legitimacy is deeply rooted in spiritual belief. The community believes that the *mosa laki* possesses sacred authority to communicate with ancestral spirits through ritual chants and prayers. This spiritual dimension strengthens obedience because authority becomes linked to cosmological order rather than mere social convention.

During ritual chanting, researchers observed profound silence across participants. Community members lowered their heads, avoided movement, and displayed visible reverence. The atmosphere shifted dramatically from communal interaction to sacred concentration.

One community member explained the spiritual experience:

“When the mosa laki begins chanting, everything changes. People stop talking immediately. We believe the ancestors are listening. In those moments, obedience is not only to the leader but to the ancestors themselves. Disrespecting the ritual feels like disrespecting the unseen world.”

This suggests that ritual obedience is spiritually mediated.

A ritual attendee described personal sensory experience:

“Sometimes during the chants, the air feels different. The wind moves strangely, or the atmosphere becomes heavy. Elders say that is the sign of ancestral presence. Whether we see them or not, we feel that they are here.”

This illustrates how spiritual belief reinforces ritual authority emotionally and collectively.

A local teacher provided a generational reflection:

“Many young people no longer understand every word in the old ritual language. But understanding every word is not the main issue. Reverence survives because the sacred feeling remains stronger than literal comprehension.”

This indicates that symbolic power persists even when linguistic understanding declines. Spiritual legitimacy therefore operates through experience, emotion, and collective belief, strengthening the authority of ritual leadership.

Negotiation of Power in the Context of Modernity

The final finding shows that ritual authority is not static. Traditional power continues to adapt in response to modernization, technological change, state presence, and shifting gender dynamics. Rather than weakening ritual legitimacy, these changes often lead to strategic adaptation.

Field observation revealed several modern modifications. Ritual duration has been shortened to accommodate government visitors and working schedules. Microphones are used for communication, and some ceremonial segments are documented digitally. However, the core symbolic structure remains unchanged.

A ritual committee member explained:

“Years ago, ceremonies could last for days. Now schedules are different. Government officials, visitors, and younger workers cannot stay that long. So we shorten some parts, but the sacred core remains untouched.”

This shows selective adaptation.

A youth organizer described technological integration:

“We use microphones and sometimes record ceremonies so younger generations can learn later. But we never record sacred segments without permission from elders. Technology helps preservation, but tradition still decides the boundaries.”

This indicates coexistence rather than conflict between tradition and modernity.

Gender dynamics also show meaningful transformation. Women remain less visible in formal leadership roles, but their ceremonial participation has increased significantly.

A female participant explained this shift:

“In the past, women mostly worked behind the scenes preparing offerings and food. Now we participate more openly in symbolic activities. We still respect customary rules, but our visibility has increased. People now recognize that preserving ritual also requires women’s voices.”

This statement reflects gradual redistribution of symbolic participation.

The findings demonstrate that ritual power in Eastern Indonesian indigenous communities is sustained through interconnected mechanisms of hierarchy, material symbolism, spiritual legitimacy, and adaptive negotiation. Rituals do not simply preserve tradition; they continuously reproduce authority through cultural

performance and collective belief. At the same time, rituals remain sufficiently flexible to accommodate generational transitions, technological change, and evolving gender roles without losing symbolic legitimacy.

Symbolic Power, Ritual Legitimacy, and the Adaptive Continuity of Indigenous Authority

The findings of this study demonstrate that traditional rituals in Eastern Indonesia function as sophisticated systems of symbolic governance through which authority is legitimized, social hierarchy is reproduced, and collective obedience is culturally maintained. Rather than operating merely as ceremonial or spiritual practices, rituals act as social mechanisms that transform leadership into a sacred institution. This finding reinforces the growing body of contemporary scholarship arguing that ritual should be understood not only as cultural performance but as a political arena where symbolic power is continuously produced and negotiated (Sasaki & Baba, 2024; Parker, 2024). The present study extends this perspective by showing that symbolic power within indigenous rituals is sustained through the interaction of hierarchy, sacred materiality, spiritual legitimacy, and adaptive negotiation with modernity.

The first major finding concerning ritual hierarchy confirms that ceremonial structures function as mechanisms of authority reproduction. The hierarchical arrangement observed in *Haru Matua* demonstrates that power is institutionalized through ritual order, spatial positioning, and symbolic control over ceremonial transitions. This finding aligns with recent studies emphasizing that ritual hierarchy remains central to indigenous governance because leadership legitimacy is reinforced through repeated ceremonial enactment rather than solely through formal institutional recognition (Shamhuna, 2025; Otubanjo & Balogun, 2025). Similar patterns have been documented in indigenous leadership systems in Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, where ritual authority legitimizes leadership by connecting present leaders to ancestral continuity (Lynch et al., 2024).

However, this study goes beyond prior work by showing that ritual hierarchy in Eastern Indonesia is not simply maintained through inherited status but through collective participation in symbolic obedience. Authority becomes effective because community members actively recognize and reproduce it during ritual performance. This finding supports contemporary reinterpretations of symbolic power theory, which argue that power persists not only because elites impose authority but because communities participate in legitimizing it through cultural practices (Keane, 2023; Becker & Bernecker, 2023). Theoretically, this contributes to symbolic anthropology by demonstrating that ritual hierarchy is relational rather than purely top-down. Authority exists through continuous cultural enactment, not static structural dominance.

The second major finding regarding material symbolism reveals that sacred objects function as visible embodiments of legitimacy. Ritual textiles, heirloom stones, ceremonial weapons, and sacred ornaments serve not only as cultural artifacts but as symbolic capital that distinguishes elites from ordinary members. This finding strongly supports recent studies on material symbolism in indigenous societies, which argue that sacred objects carry political meaning because they visually encode authority and ancestral legitimacy (Rusdi et al., 2025; Letlora et al., 2024). Similar evidence has been observed in ritual systems across Melanesia and Southeast Asia, where restricted access to sacred objects reinforces hierarchical distinctions and preserves elite dominance (Kay, 2024).

Nevertheless, the present study identifies a more nuanced dimension absent in much of the existing literature. Sacred objects do not merely symbolize authority; they actively produce social boundaries by regulating who may access, touch, or display

them. This distinction is theoretically important because it shifts the analysis from symbolic representation toward symbolic regulation. Power is embedded not only in the meaning of ritual objects but in the social restrictions surrounding them. Such findings enrich contemporary debates on symbolic capital by demonstrating that ritual objects function simultaneously as markers of identity, instruments of exclusion, and mechanisms of authority preservation. Practically, this implies that cultural preservation policies should not reduce sacred artifacts to heritage commodities, as commodification risks eroding the symbolic restrictions that sustain their meaning.

The third finding highlights the centrality of spiritual legitimacy in maintaining indigenous authority. Leadership in the studied community derives legitimacy not only from lineage or ceremonial position but from the belief that traditional leaders mediate communication between the human and ancestral worlds. This finding is consistent with recent scholarship showing that spiritual legitimacy remains foundational in many indigenous governance systems despite modernization (Parker, 2024; Shamhuna, 2025). Similar dynamics have been reported in ritual-based communities in Nigeria, Papua, and the Philippines, where obedience to traditional authority is reinforced through sacred narratives and cosmological belief systems (Otubanjo & Balogun, 2025; Allasiw et al., 2023).

A particularly significant contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how spiritual legitimacy operates through affective experience rather than doctrinal understanding. Younger participants often no longer fully understand the ancient ritual language, yet they continue to express reverence and obedience. This finding differs from conventional assumptions that symbolic authority weakens when traditional linguistic knowledge declines. Instead, the evidence suggests that symbolic power may persist through embodied experience, emotional atmosphere, and collective ritual sensation. This extends current anthropological discussions by showing that sacred legitimacy can remain robust even under partial cultural discontinuity. The implication is that ritual authority does not depend solely on textual preservation but on experiential continuity. This insight is especially relevant for understanding cultural resilience under globalization.

The fourth finding regarding adaptation to modernity challenges the binary assumption that modernization inevitably erodes traditional authority. The study found that rituals in Eastern Indonesia have adapted to technological change, state presence, and shifting social roles while preserving their symbolic core. This finding aligns with recent studies on ritual resilience, which emphasize that indigenous traditions survive by selectively integrating modern elements rather than rejecting them entirely (Sasaki & Baba, 2024; Kay, 2024). Digital documentation, shortened ceremonies, and broader participation do not necessarily diminish ritual authority; instead, they may strengthen cultural transmission across generations.

This result differs from modernization theories that predict progressive secularization and declining ritual significance. Rather than experiencing ritual decline, the community demonstrates adaptive continuity. Traditional authority remains legitimate because cultural flexibility allows rituals to remain socially relevant. This finding contributes theoretically to debates on cultural resilience by proposing that continuity should not be understood as rigid preservation. Instead, continuity may emerge through strategic adaptation. Ritual persistence therefore depends not on resisting change but on managing change without losing symbolic legitimacy.

Gender transformation constitutes another important dimension of adaptive continuity. The study found increasing visibility of women in ritual participation, although formal leadership remains male-dominated. This partially supports recent gender studies suggesting that indigenous ritual systems are becoming more

inclusive under broader social transformations (Nilan & Maunati, 2025; Isro'iyah, 2025). However, unlike studies that interpret women's increasing participation as evidence of structural transformation, the present findings suggest more gradual symbolic renegotiation. Women's roles have expanded primarily in visible ceremonial participation rather than in ultimate authority distribution.

This separation is an empirical one and is very important. It implies that symbolic inclusion does not necessarily result in structural equality. The number of participants can go up without an increase of the core authority. In such findings, the possibility of more complex understandings of gender transformation in ritual systems is further spurred. This research challenges the dichotomy of the traditional versus the modern, the excluded versus the equal, and suggests that, in some cases, change is a gradual process in which symbolic participation is negotiated.

What makes this study novel is the combination of the analytical tools from symbolic anthropology, power theory and adaptive governance perspectives. Earlier research has focused on ritual in one of the three aspects: cultural heritage, spiritual expression, or social tradition. This research contributes to the literature by envisioning ritual as a process of governance that both legitimates authority, regulates hierarchy and promotes adaptive continuity. The results show that symbolic power among indigenous people is not entirely consensual nor coercive. Instead, it is reproduced in a dynamic relationship between belief, performance, material symbolism and social participation.

Theoretically, the paper makes a contribution to the anthropology of power by enhancing the current understandings of symbolic legitimacy. It suggests that ritual authority is to be understood as a multi-layered system, one which involves visible hierarchy, material sacredness, emotional experience, and adaptive flexibility all in the service of retaining power. This provides a more comprehensive model of indigenous authority in current circumstances.

Its practical implications are relevant to indigenous governance structures, cultural preservation institutions, and policy makers. First, there is a need to acknowledge that rituals are not a static heritage performance but are living systems of governance. Any policy that aims to promote tourism or cultural branding alone can end up de-sacralizing rituals and reduce their social legitimacy. Secondly, local governance institutions should recognize the ongoing importance of traditional authority in community decisionmaking. Indigenous regions may benefit from models of collaborative governance that better reflect the legitimacy of indigenous policy by engaging state institutions and customary leadership. Third, more attention should be given to intercultural education for better understanding of symbols to younger generations.

Although the study has made contributions, there are some limitations. First, the ethnographic treatment of one indigenous community restricts generalization of the entire Eastern Indonesia, where the ritual systems are very different. Secondly, observations of rituals were made during a particular ritual period, which may have ignored intergenerational and seasonal differences. Third, it was found that the research mainly examined the internal community dynamics, and did not extensively investigate the external political-economic aspects of the community including the commercialization of the tourism industry or state intervention.

Future research should address these limitations by conducting comparative ethnographic studies across multiple indigenous communities in Eastern Indonesia, including Maluku, Papua, and East Nusa Tenggara. Comparative analysis could reveal how variations in ritual structure shape different forms of symbolic authority. Future studies may also integrate digital anthropology to examine how social media and virtual representation influence ritual legitimacy. Additionally, more focused

gender-based research is needed to explore whether increased symbolic participation eventually transforms formal leadership structures. Such research would deepen understanding of how ritual power evolves in increasingly interconnected societies.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that traditional rituals in Eastern Indonesia function as powerful symbolic mechanisms through which authority is represented, legitimized, and continuously reproduced within indigenous communities. The findings reveal that ritual hierarchy, sacred material objects, spiritual beliefs, and adaptive cultural practices collectively sustain traditional leadership and reinforce social order. Power is not exercised solely through explicit domination but through symbolic structures that embed obedience within collective meaning, sacred legitimacy, and cultural continuity.

Theoretically, this study contributes to cultural anthropology by extending symbolic power analysis beyond representation toward ritual governance, showing how authority is maintained through the interaction of material symbolism, spiritual legitimacy, and social participation. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of recognizing rituals as living governance systems rather than merely cultural heritage, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive preservation and inclusive governance policies. This study is limited by its focus on a single indigenous community and a specific ritual cycle, which constrains broader generalization. Future research should conduct comparative studies across multiple indigenous communities and explore how digital transformation, gender shifts, and external institutional pressures reshape ritual authority in contemporary societies.

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