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PLURAL IDENTITIES AND CUSTOMARY GOVERNANCE IN EAST SERAM: THE PERSISTENCE OF NEGERI INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract *This article examines the interplay of cultural identity, territoriality, and adat governance among negeri communities in East Seram, Maluku. Based on field research by Gaia Indonesia from January to February 2024 across twelve villages near a forestry concession, the study identifies three community typologies: coastal negeri linked to the Tidore Sultanate, mountain negeri of the Alifuru people, and state-built transmigration villages. Using ethnographic methods—interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and participatory mapping—the research explores oral histories, adat institutions, sacred sites, and land disputes. Findings show that negeri are not merely administrative entities but living institutions shaping social life, cultural identity, and territorial governance. Coastal negeri such as Waru and Belis assert legitimacy through Tidore recognition and maritime alliances, while mountain negeri such as Boinfia, Gah, and Solang root identity in ancestral myths, sacred landscapes, and adat law. Transmigration villages, by contrast, derive legitimacy from state regulation and development programs. Tensions emerge where adat boundaries diverge from administrative borders, creating overlapping claims and potential conflicts, especially when external actors like logging concessions intervene. The study contributes to anthropological debates on space and identity by showing that cultural identity in East Seram is plural, negotiated, and historically situated.*

Keyword:
East Seram, cultural identity, territoriality, indigenous governance, negotiated legitimacy

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1. Introduction

The island of Seram, the largest in the Maluku archipelago, has long occupied a central place in both historical narratives and anthropological scholarship. Its rugged mountains, dense forests, and coastal settlements are more than physical landscapes; they are cultural spaces imbued with meaning, memory, and authority. Communities in Seram identify themselves not only through lineage or religion but also through the institution of the *negeri*—a customary sociopolitical unit that persists alongside the modern administrative *desa*. The *negeri* is simultaneously a space of settlement, a polity of governance, and a locus of identity, embodying what Henri Lefebvre (1991) terms the *production of space*.

In East Seram (Seram Bagian Timur, SBT), *negeri* histories reveal two major trajectories of formation. The first consists of coastal negeri, which maintains oral traditions of allegiance to the Tidore Sultanate, a maritime power that extended its influence across the Maluku islands. Communities such as Waru, Belis, and Hote narrate their legitimacy through gifts of regalia, oaths of loyalty, and the presence of Tidore emissaries. These negeri situate themselves within wider maritime networks, linking local governance to external authority. The second trajectory consists of mountain negeri, such as Boinfia, Salas, Solang, Dawang, and Selor, whose identities are grounded in Alifuru genealogies, ancestral myths, and sacred landscapes. Here, legitimacy derives not from external recognition but from acts of founding ancestors—cutting the first tree, planting the first yam, or following spirits to a mountain spring.

The persistence of the *negeri* institution has long attracted scholarly attention. Cooley (1962) described Ambonese adat as a living system shaped by both alliance and hierarchy. Ellen (1978, 1983) emphasized the ecological dimension of settlement and the role of rituals in structuring Nuaulu society. Bartels (1977, 2017) documented inter-village alliances and religious syncretism, while Laksono (1990) highlighted the endurance of kingship and adat governance in Maluku. Valeri (1980, 2000) demonstrated how cosmology and ritual structure identity among the Huaulu of central Seram, particularly through the moral force of taboos and the sacrality of forests.

In contrast to these coastal and central traditions, many upland groups in East Seram explicitly identify as part of the Alifuru people, widely regarded as the indigenous inhabitants of Seram's mountainous interior. The term *Alifuru* historically referred to highland populations who resisted incorporation into coastal sultanate networks, maintaining distinctive cosmologies, rituals, and forms of adat governance. Ethnographic studies emphasize that Alifuru identity is anchored in kinship, myth, and ecological knowledge rather than in external alliances (Cooley, 1962; Ellen, 1978; Valeri, 1980; Bartels, 1977). Valeri (2000) shows how the Huaulu, considered an Alifuru group, grounds their identity in ritual prohibitions and sacred forests, while Ellen (1978) highlights the Nuaulu's complex rituals tied to forest ecology and clan organization. In East Seram, negeri such as Boinfia, Salas, Solang, Dawang, and Selor continue to embody this Alifuru orientation: their narratives recount ancestral acts of forest clearing or journeys guided by spirits to rivers and springs, and their governance emphasizes consensus among adat elders rather than external sanction.

Cultural identity, as Stuart Hall (1996) argued, is not singular or fixed but negotiated and contested. In East Seram, coastal and mountain negeri exemplify this dynamic. Coastal communities emphasize external legitimacy through Tidore-linked histories, while mountain communities emphasize internal legitimacy through Alifuru cosmologies. Yet both rely on adat institutions—the *raja negeri*, the *saniri negeri*, and the authority of elders—to govern social life and reproduce identity. Sacred sites—*batu keramat*, graves, ritual forests, and springs—serve as anchors of belonging, functioning as living coordinates of identity.

Building on this, the article draws conceptually on Marshall Sahlins's (1985) understanding of cosmology as the cultural logic through which societies interpret and reproduce their history. For Sahlins, cosmology is not a static belief system but a symbolic order that organizes moral and political life. It provides the idioms through which people act historically—what he terms the *structure of the conjuncture*, where cosmological logics encounter and reinterpret new historical forces. Viewed through this lens, the contrasting

trajectories of coastal and mountain *negeri* represent distinct yet interacting cosmological orders. The former is grounded in maritime sovereignty and external alliances, while the latter is rooted in ancestral relations with forested landscapes and sacred geographies. These cosmologies shape not only ritual and governance but also how communities negotiate their place within the modern state and its spatial order.

The significance of the *negeri* today is not only cultural but also legal. The Provincial Regulation of Maluku No. 10/2006 on Negeri provides juridical recognition for negeri as customary law communities equivalent to villages. This dual recognition—ancestral and legal—grants negeri a unique status within Indonesia's governance system. In practice, however, negeri continue to navigate tensions between adat sovereignty and state administration, particularly in areas where transmigration settlements such as Jembatan Basah and Rukun Jaya were established. These villages follow state-designed structures, contrasting sharply with adat-based governance, yet they now coexist in the same landscape with coastal and mountain negeri.

This article is based on field research conducted by Gaia Indonesia during January–February 2024 across thirteen villages of East Seram (Profil Desa-Desa Sekitar PT Strata Pacific SBT 2024). The fieldwork combined ethnographic interviews, participatory mapping, and archival tracing to capture both historical narratives and contemporary adat governance. It seeks to answer the following questions: How did coastal and mountain negeri emerge historically, and how do they sustain identity through adat and sacred space? How are differences between coastal Tidore-linked identities and mountain Alifuru cosmologies articulated in everyday governance, ritual, and territoriality? What tensions and negotiations arise when state-built transmigration villages intersect with adat-based negeri?

Rooted in these questions, the present study offers an ethnographic exploration of how history, cosmology, and governance intersect in the daily life of East Seram communities. First, it seeks to document the historical narratives and origin myths through which coastal and mountain negeri trace their beginnings, paying attention to both Tidore-linked coastal accounts and Alifuru genealogies of the interior. At the same time, the study analyzes the functioning of adat institutions—*raja negeri*, *saniri negeri*, and adat elders—that regulate governance and sustain the reproduction of cultural identity in daily life. A further objective is to explore the significance of sacred and historical sites such as *batu keramat*, ancestral graves, ritual forests, and springs, which operate as anchors of collective memory and living symbols of belonging. Finally, the article positions the plural identities of East Seram—coastal, mountain, and transmigrant—within wider anthropological debates on space, identity, and governance, demonstrating that the *negeri* is not a relic of the past but a living institution continuously negotiated between history, cosmology, and the modern state.

2. Method

This study applied a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore the cultural identity, adat governance, and territorial claims of negeri communities in East Seram. The research was carried out under the auspices of Gaia Indonesia between January and February 2024, with a specific focus on villages located around a forestry concession area. In total, twelve communities were studied, representing three distinct typologies: coastal negeri historically linked to Tidore (Waru, Belis, Hote, and Gah), mountain negeri of the

Alifuru people (Boinfia, Salas, Solang, and Dawang), and state-built transmigration villages (Jembatan Basah and Rukun Jaya). In addition, Selor was included as a liminal case that does not fit neatly into either coastal or mountain typologies, but nevertheless provides valuable insight into the plurality of East Seram's cultural landscape.

Fieldwork combined several techniques aimed at capturing both the historical depth and the contemporary practice of adat. Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with adat elders, *raja negeri*, members of the *saniri negeri*, and ordinary villagers, focusing on oral histories, myths of origin, and governance practices. These interviews were complemented by focus group discussions that encouraged collective reflection on sacred sites, boundary claims, and adat rules. Researchers also engaged in participant observation, attending ritual ceremonies, community meetings, and everyday activities, thereby gaining access to the lived realities of adat governance. Participatory mapping sessions were carried out to delineate customary territories and to identify sacred landscapes such as *batu keramat*, ancestral graves, ritual forests, and springs. To contextualize these accounts historically, archival research was also undertaken, including the consultation of colonial records, church registers, and local documents such as *profil desa*.

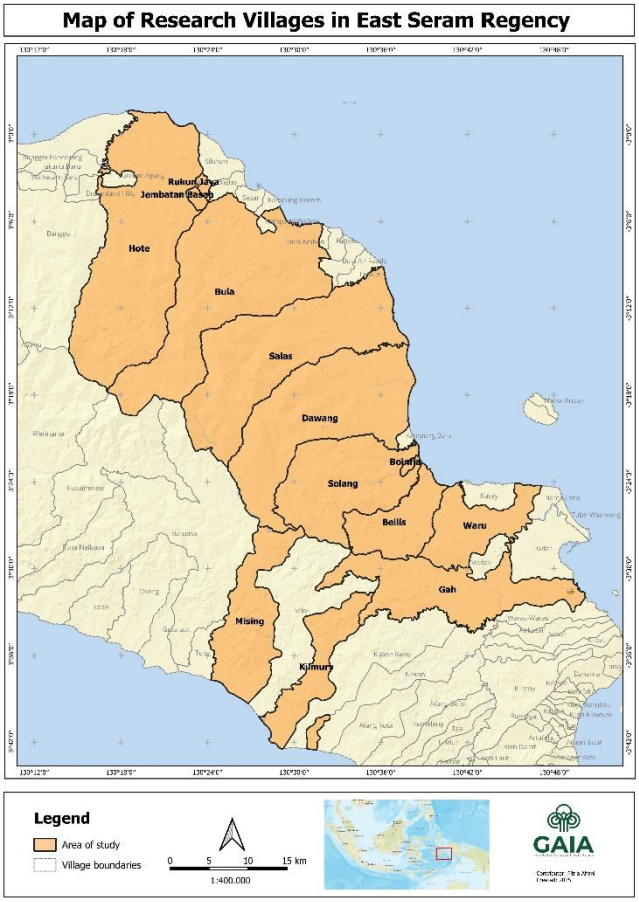
The data collected encompassed a wide range of themes: narratives of village formation (for example, Waru's Tidore-linked origins, Belis's emergence as a splinter community, or Boinfia's myth of the three rivers), adat institutions of governance such as the *matarumah* and *saniri negeri*, sacred and taboo sites that function as both symbolic and territorial anchors, overlapping land claims and boundary disputes particularly where adat and administrative borders diverge, and finally contemporary negotiations between adat communities, transmigrant villages, and external actors such as logging concessions.

Analysis proceeded through thematic interpretation, moving between emic perspectives—how communities narrate their own histories and articulate their claims—and etic frameworks drawn from anthropology. Comparative attention was given to the differences between coastal, mountain, and transmigration villages, highlighting their distinct genealogies of legitimacy: external recognition, ancestral cosmology, and state law. These findings were then situated within broader theoretical debates, particularly Stuart Hall's (1996) view of cultural identity as negotiated and historically situated, and Henri Lefebvre's (1991) concept of space as socially produced. Following Hall's postcolonial perspective, identity in East Seram can also be understood as emerging thought historical encounters with external powers from the Tidore Sultanesses to colonial and modern state formations where local cosmologies continually rearticulate power and belonging within shifting regimes of authority.

Throughout the research, reflexivity was central. As a consultancy team, access to adat leaders and ritual knowledge depended on trust-building and repeated consultations, as well as careful adherence to prohibitions surrounding sacred sites. The presence of state authorities and NGOs also shaped the dynamics of fieldwork, influencing the ways communities narrated their identities and claims. This positionality is part of the data itself, reminding us that knowledge of negeri is always mediated through relationships, negotiations, and the responsibilities of working in a culturally charged environment.

3. Result and Discussion

The field research conducted by Gaia Indonesia in January–February 2024 covered twelve villages in East Seram, which can be grouped into three broad typologies. Four are coastal negeri historically linked to Tidore (Waru, Belis, and Hote) whose oral traditions highlight legitimacy derived from Tidore's recognition and maritime alliances. Five are mountain negeri of the Alifuru people (Boinfia, Salas, Solang, Gah, and Dawang) which base their identity on ancestral genealogies, myths of origin, and sacred landscapes. Two are state-built transmigration villages—Jembatan Basah and Rukun Jaya—established during the New Order period as part of national settlement programs, populated largely by migrants from outside Maluku. These categories form the framework through which the findings are presented.



Before turning to the ethnographic accounts of each village, it is important to note how people themselves conceive of their territorial boundaries. For local communities, the river is the primary axis of spatial imagination, functioning as both an ecological resource and a cultural marker. Boundaries are not seen as abstract lines on a government map, but as stretches of river, flowing from the mouth (*hilir*) upstream (*hulu*), each segment belonging to a particular negeri. Sacred stones, springs, and graves often mark these divisions, rooting territory in both landscape and memory. As one elder in Boinfia explained:

"Our land follows the river; from the place where it enters the sea up to the headwaters, that is where our ancestors settled."

This river-based way of imagining territory stands in sharp contrast to the administrative borders drawn by the state, which often impose straight lines across landscapes. For the people of East Seram, rivers are lifelines that organize not only ecology and subsistence, but also authority, belonging, and inter-village relations.

The Sultanate of Tidore historically exerted influence over much of Maluku through networks of tribute, trade, and symbolic authority. In oral traditions, Tidore is remembered as the source of legitimacy for coastal negeri. In Waru, for example, the arrival of a keris from Tidore is recalled as the foundation of the raja's authority, while in Hote villagers narrate how emissaries from Tidore once stayed in their settlement, leaving a legacy that continues to be ritually honored. These memories position coastal negeri within a broader maritime political world that links Seram to external powers.

In contrast, the Alifuru people of the mountain negeri are recognized as the indigenous inhabitants of Seram's uplands. Historically resistant to incorporation into coastal sultanate networks, the Alifuru maintained distinctive cosmologies, rituals, and systems of adat governance (Cooley, 1962; Ellen, 1978; Valeri, 1980; Bartels, 1977). For Alifuru communities such as Boinfia, Solang, Salas, Dawang, and Selor, legitimacy derives not from external kings but from ancestral acts—cutting the first tree, planting the first yam, or following spirits to rivers and springs. Their authority is collective, vested in the saniri council and adat elders, and their land is understood as a cosmological inheritance guarded by taboos and ancestral spirits.

The following sections present ethnographic accounts of these twelve villages, organized into coastal Tidore-linked negeri, mountain Alifuru negeri, and state-built transmigration settlements. This structure allows us to trace how different genealogies of legitimacy—external, ancestral, and state-based—shape identity, authority, and space in East Seram.

3.1 Coastal Negeri: Tidore-linked Identities

On the coast, Waru, Belis, and Hote situate their legitimacy within the historical connections to the Sultanate of Tidore. In Waru, oral traditions recall the arrival of three lineages (Kilbaren, Rumeon, and Rumbalifar) who trace their origins to Tidore. Upon settling in Seram, these Tidore-linked clans established ties with the indigenous Fesan Alifuru community. Their relationship was sealed through a solemn oath in the local language: *"Tumbah-tumbah Fakut O Da Tumbah Laimelo Ertarfat"*, meaning *"the four clans cannot be separated."* This oath continues to serve as the symbolic foundation of Waru's unity and legitimacy.

Belis emerged later as a splinter community from Waru, formed after internal disputes. During the Dutch colonial period, Belis gained a degree of autonomy when one of its members—chosen for his ability to speak Malay—was appointed as raja. This marked the beginning of Belis as an independent negeri, though its identity remains historically intertwined with Waru.

The inauguration ceremony of the Raja of Belis functions as an arena of symbolic legitimacy. Beyond confirming the authority of the raja within Belis itself, the ceremony becomes a broader political event through the participation of neighboring communities. On

these occasions, *eserium* (adat representatives) from Dusun Teon and Boinfia attend as witnesses and guarantors of legitimacy. Their presence ensures that the leadership of Belis is not only accepted internally but also acknowledged across the wider adat network, embedding the negeri within a shared moral and political order.

Across these coastal negeri, political authority is embedded in marga-based leadership. The raja negeri is chosen from the matarumah, the lineage house of the ruling clan, and leadership is inherited through male descent. The *matarumah* itself is headed by the eldest male of the clan, who presides over deliberations to determine the candidate for raja. Once selected, the raja is confirmed through adat rituals, symbolizing both continuity and consensus.

Balancing this hereditary principle is the role of the saniri negeri, the customary council that functions as a legislative body. The *saniri* serves as a check on the raja's authority, ensuring that decisions align with adat law and communal interests. Together, the raja, the *matarumah*, and the *saniri* form a governance structure that blends hereditary legitimacy with collective oversight, anchoring coastal negeri in both genealogy and deliberation.

Religious affiliation further strengthens the outward-facing orientation of these communities. The coastal negeri are predominantly Muslim, reflecting their historical ties with Tidore and the broader Islamic networks of Maluku. Oral histories recall not only political recognition from the Sultanate but also the transmission of Islam through traders, emissaries, and intermarriage. Community leaders often emphasize their desire to spread Islamic teachings (*syiar Islam*) among neighboring settlements, positioning themselves as both political heirs of Tidore and religious bearers of its legacy. This intertwining of Islam with adat governance adds another layer of legitimacy to the coastal negeri, situating them firmly within a maritime world of alliances, faith, and authority.

3.2 Mountain Negeri: Alifuru Cosmologies

In contrast, the mountain negeri—including Boinfia, Salas, Solang, Dawang, and Gah—emphasize their autonomy and ancestral continuity as Alifuru people. Their narratives do not draw upon Tidore, but upon genealogies, cosmologies, and acts of founding ancestors. Importantly, older oral histories recall that these groups originally did not possess family names or *marga*. It was only through sustained interaction with coastal negeri, particularly those under Tidore influence, that Alifuru groups gradually adopted the institution of *marga* as a way to formalize kinship and articulate political identity within inter-village relations.

In Boinfia, origin myths tell of three rivers whose confluence gave birth to the negeri. Elders warn that polluting the river threatens not only water but also the unity of the people, and rituals of harvest and collective feasting reaffirm this sacred bond. Yet despite their strong sense of identity, Boinfia is considered to have no autonomous adat territory, because its land is historically acknowledged as belonging to Belis, following agreements made in the past. In Boinfia, there are also taboo forest areas where sacred heirlooms (*benda pusaka*) are believed to be stored. These places cannot be entered without ritual preparation, and disturbing them is said to bring misfortune to the entire community.

Solang recounts myths of ancestral spirits who guided the first settlers to the mountain springs:

> *"The spirits showed our forefathers the mountain and the water. Without these gifts, there would be no Solang."*

Ritual dances and chants continue to honor the springs, while adat rules strictly forbid washing or waste disposal near them. Similar to Boinfia, Solang is also considered to lack independent adat territory, its settlement recognized within the broader adat domain of Belis.

Salas and Dawang ground their legitimacy in ancestral acts of forest clearing and settlement. Elders describe the first yam planted or the first tree felled as cosmological events, remembered and renewed through ritual offerings. In these communities, the raja negeri acts as ritual coordinator rather than supreme ruler, with authority more evenly distributed among elders and *saniri* councils.

Gah represents another expression of Alifuru orientation. The choice of its current location is tied not to external alliances but to subsistence needs. Oral traditions explain that the settlement was founded where it stands today because of the presence of sago palms, considered essential as a staple food. The availability of sago provided both nourishment and symbolic grounding, making the site a fitting place for permanent residence.

Today, all of these mountain negeri are predominantly Muslim, a transformation that followed the religious conflict in Maluku in 2001. Prior to that period, oral accounts recall that some settlements still practiced ancestral religions alongside Christianity and Islam. The violence of the early 2000s, however, compelled communities to consolidate their religious identity, and in the aftermath of the conflict, Islam became the dominant and unifying faith across the upland settlements.

Together, these mountain negeri illustrate the inward orientation of Alifuru cosmologies. Identity is not granted from outside powers but inherited through descent and enacted through ritual. The forest, rivers, and mountains are not resources but ancestral legacies, inhabited by spirits and guarded by taboos. Yet their position is also shaped by relations with neighboring coastal negeri, which have influenced their adoption of *marga*

and, in some cases, curtailed their territorial autonomy. The shift to a shared Islamic identity adds another layer, intertwining cosmology and religion in the ongoing negotiation of Alifuru belonging.

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3.3 Transmigration Villages: State-built Settlements

Alongside these adat communities stand the transmigration villages of Jembatan Basah and Rukun Jaya, established by the Indonesian government during the New Order's transmigration programs. Unlike the negeri, these villages are products of state planning, populated by migrants from Java, Sulawesi, and other islands.

In these settlements, governance follows the administrative structure of the modern desa, with elected heads rather than adat-based raja or saniri councils. Ritual life is shaped more by national religious institutions—mosques, churches—than by ancestral stones or forests. As one migrant in Jembatan Basah explained:

> *"We came here to farm. We follow the state's rules, not the adat. Our identity is as Indonesians, not as negeri people."*

Rukun Jaya reflects similar dynamics. The layout of houses, the organization of farmland, and the governance system all follow the grid of government planning. Yet interactions with neighboring negeri are unavoidable. Transmigrant communities often negotiate access to forests or rivers with adat elders, sometimes leading to tension. A leader in Solang remarked:

> *"The people of Rukun Jaya do not know our taboos. They see forest as empty land, but for us it is sacred."*

This juxtaposition highlights the contrast between state-built villages, oriented toward productivity and integration, and adat-based negeri, oriented toward continuity and sacred space.

3.4 Interwoven Identities

The three formations—Tidore-linked coastal negeri, Alifuru mountain negeri, and state-built transmigration villages—together reveal the plural landscape of East Seram. Coastal negeri embody histories of maritime alliances, mountain negeri reproduce ancestral cosmologies, and transmigration villages materialize state visions of settlement. Each claims legitimacy in different ways: external recognition, ancestral myth, or government law.

Yet they are not isolated. Trade, intermarriage, and disputes over land bring them into constant interaction. In some places, tensions arise—between adat prohibitions and state projects, between indigenous authority and migrant ambitions. In others, accommodations are made, as when transmigrant leaders attend negeri rituals to show respect, or when saniri councils consult with desa heads to resolve disputes.

This interwoven reality underscores that identity in East Seram is never singular. It is layered, negotiated, and contested, produced through history, ritual, and law. The

coexistence of negeri and transmigration villages illustrates the ongoing negotiation between indigenous cosmologies, external powers, and the modern Indonesian state.

3.5 Land Conflicts and Historical Claims

The three formations—Tidore-linked coastal negeri, Alifuru mountain negeri, and state-built transmigration villages—together reveal the plural landscape of East Seram. Coastal negeri embody histories of maritime alliances, mountain negeri reproduce ancestral cosmologies, and transmigration villages materialize state visions of settlement. Each claims legitimacy in different ways: external recognition, ancestral myth, or government law.

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Conflicts are particularly visible in land claims based on historical narratives of village formation. These surfaced sharply during the arrival of logging companies (HPH concessions), when boundaries had to be drawn and forest resources became contested. Waru asserted rights over a wide area, claiming a territory much larger than its administrative boundaries, justified by its Tidore-linked history. Belis, meanwhile, not only contested Waru's claims but also extended its own, asserting authority over lands now occupied by Boinfia and Solang. Such overlapping claims—rooted in narratives of origin, splintering, and historical agreements—have fueled recurring disputes, making the landscape of East Seram a site where identity and territory are constantly renegotiated.

This interwoven reality underscores that identity in East Seram is never singular. It is layered, negotiated, and contested, produced through history, ritual, and law. The coexistence of negeri and transmigration villages illustrates the ongoing negotiation between indigenous cosmologies, external powers, and the modern Indonesian state, with land conflicts revealing the fragility as well as the persistence of historical claims to space.

3.6 Identity, Territory, and Plural Legitimacies in East Seram

Across the negeri of East Seram, sacred and historical places as classified in conservation assessments as cultural values are central to the reproduction of identity. These sites include *batu keramat* (sacred stones), ancestral graves, ritual forests, springs, and mythic landmarks. Communities describe them not as inert remnants of the past but as living entities that mediate relationships between the present and ancestral worlds.

In Belis, elders point to an ancient graveyard located on a hill overlooking the sea. As one villager explained:

> *"These graves are not forgotten. Each year we clean them and offer food. If we abandon them, our negeri loses its protection."*

In Gah, a large tree known as the "first tree" is preserved near a sacred stone. It is believed to mark the spot where the founding ancestor felled wood to open the settlement. Cutting this tree or disturbing the stone is strictly forbidden. A *saniri* elder warned:

"If anyone dares to touch it, sickness will come to the whole community."

In Solang, the spring where spirits were said to guide the first settlers remains the focus of ritual chants. People still gather there during planting season to pour offerings of betel nut and rice. One woman said:

"This water is our life. Without it, we are no longer Solang."

These examples highlight that sacred sites are not marginal; they anchor the legitimacy of the negeri. They are simultaneously historical records, spiritual centers, and territorial markers.

Yet sacred sites and origin stories are also the basis of land claims. Narratives of how a village was founded—whether through Tidore emissaries on the coast or Alifuru ancestors in the mountains—are used to justify territorial authority. This means that the history of settlement is inseparable from the politics of land ownership, and differences in narrative lead directly to differences in claims.

Importantly, the transformation of negeri into state-recognized villages has not erased adat claims. Administrative borders drawn by the state often diverge from customary boundaries, creating overlapping and sometimes contradictory territorialities. Thus, the village border (desa) is not always the same as the negeri border (adat), leaving space for contestation.

This pattern contains the seeds of horizontal conflict. While communities may coexist peacefully, the entry of external actors—such as logging concessions or plantation companies—forces the question of whose claim is valid. In such moments, historical narratives are mobilized, with coastal negeri like Waru asserting wide territories based on Tidore recognition, and mountain communities insisting on ancestral rights tied to rivers and forests. Conflicts between Waru and Belis, and between Belis and Boinfia or Solang, exemplify how these overlapping claims can resurface when resources are at stake.

Taken together, these dynamics highlight the plurality of East Seram. Coastal people ground their identity in Tidore-linked histories, mountain people in Alifuru cosmologies, and transmigrants in state law and agricultural productivity. This diversity is not merely cultural but spatial and political, shaping how communities understand land, identity, and authority. Far from being relics of the past, these plural orientations actively structure governance and interaction in the present.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined the historical formation, cultural identity, and adat governance of negeri in East Seram, drawing on ethnographic research in twelve communities. The findings demonstrate that the negeri is not merely an administrative category or a residual form of pre-modern organization, but rather a living institution that continues to shape social life, territoriality, and cultural identity.

Two broad trajectories of negeri formation were identified. The first is the coastal negeri, exemplified by Waru, Belis, and Hote, whose authority and identity were historically linked to the Tidore Sultanate. In these negeri, legitimacy was reinforced through external recognition, tributary relations, and the incorporation of Islam, while adat institutions such as the raja negeri and saniri negeri ensured that governance remained locally grounded. The second trajectory is represented by mountain negeri such as Gah, Boinfia, Solang, Salas, and Dawang, which emerged from the consolidation of upland tribal groups. Here, legitimacy rests on genealogical continuity, ancestral myths, and autonomous adat structures rather than external alliances.

Despite their differences, both coastal and mountain negeri share several common features. Each recognizes the authority of a raja negeri, supported by a saniri negeri and adat

elders who safeguard oral histories, ritual knowledge, and territorial boundaries. Each locates its identity in sacred landscapes—*batu keramat*, ancestral graves, ritual forests, and rivers—that are not only symbolic but also constitutive of collective memory. Both emphasize that land is not a commodity but an ancestral heritage, entrusted to the living by previous generations and to be passed on to the future.

The contrast between coastal and mountain negeri thus illustrates two different but equally valid ways of producing cultural identity. Coastal negeri look outward, grounding legitimacy in historical connections to Tidore and maritime networks. Mountain negeri look inward, grounding legitimacy in kinship, genealogy, and ancestral cosmologies. Yet both demonstrate what Stuart Hall (1996) argued: that cultural identity is always negotiated, contested, and historically situated.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings support Henri Lefebvre's (1991) insight that space is socially produced. As Setha Low (2017) further argues in *Spatializing Culture,* space is not only a material or political construct but also a lived and embodied one that constituted through everyday practices, movements, and meanings. This perspective helps illuminate how *negeri* spaces in East Seram are continually shaped through ritual, governance, and interaction with the state. In East Seram, the boundaries and territories of negeri are not determined solely by geography or administration but by histories of migration, alliances, rituals, and oral narratives. Importantly, the research also reveals that customary land claims do not always align with administrative village borders, creating overlapping and contested spaces. This discrepancy carries the potential for horizontal conflicts of territorial control, especially when external actors such as logging concessions or plantation companies enter the landscape and force questions of jurisdiction.

The study also reinforces the contributions of anthropologists who have long engaged with Maluku societies. Cooley (1962) emphasized the interplay of alliance and authority in Ambon and Seram; Valeri (1980) analyzed the ritual cosmologies of Huaulu in central Seram; Laksono (1990) highlighted the endurance of kingship and adat governance. Together with the work of Bartels (1977) and Ellen (1978), these studies underline the importance of situating identity in both history and practice. This article contributes to that lineage by documenting how East Seram communities continue to reproduce identity through the institution of the negeri.

Practically, the findings highlight the need to take seriously indigenous categories of governance and space. Policies that collapse negeri into administrative "villages" or abstract ecological "zones" risk obscuring the historical and cultural dimensions that matter most to local communities. Recognizing negeri as a legitimate institution means acknowledging its role in regulating social life, managing territory, and reproducing cultural identity. Such recognition would not only enrich the anthropology of Maluku but also provide a foundation for more respectful engagement between state, corporate, and community actors.

In conclusion, the negeri of East Seram illustrates that identity is neither static nor singular. It is produced through history, alliances, genealogies, rituals, and landscapes. The coastal and mountain negeri embody different historical experiences, yet both affirm belonging through adat and territory. To study the negeri is therefore to study the ways in which people make space meaningful, linking the past to the present and the ancestral to the everyday. The persistence of the negeri demonstrates that cultural identity in Maluku is not a fragile remnant but a resilient and adaptive institution—an enduring framework through which communities articulate who they are, where they belong, and how they should live.

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