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## Narratives, Symbols, and Rituals: Oral Tradition in Indigenous Resistance to Development Structuralism in West Papua, Indonesia

Published 2024-10-30

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**Article History:**

Submitted: May 28, 2024

Reviewed: June 1, 2024

Accepted: August 31, 2024

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**How to Cite:**

Narratives, Symbols, and Rituals: Oral Tradition in Indigenous Resistance to Development Structuralism in West Papua, Indonesia. (2024). *Jurnal Sosiologi Reflektif*, 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.14421/z1s1th71>

**Abstract**

Development projects that disregard Indigenous rights often provoke resistance, particularly in West Papua, Indonesia, where the Indigenous Kaimana people uniquely employ covert resistance through *oral traditions* to safeguard their rights. This study aims to understand how the Kaimana Indigenous community utilizes orality as a form of resistance against developmental structuralism. Employing a realist ethnographic method, this research directly observes the daily lives of the Indigenous community and documents forms of hidden resistance embedded in their oral traditions. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), observation, and documentary analysis of symbolic resistance activities. The findings reveal that Kaimana's Indigenous resistance is conveyed through three principal elements: storytelling, symbolism, and ritual. First, storytelling serves as a medium of resistance by recounting their spiritual connection to nature as a way of upholding ancestral rights. Second, symbols such as bamboo and sago leaves are used in road blockades, representing life and resistance. Third, traditional rituals involving everyday symbols are believed to possess mystical power and are used to protect Indigenous lands. These three elements illustrate that while the Kaimana community does not wholly oppose development, they demand that their customary rights be respected throughout the process.

**Keywords:** *Oral Traditions; Indigenous Community; Narratives Resistance; Symbolic Resistance*

*Pembangunan yang mengabaikan hak-hak masyarakat adat sering kali memicu resistensi, terutama di wilayah Papua Barat, Indonesia, di mana masyarakat adat Kaimana memiliki cara unik dalam mempertahankan hak mereka melalui resistensi tertutup berbasis Oral Traditions. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami bagaimana masyarakat adat Kaimana menggunakan kelisanan sebagai bentuk perlawanan terhadap strukturalisme pembangunan. Dengan menggunakan metode etnografi realis, penelitian ini mengamati langsung kehidupan sehari-hari masyarakat adat dan mendokumentasikan bentuk-bentuk perlawanan yang tersembunyi dalam tradisi lisan. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, diskusi kelompok terfokus (FGD), observasi, dan studi dokumentasi terkait aksi perlawanan simbolis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa resistensi masyarakat adat Kaimana dilakukan melalui tiga elemen utama: cerita, simbol, dan ritual. Pertama, cerita menjadi sarana perlawanan dengan mengisahkan hubungan spiritual mereka dengan alam sebagai cara mempertahankan hak leluhur. Kedua, simbol-simbol seperti bambu dan daun sago digunakan dalam aksi pemalangan sebagai lambang kehidupan dan perlawanan. Ketiga, ritual adat yang melibatkan simbol-simbol sehari-hari dianggap memiliki kekuatan magis dan digunakan untuk melindungi wilayah adat. Ketiga elemen ini memperlihatkan bahwa masyarakat adat Kaimana tidak sepenuhnya menolak pembangunan, namun menuntut agar hak-hak adat mereka dihormati dalam proses tersebut.*

## A. INTRODUCTION

Development projects across various regions frequently have adverse effects on Indigenous communities, impacting not only their socio-cultural foundations but also encroaching upon essential spaces integral to their identity. When such development threatens Indigenous interests, resistance emerges, manifesting through physical actions as well as legal and policy mechanisms. However, these forms of resistance often inadequately address Indigenous values and rights, compelling Indigenous communities to defend themselves in ways rooted deeply in their own traditions and cultural frameworks.

In Kaimana, Papua, Indonesia, Indigenous communities resist development that undermines their wellbeing by utilizing oral traditions – an essential component of their *indigenous wisdom*. This resistance is expressed not only through direct protest but also through the integration of traditional rituals and religious symbols within their cultural practices. Oral traditions – encompassing ceremonial rites, historical narratives, and religious symbolism – serve as a conduit for the Kaimana people to articulate dissent. Through this *indigenous wisdom*, they communicate resistance in culturally meaningful ways, reinforcing identity, fostering community solidarity, and preserving values passed down through generations.

The literature on Indigenous resistance to development in Indonesia is extensive, covering regions such as Papua, East Kalimantan, Sumatra, Bangka Regency, and Southeast Sulawesi (Siahainenia 2017; Juhaepa and Upe 2018; Hajang et al. 2018; Al Kodri 2016; Ayuningmas et al. 2023; Syafrudin and Telaumbanua 2021; Pranawa and Hamid 2023). These studies often depict Indigenous resistance as an effort to safeguard rights and cultural heritage amidst the pressures of prevailing economic and political structures. Additionally, oral traditions are utilized by Indigenous

communities as a means to challenge dominant powers and repressive structures that threaten their cultural survival and way of life (Namah 2020; Rahayu 2014; Sujito 2014).

While numerous studies have examined Indigenous resistance to development, most have concentrated on explicit, overt forms of protest. Few studies address the more nuanced, covert forms of resistance, such as oral traditions that subtly preserve cultural values without open confrontation. Furthermore, limited research has specifically explored how oral traditions operate as symbolic resistance against development activities that endanger both traditional practices and the environment in Papua.

This study aims to analyze how oral traditions function as a medium of resistance for the Indigenous communities of Kaimana, Papua, particularly in response to development perceived as harmful and dismissive of their *indigenous wisdom*. By examining this approach, the study seeks to understand how orally-oriented societies employ symbols, narratives, rituals, and symbolic actions as mechanisms of resistance against developmental structuralism, which often disregards their *indigenous wisdom*. This research aspires to enrich the understanding of unique forms of Indigenous resistance, providing insights into how oral traditions, as an integral part of *indigenous wisdom*, serve to preserve identity, rights, and the continuity of Indigenous traditions in the face of modernization.

## **B. METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a realist ethnographic approach to explore the Indigenous Kaimana community's resistance to structuralism within development policies in Papua. Realist ethnography was selected as it allows for an in-depth understanding of local culture and perspectives through the researcher's direct engagement (Cresswell 2009). This approach provides a comprehensive depiction of the community's way of life and interactions, with the researcher immersing themselves in daily activities,

particularly in observing expressions of resistance through oral traditions (Spradley 2007; Geertz 2000).

Data were collected over a span from 2021 to 2024 through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), observation, and documentary analysis. Interviews were conducted with community leaders, religious figures, and policymakers in West Papua to gather insights into forms of resistance against development perceived as threatening to traditional land. FGDs were used to obtain collective views from customary and religious leaders, while observations focused on symbolic resistance actions, such as road blockades. Document analysis of articles, books, and previous reports further enriched the context of oral resistance in Kaimana. The data were analyzed through an interpretative approach, involving the sorting and interpretation of data to identify patterns of Indigenous resistance. This analysis systematically examines the data to understand the relationship between symbolic acts of resistance and the underlying cultural values.

The researcher, a pastor who has lived and engaged with the Kaimana Indigenous community for seven years, brings a deep understanding of local dynamics to this study. While this familiarity offers valuable insights, the researcher has taken measures to avoid bias by maintaining objectivity and prioritizing the Indigenous perspective as the primary focus of this research. Throughout data collection and analysis, personal interpretation was minimized to authentically represent Indigenous voices and the underlying *indigenous wisdom* informing each act of resistance. This approach ensures that findings reflect the community's perspective, free from personal influence

## C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Resistance should not be narrowly interpreted as collective defiance or disobedience towards an institution or any particular entity. Rather, resistance deserves to be framed in a positive context. In reality, recognizing and addressing expressions of resistance is not a novel concept. Indeed, in everyday life, understanding Indigenous resistance often manifests through behaviors, ways of speaking, expressions of praise, and argumentation. The Kaimana community, for instance, resists development that conflicts with their traditions through oral resistance expressed in stories, symbols, and rituals. These aspects are deeply connected to their cultural beliefs, where each form of resistance is inherently tied to their values. Durkheim's concepts of the sacred and the profane are reflected in this, reinforcing the idea that religion can be understood as a social system that unites a community through shared rituals and beliefs (Turner, 2012).

### 1. *Narratives Resistance*

Oral resistance among the Indigenous communities in Kaimana is rooted in their unique perspective on nature. For them, nature is not solely valued for its economic resources but is imbued with abstract, symbolic meanings that form a spiritual connection with the divine.

In the context of Indigenous resistance against structuralist development in Kaimana, these acts are tightly connected to government policies. One primary policy focus is infrastructure development. Since its establishment on April 11, 2003, as a relatively young regency, Kaimana has relied on its natural resources to boost local revenue, attracting logging companies and other investors. However, the structuralist nature of development poses significant challenges, as political interests and oligarchic influence play a substantial role in shaping local policies.

Indigenous communities resist such development structures as they see it encroaching on and erasing their traditional lands.

Indigenous resistance is largely non-violent, relying instead on oral traditions. For these communities, storytelling provides a non-aggressive yet powerful form of protest, leaving the message that violence is not always the answer. Storytelling as a form of resistance serves as a model for managing anger, rejection, and discontent in an honorable manner.

For the Indigenous people, storytelling embodies resistance. In 2011, the Kuri, Irarutu, and Mairasi tribes in Bayeda Village, Upper Arguni Bay District, resisted logging companies attempting to exploit forest resources and collect earth and stones rich in gold from their ancestral lands. Community elders countered the investor's presence by sharing stories of local history and beliefs regarding the sacred mountains targeted for exploitation. This counter-narrative was expressed orally during investor meetings with the Indigenous community, who opposed the project, viewing it as a threat to their cultural heritage. Marius Nega, a young Indigenous leader from the Mairasi tribe, asserted:

“According to the stories passed down from our elders, this mountain is a ship that once carried great wealth, but then the ship capsized. There's no way we will allow anyone to do as they please in this forest. So, no matter how much you offer, I refuse.” (Interview, 2022)

Another symbolic expression of the Indigenous community's profound connection with nature is reflected in the use of clan names. For example, the *Ruwe* clan from the *Irarutu* tribe derives its name from the *Ruwe* tree, a type of wood known for its exceptional hardness compared to other trees. Similarly, the *Werfete* clan, originating from the *Kuri* tribe, is composed of 'Wer' (water) and 'fete' (a resilient aquatic being difficult to destroy), symbolizing resilience and the community's deep-rooted bond with natural elements. This context highlights that for Indigenous communities, nature is not merely a physical space but a repository of identity, discovered and reaffirmed through oral narratives.

The strategy of resistance through identity preservation, expressed as oral resistance, is not inherently oppositional. Instead, "resisting through narratives" embodies a significant ethos of balance and advocacy. For Indigenous communities, welfare and development should not come at the expense of cultural values. They believe that when these values are compromised, resistance is essential. Resisting through narratives represents a subtle yet potent form of collective resistance. By leveraging oral traditions, the Indigenous community rallies behind shared historical narratives as a basis for resistance.

This narrative-based approach is effective for two primary reasons. First, overt resistance often invites mischaracterization as defiance or anti-government sentiment. Second, by framing resistance within oral traditions (resisting through narratives-red) Indigenous communities honor their cultural heritage and customs, reinforcing the importance of respecting the unique cultural values of each region.

## 2. *Resistance Through Symbol*

In Kaimana Regency, resistance is frequently expressed through symbolic acts known as *pemalangan* (or *sasi adat*), using materials rooted in traditional customs. In this context, *pemalangan* embodies a collective agreement in which symbols represent the community's enduring narratives and worldview regarding nature. The materials used in these acts of resistance—such as small bamboo (*schizostachyum blumei*), sago leaves (*metroxylon sagu*), coconut leaves (*cocos nucifera*), and red cloth—hold deep cultural significance. For example, sago leaves are often used as a symbol of resistance because the sago tree is a fundamental source of sustenance for the community. Thus, the use of these customary materials symbolically underscores the notion that preserving something of profound value in life requires symbols of equally significant worth.

In their symbolic resistance, Indigenous communities urge the public to look deeper into the socio-cultural arguments and narratives behind these traditional symbols. For the Indigenous community, symbolic resistance through these elements opens a space for storytelling about their civilization's origins, which are intimately connected to the natural world. Rony Amirbay, a youth leader from the *Napiti* tribe and former member of the Kaimana Regency Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) from 2004 to 2009, expressed this sentiment, stating:

"...such as PT. Avona Mina Lestari (now no longer in operation) and several logging companies. The issue arose because these companies violated a mutual agreement regarding the payment of *ulayat* rights and the extraction of resources within Indigenous territories." (Interview, 2022)

Another example of Indigenous resistance to development structuralism involves several logging companies, such as PT. Prabu Alaska, PT. Wukirasari, and PT. Wanakayu Hasilindo, which operate within the traditional territories of the eight Indigenous tribes in Kaimana. Resistance arose because these companies' production activities encroached upon sacred Indigenous lands and community-designated areas (protected forests) essential for sustaining local livelihoods. According to Martinus Birawa, the secretary of Guriasa Village from the Madewana tribe:

"...so, when the company first came in, we had already agreed that this area should remain off-limits for their resource extraction. Perhaps during their survey, they found it rich in resources, but they went ahead and took what they wanted during production. The community keeps filing reports with the government... but nothing changes. Eventually, they come back and do it again". (Interview, 2021)

The symbolic resistance practiced by the Madewana tribe, according to Arnesius Refideso, a youth leader from the Kuri tribe, represents resistance through symbols.

"We truly understand the significance of symbols in every context". (Interview, 2022).

For Indigenous communities, the placement of symbols in any context serves as a representation of the community's stance on matters of yes or no, right or wrong, possible or impossible, good or bad. Symbolic resistance, which includes placing materials such as bamboo and sago leaves, carries dual meanings: life and war. The sago leaf symbolizes sustenance (life) for



Indigenous people, while bamboo represents a weapon (war). The people of Kaimana believe that life and war are inseparably linked. War, in any form, arises when individuals interpret life through their own perspectives. Thus, the community fights to protect their way of life.

### 3. *Ritual Resistance*

A fundamental question arises regarding whether each act of resistance by Indigenous communities, symbolized by elements like bamboo and sago leaves, is preceded by a traditional ritual. Within the context of the eight Indigenous tribes of Kaimana, resistance is, indeed, typically anchored in ritual practices.

According to Darso Bunbaban, a pastor who has served for 14 years in Kaimana's Teluk Arguni District:

“...What is usually observed includes *siri pinang* (betel nut) for chewing, followed by the use of local language to signify the intent to initiate *pemalangan*. They use bamboo, sago leaves, coconut leaves, and red cloth as symbols in their resistance”. (Interview, 2024).

In Bunbaban's view, these symbols used in acts of resistance carry profound meaning. Bamboo, for example, represents a tool of resistance, as it functions as a cutting instrument (like a knife) and is understood in traditional terms. To Indigenous communities, bamboo signifies an instrument that can harm anyone who disregards these symbols. Sago or coconut leaves symbolically represent the human large intestine (colon). When used alongside bamboo, it is believed that this combination can cause illness to those who violate the sacred symbols, specifically affecting the colon. Red cloth is used as a symbol of courage, representing the community's readiness for conflict. The presence of this cloth signals that the Indigenous community is placed in a situation of confrontation.

*Bunbaban* recounts several instances of symbolic resistance by Indigenous communities in 2011 and 2013, such as the blockades at the

Teluk Arguni District office and road-widening activities in Efara Village, Teluk Arguni District. As a pastor who served in the Teluk Arguni District, specifically at the Usmani Weswasa congregation (at that time Efara Village was a part of the congregation's service area), he observed that the resistance stemmed from road expansion infringing on Indigenous land rights. The community responded by halting construction activities, a process that, according to him, was preceded by a traditional ritual. A similar instance occurred at the Teluk Arguni District office, where a blockade was initiated due to the appointment of a new district head. The Indigenous community demanded that the district leadership be entrusted to a native of Teluk Arguni.

Yakob Musmafa, a leader from the *Mairasi* tribe in Urisa Village, echoes Bunbaban's view. He believes that ritual is foundational to the act of *pemalangan* (blockading). For him, ritual underscores the community's faith in resistance. During a blockade, a prayer or plea is directed to the ancestors, as the materials used in these symbolic acts are believed to possess mystical power. Yakob's plea goes as follows:

*"Arkakurani nir utyeroani rasbit fianiro matunud nir segigroge ftanfid te interoge  
nirwams teinmat."  
("I place this blockade using bamboo and sago leaves in the shape of a cross.  
Should anyone dismantle it, may they suffer stomach pain, endure severe  
bowel movements, and die in the process.")*

In the context of the Teluk Arguni District office blockade, as described by Bunbaban, Arnesius Refideso provides an example of the ritual narrative used before initiating the blockade in the Irarutu language:

*"Efut adni nir utie roani a mbu ra sbit kantor ani, moto matu tni mnu nma nfi tuon  
nene kantor ani ti ot se am matu jie amri fi ge nfi tuon se ambu fir sbibit ani."  
("We use this bamboo and sago leaf as a sacred symbol on this office. No one  
else should come to lead in this office except our own kin; only then will we  
remove this *sasi*.")*

Regarding development in Kaimana, the management of natural resources (particularly forestry products) permitted by the government through private companies has created road access to previously isolated Indigenous areas. However, findings suggest that the presence of investors has inadvertently triggered horizontal conflicts between Indigenous communities and the companies. During field research, Indigenous residents repeatedly emphasized that they are not against development; in fact, they welcome it. This stance reflects the community's assertion that development is a noble act, yet it becomes far more meaningful when it respects local culture and traditions.

#### ***4. Oral Tradition as Subtle Resistance: Indigenous Responses to Development Structuralism in Kaimana, West Papua***

Resistance theory is employed as an analytical tool to describe the position of both Indigenous communities and the government. Indigenous peoples hold a high status, possessing a dominant influence over institutions and policies, which they can leverage as an instrument of authority to act against oppressive forces. Resistance arises from government policies that aim to expropriate Indigenous lands in the name of development. For Indigenous communities, this resistance seeks to safeguard the identity of ancestral territories, which are perceived as their home. Territorial boundaries, in this context, are not merely administrative definitions; they signify ownership rights. For Indigenous peoples, these boundaries encompass a collective memory of their beginnings, narrating both their past and continuity into the future.

In understanding resistance theoretically, Scott divides it into three categories. First, covert resistance, which can be understood as symbolic or ideological acts. This form of resistance includes rejecting imposed categories on communities. Second, semi-open resistance, such as social protests or demonstrations. Third, open resistance, viewed as an organized,

systematic, and principled movement. Sociologically, Scott argues that resistance manifests daily in subtle and covert forms, while on the other hand, direct confrontation dominates the reality of social conflict. Any actions taken have structurally positioned individuals as “defeated.” Focusing on peasant resistance, Scott emphasizes that resistance is not merely about overthrowing or altering a system of dominance but is instead a means of survival—today, this week, or this season (Scott 1992, 2000, 1993).

Referencing Scott’s perspective, the resistance of Indigenous communities in Kaimana raises an essential question: why does oral resistance hold such significance? Indigenous communities regard oral resistance as crucial and as a solution; they do not seek open confrontation. Oral resistance resonates with their identity, as it draws from their cultural tradition of oral history. This oral tradition provides Indigenous communities with a framework to assert ownership, as historical memory preserved in storytelling ensures the perpetuation of their rights. Oral traditions are central in conveying resistance because they grow within a culture steeped in oral practices. Indigenous communities use oral resistance against the structuralism of development, often influenced by external interests in resource exploitation, particularly by logging companies allowed by the government to operate in Indigenous territories. This context has fostered horizontal conflict between Indigenous communities, companies, and even the government.

Indigenous communities resist development practices that threaten sacred and ancestral lands. From their perspective, development must stem from an ethical framework that respects equality, culture, and tradition as inseparable components of life. Development, in their view, should prioritize human welfare, where humans are both the subjects and primary beneficiaries. Resistance emerges, for instance, when companies encroach upon protected areas of Indigenous territories for resource extraction. An

illustrative case involves the community of Guriasa Village, where Martinus Birawa reported a physical blockade to halt ongoing logging activities. According to Birawa, the company violated an initial agreement with the Indigenous community. He notes that the incident escalated to physical altercations between company employees and Indigenous community members engaged in production activities on-site.

This case, as experienced by the *Madewana* people of Guriasa Village, exemplifies how Indigenous communities perceive and enact resistance. By narrating history, origins, and identity, they collectively empower resistance through storytelling, a method believed to hold a mystical strength. This approach stems from their deep connection to the land, understood as a “*place of prohibition*,” meaning a site with historical significance and sacred power. Resistance through storytelling allows Indigenous communities to convey their connection with nature, their economic reliance on it, and its role in maintaining their cultural continuity.

For Indigenous communities, oral resistance should be perceived by companies and governments as a form of protest. Though symbolic in nature, the act of storytelling itself communicates resistance and disapproval. This approach can be summarized as “resistance through narrative,” a model where storytelling carries the essence of opposition. This perspective is supported by Walter J. Ong (2020), who argues that oral societies worldwide attribute magical power to words, deeply connected to their worldview. Ong posits that narrative originality lies not in creating new stories but in the capacity to engage and evoke responses from others in every retelling.

In alignment with Ong’s perspective, Barthes (2006) contends that orality embodies the conditions necessary to become mythic, as it represents a mode of signification – a form with defined historical boundaries, usage conditions, and a reintroduction to Indigenous society. Consequently,

Indigenous communities must initially describe this as a form of knowledge.

The ongoing emphasis on development often brings adverse consequences for Indigenous communities, with ramifications extending beyond social and cultural aspects to encompass physical displacement and the degradation of spaces integral to their identity. During the New Order regime (1968–1998), development driven by investment was frequently at odds with local interests, particularly in land conflicts. Investors routinely acquired Indigenous land for infrastructure or commercial projects, depriving local communities of access to essential resources like farming and gathering lands. This drove a wedge between Indigenous perspectives on economic development and mainstream governmental policies.

In Papua and especially Kaimana, resistance to development has emerged due to the violation of cultural and territorial rights. Such conflicts often reflect not merely a rejection of material exploitation but a desire for development practices that respect Indigenous ways of life. For Indigenous Papuans, development is about equality and empowerment within the framework of the Indonesian state.

#### D. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that the indigenous resistance of the Kaimana community to development projects, which threaten their customary rights, is uniquely expressed through discreet oral traditions encompassing narratives, symbolic actions, and ritual practices. These elements serve not only as forms of cultural expression but also as protective mechanisms to uphold ancestral rights. Rather than opposing development entirely, the Kaimana people advocate for sustainable progress that respects their *indigenous wisdom* and rights.

While this study has offered a comprehensive view of oral-based resistance, challenges such as geographical barriers and the community's

use of metaphorical communication presented notable limitations. Further research is recommended to explore indigenous resistance through oral traditions across diverse contexts, thereby enriching policies that foster culturally respectful and sustainable development.

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