
Guardians of Cultural Heritage: Traditional Elites and the Preservation of Local Wisdom in Buton, Indonesia

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Abstract:

This article describes the role of traditional elite actors in Buton Indonesia, namely customary elite actors, palace elite actors, and religious elite actors, in maintaining and transforming local wisdom values. The research was conducted in Baubau City, the former center of Buton Sultanate. The research data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, document (archive) study, and literature study. The results showed that traditional elite actors in Buton have a strategic role in maintaining and preserving local wisdom values, symbolically, educationally and adaptively. Through the active role of traditional elite actors, Buton's cultural identity that is deeply rooted in the values of local wisdom can be preserved amid the dynamics of contemporary social change.

Keywords: traditional elite actors, Buton local wisdom, symbolic, educative, adaptive.

Introduction:

Cultural diversity is a striking feature of Indonesia that relatively distinguishes it from most nations in the world. Cultural diversity has constructed Indonesia's identity as a multicultural nation (Saripudin et al, 2023; Sari & Aulia Thesa, 2023; Khilmi et al, 2024). The reality of cultural diversity is reflected through various elements of local wisdom of the Indonesian people as a creative response to local geographical-political, historical, and situational situations, which contain attitudes, views, and abilities in managing their spiritual and physical environment (Kartawinata ed, 2011: ix). In anthropological approaches in Indonesia, local wisdom is understood as local knowledge, or local intelligence, that is the basis of Indonesian cultural identity.

Preserving the values of local wisdom is a major challenge faced by communities in various parts of Indonesia, including in Buton. As a social entity that has a historical background of a sultanate (Islamic kingdom), the Buton community inherits various elements of local wisdom, both customary values, Islamic spiritual values, and the historical memory of the Buton Sultanate. In the midst of the dynamics of contemporary social change, efforts to maintain and preserve the values of local wisdom in Buton are shown by its traditional elite actors. They are customary elite actors (traditional leaders), palace elite actors (palace heirs), and religious elite actors (local religious leaders). All three play complementary functions that support each other in maintaining the continuity of Buton's cultural

heritage which is deeply rooted in local wisdom values. Their active role and direct involvement in maintaining the sustainability of local wisdom values can be explained through three strategic domains, namely the symbolic, educative and adaptive domains. Through these three strategic domains played by traditional elite actors, Buton's local wisdom values appear to be not just a static heritage, but a living and dynamic social capital. Following Geertz (1973), the practices shown by traditional elite actors in Buton in an effort to maintain and transform local wisdom values reflect their important role in mediating and negotiating cultural meanings so that the noble heritage of Buton culture that is deeply rooted in local wisdom values can be adaptive in an atmosphere of contemporary social change.

So far, studies on the local wisdom of the Buton people have not paid attention to the role of traditional elite actors; traditional elites, palace elites, and religious elites in maintaining and transforming local wisdom values, both in the symbolic, educative and adaptive domains. A number of studies conducted previously generally only highlight the diversity of elements of local wisdom of the Buton community (Sahlan, 2012; Tenri et al, 2019; Hidayatulloh, 2020; Tahara et al, 2021; Dirman, 2021; Munafi et al, 2021). In the Indonesian context, studies on the preservation of local wisdom values are generally associated with the role of customary institutions as buffer institutions (Indah et al, 2023; Purwanti et al, 2024; Hafizhuddin, 2024; Lestari et al, 2025). In fact, in the same study, in a number of countries also still place an important role for customary institutions in the preservation of local wisdom (Khattiri & Rishikesh Pandey, 2023). In contrast to these studies, this article describes the role of traditional elite actors, namely customary elite actors, palace elite actors, and religious elite actors in the preservation of local wisdom, both symbolically, educationally, and adaptively. Through the role of traditional elite actors, Buton's cultural heritage that is deeply rooted in local wisdom values remains relevant in the contemporary socio-cultural landscape.

Methods:

This research was a type of qualitative research with an ethnographic design. The research was conducted in Baubau City, Southeast Sulawesi Province, which is the historical and cultural center of the Buton Sultanate. This region was chosen because it still maintains a social structure that includes customary communities, palaces and local religious institutions that have strong historical roots in the heritage of the Buton Sultanate. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with customary elite actors (traditional leaders), palace elite actors (heirs of the Buton Sultanate), and religious elite actors (local religious leaders), participatory observation, document (archive) study, and literature study. Data analysis was conducted through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing using an interpretative approach.

Results and Discussion:

Categories of Buton Traditional Elites

The existence of traditional elites in contemporary Buton is a legacy of social structures formed since the time of the Buton Sultanate. During the sultanate period, the category of elite in Buton referred to individuals or groups who had special rights in political and governmental power, religion, economy, culture and customs. In the traditional structure of Buton society, they are called *kaomu* and *walaka* (Munafi et al, 2016). In the system of power in the Buton Sultanate, the *kaomu* people have the authority to exercise executive and judicial power in the sultanate institution. The sultan and a number of other high positions in the sultanate organization were reserved for them. Meanwhile, the *walaka* people had the authority to exercise legislative power. Their representatives sit on the customary council, called *siolimbona*.

Today, the descendants of the sultan and the families of the nobles, both *kaomu* and *walaka*, are seen as the palace elite, the heirs of the Buton Sultanate. Through their cultural knowledge and practices, both *kaomu* and *walaka* people play an important role in maintaining the

continuity of the traditions and cultural values of the Buton palace.

In addition to being the palace elite (heirs of the Buton Sultanate palace), the *kaomu* and *walaka* people are also seen as customary elites. In the customary structure, they have the authority to determine social norms and oversee the implementation of customs. The customary elite actors, both *kaomu* and *walaka*, play an active role as guardians, directors and interpreters of local values that have been passed down from generation to generation.

The category of customary elites also includes *bhisa bhawine*, a status designation for an elderly woman, either from among the *kaomu* or *walaka*. In social construction, *bhisa bhawine* are seen as having knowledge and authority in the implementation of customary rituals, especially those related to women's lives, such as pregnancy care, childbirth, pingitan, and the preparation of rituals for the funeral of a woman's body. As elite customary actors, *bhisa bhawine* have an important role in maintaining moral values and customs, especially in guiding women about their role in family life.

Apart from the former center of the Buton Sultanate, the category of customary elite actors is also found in the *kadie*, which is the former territory of the Buton Sultanate. During the sultanate era, each *kadie* had a local government institution, called a *sarana kadie* which consisted of local customary elites. As the *kadie's* local government institution, the *sarana kadie* was led by an official with the title *parabela*. Although the Buton Sultanate has been dissolved since 1960, the existence of the *sarana kadie* under the charismatic leadership of the *parabela* and its customary apparatus is still respected in the life of the people in the local *kadie*. As the leader of the *sarana kadie* today, the *parabela* and the *kadie* customary apparatus have an important role in traditional life, namely as guardians of moral values, customs, and enforcement of customary law in the *kadie* area they lead.

The category of traditional elites in Buton also includes local religious leaders. In the

structure of society, they are religious elite actors. Religious elite actors are organized as members of *sarana agama*, a local religious institution that has existed since the sultanate era. In the central region of Buton Sultanate, the *sarana agama* consisted of one *lakina agama*, one imam, four hatibs, twelve *moji* and four *tungguna ganda*. This institution is centered in the grand mosque of the Buton palace. Apart from the grand mosque of the Buton palace, *sarana agama* are also found in a number of mosques that are part of the long history of the Buton Sultanate, such as Baadia mosque, Sora Wolio mosque, *kalimbo-limbo* mosques, and mosques in the *kadie* area. The recruitment and impeachment of members of *sarana agama* refers to customs.

In addition to those who are still active members of *sarana agama*, elite religious actors also include *yaro*, the status designation for former members of local religious institutions. In the former sultanate center (Wolio), the *sarana agama* were composed of *kaomu* and *walaka* people. Meanwhile, in the *kadie* area, it was filled by local religious elites. In social construction, these religious elite actors are seen as people who have extensive religious knowledge so that they become references in religious life by the community. Apart from leading worship, they also act as *lebe* (ceremony leaders), both in organizing traditional and religious ceremonies. The active role and direct involvement of religious elite actors in the procession of traditional and religious ceremonies reflect their important position in linking custom and religion as the joints of the religious life of the Buton people.

Traditional Elites and the Preservation of Local Wisdom

Traditional elites are individuals or groups who have social standing, symbolic power and influence derived from traditional socio-cultural structures, such as custom, lineage or other historical heritage. In social construction, they are seen as moral, cultural and even political authorities in their communities (Vel & Stepanus Makambombu, 2019). Because of this position, traditional elites have an important role in

maintaining the sustainability of cultural heritage. In Buton, these traditional elites include customary elite actors (traditional leaders), palace elite actors (heirs of the Buton Sultanate palace) and religious elite actors (local religious leaders). Complementarily and mutually supporting, they have an important role in maintaining and transmitting local wisdom values, both in the form of traditional values, Islamic spiritual values, and the historical heritage of the Buton Sultanate. Their active role and direct involvement in maintaining and transmitting Buton's cultural heritage, which is deeply rooted in local wisdom values, can be explained through three strategic domains, namely symbolic, educative and adaptive.

Customary Elite Actors

The survival of Buton's local wisdom values amid the dynamics of contemporary social change cannot be separated from the active role and direct involvement of its customary elite actors, both among the *kaomu*, *walaka*, *bhisa bhawine*, and *parabela*. In an effort to maintain and transmit local wisdom values, customary elite actors play a key role through symbolic legitimacy, value internalization (education), and cultural adaptation.

In the symbolic realm, efforts to maintain and transmit local wisdom values are shown through the direct involvement of traditional elite actors in the procession of traditional ceremonies, such as the human life circle ceremony, agricultural ceremony, sea ceremony, boat inauguration ceremony, house inauguration ceremony, and pilgrimage ceremony (Munafi et al, 2019). Their direct involvement in the ceremonial procession keeps customary values alive and recognized as the moral foundation of the community. In the ceremonial procession, customary elite actors, whether a *kaomu*, *walaka*, *bhisa bhawine*, or *parabela*, not only play a role in leading traditional ceremonies, but also strengthen the symbolic meaning of the ceremony as a cultural practice. In the ceremony, they have the symbolic authority to guide the procession according to the value order that has been passed

down from generation to generation, as well as ensuring that each element in the procession runs appropriately to maintain the sacredness of the ceremony. In Geertz's (1973) view, traditional ceremonies are symbolic expressions of the community's worldview, and the main actors, in this case the traditional elite, play a key role in representing these meanings. In the context of traditional ceremonies in Buton society, traditional elite actors act as symbolic agents who translate abstract values into concrete ritual actions. Their direct involvement in the ceremonial procession not only maintains formality, but also maintains collective memory, strengthens spiritual values, and affirms a sense of belonging to a living cultural heritage. Following Koenjaraningrat (2009), the active role and direct involvement of customary elite actors in ceremonial processes also reflects their important role as custodians of the sustainability of cultural values.

In the educative realm, traditional elite actors in Buton play an important role in instilling moral values, ethics and manners to the community. This role is demonstrated both in ceremonial processions and in daily interactions with community members. The importance of instilling moral values, ethics and manners to the community, especially the younger generation, was expressed by an elite *kaomu* actor as follows:

“...Now is the time of *simbalasoke* (chaos). In order for our children not to be carried away by the changing times, they must be equipped with traditional knowledge, such as the values of *sara pataanguna*, from an early age. On many occasions I always explain the content of the philosophical values to the younger generation. My hope is that their personalities will grow and develop in line with the guidance of the values of our philosophy of life”.

The cultivation of moral values, ethics and manners as a manifestation of the educative role of traditional elite actors is also shown by *the bhisa bhawine* in the procession of traditional

ceremonies, especially those related to women's lives. Various Buton traditional ceremonies related to women's lives are *posusu* (circumcision ceremony for girls), *posuo* (seclusion ceremony for adult girls), *kawia* (marriage ceremony), *posipo* (ceremony for feeding pregnant women), and pregnancy care practices (Laxmi et al, 2021). In the procession of ceremonies, *bhisa bhawine* conveyed guidance through traditional advice on how women should behave and conduct themselves, both as individuals, family members, and later when they are married. One *bhisa bhawine* recounted her experience of playing an educative role in the *posuo* ceremony as follows:

“...In *posuo*, the *bhisa* provides mental and physical education to them (ceremony participants). Mental education is given through advice so that they understand their status as adult girls, who will soon be married. We also give advice on the role of a mother in the household according to customary guidance. Physical education is provided through body care procedures to stay healthy and beautiful as well as physical movements according to traditional manners, such as *pauncura*, *pakole*, *palego*”.

The educative role of customary elite actors is also reflected through the internalization of moral and ethical values, including environmental ethics by the *parabela*. In the local wisdom of the Buton people, each *kadie* in Buton has a *kaombo*, a customary protected forest area. Within the *kaombo* (customary protected forest area), customary law applies in the form of a ban on cutting down trees and cultivating crops. The importance of preserving the *kaombo* is always conveyed by the *parabela*, both in *rompua* (customary deliberation forums) and in daily interactions with community members (Munafi et al, 2022). Through the active role and direct involvement of customary elite actors, both in the procession of traditional ceremonies and in daily interactions with community members, educatively, the actors play an important role as agents of cultural education that bridge the

collective memory of the past with the reality of the present.

In the adaptive realm, traditional elite actors also play an active role as agents of cultural adaptation. This role is shown, among others, through the direct involvement of customary elite actors in fostering cultural arts studios. One informant recounted his experience:

“...Ten years ago, I initiated the formation of an art studio with the aim of preserving the performing arts heritage of the Buton people. This studio fosters younger siblings to practice traditional singing, music and dance. In this studio, we create traditional music, dance and songs according to trends in the community. For example, we adjust the arrangements of music and folk songs to suit the interests of the younger generation, but still maintain their characteristics as traditional art heritage. The results of these creations we make in the form of content on social media so that they become creative industry products”.

The informant's explanation above reflects the role of customary elite actors as agents of cultural adaptation. They play an active role in recontextualizing local wisdom in contemporary dynamics. Through their active role and direct involvement, traditional art heritage as a form of local wisdom of the Buton community can be adaptive in the dynamics of contemporary social change.

Palace Elite Actors:

Historically, Buton was an Islamic kingdom (sultanate), established in the 14th century, growing and developing until the formation of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. In the long journey of its history, Buton inherited a value system of state management that was supported by an institution, called *Sarana Wolio*, the name of the central government institution of the Buton Sultanate. This government institution was led by a sultan, consisting of high-ranking officials recruited from

among the *kaomu* and *walaka*. As the sultanate's central government institution, *Sarana Wolio* was dissolved in 1960 following Buton's integration into the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia.

The rolling reform in Indonesia since 1998, which among others was marked by the granting of autonomy to the regions, became a momentum for the elite palace actors in Buton, as the heir to the Buton Sultanate palace, initiated the reformulation of the *Sarana Wolio* institution into a new institution, called the Buton Sultanate Customary Institution (LAKB). Like the existence of *Sarana Wolio* in the past, the Buton Sultanate Customary Institution today is led by a sultan who was appointed from the descendants of the previous Buton sultans. In addition to the sultan also recruited people from among the *kaomu* and *walaka* to fill the membership structure in the customary institution.

The existence of the Buton Sultanate Customary Institution as a reformulation of *Sarana Wolio*, which consists of elite palace actors today, can symbolically be interpreted as a historical representation of the Buton Sultanate. In the symbolic realm, the existence of the customary institution is a vehicle for maintaining the collective memory of the community where the *kaomu* and *walaka* occupy a position as an icon of power in Buton. Through the Buton Sultanate Customary Institution, elite palace actors became central figures in the community. The presence of the sultan and members of the customary institution in various activities is a symbolic representation of local wisdom values that are still a moral reference for the community. Not only that, the role of elite palace actors in maintaining traditional symbols of power, such as titles of nobility, palaces and heirlooms also represents the sustainability of cultural heritage as part of the historical memory of the Buton community.

In the educative realm, elite palace actors also play an important role, both directly and indirectly, in maintaining the sustainability of local wisdom values today. Some of them are

often involved as resource persons in cultural dialog forums. An informant who actively participates in cultural dialog forums shared his experience:

“...I am usually invited to be a resource person in cultural dialogue forums, either held by the government or community organizations. In these forums, I often talk about Buton's history, society and culture. My hope is that people, especially the younger generation of Buton, will have a full understanding of its history, society and culture”.

The educative role of elite palace actors in preserving local wisdom values is also shown through the books they write. Functionally, books that contain descriptions of Buton's history, society and customs that they write become materials for enriching cultural literacy for the community, especially the younger generation. Through this active role, educationally, the elite palace actors not only become historical narrators, but also cultural mentors in an effort to transmit Buton's cultural heritage rooted in local wisdom values. This means that in the educational realm, they also play a strategic role as cultural teachers who bridge the older and younger generations in understanding the identity of Buton society and culture.

The active role of elite palace actors in the educative sphere is also reflected in their faithfulness in preserving and documenting the heritage of Buton's ancient manuscripts. The ancient manuscripts in their care become instruments of value transmission for the younger generation. Through this active role, elite palace actors play an important role as cultural agents who are active in maintaining and transmitting Buton's local wisdom values.

In the adaptive realm, elite palace actors also play an important role as agents of cultural adaptation. They play a role in reformulating local wisdom values so that they remain relevant in the dynamics of contemporary social change. Some of them are concerned with introducing Buton's

local wisdom values into development discourse. One informant recounted his experience:

“...Buton is rich in traditional handicrafts, such as weaving, traditional clothing, culinary, and others. The management of these traditional handicrafts can be improved so that they can be useful, not only to improve the welfare of the craftsmen, but also to spur regional economic growth”.

Another informant explained:

“...The Buton community has a philosophical heritage, including the social philosophy of *sara pataanguna*. The values of this philosophy are very appropriate to be integrated in the education curriculum, especially the curriculum for strengthening character education for the younger generation. Strengthening character education based on the value of local wisdom of Buton is a necessity today amid the rampant moral decadence”.

The active role of the palace elite actors in efforts to maintain and preserve Buton's local wisdom is also shown through direct involvement in advocating for the protection of cultural heritage. One informant explained that Buton is rich in cultural heritage, whether in the form of objects, buildings, structures, sites or areas. According to this informant, the wealth of cultural heritage in Buton is not enough to be protected from the threat of damage and extinction, but at the same time it must be utilized to improve the welfare of the community. This informant's explanation shows that in the adaptive realm, elite palace actors play an active role as innovators in reformulating Buton's cultural heritage so that it is adaptive in contemporary social change.

Religious Elite Actors

The sustainability of Buton's local wisdom values amidst the dynamics of contemporary social change cannot be separated from the role of local religious elite actors. Their role manifests itself symbolically, educationally and adaptively.

In the symbolic realm, religious elite actors, both those who are temporarily active as members of the formal structure of *sarana agama*, and those who have the status of *yaro* (former members of *sarana agama*) play an important role as bearers of authority who provide spiritual legitimacy to religious practices that have become part of the traditions of the Buton people. This role is shown, among other things, through their direct involvement in the procession of religious ceremonies. The variety of religious ceremonies traditionalized in the life of the Buton people includes: *haroana Maludhu*, a ceremony commemorating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), in every month of Rabiul Awal; *haroana Rajabu*, a ceremony to offer prayers for the salvation of family members who have passed away, on every first and fourth Friday of the month of Rajab; *haroana Nisifu*, a ceremony to offer prayers to be given long life, spaciousness of faith, and breadth of fortune on every 14th and 15th of the month of Sha'ban; *pakandena ana-ana maelu*, the ceremony of giving compensation to orphans every 10th of the month of Muharram; *sumpuna uwena Saafara*, the ceremony of rejecting bad luck every month of Shafar; and a series of ceremonies held in the holy month of Ramadan, including: *tembana bula, qunua, Qadiri*, to *raraeampu* on every 1st of Shawwal, and *raraea haji* on every 10th of Zuhijjah. Apart from religious ceremonies, religious elite actors also play an important role in the procession of traditional ceremonies, such as the procession of organizing a corpse, agricultural ceremonies, sea ceremonies, house ceremonies, and so on. The active role and direct involvement of religious elite actors in these ceremonial processes is not only limited to leading ceremonial ceremonies, but at the same time reflects their role as custodians of the continuity of traditions that give legitimacy to local values within a distinctive Buton Islamic framework. Their active role and direct involvement in various ceremonial processions symbolically also reflects that custom and religion are a unity of spirituality in the lives of the Buton people. In this context, religious elite actors play the role of cultural mediators who

maintain the continuity of Islamic teachings in the practice of local traditions.

Religious elite actors in Buton also have an important educative role in preserving local wisdom values. This educative role is shown through their direct involvement in the internalization of religious values integrated with local traditions, such as teaching the Quran using *katu Wolio*, teaching writing Wolio script, teaching reading *kabanti*, and delivering Friday sermons. In a number of these activities, they not only convey the normative teachings of Islam, but at the same time transform them within the framework of Buton culture. Thus, religious elite actors not only play a role as religious spiritual educators for the community, but also play a role in strengthening the cultural identity of the religious Buton people. The active role and direct involvement of religious elite actors in the educational realm is a functional instrument in maintaining the continuity of Buton's cultural heritage which is integrated with Islamic values.

Efforts to maintain the sustainability of Buton's local wisdom values are also played by religious elite actors in the adaptive realm. Their role is reflected, among others, through the ability to adapt religious teachings and practices to contemporary socio-cultural dynamics, without eliminating the essence of local wisdom values. In this context, religious elite actors do not just maintain traditions, but also transform them so that they remain relevant to contemporary community life. This role is shown, among others, by inserting traditional values in religious education, as well as supporting the revitalization of local Islamic traditions that are tolerant and inclusive. Through an attitude of openness, they play a role as guardians of the continuity of local wisdom in a contextual and dialogical religious space.

Conclusion:

Buton is a former Islamic kingdom (sultanate), established since the 14th century, growing and developing until the formation of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. In the

long journey of its history, Buton has inherited local wisdom values, in the form of traditional values, Islamic spiritual values, and the historical memory of the Buton Sultanate. This research confirms that the sustainability of Buton's local wisdom values amid the dynamics of contemporary social change cannot be separated from the active role of its traditional elite actors, namely customary elite actors (traditional leaders), palace elite actors (heirs of the Buton Sultanate palace), and religious elite actors (local religious leaders). Their role is not only symbolic, as a representation of identity and customary legitimacy, but also educative in transmitting local wisdom values to the younger generation. In addition, traditional elite actors also show adaptive roles and abilities in responding to the demands of change without ignoring their traditional roots. Through the active role of traditional elite actors, Buton's cultural identity that is deeply rooted in local wisdom values can be preserved amid the dynamics of contemporary social change.

Conflicts of Interest:

The author declared no conflict of interest in this publication.

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