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Article Title

Social Critique within the Kabhanti Modero Tradition: An Interactional Development Communication Model among the Muna Indigenous Community

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ABSTRACT

The top-down structural development communication paradigm often leads to communication impasses and fails to accommodate grassroots aspirations. Amidst this bureaucratic paralysis, the kabhanti modero oral tradition among the Muna indigenous community in Southeast Sulawesi Province emerges not merely as an entertainment medium but as a dialogic space that actively responds to development failures. This study aims to examine the mechanisms of social critique encapsulated within kabhanti modero lyrics and to analyze the operationalization of this tradition as an interactional development communication model. This research employed a qualitative case study design, using participatory observation, in-depth interviews with core communicators and customary leaders, and documentation of sacred life-cycle rites. The research results demonstrated that the chanted pantun lyrics serve as symbolic interaction instruments to articulate the community's real grievances regarding infrastructure failures through polite yet politically coercive metaphors. The operationalization of this critique delivery is executed through a centralized circular formation that dismantles spatial barriers between the lay public and government elites. Furthermore, the existence of a conflict mitigation pact, internal message curation mechanisms, the involvement of customary authorities, and collective validation from the audience provide absolute social legitimacy for demands to improve government performance. This study concludes that kabhanti modero constitutes a tangible social control instrument and a highly effective form of sociological sanction. Therefore, local governments are recommended to integrate this cultural dialogic space into development planning deliberations to minimize elitist information bias.

Keywords: Development Communication; Kabhanti Modero; Local Wisdom; Social Critique; Symbolic Interaction.

INTRODUCTION

Communication practices within Indonesian indigenous communities function not merely as mechanisms for information exchange but also manifest as a medium for preserving local wisdom. Oral tradition serves as a primary means by which traditional societies maintain social cohesion and transmit cultural values across generations (Sibarani, 2012). In this context, regional arts are perceived not as passive entertainment but as dynamic spaces for symbolic interaction. The construction of shared meaning among community members occurs through oral performances that facilitate continuous cultural dialogue (Mulyana, 2001). Consequently, the study of oral traditions becomes crucial for understanding how local communities manage internal dynamics amidst massive social change.

One form of oral tradition rich in social interaction values is *kabhanti* (folk songs used for subtle insinuation) among the Muna ethnic group in Southeast Sulawesi Province. Lexically, *kabhanti* holds a dual meaning for its proponents: as an entity of folk songs and as a means of conveying subtle critiques (Hardiman & Ardianto, 2016). The most prominent and communicative variant of this tradition is *kabhanti modero* (a communal performance art involving hand-holding formations between men and women). These performances are generally held en masse and are intelligently integrated into sacred life-cycle rites, such as *katoba* (Islamic initiation), *kakawi* (marriage), *kampua* (circumcision), and *kalempagi* (seclusion). The call-and-response pattern of *pantun* (traditional rhymed poetry) during these sacred moments

creates a two-way communication arena that demands active participation from all attendees (Samsul, 2015).

The existence of *kabhanti modero* essentially plays a strategic role as a communication bridge between the grassroots and the local government. In development processes, governments often adopt a hierarchical approach that positions the community as merely a passive object of policy. This unilateral condition frequently triggers a communication impasse when community aspirations clash with the overly bureaucratic nature of change agents (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971). *Kabhanti* emerges to address this communicative void by offering a more humanistic and cultural medium for expressing aspirations. Through these folk songs, the community possesses the space to respond freely to various social and political dynamics in their environment without the constraints of governmental protocol (Rina et al., 2016).

The significance of the *kabhanti modero* tradition is increasingly evident in its ability to accommodate specific social critiques toward policymakers. Community disappointment over failed political campaign promises or the stagnation of public infrastructure development often cannot be voiced directly through formal government forums. The Muna indigenous community circumvents this bottleneck by formulating their grievances and protests into *pantun* lyrics nuanced with metaphors or allusions (Lindayani et al., 2018). This cultural mechanism enables the delivery of sharp critiques or face-threatening acts without triggering open physical aggression from the criticized parties (Lufini, 2026). Thus, this performance tradition facilitates the operationalization of elegant social control and contributes to maintaining local political stability.

This phenomenon of conveying critique through oral tradition marks a significant shift in the local-level development communication paradigm. Ideal development communication practices require a transition from a one-way information transmission model toward an interactional model centered on the active participation of the local community (Rogers, 1976). *Kabhanti modero* epitomizes this interactional communication model as it consistently involves a circular and continuous feedback mechanism between the communicator and the audience within the performance arena (Schramm, 1954). This tradition provides empirical evidence that local wisdom possesses a robust capacity to function as a participatory development communication model rooted in the grassroots.

Various previous studies have demonstrated that indigenous rituals and oral traditions in the Sulawesi region, such as those of the Kaili, Bugis, Pamona, and Boano ethnic groups, function strongly as means for identity construction and social adaptation (Sasmitha et al., 2022; Maiyo et al., 2023; Khairul et al., 2024; Patonga et al., 2024). Specifically, contemporary studies on *kabhanti* primarily focus on its status as a medium for cultural inheritance and social cohesion in the Muna and Wakatobi regions (Udu, 2015; Puspayani et al., 2019; Rahman et al., 2026). While previous

literature has touched upon aspects of metaphor and linguistic politeness, the academic landscape still leaves a void regarding macro power relations and micro operational mechanisms in the field. No research has comprehensively analyzed the physical spatiality, sociological mitigation pacts, and internal message curation of *kabhanti* as an operationalization of an interactional development communication model aimed at evaluating policy. This empirical mapping gap serves as the foundation for the novelty of this research, which deconstructs *kabhanti moderio* not merely as an instrument for preserving regional culture but as a dialogic space that actively responds to development failures.

Based on the rationalization of these empirical and theoretical gaps, this study aims to examine the mechanisms of social critique encapsulated in *kabhanti moderio* lyrics and to analyze the deep operationalization of this tradition as an interactional development communication model within the Muna indigenous community. The study is directed toward exploring how this oral local wisdom is utilized as a dialogic space that bridges grassroots aspirations with policymakers, thereby producing a synthesis of understanding regarding the effectiveness of symbolic interaction as an instrument of social control in regional development dynamics. This research is expected to provide an evaluation framework for local governments to use cultural spaces as an inclusive means of public feedback, thereby avoiding potential horizontal conflicts.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study design to examine in depth the specific and unique symbolic interaction phenomena within the cultural fabric of indigenous communities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The selection of the case study method is based on the necessity to explore communication mechanisms strongly tied to specific social and cultural contexts, which cannot be separated from the daily realities of the research subjects. Through this approach, researchers can excavate the implicit meanings behind human communicative behavior in natural settings. This strategy enables the research to produce a comprehensive understanding of how a local tradition is operationalized as an instrument of social critique.

The sociological focus of this research is directed toward the interaction space of the Muna indigenous community in Southeast Sulawesi Province, specifically the performance of the *kabhanti moderio* oral tradition. The determination of the research locus is not based solely on administrative regional boundaries but on the existence of dialogic spaces actively used as media for public expression. The researchers focused their observations on performance arenas embedded within sacred life-cycle rites, such as marriages or circumcisions, which government elites frequently attend. The selection of these observation sites is crucial for capturing the factual interactional communication dynamics between the lyric chanters and the audience, who represent both the indigenous community and regional policymakers.

The determination of informants and research subjects was conducted purposively, with strict inclusion criteria to ensure the collected data had adequate depth (Spradley, 2016). Key informants in this study included the primary *pebhanti* (lead chanters), who serve as core communicators in every performance, and the *sara* (customary leaders), who hold authority over cultural interpretation. Furthermore, this study involved local government officials, or village officials, who were the targets of the development messages conveyed through the rhymes. This informant diversity aims to provide a balanced perspective on message circulation from the viewpoints of various stakeholders.

Primary data were collected directly from the performance arena through participatory observation. The researchers were actively involved in observing all operational stages of the performance, encompassing the opening, core content, and closing stages. The observation focused on message circulation patterns, physical formations among the chanters, and spontaneous feedback mechanisms emerging during the reciprocal rhyming process. Specifically, this participatory observation technique was rigorously executed to capture spatial micro-details, such as the internal message curation flow occurring in whispers and the sociological mitigation pacts in the field arena. This technique is essential for verifying the alignment between the chanted lyrics and their surrounding social situational context.

The primary data were subsequently reinforced through in-depth interviews with selected informants to extract the philosophical meanings encapsulated within the satirical rhyme lyrics. The interviews focused on the motives behind the use of specific metaphors and the community's collective sentiments regarding development dynamics in their region. Additionally, documentation techniques were utilized to compile secondary data in the form of transcribed oral artifacts and visual documents recording the spatial layout of the performance. This documentation functions as a textual database serving as the primary material object in the symbolic interaction analysis.

The data analysis technique was executed in a circular manner using an interactive model comprising data reduction, data display, and drawing or verifying conclusions (Miles et al., 2014). Data reduction was conducted by rigorously sorting *kabhanti* lyrics that explicitly or implicitly critique development policies. The reduced data was then displayed in the form of argumentative narratives and rhyme classification tables to facilitate the mapping of emerging development communication patterns. In the final stage, the researchers synthesized the empirical field findings with the interactional theoretical framework to generate credible conclusions that fully address the research objectives.

Data validity and accountability in this study were ensured through the application of triangulation techniques, including source and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation was performed by cross-examining statements

from the primary *pebhanti* with responses from customary leaders and government officials. Meanwhile, methodological triangulation was conducted by comparing empirical field observations with in-depth interview results and rhyme documentation data. This data validity testing mechanism ensures that all narrative extractions presented in the research findings are highly objective and free of the researchers' subjective interpretation bias.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Symbolic Interaction Dynamics and Social Critique Manifestation in *Kabhanti Modero* Lyrics

The *kabhanti modero* performance within the Muna indigenous community order cannot be reduced merely to a folk entertainment instrument or a customary ceremony complement. Based on the symbolic interaction perspective, every oral tradition is a product of social meaning created and managed through individuals' collective interpretation of their surrounding reality (Blumer, 1986). The practice of chanting rhymes in *kabhanti* operates as a sign system facilitating the creation of shared meaning between the communicator and the audience within a historically bound cultural environment (Mulyana, 2001). In this context, the reciprocally chanted lyrics serve as a highly effective medium for continuously conveying moral messages and reproducing ethnic identity (Hardin & Hadirman, 2017; Hadirman & Mustafa, 2021). This shared meaning of reality ultimately provides the public with legitimacy to use the rhymes as a vehicle for openly conveying social critique while remaining linguistically encrypted.

Empirical evidence regarding the capacity of *kabhanti modero* as an instrument of social critique can be directly traced through the excavation of rhyme texts chanted during the performance. This art is not performed in a vacuum or random locations but is intelligently integrated into sacred life-cycle rites, such as *katoba*, *kakawi*, *kampung*, and *kalempagi*. The execution during this sacred moment is highly strategic because regional elites and policymakers generally attend them as guests of honor. This spatial condition provides the chanted satirical lyrics with a potent political and sociological coercive force. The details of the regional language texts alongside their free translations extracted from field observations are presented in Table 1 as the primary material objects in this meaning analysis.

Table 1. Examples of Satirical Lyrics in *Kabhanti Modero*

| Rhyme | Regional Language (Origin) | Translation |
|---------|--|---|
| Rhyme 1 | <i>Akalamo Wekanta Aerako seghulu Ghighi Podhandi Golae Santa Pandano paria mpaghi</i> | <i>I went to Kanta (a village name) I caught an eagle The promise is sweet like sugar and coconut milk The result is extremely bitter</i> |

| Rhyme | Regional Language (Origin) | Translation |
|----------------|---|---|
| Rhyme 2 | <i>Aegholimo Sebutolo Pongasi Abhaiane Taghino Mina Lima Tanghu Nowa Liwu Mina Bhehae karunsaha</i> | <i>I bought a bottle of pongasi Accompanied by its oil dregs For five years he led There are no memories to be remembered</i> |

Source: Primary Data, 2025.

The dissection of Rhyme 1 in Table 1 reveals the use of natural analogies to elegantly represent social disappointment. The line “*the promise is sweet like sugar and coconut milk*” alongside “*the result is extremely bitter*” constitutes a metaphorical construction that sharply highlights the contradiction between government political rhetoric and the reality of physical development in the field. The use of figures of speech or metaphors in *kabhanti* lyrics is not solely oriented toward linguistic aesthetic purposes but functions as a cultural strategy to precisely describe the dynamics of social and political relations (Lindayani et al., 2018). These empirical grievances regarding infrastructure failure are not channeled through physical aggression acts but are sublimated into oral texts that can be collectively accounted for by the chanting community. The transformation of social disappointment into a structured linguistic form demonstrates that oral tradition serves as a primary vessel for storing and disseminating local wisdom to maintain communal peace (Sibarani, 2012).

The critical evaluation is further strengthened by the structure of Rhyme 2, which specifically targets the periodization of local government power. The diction “*for five years he led without leaving any memorable legacy*” is a public verdict declaring the absence of a realized development heritage for the wider community. Pragmatically, this textual statement constitutes a face-threatening act against the authority’s credibility (Lufini, 2026). Despite containing a confrontational verbal attack on the government’s reputation, the critique remains entirely within the corridors of cultural politeness because it is enveloped by the culturally mutually agreed performance rhythm. This characteristic demonstrates a significant anomaly compared to customary dance traditions of other ethnic groups, such as the Torompio Dance (*Tari Torompio*) of the Pamona tribe, which emphasizes movement aesthetic symbolism and internal harmonization without carrying explicit political satire (Patonga et al., 2024).

All the sharpness of social critique encapsulated within the oral text would fundamentally lack strong political bargaining power if it only held the status of a dead script. The successful delivery of metaphor-nuanced messages to the authorities depends heavily on the presence of a physical stage that facilitates direct encounters. The *kabhanti* text demands a message circulation arena where indigenous community chanters and policymakers can meet in a single, equal interaction space. Therefore, the structural examination of these rhyme texts

inevitably necessitates further analysis of the spatial layout, physical formation, and operational mechanisms of the *kabhanti modero* performance in the field.

B. Operationalization of *Kabhanti Modero* as an Interactional Development Communication Model

The transformation of *kabhanti* lyrics into an effective instrument of critique demands an operational foundation in the form of a direct physical interaction space. Theoretically, the process of meaning creation and message reception within a group does not occur instantaneously but rolls through systematic stages of communication circulation. Mulyana (2001) presented a macroscopic understanding of this message circulation by adapting Fisher's perspective. Fisher (1974), as cited in Mulyana (2001), asserted that participants in an interactional model are individuals developing their human potential through role-taking. The "self" concept develops through social interaction originating from the immediate environment. To understand how this role-taking is structurally enacted within a group, Mulyana (2001) presented a framework for the emergence of group decision.

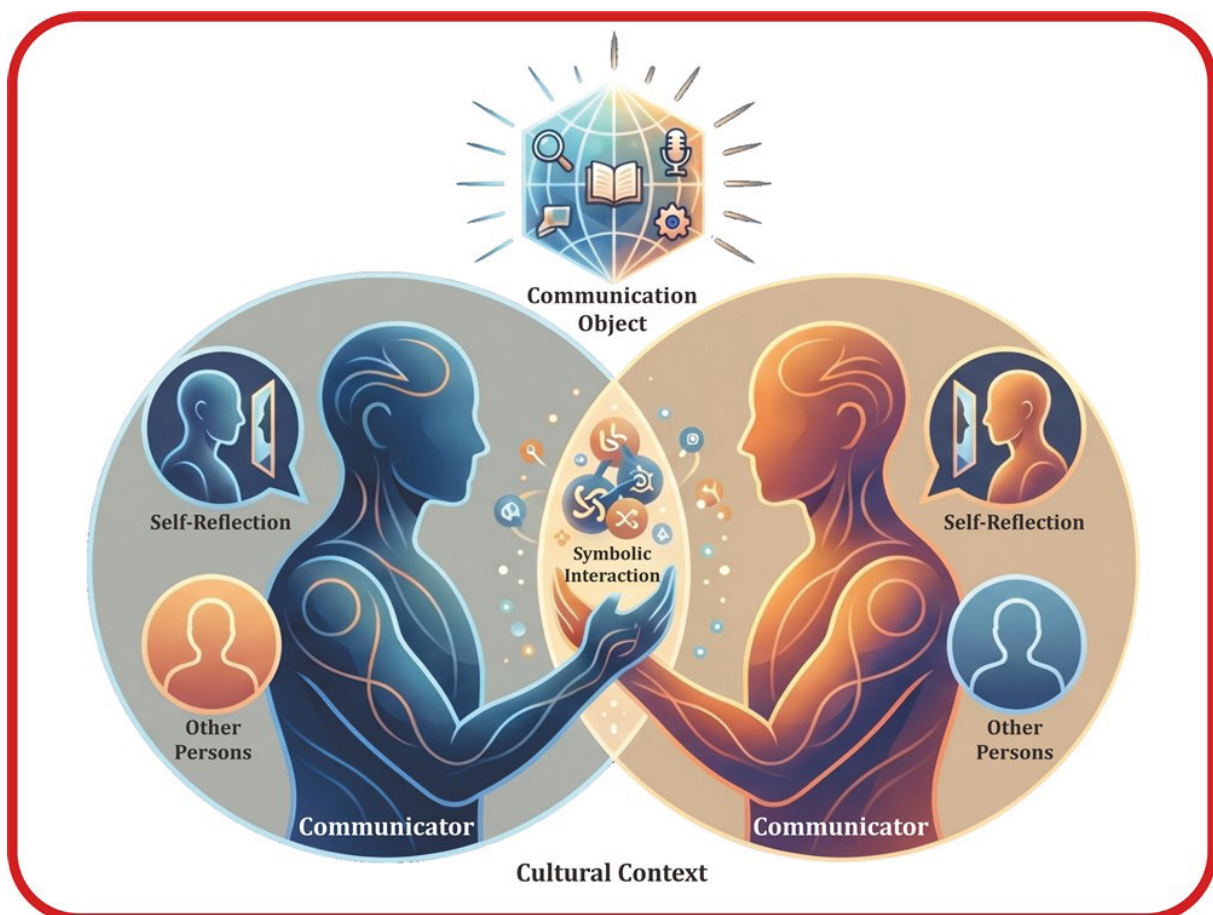


Figure 1. Dynamics of the Interactional Communication Model

The implementation of the philosophical and theoretical framework of Fisher (1974) is empirically manifested with high precision into three stages of the *kabhanti modero* execution process in the field. The first stage is the opening

stage, which functions as the orientation phase. During this phase, the indigenous community agrees to an unwritten pact to mitigate conflict: if one group chants harsh lyrics, the opposing group must reply with refined lyrics. This empirical observation demonstrates that the Muna oral tradition possesses a robust cultural defense system to manage face-threatening acts, preventing them from escalating into open aggression or altercations (Lufini, 2026).

The second stage is the core content stage, representing both conflict emergence and consensus in the model of Fisher (1974). During this stage, when one group throws a satirical rhyme, the primary *pehchanti* of the opposing group will whisper instructions to their members for their responses. If the members do not know how to respond, they will wait and directly follow the primary *pebhanti* when the lyrics are repeated for the second time. This whispering and repeating mechanism constitutes irrefutable evidence of an internal message-curation process and of group compromise before the message is finally communicated externally. The final stage is the closing stage, functioning as a reinforcement phase to cool down social tension. This entire sequence operates through a circular feedback mechanism, where the chanter simultaneously acts as both an encoder and a decoder (Schramm, 1954; West & Turner, 2021).

The regularity of this communication architecture, comprising the mitigation pact and internal curation, solidifies *kabhanti modero's* capacity as a highly systematic traditional media (Hardiman & Ardianto, 2016). This phenomenon demonstrates strong equivalence with various customary preservation rites in other Sulawesi regions, which also operationalize hierarchical stages to internalize identity messages. This step-by-step process shares functional complexity with the life-cycle rites of the Boano community, the healing rites of the Kaili society, and the social adaptation practices of the Bugis ethnic group (Sasmita et al., 2022; Maiyo et al., 2023; Khairul et al., 2024). This comparison objectively demonstrates that indigenous communities possess the intelligence to design communication spaces guided by clear principles, extending far beyond mere musical instruments (Fitriani et al., 2022).

The sharpness of this communication spatial architecture is also comprehensively captured through spatial mapping in the performance arena. Based on participatory observation results, the physical formation of holding hands and the direction of the rhyme flow construct a centralized communication hierarchy. The empirical mapping of this social spatial layout is visualized as a stratified concentric-circle model to distinguish the positions of message senders and receivers. This observational visualization regarding the formation of development message delivery is illustratively reconstructed in Figure 2.

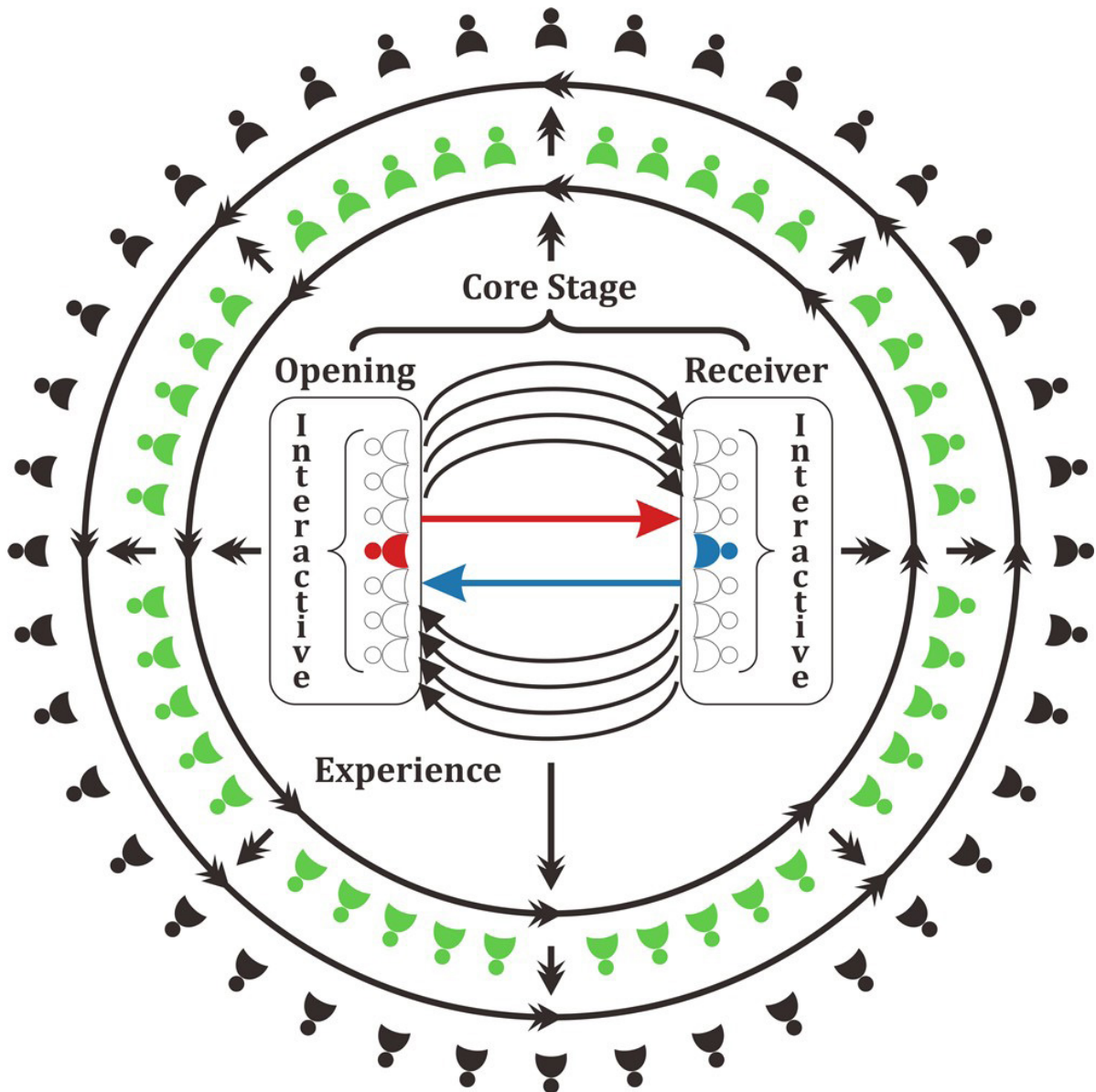










Figure 2. Interactional Communication Model in the Development Message Delivery Process through Kabhanti Modero

Figure Description:

- | | |
|---|---|
|  : Indirect Audience |  : Opening Message from the Male Group |
|  : Direct Audience |  : Answer from the Female Group |
|  : Primary <i>Pebhanti</i> of the Male Group |  : Relationship/Interaction |
|  : Primary <i>Pebhanti</i> of the Female Group |  : Message |

The analytical dissection of Figure 2's structure reveals a highly complex orchestration of message circulation. At the epicenter layer, control is held by the primary male and female *pebhanti*. The positioning of these core communicators is not based merely on seniority but on their mastery of the communal field

of experience. Based on the concept of Schramm (1954), communication can succeed only when there is an intersection of cultural experiences between the communicator and the audience. The *pebhanti* are required to possess the intelligence to encode the reality of development failure into metaphors that can be easily decrypted cognitively by both the government and the community. This simultaneously acts as a mitigation strategy to avoid heterophily anomalies, enabling the message to disseminate organically without triggering resistance from the authorities (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971; Rina et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the interaction arrows in Figure 2 clearly demonstrate the multi-step flow of the communication process. The satirical rhymes are not thrown directly at the government's face but are bounced first among fellow *pebhanti* in the core space. Once the message matures through interactional curation, its resonance radiates outwardly, penetrating the layers of the direct and indirect audience. This mass circular formation of holding hands dismantles spatial barriers among the artists, the lay public, and the attending government elites (Udu, 2015). In this distance-less assimilation space, every individual is fused into a single large family entity.

The presence of the audience within these concentric layers plays a far more crucial role than merely being art appreciators. The audience's emotional involvement, expressed through cheers or verbal agreement during satire, serves as a collective validation mechanism (Samsul, 2015). Without this active response from the audience, the *kabhanti* lyrics would be reduced to mere empty songs. However, with the instant mass affirmation in the arena, the initially individual critical message from the *pebhanti* instantly transforms into a sociologically coercive social mandate or public legitimacy. This spatial reality proves that *kabhanti moderato* does not operate in a vacuum but rather functions aggressively yet civilly as a cultural instrument to evaluate the failures of government bureaucracy.

C. Dialogic Space Reconstruction: A Synthesis of the Indigenous Community's Role as a Social Control Instrument

The interactional communication mechanism established in the *kabhanti moderato* arena culminates in a highly crucial sociological function: serving as a social control instrument over regional development dynamics. The grassroots' disappointment regarding unrealized political promises does not merely evaporate as passive complaints. Based on deeper examination, the satirical lyrics chanted during the core stage of the performance fundamentally stem from the accumulation of real grievances in the field. The context of this factual disappointment is sharply captured through the acknowledgment of a community informant, who provided direct testimony regarding the functional failure of infrastructure during the previous administration:

“During the previous administration, there was nothing the community could enjoy or see because, up to this point, the public felt that development during that administration was nonexistent. The community can only see the hospital, but the hospital built during his administration cannot be utilized to this day. The community hopes that this new administration can complete the regional development of Muna.”

The informant’s narrative of disappointment concretely represents the phenomenon of elitist development paralysis. The operational failure of vital infrastructure, such as hospitals, empirically demonstrates the collapse of the dominant development communication paradigm’s effectiveness, which relies on a top-down approach (Rogers, 1976). Thus far, government apparatuses tend to position the community merely as passive recipients of policy information without opening an equal evaluation space. This unilateral policy reporting practice is frequently laden with editorial bias to protect the authorities’ reputations, thereby intentionally obscuring the reality of failure in the field from formal public discourse (Marua & Muzakkir, 2023). Amid this impasse in information access and limited space for participation, the Muna indigenous community autonomously seized the *kabhanti* cultural space to declare these failures openly.

The social critique launched through the performance arena is not permitted to trigger regional instability; rather, it is immediately followed up through cultural resolution mechanisms. The sharp critiques embedded within the *kabhanti* lyrics are proactively addressed by customary leaders or the *sara* council. The involvement of this customary authority is vital in urging the government to respond to the satirical texts with concrete performance improvement steps, a pattern confirming that local indigenous storytelling possesses absolute bargaining power in guiding regional development discourse (Puspayani et al., 2019; Rahayu et al., 2026; Rahman et al., 2026). If the government ignores or refuses to respond to the message, the community will impose social sanctions, including widespread reprimands, potentially triggering systematic sociological resistance to the rulers’ policies. This sociological sanction strategy represents a robust cultural adaptation for maintaining social equilibrium, aligning with customary defense values across the Indonesian archipelago (Rusman et al., 2023). This fact affirms that the indigenous community solidarity consolidated through the hand-holding philosophy in the performance arena constitutes a tangible political force capable of challenging the government elites’ performance (Samsul, 2015).

The synthesis of all these symbolic interaction dynamics and spatial operationalizations proves that *kabhanti modero* is an absolute manifestation of a participatory dialogic space. This tradition demands that the local government reevaluate its bureaucratic communication style and begin positioning the indigenous community as active development subjects. Acknowledging the effectiveness of this cultural critique becomes an essential prerequisite for

actualizing an integrated cross-sectoral development collaboration model that equitably involves the government, academics, local communities, and the media (Rianse et al., 2025). Therefore, the preservation of oral tradition is no longer merely a celebration of past romanticism but is increasingly operationalized as a primary pillar for maintaining accountability and power balance in regional development.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes that the *kabhanti modero* oral tradition among the Muna indigenous community has transcended its fundamental function as a cultural entertainment medium and has become a highly effective interactive development communication model. From a symbolic interaction perspective, the chanted *pantun* lyrics are shown capable of articulating grassroots disappointment over infrastructure failures through polite yet politically coercive metaphors. The sharpness of these texts is operationalized through a concentric circular spatial layout and a systematic circulation of messages. The existence of a conflict mitigation pact during the opening stage and the internal message curation mechanism during the core stage ensures that social critiques are conveyed organically without triggering confrontational resistance from the authorities attending the performance arena.

The successful operationalization of this linguistic space and physical layout directly addresses the impasse of the structural development communication paradigm that has thus far unilaterally dominated. This oral tradition has been proven to serve as a tangible social control instrument that dismantles bureaucratic paralysis and bridges the aspirations of the lay public with those of regional policymakers. Collective validation from the audience fused in the hand-holding formation, combined with the proactive involvement of customary institutions, provides absolute social legitimacy for demands to improve government performance. If these critical messages are ignored, the indigenous community is proven to possess sociological sanction instruments to erode the authorities' credibility systematically. This fact confirms the research problem that coastal local wisdom possesses the capacity to evaluate development failures and urge the actualization of more participatory governance.

Based on the synthesis of these findings, this study provides clear recommendations and policy implications for regional stakeholders. Local governments are recommended to cease positioning traditional arts solely as tourism commodities or bureaucratic ceremony complements. Conversely, the government must integrate these cultural dialogic spaces into public policy evaluation mechanisms and inclusive regional development planning deliberations to minimize elitist information bias. Academically, future research is recommended to examine the effectiveness of this cultural interactional communication model through a longitudinal study, measuring the tangible responsiveness of government agencies post-performance. Furthermore,

a comparative expansion of the study locus, incorporating political critique-oriented oral traditions from other regions of the Indonesian archipelago, is highly necessary to enrich the development communication literature rooted in local wisdom.

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