

Contesting Sovereignty: The State-Indigenous Relations at the Indonesia - Timor-Leste Borderlands

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Abstract

The contestation of the state and Indigenous people at the Indonesia – Timor Leste border has formed a distinctive pattern. The state's contestation represents sovereignty, while Indigenous people reflects socio-cultural integrity. The dynamics and strategic issues of the border area in Indonesia – Timor Leste are interesting topics of the study, especially those related to the resistance between the state and customary institutions. Conflicts often arise due to contestations over political and cultural boundaries, shaping the relationship between the state and local communities. This topic is significant as it involves two parties: state institutions and customary institutions. Moreover, there is a strong common thread connecting these interactions. This research examined the forms of political and cultural contestation and analyzes the factors driving the contestation between these two entities. Furthermore, it explored the implications of these contestations for the role of customary institutions in Indonesia-Timor Leste bilateral relations. This research applied an ethnographic approach, relying on the acquisition of primary and secondary data collected for analysis. The forms of contestation between the state and customary institutions include conflicts over identity, struggles regarding the formal spatial concept of the state and the socio-cultural space of customary institutions, and disputes over ownership claims. A key factor driving these contestations is the restriction of customary participation which is restricted by the government through regulations and marginalization of customary institutions. The contestation has implications for regulation, including

compromises between the state and customary practices, the provision of new customary spaces, and the evolving relationship between Indigenous communities and transnational cultures.

Keywords: border area, Indigenous people contestation, politics, state contestation

Introduction

The contestation between the state and Indigenous people at the Indonesia-Timor Leste border results in direct confrontations between the state and traditional institutions (Alkatiri, 2020). The conflict over political and cultural boundaries challenges the state sovereignty and customary integrity (Benhabib, 2021). The state establishes its integrity through formal legal rules for sovereignty, while customary integrity is based on sociocultural relations and traditional ties (Strelein, 2021). On August 18, 2020, large-scale destruction of houses occurred in the 3700-hectare Pubabu customary forest in Besipae, South Central Timor, to facilitate the development of livestock, tourism, and plantations. Another case involved the displacement of a customary pillar in the village of Nelu Leolbatan by the Bakorsurtanal team, which resulted in a national border conflict (Kennedy et al., 2022). These conflicts stem from intense nationalism, driving actions intended to uphold the country's dignity and sovereignty.

Research on contestation tends to examine it from symbolic aspects and opposition aspects (Thompson, 2024). The first perspective views contestation as an action expressed through symbols, while the second examines it through direct forms of resistance itself (Tho Seeth, 2023; Barton et al., 2021; Hidayatulloh, 2024). These two approaches primarily focus on conflicts between groups. However, previous research has not thoroughly explored the implications for the contestants or the contradictions that arise. National Values at the Indonesian border in Timor-Leste are constructed through two models: civil nationalism and ethnocultural nationalism (Balcom et al., 2021).

The border of Timor Leste is a highly dynamic area in terms of political, social, cultural, and economic aspects (Arvanti et al., 2023; Mangku, 2020b; Sunyowati et al., 2022; Yahya et al., 2024). Government policies that adopt a prosperity-based approach have significantly influenced studies on national borders (Sunyowati et al., 2023). The border between Indonesia and Timor Leste is particularly noteworthy to discuss due to its long territorial boundaries and deep-rooted historical socio-cultural ties, which have evolved within traditional societies. Issues along the Indonesia-Timor Leste border have the potential to generate both conflict and bilateral consolidation, as they leverage historical socio-cultural connections between nations and Indigenous people (Kennedy et al., 2022; Dari et al., 2023; Rachmawati et al., 2020; Rachmawati & Djalaludin, 2017). The vertical conflict between the state and the people presents an intriguing topic for examining the interaction between customary and formal institutions. The research of contestation, the socio-cultural reproduction of the state, and global relations serve as a strategic issue that informs government policy-making in the development process of border areas, particularly in newly established territories.

This research is based on the idea that identity contestation is primarily limited to differences in citizenship status and the status of Indigenous people. While the country's political identity is official, it inherently allows room for change and adaptation. In contrast, people's cultural identity is both fluid and permanent, making it highly resistant to change due to the rigid customary mechanisms that govern it (Kramsch & Uryu, 2020). Although political identity is rigid, there is space for transformation. Meanwhile, the community's cultural identity remains fluid and permanent, making modifications exceedingly difficult due to the strict customary mechanisms. The political identities of border residents are not predetermined but rather shaped by the political state. This formation may stem from the need to uphold national dignity, even when it contradicts the cultural ties that traditionally serve as a medium of cohesion within society (Adelita & Romadhona, 2023; Tiwari, 2021; Wiratama et al., 2023).

Setting up the borders between countries should not be based solely on a nation's history, politics, national law, and international law (Abramson et al., 2022; Elden, 2021; Klabbers, 2020a; Paasi et al., 2022). It should also involve the people living near the borders to ensure fairness and alignment with the community's needs (Windradi & Wahyuni, 2020). They explained that centralized political and legal interests primarily drove many historical agreements defining borders (Windradi & Wahyuni, 2020). Furthermore, interaction and communication between people in border areas must adhere to the boundaries established through legal formalities. Therefore, a country's political and legal principles not only regulate sovereignty between countries but also regulate the interaction and communication of people living in the border areas (Mangku, 2020b; Damayanthi et al., 2022; Leonardi et al., 2021). The fanatical management of border areas at political and legal boundaries has led to the neglect of collective interests in border areas, especially in facilitating interaction and communication among local communities (Sunnyowati et al., 2023).

In managing border areas, local governments' participation is crucial in determining regional boundaries and establishing identity per agreed political and legal policies (Sabuna, 2020). Politically, the legal identity of people living in border areas is an essential aspect to ensure the welfare and security of people in border areas, especially in carrying out the process of interaction and communication (Sabuna, 2020). Therefore, geographical, political, and legal factors are important aspects that cannot only determine territorial boundaries (Sassen, 2020; Jessop, 2020; Barbour, 2023; Schimmelfennig, 2021), but also regulate how people in border areas behave, interact, and communicate in compliance with legal provisions (Rokhanyah et al., 2023; Encarnacao et al., 2022; Uly et al., 2023; Mauk et al., 2023; Tjitrawati & Romadhona, 2024). However, the interaction and communication of people living in border areas must also be recognized as a vital socio-cultural aspect beyond political and legal perspective (Suwartiningsih & Purnomo, 2020; Ida et al., 2023), as local wisdom in these areas plays a key role in maintaining harmonization between border communities (Hasnan & Pakri, 2021).

Politically, people living in border areas are separated by administrative legal boundaries. However, regarding attitudes, interactions, and communication, there are no cultural boundaries between those people (Djuyandi et al., 2023; Arifin, 2022). In line with this,

border areas are not only a statement of administrative demarcations that define a country's sovereignty but also a cultural statement that transcends formal national boundaries (Handayani, 2020). The cultural boundaries of communities in border areas should be recognized as a strategic value in fostering harmonious welfare and security through an approach to interaction and communication between communities (Arditama & Lestari, 2020; Atem & Niko, 2020). Therefore, the management of national space and culture in border areas must accommodate national and cultural interests to enhance welfare and security among border communities. Based on the political and legal assessment of Indigenous territorial recognition, many Indigenous communities are restricted to the territories within border areas (Monteiro, 2020; Bauder & Mueller, 2023).

The cultural boundaries of people living in border areas have transcended formal political and legal administration boundaries (Roluahpuia, 2024; Gohain, 2020; Jain & DasGupta, 2021; Munandar, 2020). In this context, cultural-based regional management at the border must be implemented proportionally (Stiefel & Peleg, 2023), as each country has its uniqueness and distinctiveness, as reflected in the interaction and communication between the people of Indonesia and Timor Leste in the border area (Metherall et al., 2022). The dynamic of cultural area boundaries in border communities can positively impact increasing security and tolerance by upholding collective values among communities. Therefore, the dynamics of Indigenous territories in border areas have demonstrated a positive impact on the process of community interaction and communication. Moreover, customary involvement in border areas has played a crucial role in preventing illegal logging, human trafficking, and inter-ethnic conflicts in the border area (Irawan et al., 2021; Anwar, 2021; Haryaningsih & Andriani, 2022).

The identity of people living in border areas often creates polemics between the people and the state (Ochoa Espejo, 2020; Stoffelen, 2022; Furedi, 2020). In Nunukan Regency, North Kalimantan Province, people living in border areas only have a Temporary Residence Certificate (SKTS) as an identity card, making their Indonesian identity dependent on Malaysia's state policies (Ford, 2024). The limitations faced by border communities have pragmatically influenced their orientation toward establishing identity in a pragmatic manner. In the context of cross-border societies, political space is shaped by varying levels of cultural and ethnic interest, serving as the foundation for ideological, linguistic, and social differences (Sarjono & Rudiati, 2022). This has led to paradoxical state policies regarding border populations. The social and cultural characteristics of people living along various borders have, in some cases, resulted in disunity among Indigenous communities, as seen in communities living in border areas between the United States and Mexico (Gonlin et al., 2020; Kurniawan et al., 2022; Subagyono et al., 2024).

Convergence and differences in preferences regarding border area regulations must gain public support to ensure politically reasonable policies and promote the integration of people living in border areas, thereby minimizing discrimination, racism, and criminal practices in border areas (Mckee et al., 2021; Morgan-Jones et al., 2020; Weiß, 2021). The low level of state participation in border areas limits access to healthcare, social services, and education about nationality (Ramadani et al., 2024; Koesbardiati et al., 2025), increasing the

likelihood of the potential for community involvement in border areas to violate the law is even greater (Sagita, 2020). The example of the law violations are such as human trafficking, drugs, and inter-ethnic conflicts which often involve people in border areas (Prayuda, 2020). This situation is further exacerbated by inadequate rights and resources, including the lack of educational facilities, insufficient teaching materials, and poor education quality, ultimately marginalizing border communities and worsening their socio-economic conditions (Lengkong & Sinaga, 2021).

This research aims to address the shortcomings of existing research by examining the implications of contestation, which leads to a new form of Indigenous people's integration. In this regard, three questions are posed (Chobphon, 2021). First, what is the nature of the contestation between nations and Indigenous people? Second, what factors contribute to the emergence of this contestation? Third, what are the implications of this identity contestation on social life in the Indonesia- Timor Leste border area? The answers to these questions provide a way to obtain more complete information about the dynamics of contestation in border areas involving Indigenous communities.

Research Method

This research is an ethnographic study (Walford, 2020). It employs participatory observation research, with data collected from primary and secondary sources through field research (Walford, 2020). This research uses purposive sampling. Primary data is the data from observations, interviews of 15 respondents and perception data. Meanwhile, secondary data is obtained from the research findings and books discussing border issues, especially in the territory of Timor Leste. Data collection methods include field studies, interviews, and literature studies. The research area covers the border of North Insana, North Central Timor, Indonesia, and the Oecusse District, which is an enclave of Timor-Leste.

The research team conducts a one-month field study. Researchers observe the daily life of the people on the border of Indonesia-Oecusse Timor-Leste. They monitor the mobility of activities in the market, common meeting space known as "*ruang bertemu bersama*", local government officials, and traditional leaders. Interview are conducted to gather extensive data on issues of customary identity, people's views on identity as citizens and as members of Indigenous peoples. Interviews are conducted with people in the border areas of Indonesia and Oecusse Timor-Leste. Then, the research team re-read various written literature related to communities on the border of Indonesia-Oecusse Timor-Leste. The key theme of this research is to address the gaps in existing research by exploring the contestation between nations and Indigenous people, the factors driving it, and its implications for social life in the Indonesia-Timor Leste border area. Thus, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of Indigenous people's integration dynamics.

Data are analyzed using an interactive analysis model proposed by Milles and Huberman (as cited in Sarosa, 2021; Li & Zhang, 2022), including data reduction, data display and data verification. The models include three components: (1) data reduction, classifying

both required and unrequired data; (2) data analysis, presenting the data the researchers made by analyzing; (3) data verification, the researchers made a conclusion based on an analysis of the data that had been reduced.

Analysis

The Indonesia-Timor Leste borders are a multifaceted area characterized by historical conflicts, colonial legacies, and Indigenous resistance (Strating, 2018). The area constitutes more than a mere physical boundary that serves as a domain where Indigenous populations navigate their identity, rights, and existence within the context of state government and evolving national policy. The boundary between Indonesia and Timor Leste has been influenced by historical occurrences, including Portuguese and Dutch colonialism, Japanese occupation during World War II, and Indonesia's annexation of East Timor in 1975 (Leach, 2016; Hägerdal, 2019; Molnar, 2009; Southgate, 2019). The boundary changes normal ways of running things like government, business, and family ties (Joseph & Hamaguchi, 2014). This makes native tribes question the limits of using historical, cultural, and ancestral claims to the land. Indigenous peoples' opposition to state-imposed sovereignty is shown through rallies, efforts to restore land, and the continued use of Indigenous governance systems even when the government gets involved.

Indigenous leaders and customary elders are important in mediating between governmental authorities and local populations, often contesting policies that jeopardize their ancestral territories. The socio-political problems and discussions in the Indonesia-Timor Leste borders illustrate an ongoing negotiation between Indigenous groups and state representatives (Wigglesworth, 2013). Land conflicts, resource ownership, political representation, security and militarism, and cultural integrity are essential components of Indigenous resilience in the area (Palmer & McWilliam, 2019). Indigenous groups preserve cultural and family connections across borders through common rituals, weddings, and social events, contesting the rigidity of national boundaries and strengthening a collective identity that transcends state-imposed divides. Language and oral traditions are crucial in countering cultural absorption with local groups and activists actively working to preserve and teach Indigenous languages (Ward & Braudt, 2015). In response to contemporary challenges, Indigenous communities utilize modern technology, engage in global Indigenous movements, and leverage social media to amplify their visibility. State-Indigenous interactions along the border between Indonesia and Timor Leste illustrate the continuous contestation of sovereignty, ongoing socio-political conflicts, and the enduring resilience of Indigenous cultural identity. For these interactions to be equitable and sustainable, it is essential to take into account Indigenous perspectives, acknowledge historical injustices, and foster an inclusive governance system that respects customary laws and cultural heritage.

Contestation of Identity: Indigenous versus the State in the Borderlands of Indonesia and Timor-Leste

The contestation between Indigenous people and the state can be observed through several aspects: the reality of identity, the concept of space, and ownership (Radhuber & Radcliffe, 2023; Bauder & Mueller, 2023; Brigg et al., 2022). The reality of identity at the borderline of Timor Leste and Indonesia is evident in how local people define themselves. They commonly express their identity with statements such as, “*I am Timorese*”, Antoin Meto, “*I am a Dawan person, not an Indonesian or an East Timorese*”. Timorese people communicate using their mother tongue according to the Dawan language, which reflects their tribal heritage and unique traditions. In contrast, national identities are formalized through official documents such as ID cards, passports, and official documents. The concept of space for the Timorese is based on socio-cultural relationship and ties centered around the existence of *sonaf*, which refers to the traditional house. *Sonaf* symbolizes territorial authority and serves as a cultural marker of power. Meanwhile, the state's political concept of space at the border is defined through the delineation of administrative areas and territorial boundaries. The last aspect is the ownership as it represents another significant aspect of contestation. State ownership holds full rights to land ownership, while Indigenous ownership is reflected in customary claims over sacred sites such as the Oenakaf holy water source, *Ulayat* (customary land), and traditional tribute collection practices (Suhariono et al., 2022).

Identity contestation in the border area refers to the value of pragmatism. Individuals identify themselves as citizens through formal identity markers such as *KTP* (Indonesian ID Card), passport and other official documents. However, within cultural space, identity changes to that of Indigenous people, marked by traditional symbols embedded such as language, kinship, and ancestral rituals. The concept of socio-cultural space is reflected in *Sonaf*, which represents the contestation of space. The state's concept is defined by the demarcation line outlined in the deed of land boundary agreement (Hennida et al., 2020). In contrast, when interpreted by the concept of space in customary ties, it is very fluid and does not establish rigid land boundaries. Instead, social ties such as kinship networks create expansive and territorial boundaries. The struggle for state ownership authority and customary institutions over the right to use and manage customary land remains a significant issue. This contestation leads to disputes over land rights, production resources, conflicts, claims, and broader identity issues, which have become important issues to this date. One of the most pressing identity issues is the phenomenon of dual identification, where individuals hold official documents from both countries. Cases of identity falsification have also been found among border communities in Indonesia and Timor Leste, as stated by Dhona, “*I have two passports, Indonesian and Timor Leste, to make it easier to get in and out of Timor Leste.*”

This case occurs because, in border communities, formal identity is considered merely a formality. Illegal mobility remains a problem; a shortcut road crossing service has emerged for illegal movement, ironically located near the cross-border post (PLBN). Additionally, these shortcut road services are openly offered at the entrance to the cross-border post (PLBN). Ownership claims are also crucial issues, such as the refusal to grant *ulayat* (customary land)

for the construction of roads and facilities that pass through areas considered sacred by local custom. Furthermore, another significant claim involves the management rights to control water sources and watercourses. Traditionally, the right to manage water resources belongs to customary institutions, granting customary members in Indonesia and in Timor Leste access to these water sources. However, this situation also leads to illegal passers-by, which contradicts state law on state ownership.

The dichotomy between state-driven nationalism and Indigenous identity has been a primary source of conflict between Indonesia and Timor-Leste (Schulze, 2024). As a vast, multicultural country, Indonesia operates under a framework of national unity that often seeks to integrate Indigenous identities into more extensive national identities (Drake, 2019). Conversely, Timor-Leste's Indigenous identity is profoundly connected to its historical resistance to foreign domination and its pursuit of self-determination (Pereira & Feijó, 2024). For Indigenous populations near the border, their identity often does not align precisely with state-defined nationality. Numerous individuals have cross-border familial connections and cultural ties that precede contemporary national borders. As a result, Indigenous identity frequently conflicts with the inflexible frameworks imposed by national governments. This dynamic has led to governance issues, especially in border regions where individuals navigate between national identity and traditional cultural ties. The notion of space within the Indonesia-Timor-Leste setting transcends mere geographical boundaries. It includes historical assertions, socio-cultural exchanges, and commercial endeavors that cross boundaries.

The establishment of national borders disrupted longstanding trade networks, familial ties, and societal frameworks that had existed for generations. Disputes over land ownership, boundary delineation, and natural resource governance have intensified tensions. Numerous border communities possess historical entitlements to territories that were indiscriminately partitioned during colonial and post-colonial deliberations. The challenge of establishing legitimate ownership and jurisdiction has often led to conflicts, some of which remain unsolved to this day. In these contentious areas, inadequate regulatory enforcement has facilitated the proliferation of criminal activities, including smuggling and human trafficking, requiring more robust legal frameworks and governance structures. Since gaining independence, relations between Indonesia and Timor-Leste have improved. However, obstacles remain, especially concerning cross-border migrations, economic interactions, and security issues. The porous characteristics of the border facilitate fluid movement, but it also engenders risks that require stringent regulatory procedures. One major consequence of disputes over identity and space is the deterioration of regulatory monitoring. Owing to the complex socio-political landscape, both governments have struggled to enact coherent policies concerning citizenship, property rights, and law enforcement. Border communities often capitalize on these regulatory deficiencies, sometimes leading to conflicts, illicit commerce, and ambiguous legal statuses for persons living in border areas.

A notable issue is the governance of migration and labor. Indonesia, especially in West Timor, employs a significant number of Timorese, often under informal or inadequately regulated circumstances. The lack of robust bilateral labor agreements has resulted in labor exploitation, pay inequities, and legal ambiguities about workers' rights. Enhancing labor

legislation and cross-border employment policies is crucial to safeguarding the rights of these workers and ensuring equitable treatment.

Formation and Contestation of Political and Cultural Indo – Timor-Leste Boundaries

The driving factors behind the contestation of political and cultural boundaries can be categorized into three main aspects: political treatment, disparities in facilities, and language differences. The marginalization of customary institutions by the state is caused by not involving customary institutions in the government policies making process at the border areas. The government does not actively involve customary institutions, treating them merely as objects rather than participants in decision-making process. As stated by Yan Meko, Tribal Chief of Usi Meko or Meko King, *“The rapid changes at the border were like magic; some time ago. It was still pitch black, but now it is so bright. It took us by surprise to see.”* Furthermore, economic marginalization is apparent as traders from migrant communities are more prevalent in border markets, while traders from local communities are rarely seen. Yan Meko further emphasized, *“The government does not include customary institutions in the development process at the border, they build without involving the community except when they need our lands”*. The marginalization of traditional institutions is linked to economic disparities, characterized by low levels of the community's economy, limited education, and inadequate human resources within the local community.

The second factor contributing to contestation at the border is the complicated system and administration for crossing national borders. Government policies that enforce administrative control and improve facilities with modern technology, such as automated teller machines (ATM) and metal detectors, are responded with a reluctance to use modern bureaucracy for some Indigenous people. One of the Indigenous people said, *“To cross the river, you have to bring letter of statement which has to be processed at the village and the cross-border post (PLBN), not to mention the complicated inspection. It is easier for us to pass before there is a cross-border post (PLBN).”* The final driving factor behind contestation in border areas is language use. The government obligates people to use Indonesian as the official language to reinforce the integrity of citizens and strengthen state identity. On the other hand, using the mother tongue in border areas remains prevalent as it strengthens relations between individuals.

Trans-National Socio-Cultural Dynamics: Contestation of Political and Cultural Boundaries in Border Areas between Indonesia and Timor-Leste

There are several implications of contestation in political and cultural boundaries, namely in regulation, cultural space, and relations (Vogel & Field, 2020; Lamond & Moss, 2020; Scott, 2020; Huang et al., 2022; Naji, 2023). The implications of regulatory contestation can be seen in the emergence of new rules. The official letter number 138/BPPD-TTU/VIII/TTU/2014, issued by the Head of Agriculture Extension Center in North Central Timor Regency, serves as a relaxation policy. One of the clauses states that the Central

Government needs to listen to and accommodate all customary activities of people living in the Oecusse enclave area, including customary oaths in setting national boundaries, which have existed since before the Dutch and Portuguese colonization on the island of Timor. In this context, the community's identity as citizens become secondary when Indigenous people gather for cultural ceremonies. This is reflected in an interview with Leader of *Usi Meko*, who stated that, *"Even though our citizens are different, our identities are the same as Dawan people during traditional rituals. It does not matter what nationality we are"*.

The implications of the contestation on cultural space are evident in the holding of a joint market, meeting place, joint cultural festival, and the use of rivers as gathering spaces. Indigenous people actively construct new cultural boundaries by adopting distinctive customary values. The adoption of these customary values and adaption to changes are the strategies applied by Indigenous people at the border. This process involves Indigenous people from both countries, dissolving the political identity boundaries of each nation and uniting them through customary ties.

However, the implications of the cultural contestation experienced by customary institutions have changed the existence and essence of the cultural values of Indigenous people in border areas. As stated by Ji, *Meko Tribal Community*, *"This new cultural compromise is perceived when the implementation of modernization of governance coincides with the change in the country's orientation towards the border area. Rapid changes shift some customs and customary orders. Modernization of technology shifts the tradition of social interaction, such as the tradition of munching sirih pinang (betel leaf and areca nut) as a form of politeness in social interaction. The tradition of munching sirih pinang has been replaced by the use of digital communication."* The last aspect is the implications of relation. The implication can be seen in the use of the mother tongue in communication between Indigenous people. Relational aspects are also found in the typical form of interaction, such as nose touch.

Regulatory implications in the form of loosening regulations on border areas as a form of compromise between countries and customs are depicted in the portrait of the use of public space. One example is the common market utilization as a market representation in the cultural space. The portrait of the common market can be seen from the narrative *"...The holding of a traditional common market is unique. The common market is a product of an agreement to loosening the regulations that provide a place for our community to carry out habits such as eating together and discussing the implementation of traditional rituals other than as a place to fulfill their daily needs."* Another example is the loosening of rules for crossing the country into and out of the border in urgent conditions, such as a deceased person. The death ritual is a ceremony involving Indigenous people in two countries. Formal rules cannot be strictly enforced. Moreover, relation aspect on the implications of cultural and political contestation is communication. The regulations to use Indonesian when communicating have changed when there is a loosening of regulations. People use their mother tongue, especially in mutual communication. It provides more space for Indigenous people and positively impacts the relationships among Indigenous people to interact. The interaction takes place in the cultural space. The government provides a common market with an agreed-upon schedule between

Indonesia and Timor Leste. Meeting spaces are also an effective place for Indigenous people to communicate. Apart from that, the river is also used as a place to solve customary problems.

The Interplay of Political Boundaries, Cultural Contestation, and Transnationalism among Indigenous Communities at Borderlands

The research on political and cultural boundary contestation discovered an important point (Ximenes, 2021). There is a seizure between the national integrity of the state and local socio-cultural integrity by Indigenous people. The state's power over the people at the border requires citizens to obey the state's formal legal rules and values (Andrian, 2020). Meanwhile, socio-cultural integrity requires its members to use customary values and rules in their relationships and interactions. Differences in interests and orientations lead to the dualism of orientations and interests, so the term state within the state emerges (Paquin, 2023). The contestation of political and cultural boundaries encourages the formation of transnationalism for Indigenous people (Koos & Wachsmann, 2023). The unique transnationalism formation of the Indigenous community can be seen from the emergence of new rules that compromise between the value of culture and formal rules. It can be applied in a common market which cross between two countries, the use of *ulayat* land to facilitate public utilization, and the adjustment of identities in accordance with the needs (Fauzi, 2023). To a certain extent, transnationalism has become a consolidated medium to suppress bilateral conflicts.

The formation of a distinctive culture among Indigenous people in border area is a logical consequence of the contestation between political boundaries—represented by formal legal relations and ties of the state and cultural boundaries as a historical experience of the socio-cultural ties of society framed in customary value, which are shaped by social formation and cultural formation (Meissner, 2021). These two forces collectively compete to influence Indigenous people as objects. Distinctive socio-cultural relations become a new building for Indigenous people in forming a new imaginary Indigenous system of relations in border areas and border dynamics as objective habitus. The new culture still maintains the relationship between citizens and the state, but there is an adjustment to customs by making compromises on values within the customary framework. This compromise has implications for deviations and even a crisis of customary values.

The research results explain that contention at the border involves two actors, namely state and non-state institutions. State actors are integrated with the formal rule system, while non-state actors are Indigenous people's institutions that are integrated in socio-cultural ties based on customary values. When there is a conflict between the state and customary institutions, they encourage customary institutions to develop socio-cultural integration in their way. Therefore, there is a new socio-cultural construction as a product of a distinctive value order by adjusting the interests of the two power territories of Indonesia and Timor Leste. The integration of people from two countries unites and forms of trans-national socio-cultural relations and ties. Moreover, it impacts the manifestation flexibility of new values in the form of global ties with national boundaries and increasing socio-cultural integrity as a place and global Indigenous people.

Several researchers have conducted research on contestation (Steininger, 2021; Wiener, 2020; Orchard & Wiener, 2023a; Orchard & Wiener, 2023b). Previous research tends to discuss the contestation between interested parties. The struggle for contestation plays a role, at the same time of their identity. This research is different from the research on the conflict interest between the state and customary institutions involving two countries with the same Indigenous people. The other interesting part is the similarity of very strong socio-cultural ties of people in two different countries. The research on contestation reveals how sociocultural ties create social and cultural transnationalism relations in border communities. By examining the factors influencing the dualism of the Indigenous people' identity at the border, a habitus is formed, especially those related to reality as citizens (Robbins, 2020). This is then considered as a subjective factor. However, identity is not solely shaped by subjective experiences but also objective factors. These objective factors include social space, such as social ties, supportive relationship networks, shared values, and others (Wolf, 2021; Schirone, 2023). While the state firmly enforces formal legal rules to establish social rules, there is still a gap for Indigenous people to implement joint mechanisms that serve as a common space and reduce cultural identity (Robles, 2023; Lipsky, 2023; Hadi & Michael, 2022; Widłak, 2021; Rahman, 2022; Kurgan, 2023).

Transnationalism of Indigenous people in the international relations between two countries (Menon, 2020), Indonesia and Timor-Leste, is v crucial to policy-making process. Transnationalism on Indigenous people cannot become a consolidated medium to suppress bilateral conflicts by involving trans-nationalist Indigenous people in those two countries. Strong socio-cultural integration between relations and interactions in trans-nationalist Indigenous people becomes social principal and cultural (Gilleard, 2020; Smart, 2022; Brough et al., 2020; Branson & Miller, 2020; Threadgold, 2020). It is to form the harmonization of bilateral relations between Indonesia and Timor Leste. The country can actively involve the community in the harmonization process under government regulations to manage the border area.

Conclusion

The intense presence of the state on Indigenous people causes the traditional structure of customary institutions to falter. Country, with its political power, enforces the rules that shape the identity of its citizens. In the government's position, Indigenous people are the object of formal regulation. The state often ignores the historical roots of society's socio-cultural relations. Customary institutions and Indigenous people strengthen the habitus of their objective factors by strengthening the network of relations that penetrate national boundaries, forming identities, concepts of space, and authority as shared spaces. Customary institutions make efforts to compromise culturally to form a new culture. The mechanism of Indigenous people at the network border forms bilateral relations between countries in the form of transnationalism of Indigenous people.

This research can provide initial insight into transnationalism research involving traditional institutions as the subject of studies on globalization issues in the Indonesian Timor

Leste border community. The issue of globalization in today's development is prevalent. However, there is an interesting gap about how two or more countries create globalization. The issue, which is based on cultural similarities, will become a new issue that needs to get attention for further research. The results of this study are expected to be helpful for the government in making regulations that still pay attention to the dynamics that exist at the community level. Regulations that still provide space for the creation of bilateral relations by using social and cultural principles as a reference. It is no exaggeration if social and cultural principles have become a consolidation medium for resolving bilateral conflicts in national border areas.

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