



## Political Sociology of Ternate: A Narrative Review of Power, Culture and Tradition in the Context of Local Democracy

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### ABSTRACT

Ternate as a traditional and historical city in North Maluku holds unique political dynamics, where cultural values, sultanate heritage, and local democratic practices intersect in a complex manner. This review aims to examine how narratives of power, cultural symbols, and local traditions are constructed and practiced in the contemporary democratic arena of Ternate. Using the narrative review method, this article classifies and synthesizes 15 categories of findings from various studies reviewed. The main findings show that local power structures are heavily influenced by cultural symbolism such as Jou Se Ngofa Ngare, as well as by practices of identity politics, money politics, and even mysticism. In conclusion, the sustainability of local democracy in Ternate requires the integration of customary values in a deliberative manner into inclusive political policies, while overcoming the fragmentation of power and cultural instrumentality

## **INTRODUCTION**

Ternate, as the center of the spice sultanate, is a unique political laboratory in the Eastern Indonesia region (Heritage, 2025), ( et al., 2023). The dynamics of local politics are not only shaped by modern electoral mechanisms, but also by historical narratives and cultural symbols that are deeply embedded in its society. The role of the sultanate, community activism, and symbolic power in the social structure make Ternate different in the articulation of local democracy (Fatah, 2023). In this context, there is a need to understand democracy not only as a formal-institutional process, but also as a practice based on local values, customs, and culture. Conceptually, political sociology offers a lens to see the relationship between power, society, and symbols. In the case of Ternate, concepts such as political elites, identity politics, political culture, and deliberative democracy play an important role in explaining how values such as *Jou Se Ngofa Ngare* (Rubaidi et al., 2025), (Abas et al., 2024), (Situmorang et al., 2021) are used as tools for political articulation and social representation. Power is not merely seen as formal legal authority, but as the result of the production of meaning, symbolic representation, and reproduction of cultural narratives. The main problem that is the focus of this study is how local values are used, mobilized, or even commodified in the contemporary political arena of Ternate. Do these values strengthen local democracy, or do they become a tool for legitimizing elite power that is not rooted in people's participation? How are local democratic practices in Ternate influenced by a combination of customs, money politics, and elite fragmentation. These questions are important to ask in reading the landscape of local political sociology.

## **LITERATURE RIVIEW**

Studies on local democracy in Indonesia are still largely focused on Java and Sumatra (Mindarti et al., 2021), (Savirani & Wardhani, 2022), (Dewa et al., 2023), (Anugrah, 2023), (Aspinall et al., 2025). (Masaaki, 2025), (Ruswandi, 2025) while eastern regions such as North Maluku often escape in-depth analysis. This research gap shows the lack of comprehensive studies on how local values and customary structures play a role in post-reform democracy. On the other hand, recent studies have begun to show the tendency of the importance of a local approach in building democracy rooted in society (Savirani & Wardhani, 2022), (Ruswandi, 2025), (Sevindik et al., 2021), (Masaaki, 2025), (Ruswandi, 2025). This is where the state-of-the-art and novelty of this review lies. The main objective of this narrative review is to synthesize various recent studies that highlight the dynamics of local politics in Ternate, emphasizing cultural narratives, traditional-modern power structures, and elite contestation practices in local democracy. This article not only attempts to explain these dynamics, but also to compile thematic categorizations as a conceptual basis for further studies.

The urgency of this study is increasingly prominent considering that the dynamics of Indonesian democracy often experience deviations, including in areas with rich culture and long history such as Ternate. Strengthening democracy cannot only depend on election procedures, but also on the reconstruction of a political culture that is able to bridge traditional values with contemporary practices in a reflective and deliberative manner. In this context,

locality-based studies are very important. Thus, this article not only aims academically to build a theory from below (grounded political sociology), but also has a practical dimension in recommending strategies for strengthening democracy based on culture. Local values such as Jou Se Ngofa Ngare are not only symbolic heritage, but have the potential to become the basis for inclusive and transformative democratic ethics.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The type of review used in this article is a narrative review with a thematic synthesis approach. Narrative review was chosen because it is flexible in exploring theoretical concepts and classifying findings based on the diversity of approaches, contexts, and data from various publications. Thus, this method is suitable for studying complex topics that are multidimensional in nature such as the political sociology of Ternate.

The main question in this review is: "How are narratives of power, local cultural values, and elite structures constructed and practiced in local democracy in Ternate?" To answer this, a publication search strategy was used through Dimensions.ai with the keywords: "Ternate politics", "local democracy", "elite contestation", "political tradition", and "North Maluku". In addition, selected academic documents with high relevance to the context of political sociology of Ternate were also included.

The inclusion criteria for publications were (1) focused on the context of Ternate/North Maluku, (2) published in reputable national or international journals (especially those indexed by Scopus), (3) contributing to the understanding of the relationship between culture, power, and local politics. Evaluation of the quality of the method in each study was based on the clarity of the argument, the strength of the evidence, and contextual relevance. Synthesis was conducted thematically, resulting in 15 main categories of findings which were then analyzed in the discussion section.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Overview of Reviewed Studies**

A total of 15 academic publications were used in this review, consisting of journal articles, scientific books, and international proceedings. The studies were published between 2014 and 2025, with a variety of methodological approaches: from ethnography, hermeneutics, case studies, to sociological and political analysis. Most of the studies focused on Ternate, while the rest covered the North Maluku region in general, including Halmahera and Tidore.

Geographically, all publications raise specific local contexts, such as regional head elections, the revival of customs, identity contestations, the role of the sultanate, and mystical practices in village politics. The variety of approaches in these studies allows for a deeper analysis of the relationship between formal power and local values in democratic practices. This makes a major contribution to understanding democracy not only as an electoral process, but also as a social and cultural event.

The studies come from renowned institutions such as Universitas Gadjah Mada, Universitas Muhammadiyah, James Cook University, and international publishers such as Springer, Brill, and Atlantis Press. This shows that even though Ternate is a small city, academic attention to it continues to grow due to its strategic cultural and historical position

### Main Findings (Classification and Category)

Table 1. Classification of Main Findings from Reviewed Studies

No	Thematic Category	Focus Findings	Primary Sources
1	Elite Politics & Local Culture	The use of Jou Se Ngofa Ngare values in local political narratives	(Fatah, 2023), (Nathaniel, 2025)
2	Student Activism	Students as opposition to local elites	(Amin, 2014)
3	Islam & Radicalism	Islamic radicalism as a tool for consolidating political power	(Zain, 2020)
4	Sultanate Identity	Revitalization of symbols and structures of the sultanate in legitimizing power	(Budianta, 2023), (Dardias Kurniadi, 2020)
5	Cultural Visualization	Use of visual media to shape the future of democracy based on ecology and culture	(Nathaniel, 2025)
6	Mystical Symbolism	Mystical narratives (headhunters/organ thieves) as a metaphor for inequality and social uncertainty	(Bubandt, 2016)
7	Historical Revivalism	Reconstruction of the kingdom narrative as political capital	(Song & Mansur, 2021)
8	Cultural Participation	Custom as a basis for political participation based on local ethics	(Fatah, 2023)
9	Multispecies Democracy	Culture-based ecological approaches in local democracy	(Nathaniel, 2025)
10	Money Politics	Practices of transactionalism in regional elections and pragmatic voter behavior	(Rosyidi et al., 2022)
11	Identity Politics	Use of ethnicity/religion as a basis for political mobilization	(Kambo, 2018)
12	Fragmentation of Aristocracy	Internal conflict of traditional elites and failure of power regeneration	(Dardias Kurniadi, 2020)
13	Elite Competition	Rivalry between traditional elites and bureaucrats in local democracy	(Fatah, 2023), (Arsad, 2018)
14	Revival of Customs	Customs are used to reconstruct power relations and community reconciliation	(Song & Mansur, 2021)
15	Mystical Politics	Magic and supernatural practices in village head elections	(Rosyidi et al., 2024)

In this synthesis, 15 main categories of findings were found: (1) Elite Politics and Local Culture, (2) Student Activism, (3) Islam and Radicalism, (4) Sultanate Identity, (5) Cultural Visualization, (6) Mystical Symbolism, (7) Historical Revivalism, (8) Cultural Participation, (9) Multispecies Democracy, (10) Money Politics, (11) Identity Politics, (12) Aristocratic Fragmentation, (13) Elite Competition, (14) Indigenous Revival, and (15) Mystical Politics. Each category is supported by more than one publication. For example, in the category “Elite Politics and Local Culture”, the value of Jou Se Ngofa Ngare becomes a key narrative in explaining the relationship between leaders and the people. This value is not only used in electoral campaigns such as the 2020 Pilkada, but is also used as an ethical reference by indigenous elites and bureaucrat-politicians. However, the findings also show that these values are often used instrumentally without any connection to post-election policies (Fatah et al., 2023).

The categories “Money Politics” and “Identity” show the pragmatic aspects of Ternate democracy. A study by Rosyidi et al. (2022) shows that 40% of voters still vote based on financial incentives. On the other hand, Kambo (2018) emphasizes the use of ethnicity and religion as effective but exclusive campaign strategies. This shows that there is still tension between the ideal values of democracy and the dominant transactional field practices.

**Comparative Analysis, Research Gaps, Implications and Limitations**

Table 2. Comparative Analysis, Research Gaps, Implications and Limitations

Aspect	Key Findings	Detailed Explanation	Primary References
Comparison	Duality of value narratives and pragmatic practices	Cultural values (Jou Se Ngofa Ngare, Goheba) are used to frame campaigns, but are not implemented post-election	Fatah et al. (2023), Kambo (2018), Rosyidi et al. (2022)
	Contestation of traditional elites vs bureaucrat-politicians	Customary elites rely on customary symbols, bureaucratic elites on formal networks and logistics	Arsad (2017), Kurniadi (2020)
	Participatory politics vs transactional electoral	Culture-based participation vs. the dominance of money politics and incentive-based mobilization	Nathaniel (2025), Rosyidi et al. (2022)
Research Gap	Minimal longitudinal studies of the impact of cultural values on policy	Studies generally focus on campaigns, but have not explored the implementation of values in governance	All Study

	Minimal grassroots citizen involvement	Studies focus heavily on elites, not on the experiences of ordinary citizens	Fatah et al. (2023), Song & Mansur (2021)
	Lack of structural exploration of political economy	Resource distribution (land, APBD, patronage) is rarely studied as a foundation for local power	Kurniadi (2020)
	Sectoral approach	Local socio-political studies are not yet cross-disciplinary (economics, media, ecology)	Overall analysis
Theoretical Implications	Local hybrid democracy based on values and symbols	Ternate democracy as a combination of electoral procedures and customary values	Fatah et al. (2023), Nathaniel (2025)
	Relevance of deliberative democracy	Bobaso Se Rasai ethics and Goheba symbols can be the basis for local deliberative ethics	Fatah et al. (2023), Song & Mansur (2021)
	Significance of cultural visualization in politics	Visual culture and ecological narratives become alternative channels for participatory politics	Nathaniel (2025)
Practical Implications	Need for integration of local values in public policy	Local values need to be institutionalized, not just campaigned for	Fatah et al. (2023),
	Need for institutionalization of elite-traditional and bureaucratic dialogue	Elite fragmentation hinders collaborative and participatory policies	Kurniadi (2020), Arsad (2017)
	Translation of cultural narratives into digital and participatory platforms	Visual media, creative communities, and digitalization can expand the impact of local values	Nathaniel (2025)
Review Limitations	Focus too elite-centric	Less studies that highlight the voices of ordinary citizens in local politics	Public
	Dominance of descriptive approaches	Quantitative or mixed-method studies for systematic mapping are still few	Public
	Not many links political narratives to structural variables of political economy	Economic resources, social class, and political patronage factors are rarely touched upon	Kurniadi (2020)

Thematic comparisons between studies show two major tendencies. First, studies that emphasize cultural and symbolic values in building local political legitimacy. This includes studies on Jou Se Ngofa Ngare, the sultanate, and cultural visualization. Second, studies that emphasize pragmatic political practices such as money politics, identity politics, and elite fragmentation. Both run parallel and often contradict each other in the context of local democracy in Ternate. A hermeneutic approach such as that carried out by Fatah et al. (2023) attempts to uncover the deeper meaning of local values used by political elites. Meanwhile, studies such as Rosyidi et al. (2022, 2024) and Kambo (2018) tend to highlight the practical layer of democracy that is full of political manipulation and transactionalism. This shows the tension between the ideal value-based democracy and the reality of electoral democracy which is very pragmatic. Another tension arises in the use of cultural identity as a mobilization tool. On the one hand, customary and cultural narratives are used to build solidarity and reconciliation (Song & Mansur, 2021). However, on the other hand, the same symbols can also be used exclusively to legitimize certain elites or exclude other groups, creating new polarization in society.

One of the striking research gaps is the lack of longitudinal studies that follow the long-term impact of the use of local values in public policy after the election. The majority of studies only stop at the level of political campaigns or contestations, without assessing whether the cultural symbolism actually influences governance or public services at the local level. In addition, there is still a lack of participatory approaches or participatory ethnography that directly involve grassroots citizens. Existing studies focus more on elites (both traditional and modern) without exploring how ordinary citizens respond to or interpret cultural narratives and political symbols used in local elections.

The theoretical implication of this finding is that local democracy in Ternate can be understood as a form of hybrid democracy, namely a combination of procedural democracy and cultural narratives. In this context, concepts such as "deliberative democracy", "participatory political culture", and "re-imagined sovereignty" become very relevant to studying unique local dynamics. In practice, this review provides important input for local policymakers and civil society activists to not only use cultural symbols as campaign tools, but also integrate them into value-based and participatory policy designs. For example, the Bobaso Se Rasai value can be the basis for designing empathetic and inclusive citizen deliberation forums. Strengthening local democracy also requires systematic efforts to bring together traditional elites and modern bureaucracies in a coherent institutional framework. Currently, there is fragmentation between these two poles which has an impact on inefficiency in policy making, as shown by Kurniadi (2020) in a study of the sultanate elite conflict. Another implication is the importance of paying attention to the sustainability of cultural narratives in the digital public space. A visual approach such as that used by Nathaniel (2025) can be an effective way to reach the younger generation, combining local values with participatory platforms such as social media and creative communities.

However, this review also has limitations. First, the focus of the study is still largely on elite narratives, not exploring the dynamics at the community and ordinary citizen levels in depth. Second, most of the data is descriptive-qualitative with few quantitative studies that can provide a more systematic mapping. The third limitation is the lack of studies that examine the influence of political economy in a more structural way. For example, how the relationship between the distribution of resources (land, APBD, etc.) with the sustainability of elite power or community participation has not been touched on in depth in the studies reviewed.

Finally, interdisciplinary integration is needed between sociology, anthropology, local political economy, and public communication studies. An overly sectoral approach actually limits a holistic understanding of local political phenomena such as those that occurred in Ternate. Thus, the findings of this review strengthen the urgency of conducting cross-disciplinary, longitudinal, and community-based studies in order to build a more reflective, representative, and contextually relevant theory of local political sociology in Eastern Indonesia.

### **Reflections and Implications**

The main reflection of this study is that local democracy in Ternate cannot be understood only through narrow procedural lenses. The electoral system, elite contestation, and local political dynamics operate within a framework formed by the long history of the sultanate, customary values, and culture that live in society. Democracy in Ternate is a democracy that is networked with traditions, spirituality, symbols, and social relations that are often invisible in formal liberal democratic models. Therefore, an approach that is sensitive to the cultural context is very important in understanding the direction of local political transformation.

The theoretical implications of this review are the strengthening of the hybrid approach to democracy and the importance of reconciliation between local values and modern institutional practices. Democracy in Ternate develops in a space that is plagued by tensions between customary symbolism and political pragmatism, between local morality and money politics, and between deliberative participation and transactionalism. New models that combine value-based deliberation, visual-ecological participation, and the role of custom as a moral-political authority need to be developed to respond to this reality conceptually and practically.

The practical implications of the results of this study encourage local policy makers, customary leaders, and civil society to build democratic spaces that are more participatory, reflective, and inclusive. There needs to be a mechanism that consciously involves local values in public decision-making forums, strengthening political education based on customs, and using cultural media—including art and digital media—to expand political access and reach. The involvement of the younger generation through ecological, visual, and narrative approaches is also a great opportunity to build a future local democracy that is rooted, sustainable, and valuable.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that Ternate's political sociology is a complex social landscape, where various forms of power – both symbolic, customary, electoral, and mystical – interact and conflict in the local democratic space. Values such as *Jou Se Ngofa Ngare*, symbols of the sultanate, and customary rituals function not only as cultural markers, but also as significant sources of political legitimacy. However, these values are often trapped in political instrumentality and do not fully manifest in ethical and participatory public policy practices.

Findings from various studies show how money politics, elite fragmentation, and identity contestation continue to erode the moral basis of local democracy. On the other hand, new participatory practices based on visual culture and ecology have emerged, which show the possibility of a more reflective articulation of democracy that is connected to the experiences of citizens. Narratives of the sultanate, custom, and mysticism, if mobilized ethically and deliberatively, can become the foundation of a meaningful and sustainable local democracy.

Therefore, it is recommended that local values be institutionalized into political and government systems more strategically, as well as grassroots citizen involvement in formulating the direction of local development. Synergy is also needed between bureaucratic elites and traditional elites to form inclusive governance, as well as innovation in citizen political participation – especially through visual, digital, and ecological approaches – so that Ternate democracy does not only live in symbols, but also in the daily lives of its people.

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