

INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION OF CUSTOMARY VILLAGES IN CENTRAL MALUKU: INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE, IDENTITY POLITICS, AND LAND RIGHTS IN TULEHU AND HARUKU

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received : 23-2-2022

Revised : 18-3-2022

Accepted : 17-4-2022

KEYWORDS

Customary governance

Indigenous legal communities

Institutional transformation

Identity politics

Land rights

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the institutional transformation of customary villages in Central Maluku, focusing on the indigenous governance systems of Tulehu and Haruku. Employing a critical qualitative case-study approach, the research integrates in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis to examine how customary institutions negotiate authority, identity, and land rights within the framework of state administration after the enactment of Village Law No. 6/2014. The findings reveal that institutional transformation is shaped by tensions between traditional governance—embodied in the Raja, Saniri Negeri, and Soa structures—and modern bureaucratic requirements. Tulehu retains strong socio-cultural identity yet faces challenges related to incomplete documentation, leadership dualism, and unresolved territorial boundaries. Conversely, Haruku demonstrates more systematic administrative integration through clear genealogical records, church-supported governance, and formal recognition as an Indigenous Legal Community (MHA). Both communities adopt adaptive strategies, including revitalizing deliberative forums, strengthening religious leadership, and documenting territorial claims. The study concludes that institutional transformation in Central Maluku reflects a negotiated process between preserving indigenous identity and meeting administrative demands, highlighting the need for context-sensitive legal frameworks that safeguard adat autonomy.

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INTRODUCTIONS

Since the decentralization era after the reform period, Indonesia's political landscape has increasingly emphasized the strengthening of local governance, including at the village level (Huda & Fauzani, 2024). Law Number 6 of 2014 concerning Villages explicitly recognizes customary law communities, creating normative opportunities for cultural identity reinforcement and the legitimization of indigenous institutions (Salam, 2023). Yet such recognition does not automatically ensure the protection of collective rights, as its realization depends heavily on local political will and derivative regulations that are often delayed or unsupportive (Purwanto et al., 2025). In practice, the recognition of customary villages remains highly procedural and administrative (Suryawati & Syaputri, 2021), relying on formal legalization through regional regulations or executive decisions that complicate recognition for many indigenous communities (Warjiyati et al., 2023). This administrative orientation creates tension between traditional governance and modern state structures, challenging indigenous autonomy and cultural norms (Roy, 2024).

State interventions frequently generate a process known as "customarization," in which customary practices are reshaped according to state legal frameworks rather than emerging organically from internal community dynamics (Luo et al., 2024). Such adjustments produce institutional transformations that may marginalize indigenous sovereignty and reorganize authority, social order, and resource management according to external administrative norms (Rumiartha et al., 2022; Mensah, 2021). These pressures are evident in regions such as Maluku, where customary villages in Central Maluku experience bureaucratization and overlapping authority between indigenous structures and formal state governance systems (Suardana et al., 2022). These overlapping jurisdictions undermine traditional roles, weaken culturally embedded governance mechanisms, and disrupt long-standing modes of resource management.

Historically, customary villages in Central Maluku functioned as autonomous socio-political institutions governing social, economic, and cultural life long before the emergence of colonial or republican state structures (Hamida, 2022). They served as centers of collective identity, conflict resolution, and communal resource management through leaders, councils, and clan-based structures (Harada et al., 2022). However, the post-reform legal framework, particularly Law No. 6/2014, has accelerated the formalization of village governance, often clashing with customary institutional logics. These developments not only shift power relations between the state and indigenous communities but also influence identity formation and access to communal land and resources (Rahman & Maulana Hakim, 2024).

State development programs further adjust customary institutions to conform to administrative requirements, reducing local autonomy and reshaping governance according to political and economic interests, including those related to natural resource control (Utami et al., 2022; Yanan et al., 2024). The revival of customary practices after the reform era is therefore not purely bottom-up but shaped by political actors and economic agendas (Widianingsih et al., 2023). At the same time, postcolonial bureaucratic legacies and historical memory influence territorial claims, identity negotiations, and institutional transformations (Dasgupta et al., 2023).

Internal fragmentation further weakens social resilience in indigenous communities in Central Maluku. Tensions often arise from dual leadership structures, with traditional leaders representing customary legitimacy and state-appointed village heads representing administrative legitimacy (Selanno & Wance, 2021; Akhmar et al., 2023). These leadership conflicts are not merely struggles for authority but reflect deeper clashes between distinct systems of legitimacy, undermining solidarity and disrupting decision-making processes (Mbuvu & Kungu, 2021). Development planning practices also frequently bypass customary institutions (Swardhana & Jenvitchuwong, 2023), contributing to the erosion of indigenous authority, loss of control over communal lands, and weakening of social

capital (Jayawarsa et al., 2021). These pressures heighten vulnerability to inequality and inter-village conflicts (Yannakakis, 2023).

A substantial number of customary villages still lack formal legal recognition through regional regulations or official decrees (Asteria et al., 2024). This absence of legal status undermines their juridical legitimacy, exposes communal lands to potential dispossession by state agencies or corporations, and excludes customary leaders from development planning and access to government programs such as customary village fund schemes (Nuraini et al., 2024). Without recognition, internal leadership disputes and territorial boundary conflicts intensify (Talaohu et al., 2024), eroding social resilience and weakening indigenous sovereignty. Land grabbing justified in the name of development and investment threatens territorial rights and the cultural foundations of indigenous life.

In this context, this study examines how indigenous communities respond to the erosion of customary authority, the fragmentation of collective identity, and marginalization within state-led development processes. It explores the strategies communities employ to preserve cultural continuity, maintain control over living spaces, and safeguard ancestral values. Focusing on Tulehu—which continues to seek formal recognition—and Haruku—which has secured recognition—this research offers comparative insights into how indigenous groups negotiate their institutional existence within state bureaucratic structures.

Existing studies predominantly examine indigenous institutional change from legal or administrative perspectives, but few explore how customary communities negotiate authority, identity, and territorial rights simultaneously during the recognition process. This study addresses this gap by comparing two culturally distinct customary villages in Central Maluku. Against this background, the research investigates the institutional transformation of customary villages under state intervention, the intersection of state–community relations with identity politics and land-rights struggles, and the strategies indigenous communities employ to maintain sovereignty and continuity. The research questions focus on how customary institutions have changed since the enactment of Law No. 6/2014, how state relations, identity, and land rights shape these transformations, and what strategies communities use to secure formal recognition. Correspondingly, the study aims to describe these institutional transformations, critically analyze the interplay among state policy, identity, and land rights, and formulate strategies to strengthen customary institutions in achieving and sustaining recognition.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a critical qualitative approach using a case study method to investigate the institutional transformation of customary villages within indigenous law communities in Central Maluku. This design is suited to capturing the complexity of power relations, identity construction, and shifting meanings embedded in the lived experiences of indigenous communities—dimensions that cannot be reduced to quantitative metrics. From a critical standpoint, social reality is understood as a negotiated construction shaped by power and discourse, rather than a neutral or purely objective condition. Accordingly, the research seeks not only to describe but also to critique hegemonic processes that influence institutional transformation, especially in relation to state intervention and pressures of administrative modernization (Alaslan, 2023).

Research Sites: Tulehu and Haruku

The study focuses on two customary villages—Tulehu and Haruku—that are culturally and politically representative within Central Maluku. These sites were selected due to their long-standing histories of managing

customary institutions, involvement in conflict and reconciliation processes, and distinct experiences of institutional transformation. The case study approach enables contextualized examination of institutional practices, community-state interactions, and mechanisms through which each village maintains cultural authority amid the integration of modern administrative structures (Abdussamad & Sik, 2021).

Participants and Sampling Technique

Participants were identified using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of actors with authoritative knowledge of village history, institutional arrangements, territorial boundaries, leadership structures, and inter-clan or inter-village relations. Primary participants included customary leaders, village government officials, Saniri members, and local government officers directly involved in the recognition process of indigenous law communities in Central Maluku. The purposive strategy allowed the researcher to engage with individuals capable of articulating both historical narratives and contemporary institutional dynamics.

Data Collection

Data collection utilized multiple complementary techniques to ensure depth and contextual richness. Primary data were gathered through in-depth interviews with traditional leaders, Saniri members, youth representatives, village officials, and district government actors. These interviews explored narratives, perceptions, and strategies employed in navigating institutional transformation and indigenous law issues. Participatory observation was conducted during customary rituals, village council meetings, Saniri forums, conflict mediation practices, inauguration ceremonies, and routine administrative activities to capture symbolic meanings and non-verbal dynamics of power and interaction.

Document study complemented the primary data, involving analysis of village regulations, customary leader decrees, leadership archives, Saniri meeting minutes, customary maps, land dispute reports, spatial planning documents, regional and ministerial regulations, and relevant legal frameworks such as the Village Law. Academic literature pertinent to customary governance and indigenous recognition was also reviewed. In addition, focus group discussions were used to elicit collective views and deliberative practices typical of communal indigenous life, providing insight into how institutional roles are reinterpreted during interaction with the state.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using critical discourse analysis (CDA) to uncover dominant narratives, discursive power structures, and forms of resistance in interactions between state actors and indigenous communities. CDA enabled the examination of how meanings, legitimacy, and authority are constructed within institutional transformation processes. Social mapping was also used to visualize relationships among actors involved in land conflicts, leadership selection, and institutional negotiations, revealing networks of influence, alliances, and power distribution. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents ensured validity by comparing and confirming information from multiple sources. This was essential to critical qualitative research, which views social reality as constructed, meaningful, and embedded in power relations. Through triangulation, the analysis becomes both descriptive and interpretative, capturing the political and social dynamics that shape the transformation of customary village institutions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were upheld throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing personal identifiers and ensuring secure handling of sensitive information, especially regarding land

disputes, leadership conflicts, and institutional negotiations. Respect for customary norms was prioritized during observations and interviews, with all interactions conducted in accordance with local protocols and cultural expectations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

The transformation of customary governance institutions in Tulehu and Haruku reflects the ongoing negotiation of authority within Indigenous Legal Communities as they engage with modern state structures. These communities navigate complex historical legacies, religious influences, and bureaucratic expectations while maintaining the cultural legitimacy of adat institutions. The comparison between Tulehu and Haruku illustrates how each community adapts its traditional structures to meet administrative requirements, negotiate recognition, and sustain collective identity. Through this transformation, the study highlights broader themes of legal pluralism, identity politics, and institutional change, showing how customary authority interacts with state law while remaining embedded in localized cultural and political histories.

Mediation Processes and Land Boundary Resolution

Land boundary mediation represents a critical arena where customary authority and state power intersect. Recognition as Indigenous Legal Communities requires reconciliation between adat-based mechanisms such as pelagandong and formal administrative procedures enforced by sub-district and district offices. The negotiation of ulayat land, genealogical legitimacy, and historical claims underscores the coexistence of multiple normative orders, illustrating the dynamics of legal pluralism as described by Merry, where communities simultaneously operate within customary and state legal frameworks. The experiences of Tulehu and Haruku reveal differing capacities to navigate this plural legal space. Haruku has successfully harmonized adat and bureaucratic processes, while Tulehu continues to face unresolved disputes with neighboring villages such as Suli, Wai, and Tial due to overlapping claims and incomplete records. Mediation thus becomes a site of identity politics, as oral histories, clan narratives, and collective memory compete with formal documentation. The collaborative involvement of adat leaders, state authorities, and academic institutions demonstrates an emergent model of hybrid governance capable of resolving disputes while validating cultural identity.

Administrative Challenges and Institutional Capacity

Administrative documentation—genealogies, Saniri meeting records, territorial maps—is central to state verification of Indigenous Legal Community status. Yet many communities lack structured systems capable of meeting bureaucratic standards. Tulehu's archives, stored in old manuscripts and family holdings, pose challenges to verification and accountability, while Haruku's organized documentation and dedicated adat office facilitate compliance. These differences align with theories of institutional change, particularly Ostrom's perspective on governance systems adapting to new rules and expectations. Institutional capacity is not merely technical but also cultural: traditional systems emphasizing oral transmission, musyawarah, and flexible decision-making must adjust to bureaucratic norms such as standardization, transparency, and digital documentation. Haruku's progress shows how institutional arrangements can evolve when local actors receive training and administrative support, whereas Tulehu's informal governance structures illustrate the slower pace of adaptation when institutional foundations are less developed.

Tensions Between Adat Values and Modern Bureaucracy

The tension between flexible adat norms and rigid bureaucratic requirements reflects a deeper clash between culturally embedded authority and modern administrative rationality. Adat depends on oral histories, collective legitimacy, and relational authority among the Raja, Saniri, and Soa, while the state emphasizes written standards, hierarchical structures, and procedural accountability. This tension can be understood through the lens of identity politics, as communities must defend cultural legitimacy while conforming to external rules. Haruku's integration of adat with church structures illustrates a successful hybridization of authority, whereas Tulehu's more fluid system results in ongoing negotiation between customary and bureaucratic expectations. The challenge lies in bridging these differences without eroding cultural identity—a process requiring capacity-building, record digitization, and regulatory harmonization.

Comparative Transformations in Tulehu and Haruku

Both communities are undergoing institutional transformation characterized by the coexistence and mutual reshaping of adat and bureaucratic systems. Decisions grounded in traditional structures—musyawarah, pela-gandong, masohi—are increasingly linked to documentation, reporting, and legal compliance. This dual system demonstrates Ostrom's concept of polycentric governance, where multiple authorities coexist and influence local decision-making.

Yet transformation is context-dependent. Tulehu and Haruku follow similar structural patterns but differ in speed and coherence. Haruku exhibits stronger organizational capacity, clearer boundaries, and more stable leadership, while Tulehu confronts lengthy negotiations, fragmented documentation, and persistent territorial claims. These differences show that institutional change is not linear; it is shaped by socio-religious identities, historical experience, and existing administrative infrastructures.

Significant Differences Between Tulehu and Haruku

Historical, religious, and administrative distinctions underscore divergent pathways. Haruku's Christian institutional heritage and long engagement with colonial governance facilitate orderly documentation, stable leadership, and systematic archives. Tulehu's Muslim-majority context, coastal dynamics, and flexible adat structures shape a more fluid approach to governance and documentation. From the perspective of legal pluralism, Haruku exhibits more formalized integration of customary and bureaucratic authority, whereas Tulehu's informal system complicates state recognition. Religious institutions also play significant roles in shaping governance norms: the church in Haruku reinforces documentation practices, whereas Islamic leadership in Tulehu influences consensus-building and social cohesion. These distinctions highlight how identity and history inform institutional performance and boundary management.

Challenges in the Transformation Toward MHA

The path toward Indigenous Legal Community recognition involves more than administrative compliance; it is a socio-political negotiation shaped by territorial disputes, documentation gaps, and overlapping sources of authority. Tulehu's challenges—fragmented archives, unresolved boundaries, and inconsistent verification—reflect deeper institutional constraints. Haruku, while more advanced, must also balance adat authority with strong church influence, demonstrating that institutional stability requires harmonizing diverse sources of legitimacy. These challenges reflect theories of institutional change, where organizations facing new regulatory pressures must adapt without losing internal cohesion. Boundary conflicts, leadership negotiations, and historical claims reveal the

continuous interplay between cultural identity and state authority, requiring coordinated efforts among traditional leaders, government officials, and religious actors.

Summary Comparison and Implications

The comparative analysis of Tulehu and Haruku demonstrates that institutional transformation toward recognized Indigenous Legal Community status is deeply shaped by historical experience, religious structures, and administrative capacity. Haruku's well-documented archives, stable leadership, and integrated adat-church governance provide a strong foundation for bureaucratic recognition. Tulehu's flexible yet culturally strong adat system faces greater challenges due to inconsistent documentation, overlapping territorial claims, and less developed administrative structures.

From a theoretical standpoint, the cases exemplify legal pluralism, showing how customary and state systems coexist and negotiate authority. They also reveal identity politics, as communities draw upon religious and cultural narratives to assert legitimacy. Finally, they illustrate institutional change, where governance structures evolve in response to bureaucratic pressures without abandoning core cultural values. Overall, the transformation of Tulehu and Haruku underscores that recognition as Indigenous Legal Communities is not merely an administrative procedure. It is a deeply political, cultural, and institutional process that depends on collaboration, adaptive governance, and the ability of communities to integrate customary authority with modern bureaucratic demands.

Table 1. Summary Comparison and Implications

Aspect	Tulehu	Haruku
Adat Structure	<i>Maintains traditional structure (Raja, Saniri, Soa), strong local Islamic influence</i>	<i>Stable and organized adat structure, strong church influence, colonial heritage</i>
Transformation Pattern	<i>Adaptation ongoing; adat and administrative institutions not fully integrated</i>	<i>Institutional integration progressing well; internal regulations in place, formal recognition obtained</i>
Legal Status as MHA	<i>Not yet officially recognized; under verification</i>	<i>Recognized as Masyarakat Hukum Adat (MHA) by local government</i>
Adat Territory Boundaries	<i>Overlapping conflicts with neighboring communities (Suli, Wai, Tial)</i>	<i>Boundaries clearly defined and documented</i>
Adat–Religion Relation	<i>Strong influence of Islamic values; religious leaders dominate</i>	<i>Adat integrated with church norms; church plays significant role in decision-making</i>
Institutional Capacity	<i>Limited documentation; incomplete archives and maps</i>	<i>Historical archives, territorial maps, and structured documentation in place</i>
Main Challenges	<i>Territorial conflicts, weak documentation, low administrative capacity</i>	<i>Balancing adat and church authority, maintaining legitimacy in modern governance</i>
Direction of Transformation	<i>Moving toward institutional integration; needs government and academic support</i>	<i>Strengthening existing institutions; maintaining MHA status per legal framework</i>

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the transformation of adat institutions in Tulehu and Haruku is a negotiated process shaped by customary authority, state regulation, and identity politics, where both communities strategically adapt traditional structures to modern governance while maintaining cultural legitimacy. The findings imply that adat systems operate as flexible governance mechanisms requiring legal space that respects historical claims and supports collaborative documentation, revitalization, and institutional continuity. However, the study is limited by its focus on only two villages, variations in archival completeness, and a cross-sectional approach that captures transformation at a single moment in time. Future research should expand comparative cases across Maluku, employ longitudinal analyses to observe evolving adat-state dynamics, and deepen inquiry into legal pluralism and land rights in areas with overlapping territorial claims.

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