



Dominance of Government Communication Messages in The 2025 Tabut Tradition Festival

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Received: 19 April 2026

Revised: 27 June 2026

Accepted: 6 July 2026

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the dominance of government communication messages in the organization of the Bengkulu Tabut Festival 2025 and to understand the representation of the meaning of the Tabut tradition in the context of cultural tourism. The researcher uses muted group theory to explain the inequality in communication power relations between the regional government and the Tabut Family Association (Kerukunan Keluarga Tabut/KKT). This study employs a critical paradigm with a qualitative approach. Data were collected through interviews and document studies involving informants from the Bengkulu Provincial Tourism Office, the event organizer Areacorps Creative, the Rajo Penghulu Traditional Council (Balai Adat Rajo Penghulu), and the KKT. Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results show that the regional government acts as the dominant actor in constructing the meaning of the Tabut Festival through various cultural representations, public service programs, and community economic activities integrated into the festival agenda. This dominance reflects the strong control of the government over the public narrative regarding Tabut as both a cultural identity and a regional tourism attraction. From the perspective of Muted Group Theory, this condition indicates an imbalance in the production of meaning between the government as the dominant group and the KKT as a group with more limited authority in determining the representation of the tradition. Nevertheless, the KKT continues to show symbolic resistance by maintaining the sacred and spiritual values of Tabut as a cultural heritage that is not solely oriented toward tourism interests. This study contributes to the development of cultural and tourism communication studies, particularly in understanding power relations in the representation of local traditions within cultural festivals.

Keywords: Government Communication; Kerukunan Keluarga Tabut; Message Dominance; Muted Group Theory; Tabut Festival

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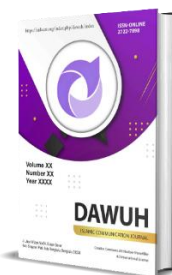


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INTRODUCTION

The Ark Festival is one of the oldest and most recognizable cultural heritages in Bengkulu Province. This festival has its roots in a religious tradition called "Tabot", a ritual to commemorate the death of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Husayn bin Ali, in the Karbala incident. However, with the development of time and the influence of local culture, the sacred ceremony underwent an acculturation process to become a more open and inclusive socio-cultural tradition for all Bengkulu people (Khairudin, 2023). This transformation shows that cultural traditions are dynamic and continue to undergo changes in accordance with social, political, and economic developments of society.

This festival is held every 1-10 Muharram in the Hijri calendar. This festival consists of a series of processions such as taking land, imprisonment, seroban liquor, to the peak of the event, namely the cane ark. Each series of activities describes a spiritual journey as well as a reflection on the values of struggle, loyalty, and sacrifice (Khairudin, 2023). However, along with the development of the times and the increasing socio-cultural interaction of the local community, the Ark underwent a significant cultural transformation. This ritual, which was originally religious in nuances, was then adapted and claimed by the people of Bengkulu as a cultural heritage or ethnic cultural festival. This shift shows a change in focus from religious aspects to a form of expression of identity and ethnic pride of the local community (Handayani, 2018).

In its development, the Bengkulu Provincial Government then packaged this tradition into an annual cultural event entitled "Bengkulu Ark Festival". This activity not only functions as an effort to preserve culture, but also acts as a means of promoting regional tourism. According to (Permana, 2021), the implementation of the Ark Festival is a strategy to strengthen the image of Bengkulu as a culture-based tourist destination. Through various art performances, craft exhibitions, local culinary, and traditional competitions, the festival presents a combination of cultural, entertainment, and creative economy values that support the development of regional tourism.

Research by Ulfa and Jalili (2024) also emphasized that the Ark Festival is a concrete example of the synergy between culture, religion, and socio-economic empowerment. This festival has a positive impact on people's lives, especially for MSME actors, artists, and the surrounding community who are directly involved in creative economy activities during the event. Through this activity, the community is not only a spectator, but also an active part of the culture-based development process. This is in line with the principle of participatory development communication put forward by Effendy (2006) and Hadiyanto (2008), where development must place the community as an active subject, not just the object of government programs.

Meanwhile, Dwi Aji Budiman (2022) in his research entitled "Tabot: Sacredness in Tourism Commodification", revealed that the transformation of the Ark from a sacred ritual to a public festival shows a complex process of cultural commoditization. On the one hand, the festival has managed to attract tourists and boost the region's economy, but on the other hand, its spiritual values have begun to shift towards entertainment and commercialization. However, Budiman assessed that the change still has a positive value if managed with the principles of preserving cultural values and empowering local communities.



The study of cultural festivals from the perspective of critical communication shows that festivals not only function as a space for the preservation of traditions, but also as an arena for the production of discourse, identity negotiations, and the struggle for symbolic power. Recent research confirms that the management of cultural festivals involves power relations between actors in determining cultural representation in public spaces (Adawiyah, 2024). The findings show that cultural festivals cannot be separated from the interests of identity politics and the development of regional image.

In perspective *Muted Group Theory*, these differences in perspectives not only show the variation in interpretation, but also reflect the inequality in the relationship of communication power. This theory explains that dominant groups have a tendency to control the production of meaning and language in public spaces, so that other groups that do not have similar power have the potential to be silenced (*muted*) in voicing their perspectives (Syawal et al., 2023). In the context of the Ark Festival, the government as the dominant actor has authority in determining how the Ark is represented to the public, while indigenous communities such as the KKT are in a more limited position in influencing the narrative.

This phenomenon of silencing can also be seen as a form of symbolic marginalization, in which non-dominant groups remain present in public spaces, but do not have full control over the constructed meaning. This is in line with research by Setyowati and Watie (2023) which shows that non-dominant groups often experience limitations in expressing their experiences due to the dominance of the communication system by more powerful groups. In the case of the Ark Festival, the KKT is still involved in the implementation, but the meaning of the Ark is more determined by the government's interest in developing regional tourism.

Thus, the difference in perspective between the government and indigenous communities in the Ark Festival not only shows a shift in cultural meaning, but also indicates the dominance of communication messages by the government in shaping the social reality that is accepted by the public. This condition is then important to be studied further in research on the Dominance of Government Communication Messages in the Celebration of the Ark Tradition 2025, in order to understand how the relationship between the power of communication is formed and how the position of indigenous communities in the process of producing meaning.

In the context of communication and power, recent research has also shown that language and discourse have a strategic role in shaping social realities as well as maintaining the dominance of certain groups. The production of discourse in the public space is often used as an instrument of power to build legitimacy and direct public opinion (Scientist, 2024). In addition, the relationship of communication and power works through a mechanism of meaning production that determines who has authority in defining social reality in the public space (Widodo, 2025).

Progress of the study *Muted Group Theory* It also shows the expansion of the use of this theory in understanding the marginalization of non-dominant group communication. Syawal et al. (2024) explain that *Muted Group Theory* It is no longer only used to look at gender inequality, but is also relevant in analyzing groups that experience limited representation due to the dominance of communication structures by powerful groups. Marginalized groups often remain engaged in public spaces, but do not have full power in determining the language and narratives that represent them.



Previous research still has a number of limitations. First, most of the research focuses more on cultural, creative economy, and tourism aspects, so it has not in-depth examined the relationship of communication power in the process of representing the Ark Festival. Second, previous studies tend to view governments and indigenous communities as in a harmonious relationship without revealing the possibility of narrative dominance by certain actors in shaping cultural meanings in public spaces. Third, research on the position of indigenous communities as groups that have the potential to experience symbolic marginalization in the production of festival communication messages is still very limited. Fourth, use *Muted Group Theory perspective* in studying local cultural festivals in Indonesia, especially the Ark Festival, it is still rare to find so that the dynamics of symbolic silencing of indigenous communities have not been widely analyzed in previous studies.

Based on these research gaps, this research offers novelty by positioning the Ark Festival not only as a cultural and tourism event, but also as an arena for the battle of meaning and the relationship of communication power. This research study how Indigenous communities are represented, negotiated, and potentially marginalized in the festival's narrative. This approach places power communication as the main focus of the analysis. Approach *Muted Group Theory* Become a Strategistis because it reveals the arena of communication power relations to understand the process of narrative domination and symbolic marginalization of indigenous communities.

METHODS

This research uses a critical paradigm with a qualitative approach to uncover power relations in the dominance of government communication messages in the implementation of the 2025 Ark Festival. The qualitative approach was chosen because this research focuses on an in-depth understanding of the meaning, experience, and construction of messages formed by actors in certain socio-cultural contexts (Creswell, 2016). A critical paradigm is used to analyze how government communication practices have the potential to create dominance over cultural narratives in the festival.

The sampling procedure is carried out in a *purposive sampling*, which selects informants based on their direct involvement, knowledge, and strategic position in the organization of the 2025 Ark Festival. This technique was chosen because it is able to provide relevant and in-depth data according to the focus of the research. The research informants consisted of parties directly involved in the planning and implementation of the festival, namely 2 people from the Bengkulu Provincial Tourism Office as government representatives, 2 people from EO Areacorps Creative as the implementer of the activity, 1 person from Rajo Penghulu Traditional Hall and 3 people from the Bencoolen KKT as a representation of cultural groups and indigenous peoples. The selection of informants is carried out until the data obtained reaches the level of saturation, which is when the information obtained begins to show a repeating pattern.

The main instrument in this study is the researcher himself who plays a role in the process of data collection, interpretation, and analysis. To support this process, the study used semi-structured interview guidelines that were compiled based on the research focus on the dominance of government communication messages, power relations, and cultural representation in the Ark Festival. In addition, the research also uses supporting instruments in



the form of documentation, activity archives, media publications, and official documents related to the organization of the festival. The validity of the data is maintained through source triangulation and triangulation methods by comparing the results of interviews, documents, and field data. The reliability of the research is strengthened through the consistency of the data collection process, systematic recording of interview results, and re-checking the data to informants.

The data collection procedure is carried out in several stages. The first stage is a document search to obtain an initial overview of the policies, event concepts, and communication narratives of the Ark Festival 2025. The second stage was carried out through in-depth interviews with research informants to explore their experiences, views, and meanings on the dominance of government communication messages in the festival. Interviews are conducted in person and recorded with the consent of the informant to maintain data accuracy. The third stage is the documentation process of publication materials, event visuals, and various forms of communication used in organizing the festival.

Data analysis uses the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusions/verification that are carried out in a circular manner throughout the research process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). This analysis technique was chosen because it allows researchers to analyze data in-depth and continuously since the data collection process took place, so that the dominance patterns of communication, power relations, and the position of cultural actors in the Ark Festival can be comprehensively identified. With this approach, the research is expected to be able to explain how the dominance of government communication messages is formed and how cultural groups and indigenous communities respond to their positions in the festival communication process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the collection of activity documents, data was obtained that the implementation of the 2025 Bengkulu Ark Festival presented a number of public service programs that are part of the local government's agenda. Based on the results of the research, during the 2025 Ark Festival, the public can access various services such as free health checkups, blood donation activities, National Health Insurance (JKN) services, and free meal programs for the community. The presence of these programs shows that the Ark Festival not only functions as a space for cultural celebration, but is also used by the government as a medium to present various development programs that are in direct contact with the needs of the community.

In addition to presenting various public service programs, the implementation of the 2025 Bengkulu Ark Festival also shows the prominence of the identity of local government programs through the use of the slogan "Bantu Rakyat" and the "Red and White" symbol which are part of the local government's communication narrative. The presence of these slogans in various elements of festival activities shows that cultural spaces such as the Ark Festival are also used as communication media to introduce government visions and programs to the community.

The findings further show that in organizing the 2025 Bengkulu Ark Festival, the local government presents various activities related to community economic activities, such



as MSME bazaars and local product exhibitions. The presence of these economic activities shows that the festival is also used as a space to encourage local economic growth through the tourism sector. This shows that the representation of the Ark from the perspective of the government is also related to efforts to develop the community's economy through the use of tourism potential.

In the implementation process, the local government through the provincial tourism office involved *event organizers* and institutions of the Rajo Penghulu Traditional Center (B'Daru). The involvement of these indigenous institutions aims to ensure that local cultural elements remain an important part of the festival's series of activities. B'Daru himself is responsible for coordinating the various cultural activities that are part of the Ark Festival. Based on the results of research, B'Daru's role is more about coordinating cultural activities in the Ark Festival, such as dol music competitions, Ark creation dance competitions, and various other art activities. The process began with the "rice" activity, which is a meeting with all studios to discuss the event concept, competition rules, and technical implementation. The joint meeting showed that the management of cultural content in the festival was carried out through a coordination process with various art studios involved in festival activities. The *technical meeting process* became a discussion space for the art actors to agree on the concept of the activity, the rules of the competition, and the technical implementation of the event. The involvement of B'Daru as a traditional institution in the implementation of the Ark Festival shows that the concept of the Ark Festival is not only oriented to tourist entertainment, but also directed as a space for cultural preservation involving local communities.

However, the results of the study show that there is another perspective in seeing the Ark Festival 2025. This perception emerges from the community that owns the Ark tradition, namely the Ark Harmony Family (KKT). Based on interviews with KKT representatives, the implementation of the 2025 Ark Festival is not seen as fully reflecting the essence of the Ark ritual that has been carried out by the Ark family for generations. Implementation Ark Festival 2025 more dominant on entertainment activities compared to the implementation of the Ark ritual itself. Tradition The Ark is only positioned as a complementary part of the festival and tend to marginalized. Tradition The Ark is used as a symbol of cultural identity so that the Ark festival looks like it has cultural value, but in terms of process and ritual implementation, it is not carried out as the tradition inherited by the Ark family.

The KKT understand the government's purpose in organizing the Ark Festival as part of the regional development program. They does not take issue with the government's efforts in developing the festival to attract tourists, but emphasizes that its implementation must still pay attention to the rules and values of the Ark tradition. According to the KKT The development of the Ark tradition into Tourism festivals should still involve their communities of origin and not change the basic rules in the tradition.

Based on the results of the research that has been presented previously, in the perspective of the Bengkulu Provincial Tourism Office, the Ark is no longer just understood as a religious ritual or sacred tradition that takes place in the community space of the tradition owner. The Ark has moved into a much larger space that accommodates the interests of regional development. When the government talks about the Ark, the meaning that emerges is no longer about the procession of land grabbing, imprisonment, or procession of the Ark, but also about



how the tradition can be revived in the form of a larger, more open, and closer festival to the interests of the creative economy and tourism. It is in this space that the government gives meaning to the Ark through various narratives, policies, and the way they package the festival. In other words, the government is one of the actors that actively shapes how the public sees and understands the Ark.

In perspective *Muted Group Theory*, this condition shows the dominance of certain groups in the production of meaning, namely the government as an actor who has the power to determine the public narrative. The dominant group tends to control language and communication systems, so other groups that do not have similar power have the potential to experience silence or limitations in expressing their perspectives (Andhika, 2022). In the context of the Ark Festival, this dominance can be seen from how the government determines the direction of the representation of the Ark as a tourism cultural product, while the sacred meaning owned by indigenous communities is not entirely at the center of the narrative.

The dominance of government communication messages in the 2025 Bengkulu Ark Festival does not only occur at the symbolic level, but also in the broader message production structure. The government has access to various communication channels, including the media, public policy, and event management, so that it is able to direct how the message about the Ark is produced and distributed to the public. This condition shows that the festival is not only a cultural space, but also an instrument of strategic communication for the government. This is in line with the findings of Afika Pertiwi Putri (2021) which shows that in government communication, actors who have power tend to dominate public discourse and determine the direction of messages received by the public.

On the other hand, indigenous communities such as the KKT can be understood as a group that experiences Marginalization in the context of communication. Although they carrying out the tradition of the Ark however Narrative present in public spaces more controlled by the local government with its Festival activities. The Existence of KKT is more symbolic than substantive in determining the main meaning of the Ark. This condition is in line with the view of Ratna Permata Sari (2020) who states that non-dominant groups are often only presented as complements in representation, without having control over the production of meaning.

Furthermore, deep silencing *Muted Group Theory* It does not necessarily mean the absence of sound, but it can be in the form of space limitations in influencing the dominant meaning. The KKT community still has space to express their views, but the voice does not have the same power as the narrative built by the government. This shows the existence of a communication hierarchy, where messages from the dominant group are more easily accepted and legitimized in the public space. In this case, the dominance of communication is not only determined by who speaks, but also by who has the power to define social reality (Indra, 2020).

Nevertheless, *Muted Group Theory* It also provides space to see resistance from subordinate groups. In this study, this resistance can be seen from how the KKT maintains their view of the essence of the Ark as a sacred ritual and continues to voice criticism of the dominance of festivalization. This attitude shows that indigenous communities are not completely passive, but actively negotiate the meaning of the domination that occurs. This is in line with the findings of Daswandi Budi Indra (2020) who stated that marginalized groups still have the agency to resist the dominance of meaning built by the dominant group. To



understand more deeply how the dominance of communication messages works in the implementation of the 2025 Bengkulu Ark Festival in perspective *Muted Group Theory*. This approach helps explain the power relationship in the production of meaning and the position of each actor in the festival communication process.

First, the government's dominance in the production and construction of the meaning of the Ark shows that the Tourism Office as the main actor has a strategic role in determining the narrative that develops in the public space. The government not only manages the festival as a cultural activity, but also actively shapes the public's perception of the Ark through the various representations displayed. In the framework *Muted Group Theory*, this condition indicates that the dominant group has control over language and communication systems, so that the meaning that circulates is more reflective of their interests. As a result, the Ark is more represented as a product of tourism culture than as a sacred ritual that is the core of tradition.

Second, in the communication structure of the festival, indigenous communities such as the Ark Harmony Family (KKT) are in a less dominant position. Although they are involved in the organization of activities, such involvement is not likely to be followed by equal power in determining the direction of the meaning constructed. This shows the existence of a process of marginalization of communication, where non-dominant groups do not have full access to the production of meaning. Thus, the sacred meaning of the Ark maintained by indigenous communities is not entirely the main narrative in the festival.

Third, this dominance is also strengthened by inequality of access to media and message distribution. The government has greater resources in managing communication, both through the media, policies, and event packaging, so that it is able to direct the messages received by the public. This condition creates a hierarchy of communication where messages from the government are easier to receive and legitimize than messages from indigenous communities. This is in line with the findings of Afika Pertiwi Putri (2021) who stated that actors with power tend to dominate public discourse in government communication.

Fourth, even though they are in a subordinate position, indigenous communities still show a form of resistance to this domination. The KKT continues to maintain the meaning of the Ark as a sacred ritual and voice criticism of the dominance of entertainment elements in the festival. In perspective *Muted Group Theory*, this condition indicates that the subordinate group is not completely passive, but rather has the ability to negotiate and resist the domination of meaning. This resistance is an indicator that silencing in communication is dynamic and always involves a process of attraction between various interests.

Thus, the 2025 Bengkulu Ark Festival can be understood as a communication space that not only functions as a medium of cultural representation, but also as an arena for contesting meaning between the government and indigenous communities. The government seeks to build the narrative of the Ark as a cultural product that has economic and tourism value, while indigenous communities seek to maintain the sacred and historical significance of the tradition. These two narratives of meaning from one source of tradition should be able to strengthen each other and not weaken each other to provide cultural education as well as entertainment for the community in general.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that the Bengkulu Regional Government is the dominant actor in shaping and constructing the meaning of the Ark tradition through various representations in the 2025 Bengkulu Ark Festival. This dominance can be seen in the packaging of festivals that emphasize entertainment aspects, tourism promotion, community economic activities, and the delivery of government programs. This condition caused a shift in the meaning of the Ark from a sacred cultural ritual to a cultural tourism commodity that was constructed for the public benefit and regional development.

The main findings of this study show that there is an imbalance in power relations in the production of meaning between local governments as the dominant group and indigenous communities, especially the Ark Harmony Family (KKT), as a group that has limited space in determining the representation of the Ark tradition in the public space. In perspective *Muted Group Theory*, the government has greater control over the festival's narrative, while indigenous communities tend to be marginalized. Despite this, indigenous communities continue to show symbolic resistance by maintaining the spiritual and sacred values of the Ark as cultural identity and traditional heritage passed down from generation to generation.

Thus, the 2025 Bengkulu Ark Festival can be understood as a space for the contestation of meaning between the interests of the government oriented towards tourism, economy, and regional image with indigenous communities that seek to maintain the spiritual authenticity of the Ark tradition. This research emphasizes that cultural festivals are not only a space for cultural preservation, but also an arena for power negotiation and the representation of meaning between social actors. Going forward, the research may examine the response of communities and tourists to the representation of the Ark in cultural festivals, as well as explore collaborative strategies between governments and indigenous communities to maintain a balance between the preservation of cultural sacred values and the sustainable development of cultural tourism.

This research suggests that local governments can be more involved in the implementation of the Ark Festival, so that the balance between the interests of tourism and the preservation of sacred values can be maintained. Festival organizers are also expected to be able to design an activity concept that is not only oriented to entertainment and economy, but still puts spiritual cultural values as the main core. On the other hand, the Ark Harmony (KKT) needs to continue to strengthen the bargaining position and expand the space for dialogue with the government in order to fight for a more equal representation of the meaning of tradition.

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