Ethnic Identity In Political Communication: A Case Study In Teluk Pulai Village, Kualuh Leidong Sub-District

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This research aims to analyse the influence of ethnic identity in political communication in Teluk Pulai Village, Kualuh Leidong Sub-district, Labuhanbatu Utara Regency. Using a qualitative approach and case study method, data was collected through participatory observation and in-depth interviews with community leaders, village heads, and residents from various ethnicities. The results show that political communication in Teluk Pulai Village shows that ethnic identity becomes social and symbolic capital in strengthening community cohesion. Traditional and political leaders utilise culture, language, and traditional rituals to build legitimacy and emotional closeness. Informal communication and cultural symbols are effective in conveying political messages. However, unwise ethnic politicisation risks divisiveness, so inclusive, dialogic and contextualised political narratives are needed to maintain unity and democratic participation. While the politicisation of ethnic identity can lead to social fragmentation, inclusive, dialogue-based political communication across ethnic lines strengthens social cohesion and the legitimacy of local leaders. This study confirms the importance of integrating socio-cultural aspects in political communication to support democracy and stability in coastal multiethnic societies.

	ABSTRAK
	Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis pengaruh identitas etnik dalam komunikasi politik di Desa Teluk Pulai, Kecamatan Kualuh Leidong, Kabupaten Labuhanbatu Utara. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan metode studi kasus, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif dan wawancara mendalam dengan tokoh masyarakat, kepala desa, dan warga dari berbagai etnik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Komunikasi politik di Desa Teluk Pulai menunjukkan bahwa identitas etnik menjadi modal sosial dan simbolik dalam memperkuat kohesi masyarakat. Tokoh adat dan politik memanfaatkan budaya, bahasa, dan ritual adat untuk membangun legitimasi serta kedekatan emosional. Komunikasi informal dan simbol budaya efektif menyampaikan pesan politik. Namun, politisasi etnik yang tidak bijak berisiko memecah belah, sehingga diperlukan narasi politik inklusif, dialogis, dan kontekstual demi menjaga persatuan dan partisipasi demokratis. Meskipun politisasi identitas etnik dapat memicu fragmentasi sosial, komunikasi politik yang inklusif dan berbasis dialog lintas etnik memperkuat kohesi sosial dan legitimasi pemimpin lokal. Studi ini menegaskan pentingnya integrasi aspek sosial budaya dalam komunikasi politik untuk mendukung demokrasi dan stabilitas di masyarakat multietnik pesisir.

1. Introduction

Political communication is a crucial aspect of democratic dynamics, especially at the local level such as villages. In this context, ethnic identity often plays a significant role in shaping political preferences and voter behaviour. Teluk Pulai Village, located in the coastal area of Kualuh Leidong Sub-district, North Labuhanbatu Regency, North Sumatra, is a clear example of the complex interaction between ethnic identity and political communication. The village's ethnic diversity creates unique socio-political dynamics, particularly in the process of village head elections and community political participation. As a coastal area, Teluk Pulai Village has distinctive social and cultural characteristics. Interactions between ethnic groups, such as Malay, Batak and Javanese, form a complex social structure. In the political context, ethnic identity can be a determining factor in the formation of political alliances, campaign strategies and voter mobilisation. This study aims to analyse how ethnic identity influences political communication in Teluk Pulai Village, and its implications for social cohesion and the democratisation process at the village level.

Research by Rahmawati et al. (2024) in Sumber Jaya Village showed that identity politics, especially ethnic-based, played an important role in the village head election. Battles between candidates from majority ethnic groups such as Java and Bali caused social tensions, although their influence declined in subsequent elections. Nahak et al. (2024) in a study in Malaka Regency revealed that the politicisation of ethnic identity was used as a strategy to gain political support. The use of traditional symbols and the role of traditional leaders became instruments in voter mobilisation. Hadi (2023) examined the political behaviour of rural communities in South Barito and found that ethnic-based political affiliation has remained dominant since the 1950s. Ethnic identity is used as a tool to protect group interests and local natural resources.

Suyatno Kahar (2023) in a study of the 2018 North Maluku governor election showed that ethnic and religious-based identity politics was used as a campaign strategy. Social media played a role in strengthening group identity sentiments. Sialagan and Lexianingrum (2024) highlighted the role of community leaders in political communication in Sumber Harum Village. Community leaders act as information conveyors and agents of change to increase political participation. Setiadi (2023) examined the political communication of Javanese descendants in the PKB Pujakesuma organisation in Langkat Regency. Social and cultural approaches are used to build effective political communication. Rosha et al. (2023) discussed that identity politics is often used in village head elections in Indonesia. Although it can be a political strategy, identity politics also has the potential to cause social divisions. The study by Iqbal et al. (2023) in Mandailing Natal Regency shows that the construction of identity politics emerged in the village head election, affecting the dynamics of local democracy. Research by Lampe (2023) highlights how ethnic identity is used in political communication, especially in multiethnic societies. Adaptation to local identity becomes a strategy to gain social and political acceptance.

Although various studies have highlighted the role of ethnic identity in political communication in various regions, there is still a lack of studies that focus on coastal areas such as Teluk Pulai Village. The social, cultural and economic characteristics of coastal communities can uniquely influence political dynamics. Therefore, it is important to understand how ethnic identity interacts with political communication in the context of coastal villages.

Teluk Pulai Village, with its ethnic diversity and strategic geographical location, faces challenges in maintaining social cohesion and political stability. The influence of ethnic identity

in the political process can strengthen or weaken social integration. This study aims to identify factors that influence ethnic identity-based political communication in this village. The lack of literature that discusses in depth the interaction between ethnic identity and political communication in coastal villages suggests a research gap. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing an in-depth contextual analysis of the political dynamics in Teluk Pulai Village.

This research offers a new contribution to the study of political communication by focusing on the interaction between ethnic identity and political dynamics in coastal areas. Using a case study approach in Teluk Pulai Village, this research reveals how ethnic identity shapes political communication strategies and influences community participation in local democratic processes. The findings of this study are expected to provide new insights for the development of political communication theory and democratic practices in multi-ethnic communities, especially in coastal areas.

2. Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to understand the dynamics of ethnic identity in political communication in Teluk Pulai Village, Kualuh Leidong District. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to deeply explore complex social and political phenomena in a distinctive local context. Through this approach, researchers can understand the meanings, perspectives, and subjective experiences of local actors in the political communication process that is laden with nuances of ethnic identity. According to John W. Creswell (2014), a qualitative approach is a method used to explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Qualitative researchers construct complex subjective meanings, which emerge from social and cultural interactions in the field. Creswell states that qualitative research emphasises process, meaning, and an in-depth understanding of social context, not just the relationship of variables that can be measured.

The main data collection techniques in this study were observation and in-depth interviews. Observations were conducted in participatory and non-participatory ways in various social and political activities of the village community, such as campaign meetings, village deliberations, and daily interactions in public spaces. These observations aimed to record the dynamics of political communication that took place directly, including symbolic expressions, the use of local languages, and inter-ethnic interaction patterns in the context of village politics. In addition to observation, in-depth interviews were conducted with purposively selected informants. Informants included community leaders from various ethnicities, village heads and community leaders, and residents from various social backgrounds. The interview technique was semi-structured, allowing researchers to explore informants' views and experiences on how ethnic identity influences political communication strategies, alliance formation, and perceptions of political leaders.

3. Results and Discussion

Ethnic identity in Teluk Pulai Village is the main foundation in building the social and political interactions of the community. The heterogeneous yet historically intertwined ethnic composition forms a distinctive pattern of political communication, where each ethnic group prioritises cultural symbols and values as tools of political legitimacy. For example, the dominant Batak ethnic group in the region utilises traditional rituals and local languages as effective political communication media to garner support, while strengthening internal group cohesion. This makes local politics not just a battle of material interests, but also a competition of cultural identities. The role of traditional and community leaders is crucial in mediating communication between ethnic groups in Teluk Pulai. Figures like Mr Muslim Nasution function as liaisons who articulate ethnic interests while maintaining harmony between groups. By using shared language and cultural symbols, these traditional figures create a space for inclusive dialogue so that ethnic

differences do not become a source of conflict, but rather a cultural richness that enriches village political communication. This mediation function is particularly important given that ethnic identity tensions can easily trigger social fragmentation if not managed well.

The dynamics of political communication in Teluk Pulai also show that ethnic identity acts as a strategic tool in local political competition. Village Head Johan Simbolon stated that prospective leaders who are able to integrate ethnic cultural symbols and values into their campaign strategies tend to gain legitimacy more easily. This shows that ethnicity is not only a source of identity, but also political capital that must be managed carefully so that it does not become a divisive tool. Political communication here becomes a symbolic negotiation arena where ethnic identities are exchanged, recognised and reinforced as part of a strategy to gain support. However, political attachment to ethnic identity also carries the risk of exclusive politicisation, which can hinder the development of inclusive politics in the village. When certain ethnic groups feel overly favoured or ignored, the potential for horizontal conflict increases. Therefore, the success of political communication in Teluk Pulai largely depends on the ability of political actors and traditional leaders to create a political narrative that accommodates the interests of all ethnic groups without losing their cultural characteristics.

Ethnic identity plays a very central role in political communication in Teluk Pulai Village, a coastal area inhabited by various ethnic groups such as Malay, Batak and Javanese. This diversity creates complex social dynamics, where ethnic identity is not only a part of everyday social life, but also an important political capital in the decision-making process and the selection of local leaders. As stated by Village Head Johan Simbolon, community loyalty to prospective leaders is often influenced by ethnic affinity, which is considered capable of representing the interests and cultural values of their group. In the context of political communication, ethnic identity is not just a social identity, but a means of symbolic communication that strengthens the emotional connection between leaders and the community. Research by Sari and Wibowo (2022) confirms that cultural identity functions as social capital that builds solidarity and influences voting patterns in rural communities. This is evident in the practice of political campaigns in Teluk Pulai, where prospective leaders use local languages, traditional clothing, and cultural rituals as part of the communication strategy to get closer to the community.

The role of traditional and community leaders is crucial in this ethnic-based political communication process. Mr Muslim Nasution, a traditional and community leader, explained that they function as cultural mediators as well as liaisons between prospective leaders and villagers. Traditional leaders use the deliberation approach and local values to maintain harmony between ethnic groups, while delivering political messages that are contextualised and easily accepted. This finding is in line with Yulianti and Ramadhan (2024) who emphasise the role of traditional leaders in managing potential identity conflicts through dialogic communication.

Communication strategies that integrate cultural aspects have proven effective in strengthening social cohesion while mobilising political support. Rizki and Nugroho (2023) state that cultural symbols and rituals in political campaigns can create collective narratives that resonate with target groups. In Teluk Pulai Village, various traditional events involving cultural elements became a momentum for informal political communication that strengthened inter-ethnic social networks. However, the politicisation of ethnic identity also brings serious challenges, such as the potential for exclusivity and social fragmentation. Village Head Johan Simbolon emphasised the importance of maintaining inclusive and open communication so that differences do not turn into conflict. Susanto and Fauzi (2021) in their research also warned that identity politics that are not managed properly can lead to polarisation and social division.

Therefore, political communication in this village does not only rely on identity narratives, but also cross-group dialogue to foster mutual respect and social cohesion.

Informal communication that takes place in social spaces such as recitation, arisan, and traditional events is very instrumental in spreading ethnic-based political messages. Fauziah and Prasetyo (2022) revealed that face-to-face communication and community meetings are still the main effective means of building political solidarity in coastal areas with limited information technology. Teluk Pulai Village relies on these methods to ensure that political messages are delivered in a contextualised and personalised manner, thus building trust and strong attachments between voters and political figures. In addition, nonverbal communication such as the use of traditional clothing, cultural symbols and traditional rituals become powerful political instruments to express ethnic identity while communicating the group's political aspirations. These symbols strengthen the appeal and legitimacy of prospective leaders in the eyes of the community. The utilisation of nonverbal aspects in political communication shows the depth of the relationship between culture and politics that is not easily separated at the local level.

In the context of political communication in Teluk Pulai Village, the ethnic aspect is not only a static identity, but a dynamic symbolic system that continues to develop in accordance with the social and political interactions that occur. Ethnic identity functions as an interpretative framework that shapes the way people understand political messages, so effective political communication must be able to adjust to the values and symbols of local culture attached to certain ethnic groups. Village Head Johan Simbolon asserts that "prospective leaders who are able to show respect for ethnic culture and traditions will more easily gain support because people feel authentically represented." In the local political process, communication is not only one-way from the leader to the community, but there is dialogue and negotiation of meaning between political actors and ethnic communities. Traditional leaders, such as Mr Muslim Nasution, act as mediators who help convey the aspirations of the community while interpreting political messages to fit the cultural context. This shows that political communication in the village is participatory and contextualised, not just mass persuasion communication.

Ethnic identity-based political communication is also often manifested in symbolic practices that are rich in meaning. The use of local languages, traditional clothing, and cultural rituals in political campaigns are forms of nonverbal communication that have a strong effect in building emotional closeness between prospective leaders and the community.

However, the dynamics of ethnic-based politics are not free from challenges. The potential for social fragmentation and identity conflict is a serious issue that must be managed wisely. Village Head Johan Simbolon recognises that there is a tendency for people to put the interests of their ethnic groups above the common interest, especially during political campaigns. Therefore, communication that promotes inclusivity and dialogue between groups is crucial to maintaining unity. In this case, the role of community and traditional leaders is vital as guardians of social stability and as facilitators of inter-ethnic dialogue.

Discussion

In addition, informal communications such as community meetings, recitations, and gotong royong activities are important channels for disseminating political messages based on ethnic identity. In the modern context, social media and local media have also begun to play a role in village political communication. However, the community's access to and ability to utilise information technology is still limited, so personal and traditional communication remains dominant. The appropriate use of ethnic-based political communication can increase people's political participation, especially those who previously felt marginalised or underrepresented. When political messages are packaged in familiar symbols and language, people feel valued and

more motivated to participate in the political process. It can also strengthen the legitimacy of local leaders who are considered capable of representing the aspirations of their ethnic groups.

Effective political communication also requires a deep understanding of social hierarchies and local power structures. In Teluk Pulai Village, political leaders are not only seen by their formal power, but also by their capacity to communicate and build networks with various ethnic groups and traditional leaders. This emphasises the importance of communication as a tool for social negotiation in the context of local politics. Furthermore, political communication based on ethnic identity can be a bridge that connects the interests of different ethnic groups. Through dialogue and cultural encounters, people learn to respect each other's differences, which then leads to the strengthening of social cohesion and village political stability. This is a form of political communication that does not only seek political victory, but also maintains the sustainability of social relations.

It should also be noted that ethnic-based political communication can strengthen people's political awareness of the importance of maintaining unity and avoiding horizontal conflicts. Ethnic identity that is well accommodated in political communication can foster a strong sense of community and reduce the potential for conflict based on socio-cultural differences. On the other hand, political leaders in Teluk Pulai are faced with the challenge of avoiding exclusive and discriminatory practices of identity politics. Thus, political communication should be directed towards building an inclusive narrative that integrates all ethnic groups without excluding any one party.

The ability of traditional and community leaders to manage ethnic-based political communication also reflects a high level of local wisdom. They are able to read social and political situations carefully, and manage potential conflicts with a peaceful and dialogical cultural approach. This is a very valuable social capital in dealing with increasingly complex political dynamics. In addition, effective political communication in this village shows that the relationship between culture and politics is symbiotic, where culture becomes a medium for political communication and politics provides a space for cultural actualisation. Thus, political communication is not only about delivering messages, but also about forming collective identity and social solidarity. Strengthening ethnic-based political communication in Teluk Pulai also has an impact on community empowerment. The community feels listened to and valued, thus increasing their sense of ownership of the political process and the resulting policies. This is a form of political democratisation at the local level that is culturally based. Finally, the integration of ethnic identity in political communication in Teluk Pulai Village shows the importance of a contextual approach in the study of political communication. This approach not only emphasises the technical aspects of communication, but also pays attention to the socio-cultural dimensions that are the foundation for successful and sustainable political communication.

4. Conclusion

Political communication in Teluk Pulai Village shows that ethnic identity plays an important role as social and symbolic capital in building community cohesion. Traditional and political leaders utilise cultural values, local languages, and traditional rituals to strengthen legitimacy and emotional closeness with residents. Informal communication and cultural symbols are effective means of conveying political messages. However, if not managed wisely, ethnic politicisation can lead to social fragmentation. Therefore, inclusive, dialogical and contextualised political narratives are key to maintaining unity and encouraging active participation in democratic local political processes.

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