

## PANDORA'S BOX IN MAPPALILI: EXPLORING ENVIRONMENTAL RHETORIC AND CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE BUGIS COMMUNITY

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### ABSTRACT

*The Mappalili ritual, held before planting, is believed to help maintain ecological balance. While past studies have emphasized its cultural significance, the research shifts the focus toward environmental conservation and the role of the Bissu as communicators of environmental values through tradition. The research explored relationship between the concept of Pandora's box and Mappalili within the framework of environmental rhetoric and cultural communication in the Bugis community, specifically in Segeri District, Pangkajene and Kepulauan Regency, South Sulawesi. The research was guided by three indicators: community awareness and participation, coordination and communication, and cultural values, using environmental rhetoric analysis. The qualitative approach included in-depth interviews with Bissu leaders and participant observation during Mappalili. The data were analyzed through environmental rhetoric theory to capture how symbolism and cultural practices contributed to ecological balance. Findings reveal that Mappalili serves as an effective tool for environmental communication, with the ritual's symbols and values fostering harmony between humans and nature. The Bissu, as the leader, imparts ecological principles to the community, including natural farming practices that preserve soil health and minimize ecosystem harm. Disruptions or improper performance of the ritual potentially lead to negative environmental impacts, akin to opening a Pandora's box that destabilizes the ecosystem. The research underscores the significance of preserving Mappalili as an essential environmental communication strategy, demonstrating that cultural continuity supports ecosystem sustainability. Additionally, the enduring role of the Bissu as cultural symbols in South Sulawesi reflects a deeply rooted environmental knowledge integral to this tradition.*

**Keywords:** Pandora's box, Mappalili ritual, environmental rhetoric, cultural communication, Bugis community

### INTRODUCTION

The Mappalili tradition, which is a traditional ritual of the Bugis people in Segeri District, Pangkajene and Islands Regency (Pangkep), South Sulawesi, is an important example of local wisdom that plays a role in maintaining ecosystem balance through communication practices and cultural rituals (Azis, 2023). This ritual is carried out routinely before the farming season begins as part of the spiritual and symbolic preparation that is believed to influence the

success of the harvest. The local community believes that without carrying out Mappalili, farmers will experience crop failure, a belief that shows how deep the relationship between humans, cultural rituals, and nature is in their lives (Hasyim & Muda, 2019; Rahmad & Winata, 2020).

In the Mappalili ritual, Bissu acts as the main leader who guides the procession, which includes not only prayers and rituals but also the use of sacred objects, one of which is *Arajang* (Pattinama et al., 2020), a plow that is considered sacred and symbolic.

*Arajang* functions as a representation of the power of nature that is presented in the Mappalili ritual to bless the land and ensure a smooth planting season. This ceremony is a manifestation of the local wisdom of the Bugis people, who believe that harmony between humans and nature must be maintained through respect for tradition and the surrounding nature. For this community, if the ritual is not carried out properly, the risk of crop failure and ecosystem damage is very likely to occur.

From a communication perspective, this practice is a study of environmental communication where the focus is on how humans communicate about nature (Primayanti & Puspita, 2022) to raise awareness of the important role of the environment in the sustainability of life so that attention needs to be paid to efforts to preserve the environment (Senda-Cook et al., 2023). The main communicators in environmental communication are the government and indigenous peoples. The communication patterns used are generally dialogic and in group communication.

The theory used to analyze this phenomenon is environmental rhetoric (Endres, 2019). The use of rhetoric in conveying messages about the environment can rebuild human relationships with the environment, including environmental crises, alternatives to adapt to the environment and climate change. From this perspective, the Mappalili tradition can be seen as a form of environmental communication that is rich in symbolism. This spiritual procession that unites the community with nature is a means to convey a message about the importance of harmony between humans and the environment (Gottlieb & Gottlieb, 2003). *Bissu*, as ritual leader, not only acts as holder of tradition but also as environmental communicator who conveys ecological values through structured actions and rituals (Hasriani, 2018).

The role of *Bissu* as a leader in the Mappalili tradition in the research of environmental communication is parallel to its function as a communicator. Therefore, the research focuses on the role of *Bissu* as a communicator of environmental values practiced by the Bugis community in Segeri District, Pangkajene and Islands Regency, South Sulawesi, through the Mappalili tradition. It explores the interrelationship of the concepts of Pandora's box and Mappalili within the framework of environmental rhetoric and cultural communication.

## METHODS

The research applies a qualitative method with an environmental communication approach to understand the meaning and dynamics of change in the Mappalili tradition. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how *Bissu* maintains and modifies this tradition in a modern context. This method is very relevant to integrating social and environmental research, where qualitative research, such as interviews and observations, can provide

a more holistic understanding of the relationship between humans and their environment (Kanazawa, 2017). It is related to the third concept, namely cultural values. There is a hereditary culture that is still believed in today.

The research is conducted through in-depth interviews with *Bissu* traditional leaders, academics with expertise in environmental and cultural communication, and the Department of Agriculture, who are directly involved in implementing Mappalili. In addition to interviews, additional data are collected through participant observation during the ritual, which allows researchers to record changes that occur in the procession directly. This participant observation provides a richer context for understanding the changes that occur in traditional practices, especially when facing the challenges of modernization, like Hasriani (2018), about the role of *Bissu* culture in South Sulawesi.

Triangulation techniques are used to increase the validity of data collected from various sources. It involves comparing the results of interviews, observations, and written sources to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the findings. Furthermore, data analysis is carried out using an environmental rhetoric approach, which focuses on how Mappalili traditions are used as a communication tool to promote environmental sustainability. This approach also allows researchers to identify the dominant narratives used by local communities to maintain these traditions and how they respond to social changes that arise from modernization.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Pandora's box is often seen as a symbol of an action that brings unexpected disaster if opened. In the research, the term "Pandora's box" from Greek mythology can be used as a metaphor to describe the consequences of ignoring traditions such as Mappalili. Likewise, ignoring or changing the Mappalili ritual without considering its values and symbolism can cause greater environmental problems.

Studies of folkloric traditions in environmental justice show that local practices such as Mappalili have an important role in ensuring ecological justice and sustainability. By maintaining this tradition, the community can maintain practices that contribute to environmental balance while preventing the opening of Pandora's box in the form of environmental damage (Ojedele-Adejumo, 2023).

The cultural values contained in the Mappalili tradition reflect the importance of local wisdom in protecting the environment. In the context of environmental communication, *Bissu*, as the ritual leader, plays an important role in maintaining and conveying these cultural values to the community. One of the main teachings passed down by the *Bissu* is the application of natural farming methods that are in line with ecological principles. For example,

instead of killing pests such as rats and insects, the *Bissu* teaches people to repel these pests naturally using spells and fumigation methods. This approach not only reduces the negative impact on the ecosystem but also strengthens the relationship between humans and nature, which is in line with the principles of environmental communication that focus on sustainability.

*Puang Matoa*, the leader of the *Bissu*, emphasizes that the role of *Bissu* in Bugis varies from each region. In the past, *Bissu* served as the king's spokesperson, but in the Segeri area, many *Bissu* had an agricultural background. It gives them basic agricultural knowledge because they live in traditional rice fields. Thus, the *Bissu* in Segeri has a strong connection to the agricultural land and a better understanding of farming practices. Moreover, the determination of planting time is done by observing the movement of the moon, called *Ompo Ulung*, and this procession must be carried out solemnly and using materials that are considered halal. Another practice taught is to let the land rest (*Mappayawa*) after the planting season. It gives the soil a chance to renew its fertility naturally, creating a sustainable agricultural cycle. In this way, the Mappalili tradition teaches people to live in harmony with nature without over-exploitation. These values not only reflect modern ecological principles but also show that local wisdom can contribute to broader conservation practices (Dahl et al., 2023).

According to *Bissu Eka*, the effectiveness of the Mappalili ritual is traditionally assessed by the occurrence of rainfall following its completion. *Sanro Nisa*, the only female *Bissu* in the community, has further emphasized the ritual's profound spiritual significance. She asserts that errors in conducting the ritual not only affect nature and society but also impose direct consequences on the *Bissu* themselves. According to her, *Dewata* (the God in Buginese belief) will deliver a divine reprimand for ritual mistakes, often manifesting as illness among the *Bissu*.

However, in 2023, despite the ritual being performed, the anticipated rainfall did not materialize. It could sign errors in carrying out the ritual, such as the use of non-halal ingredients or stages that did not comply with the rules that had been taught before. On the other hand, this could trigger Pandora's box to open. To prevent Pandora's box from being opened after the ritual was complete, people made "artificial rain" by pouring water on each other, even asking for help from the fire department so that the event could still take place, as shown in Figure 1. The environmental rhetoric constructed in this tradition serves to strengthen the relationship between humans and nature, thereby preventing greater damage (Vandamme, 2023).

Even though in *Bissu Anca's* perspective, the absence of rainfall is not due to ritual errors but to natural climate cycles, noting that an extended dry season occurs approximately every seven years in Bugis belief. The Pangkajene and Kepulauan Regency Agriculture

Service supports his perspective, attributing the 2023 drought to the El Nino phenomenon, which affected global weather patterns. It highlights the intersection of traditional wisdom with modern climatological insights, suggesting that Mappalili remains relevant even as scientific explanations evolve.



Figure 1 Artificial Rain During Mappalili Ritual

Next, in the Mappalili ritual, using various traditional tools and sacred symbols such as *Arajang*, as shown in Figure 2, underscores the importance of maintaining soil fertility and ecosystem balance. *Arajang*, a sacred plow used in the ritual, symbolizes the relationship between humans and nature. This object is paraded throughout the village before being ceremoniously bathed in a river, a practice believed to bestow blessings upon the land. This ritual fosters environmental awareness by reinforcing the belief that a well-maintained tradition ensures agricultural success.



Figure 2 *Arajang* in Mappalili Ritual

According to Primayanti and Puspita (2022), there are three main concepts in environmental sustainability: community awareness and participation, coordination and communication, and cultural values. These concepts can be used in measuring and understanding community involvement, cross-institutional communication, and local culture's role in environmental conservation.

From Prof. Hafied Cangara's perspective, the Mappalili tradition is only part of cultural preservation that has social and spiritual functions for the Bugis



people. However, scientifically, there is no definite correlation that shows a direct relationship between the ritual and the harvest. Even though *Bissu* can determine the right time to plant, it can be seen as local wisdom only. However, *Puang Matoa* says that *Bissu* can fit in any generation and combine traditional knowledge, such as local language, symbols, and mantras, with modern agriculture.

The research results indicate an opportunity to improve communication and cooperation between *Bissu*, farmers, and the Department of Agriculture. By strengthening this coordination, it is hoped that traditional knowledge and modern approaches will be combined to manage agriculture in South Sulawesi more effectively. *Bissu* should apply effective communication to the community so *Bissu* can make the community aware and still willing to participate in the Mappalili tradition. However, in this modern culture, they find a few challenges, such as no direct communication between *Bissu* and the Department of Agriculture, which has the power to regulate farming methods. So far, coordination has been carried out more with the Department of Culture because this ritual is considered a form of cultural preservation. This ritual has no clear relationship with agricultural products. *Bissu Eka* states that the ritual is still carried out as part of the tradition but is not always related to agricultural productivity.

Although there is no formal coordination with the Department of Agriculture, *Bissu* in Segeri still plays an important role in determining planting times based on knowledge of nature. *Bissu* serves as a bridge between farmers and customs, although *Bissu* is more valued in cultural and spiritual contexts (Senda-Cook et al., 2023). Strengthened coordination can combine traditional wisdom with scientific methods, improving agricultural management (Andersen, 2023).

Cultural values should be bold to promote environmental sustainability and influence people's behavior. By emphasizing harmonious practices based on local wisdom, *Bissu* functions as a mediator connecting communities with their environment, which has been proven by strengthening the relationship between humans and nature (Bullitt-Jonas, 2022). By combining traditional knowledge and modern science, as expressed by scientists such as Prof. Bulqis and a group of climate experts in Tudang Sipulung, the community, and local government collaborate to determine the right planting schedule, ensuring that each rice field gets enough water and seeds. This collaboration reflects modern adaptation to climate change, such as the El Nino phenomenon, without neglecting the local values contained in the Mappalili tradition. It reinforces the message that tradition, science, and policy can work together in environmental conservation efforts.

Through the lens of environmental rhetoric, the Mappalili tradition is not only understood as a spiritual ritual but also as a form of environmental communication that conveys a message about human responsibility towards nature. This ritual is a medium

for local communities to harmonize their relationship with the environment and maintain the sustainability of the ecosystem while reminding people of the risks that can arise if this tradition is ignored.

According to Primayanti and Puspita (2022), cultural values play a pivotal role in shaping environmental awareness and conservation behaviors. In the Mappalili context, the *Bissu* functions as a spiritual leader and environmental educator, promoting sustainable practices through oral traditions and rituals. It is also important to realize that ignoring or changing these traditions without considering the underlying cultural values can lead to environmental degradation. The cultural values inherited by the *Bissu* and Bugis communities are an important foundation in maintaining the balance of the local ecosystem (Jaiswal, 2023).

The research not only views Mappalili as a spiritual ritual but also as a concrete manifestation of complex and structured environmental communication. In this ritual, community participation, coordination, and cultural values play an important role in maintaining ecosystem balance and environmental sustainability. It shows that the Mappalili tradition is not only part of cultural heritage but also an effective communication tool in promoting sustainable awareness and action. This result is in line with the findings of Waithiru (2022), emphasizing environmental symbolism in cultural communication as an instrument for forming ecological awareness, which can arouse community involvement.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Mappalili tradition practiced by the Bugis people in South Sulawesi reflects the deep connection between cultural values, sustainable agricultural practices, and environmental communication. Through the role of *Bissu* as ritual leaders, this tradition not only functions as a form of spirituality, but also as a means to convey important messages about sustainability and ecosystem balance. The teachings applied in Mappalili, such as using natural agricultural methods and letting the land rest (*Mappayawa*), show that local wisdom can contribute to sustainable natural resource management.

In the context of environmental rhetoric, the Mappalili tradition functions as an effective communication tool to build public awareness of the importance of preserving the environment. The use of symbols, mantras, and cultural practices in this ritual plays a role in forming a narrative that supports sustainability. Through this structured communication, the community can be actively involved in maintaining the ecosystem and adapting to changes, such as extreme climate phenomena.

However, it is important to remember that ignoring this tradition can have serious consequences for the environment and society. The metaphor of "Pandora's box" reminds us of the risks that arise

when cultural values are ignored or changed without considering the impact on the ecosystem. Therefore, maintaining the Mappalili tradition and integrating its cultural values into modern agricultural practices is key to achieving the desired environmental sustainability.

In conclusion, the Mappalili tradition not only functions as a cultural ritual but also as a medium for environmental communication that educates the community about the importance of maintaining harmony between humans and nature. By prioritizing the values of local wisdom and community involvement, Mappalili proves that environmental rhetoric can inspire real action in the preservation and management of natural resources while strengthening the cultural identity of the Bugis community.

The research focuses on environmental rhetoric with an environmental communication approach, which aims to increase insight as teaching material in environmental communication courses. Through an in-depth exploration of the Mappalili tradition, the research not only examines how Bugis culture conveys messages of sustainability through local practices, but also presents a framework that can enrich students' understanding of environmental communication concepts. In the future, the research can be further developed by deepening the research related to symbolism in the Mappalili ritual dance, which is believed to contain ecological and spiritual messages, the influence of leadership communication played by Bissu in mobilizing the community to protect the environment, and an analysis of effective communication in the implementation of Mappalili as a way to increase collective awareness of the importance of natural balance. Future research is expected to enrich the perspectives of students and practitioners in understanding the dynamics of communication in the context of local traditions and cultures oriented toward sustainability.

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