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MEANING CONSTRUCTION IN MALAY CUSTOMARY TITLE CONFERRAL: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNICATION AT THE RIAU MALAY CUSTOMARY INSTITUTION

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Abstrak

Penabalan gelar adat Melayu bukan sekadar seremoni pemberian penghargaan atau status sosial, melainkan peristiwa komunikasi yang berakar pada budaya, tempat makna, legitimasi sosial, dan identitas budaya dikonstruksikan. Penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana makna dikonstruksikan melalui tuturan ritual dalam penabalan gelar adat Melayu di Lembaga Adat Melayu Riau (LAM Riau), dengan memfokuskan pada bentuk dan struktur tuturan, peristiwa komunikasi, proses interaksi, dan nilai budaya yang terkandung di dalamnya. Penelitian menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan etnografi komunikasi. Data diperoleh melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis melalui perspektif etnografi komunikasi, konstruksi sosial, tindak tutur, komunikasi budaya, dan komunikasi ritual. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penabalan mengikuti struktur komunikasi yang sistematis meliputi pembukaan, doa, pembacaan ayat suci Al-Qur'an, pantun, pidato adat, pembacaan *warkah*, pengukuhan gelar, penyampaian amanah, dan penutupan. Tuturan ritual tersebut mengonstruksikan makna simbolik, filosofis, sosial, moral, dan spiritual sekaligus menjalankan fungsi informatif, performatif, edukatif, legitimatif, dan ritual. Makna dikonstruksikan melalui interaksi antara pemangku adat, penerima gelar, LAM Riau, dan masyarakat yang memperkuat nilai *amanah*, *marwah*, kesantunan, kepemimpinan, tanggung jawab, musyawarah, kebersamaan, dan religiusitas. Penelitian menunjukkan bahwa komunikasi ritual tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai transmisi budaya, tetapi juga sebagai mekanisme legitimasi sosial dan komitmen moral yang menghubungkan status individual dengan tanggung jawab kolektif serta mempertahankan identitas budaya Melayu.

Kata Kunci: Konstruksi Makna; Penabalan Gelar Adat Melayu; Etnografi Komunikasi; Komunikasi Ritual; Legitimasi Sosial

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Abstract

Malay customary title conferral is not merely a ceremonial recognition of social status but a culturally embedded communicative event through which meaning, social legitimacy, and cultural identity are constructed. This study examines how meaning is constructed through ritual utterances in Malay customary title conferral at the Riau Malay Customary Institution (LAM Riau), focusing on speech forms and structures, communicative events, interactional processes, and embedded cultural values. Using a qualitative ethnography of communication approach, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation and analyzed through the perspectives of ethnography of communication, social construction, speech acts, cultural communication, and ritual communication. The findings reveal that title conferral follows a systematic communicative structure involving opening remarks, prayers, Qur'anic recitation, *pantun*, customary speeches, *warkah* reading, title conferral, customary messages, and closing. These ritual utterances construct symbolic, philosophical, social, moral, and spiritual meanings while performing informative, performative, educational, legitimizing, and ritual functions. Meaning is constructed through interactions among customary authorities, title recipients, LAM Riau, and the community, through which *amanah*, *marwah*, politeness, leadership, responsibility, deliberation, solidarity, and religiosity are reinforced. The study demonstrates that ritual communication operates not only as cultural transmission but also as a mechanism of social legitimacy and moral commitment that links individual status to collective responsibility and sustains Malay cultural identity.

Keywords: Meaning Construction; Malay Customary Title Conferral; Ethnography of Communication; Ritual Communication; Social Legitimacy

INTRODUCTION

Malay customary title conferral is more than a ceremonial recognition of social status; it constitutes a culturally organized communicative event through which symbolic meanings, social relationships, moral expectations, and cultural identity are enacted and reproduced. Ritual communication differs from a transmission-oriented conception of communication because participation in ritual enables communities to reproduce shared meanings, social relationships, and culturally recognizable realities. Contemporary scholarship demonstrates that ritualized and culturally patterned communication contributes to meaning-making, identity formation, and the reproduction of collective norms (Weder et al., 2023; Shoham, 2024). Within Indigenous and customary communities, language is particularly consequential because culturally distinctive ways of speaking carry social values, collective knowledge, and understandings of community membership (Henne-Ochoa, 2018; Baan et al., 2022; Durazzo, 2024; Hakim et al., 2025). These relationships are particularly visible in Malay customary title conferral at the Riau

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Malay Customary Institution (Lembaga Adat Melayu Riau/LAM Riau), where *pantun*, *petatah-petitih*, customary speeches, *warkah*, prayers, and *amanah* constitute culturally recognizable communicative forms through which honor, authority, responsibility, and *marwah* are publicly articulated. The ceremony can therefore be approached as a communicative arena in which customary language participates in producing and sustaining culturally meaningful social relations.

Recent studies have substantially advanced understanding of the relationships among language, ritual, culture, and identity. Ethnography-of-communication research emphasizes that communicative meaning is inseparable from culturally situated ways of speaking, participant relations, social norms, and communicative contexts (Ward & Spencer, 2024; Boromisza-Habashi, 2024). Research in Indonesian customary communities similarly demonstrates that ritual discourse and local linguistic practices encode cultural values, religious beliefs, social relationships, and collective identities (Enjang et al., 2022; Baan et al., 2022). Studies of ritual communication further show that symbolic participation contributes to cultural continuity and collective identity, while culturally embedded traditions provide spaces in which religious and social meanings are negotiated and reproduced (Fadhlan et al., 2023; Tuti & Safitri, 2024). Nevertheless, these strands of scholarship have tended to emphasize cultural transmission, identity reproduction, symbolic meaning, or culturally situated communication without sufficiently explaining how institutionally authorized ritual utterances participate in constructing customary status and attaching moral obligations to that status through collective recognition**.** This problem remains particularly underexplored in Malay customary title conferral, where communicative forms are embedded in institutional authority, ritual sequence, recipient participation, and community acknowledgment.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how meaning is constructed through ritual utterances in Malay customary title conferral at LAM Riau. Specifically, it examines the forms and structures of customary utterances, the communicative context in which they occur, the meanings they convey, the interactional processes through which those meanings become socially recognizable, and the Malay cultural values embedded within them. The ethnography of communication provides the principal analytical orientation because it treats communication as culturally situated practice whose meaning depends upon the relationships among setting, participants, purposes, act sequences, message forms, interactional norms, and communicative genres (Ward & Spencer, 2024). Contemporary cultural communication research further demonstrates that communicative resources circulate through processes of cultural transmission and socialization, thereby linking ways of speaking with cultural membership (Boromisza-

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Habashi, 2024). In customary contexts, ritual language may likewise function as a repository and enactment of culturally shared values and identities (Baan et al., 2022; Hakim et al., 2025). Accordingly, LAM Riau is approached not merely as the geographical location of the study but as an institutional and sociocultural communicative environment in which language, ritual procedure, customary authority, recipient participation, and community recognition interact in the production of meaning.

This study advances the argument that meaning in Malay customary title conferral is constructed through the interaction of ritual utterances, culturally situated interaction, institutional authority, moral expectations, and collective recognition**.** This proposition connects three bodies of scholarship that are often examined separately: ethnography of communication, which explains the cultural organization of communicative practices; ritual communication, which emphasizes participation in the production and reproduction of shared social worlds; and performativity, which explains how utterances can accomplish socially consequential actions under appropriate conditions. House et al. (2021) demonstrate the analytical interdependence of interaction, speech acts, and ritual, while research on legitimacy distinguishes institutionalized validity from the consensus through which social evaluations become collectively shared (Haack et al., 2021). Building on these perspectives, the study examines title conferral not simply as cultural representation but as a communicative process through which customary status is progressively constituted, publicly recognized, and connected to continuing responsibility. Its contribution therefore lies in explaining how culturally patterned utterances acquire social force through their position within an ordered ritual, their authorization by customary institutions, their acceptance by recipients, and their recognition by the wider customary community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Meaning construction provides a fundamental perspective for understanding communication as a socially situated process rather than the linear transmission of information. From a social-constructionist perspective, meanings do not reside inherently in words, symbols, or objects but emerge through interpretation, interaction, and socially shared knowledge. Communicative practices therefore participate in producing and reproducing the realities through which individuals understand social relationships, identities, obligations, and institutions. Contemporary communication research reinforces this relational understanding. Weder et al. (2023) conceptualize communication as a process of sense- and meaning-making through which meanings, values, and common beliefs are created or reproduced in interaction. Shoham (2024)

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further demonstrates that conventional practices acquire recognizable meanings through processes of social dissemination and ritualization. In culturally embedded communication, symbols and language similarly become meaningful through repeated interaction and collective interpretation (Sakdiah & Sahlaya, 2025). These perspectives are particularly relevant to customary title conferral because *pantun, petatah-petitih, warkah*, customary speeches, and *amanah* cannot be adequately interpreted from lexical content alone. Their meanings emerge through relationships among communicative forms, culturally situated actors, institutional arrangements, ritual sequences, and communities capable of recognizing their social significance.

The ethnography of communication provides a more specific framework for explaining how such meanings are culturally organized. Originating in Hymes's emphasis on culturally situated ways of speaking, this approach examines communication in relation to setting, participants, ends, act sequences, keys, instrumentalities, norms, and genres rather than isolating language from its sociocultural environment. Contemporary scholarship has expanded this tradition beyond descriptive inventories of speech events. Ward and Spencer (2024) demonstrate that ethnography of communication incorporates interpretive and critical orientations attentive to cultural context, social relations, and the consequences of communicative practice, while Boromisza-Habashi (2024) shows how culturally recognizable discursive resources circulate through cultural transmission, language socialization, and collective membership. Empirical studies further demonstrate that culturally distinctive ways of speaking can encode community values and identities. Henne-Ochoa (2018) illustrates the relationship between Indigenous ways of speaking and cultural continuity, while Enjang et al. (2022) identify the role of customary values in shaping everyday communication among the Baduy. Baan et al. (2022) similarly show that Toraja ritual discourse communicates social values, beliefs, and cultural identity. Thus, ethnography of communication enables customary utterances to be analyzed as culturally organized actions whose meanings depend on who speaks, to whom, under what circumstances, according to which norms, and with what socially recognized consequences.

Ritual communication extends this culturally situated perspective by emphasizing communication as participation in the production and reproduction of a shared social world. Rituals are consequential not simply because they transmit information but because repeated symbolic practices enable communities to express beliefs, reaffirm relationships, reproduce collective memory, and maintain cultural continuity. Weder et al. (2023) demonstrate how ritualized communicative practices participate in the creation and reproduction of meanings, norms, and identity, while Shoham (2024) explains how

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conventional practices become socially recognizable through ritualization. Studies of customary and Indigenous communities further indicate that ritual language functions as an important medium of cultural continuity. Baan et al. (2022) demonstrate how ritual discourse communicates cultural attitudes, social values, and beliefs among the Toraja, whereas Durazzo (2024) shows how Indigenous language revitalization is connected to cultural knowledge, community practices, and identity. In Indonesia, Fadhlan et al. (2023) identify culturally and religiously embedded meanings of gratitude within the *Sudah Tuai* tradition, while Tuti and Safitri (2024) demonstrate the relationship between symbolic ritual practices, collective values, and cultural preservation. Ritual communication can therefore be understood as a meaning-making process through which culturally patterned expressions become resources for reproducing collective realities and identities.

The performative dimension of ritual language further explains how culturally authorized utterances may produce social consequences rather than merely represent an existing reality. Classical speech-act scholarship established that under appropriate circumstances utterances can accomplish actions, making the relationship among language, speaker authority, context, and conventional procedure central to performativity. Contemporary research has extended this proposition by locating speech acts within interactional and ritual structures. House et al. (2021) propose an integrative model of interaction, speech acts, and ritual, demonstrating that particular speech acts acquire their communicative functions through their positions within socially organized interaction. This perspective is especially relevant to customary institutions because declarations, customary messages, prayers, formal documents, and authoritative statements may become consequential when performed by culturally recognized actors within legitimate ritual procedures. In Malay title conferral, therefore, the reading of a *warkah*, declaration of a title, and delivery of *amanah* should not be treated merely as ceremonial language. Their performative potential derives from the convergence of linguistic action, culturally appropriate conditions, institutional authorization, ritual sequence, and participant response. This framework also leaves open an important analytical question: whether the social force of customary title conferral resides primarily in a particular authoritative utterance or is distributed across a sequence of interconnected communicative acts.

Social legitimacy and collective recognition provide an additional dimension for understanding why institutionally authorized ritual acts become socially consequential. Legitimacy involves more than formal authorization because socially meaningful status also depends upon how institutional decisions and culturally recognized practices are

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interpreted by relevant communities. Haack et al. (2021) distinguish individual judgments of propriety, collective-level validity, and consensus among evaluators, demonstrating that institutionalized legitimacy and agreement among social actors are analytically related but not identical. This distinction is useful for customary communication because an institution may possess authority to confer a title while the title's continuing social significance also depends upon recognition within the community. Studies of culturally embedded communication similarly show that shared symbols, linguistic practices, and interaction contribute to collective identity and social recognition (Enjang et al., 2022; Baan et al., 2022; Sakdiah & Sahlaya, 2025). Research on Indigenous language and cultural continuity also demonstrates that community participation is important for sustaining culturally meaningful practices across generations (Durazzo, 2024; Hakim et al., 2025). Accordingly, customary title conferral can be conceptualized as a communicative process in which institutional authority and collective recognition intersect, enabling culturally authorized status to acquire broader social and moral significance.

Taken together, the literature establishes important relationships between communication and socially constructed meaning (Weder et al., 2023; Shoham, 2024), culturally situated ways of speaking and collective membership (Henne-Ochoa, 2018; Boromisza-Habashi, 2024; Ward & Spencer, 2024), ritual discourse and cultural continuity (Baan et al., 2022; Fadhlan et al., 2023; Tuti & Safitri, 2024), speech acts and ritualized interaction (House et al., 2021), and institutional legitimacy and collective evaluation (Haack et al., 2021). Nevertheless, these dimensions are frequently examined as separate analytical problems. Existing scholarship provides less explanation of how ritual utterances, culturally situated interaction, institutional authority, recipient participation, moral expectations, and collective recognition operate together in the construction of customary status. This study addresses that intersection through the case of Malay customary title conferral at LAM Riau. It therefore conceptualizes meaning construction not as the interpretation of ritual symbols alone but as a communicative process connecting ritual language with institutional and communal action. This synthesis provides the analytical basis for examining whether customary status emerges progressively across ritual stages, how performative force is organized within those stages, and how recognition becomes connected to continuing moral responsibility.

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RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design with an ethnography of communication approach to investigate how meanings are constructed through ritual utterances in Malay customary title conferral at the Riau Malay Customary Institution (Lembaga Adat Melayu Riau/LAM Riau). LAM Riau was approached not merely as a geographical research site but as a sociocultural communicative setting in which customary language, symbols, norms, institutional authority, and interactions among cultural actors acquire meaning. The study involved seven informants who possessed knowledge of and involvement in Malay customary title conferral: the chairperson and secretary of the LAM Riau Daily Executive Board (2), the secretary of the LAM Riau Customary Council (1), a descendant of the Siak Sri Indrapura Sultanate (1), Riau customary figures and cultural experts (2), and a Malay community figure (1). Informants were recruited through snowball sampling, beginning with knowledgeable participants and extending through referrals to other relevant cultural actors. Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation, while documentary sources included customary manuscripts, title-conferral guidelines, ceremony archives, customary decrees, speech texts, photographs, video recordings, audio recordings, and field notes.

Data analysis was conducted iteratively through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During data reduction, ritual utterances—including customary speeches, *pantun*, *petatah-petitih*, *warkah*, prayers, and *amanah*—were coded and organized according to recurrent meanings, communicative functions, and cultural values. Guided by the ethnography of communication, the analysis examined the communicative situation, participants, purposes, sequence of communicative acts, message forms, interactional norms, and communicative genres surrounding the title-conferral ritual. These contextual dimensions were interpreted to explain how meanings emerged through interactions among customary authorities, title recipients, LAM Riau, and the participating community, with particular attention to the relationship between ritual utterances, symbolic meanings, cultural values, and social recognition. Data trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation across informants, methodological triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents, and temporal triangulation by comparing data obtained at different moments and contexts of customary events. This analytical procedure enabled the study to move from describing ritual utterances toward interpreting how culturally situated communication constructs meaning within the institutional and social context of Malay customary title conferral.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Results

Field data obtained through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation revealed that meaning construction in Malay customary title conferral at the Riau Malay Customary Institution (LAM Riau) developed through a structured communicative process. The findings clustered around four interconnected dimensions: the communicative structure of the title-conferral process, the meanings embedded in ritual utterances, the construction of meaning through interactions among customary actors and the community, and the communicative context in which the ritual took place. Across these dimensions, customary language, pantun, petatah-petitih, warkah, prayers, customary speeches, and amanah consistently appeared as the principal verbal forms through which recognition, responsibility, cultural values, and social acknowledgment were communicated.

Communicative Structure of Malay Customary Title Conferral

The title-conferral process did not occur as a single ceremonial act but through a sequence of interconnected communicative stages. Field observations identified deliberation concerning the prospective recipient, announcement of the customary decision, reading of the warkah, formal conferral of the title, delivery of amanah, and ritual closure. Within the ceremonial sequence, these stages involved opening remarks, prayers, Qur'anic recitation, pantun, petatah-petitih, customary speeches, reading of the warkah, declaration of the title, customary advice, and closing prayers. Each stage had a distinct communicative role. Deliberation established agreement regarding the prospective recipient; the customary decision publicly communicated the outcome; the warkah formally articulated the title; the amanah specified responsibilities attached to the title; and the closing prayers and customary expressions reinforced the commitments communicated during the ceremony. The sequence showed that the title acquired its meaning gradually through successive communicative acts rather than solely at the moment when the title was formally announced.

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Table 1. Communicative Stages of Malay Customary Title Conferral

Stage	Verbal form	Communicative function	Meaning produced
Customary deliberation	Customary dialogue, *petatah-petitih*	Deliberative	Consensus and *mufakat*
Announcement of customary decision	*Pantun*, customary speech	Legitimizing	Social recognition
Reading of the *warkah*	Customary *warkah*	Performative	Change in customary status
Delivery of *amanah*	Customary advice and injunctions	Educational	Internalization of cultural and moral responsibility
Ritual closure	Prayer, *petatah-petitih*	Reinforcement	Strengthening cultural commitment

Field observations also demonstrated that the communicative sequence was accompanied by distinctive linguistic and behavioral conventions. Customary authorities consistently employed formal or high-register Malay, particularly when delivering pantun, *petatah-petitih*, the *warkah*, and *amanah*. The audience followed important stages of the ceremony attentively and without interruption, especially during the announcement of the customary decision and the reading of the *warkah*. The title recipient occupied a position determined by customary protocol, while customary authorities controlled the principal verbal acts. The significance attributed to customary language was also evident in an interview with a Riau cultural and customary figure: "*Kalau bahasa adat tidak digunakan dalam penabalan, maka hilanglah ruh, energi daripada penabalan itu sendiri. Bahasa itulah yang membawa marwah adat, mencerminkan kehormatan, dan martabat*." [If customary language is not used in the title conferral, the spirit and energy of the ceremony disappear. It is the language that carries marwah and reflects honor and dignity.] (Datok Seri Syaukani Alkarim).

Meanings Embedded in Ritual Utterances

Analysis of the field data identified five interconnected meanings embedded in the ritual utterances: symbolic, philosophical, social, moral, and spiritual. Symbolically, the title represented recognition and honor bestowed upon the recipient. Philosophically, customary expressions conveyed ideals concerning leadership, dignity, wisdom, and appropriate conduct. Socially, the title identified a recognized position within the

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customary community and established expectations concerning the recipient's relationship with others. Morally, the ritual repeatedly emphasized *amanah*, responsibility, exemplary conduct, and preservation of *marwah*. Spiritual meanings appeared through prayers, Qur'anic recitation, religious expressions, and references connecting Malay custom with Islamic teachings. These meanings were distributed across the entire communicative sequence rather than concentrated in a single text. Consequently, *pantun, petatah-petitih*, the *warkah*, customary speeches, prayers, and *amanah* collectively communicated what the title represented and what was expected from its recipient.

Among these meanings, *amanah* emerged most consistently in interviews as the central implication of receiving a customary title. Informants described title conferral not simply as the completion of recognition for past achievement but as the beginning of an enduring obligation. A member of the LAM Riau leadership stated, "*Gelar itu penghormatan, amanah, yang diberikan sepanjang rentang hidupnya, dan otomatis mengikat. Kalau tidak dijaga perilakunya, maka marwah gelarnya juga akan jatuh*." [The title is an honor and a trust given throughout one's lifetime, and it automatically binds the recipient. If one's conduct is not maintained, the dignity of the title will also decline.] (Datuk Seri H. Taufik Ikram Jamil). A customary figure from the royal tradition similarly explained that the title was "not merely an honor" but an *amanah* accompanied by moral responsibility. The interviews therefore showed a recurrent association between *gelar* (title), *amanah* (entrusted responsibility), and *marwah* (dignity). The title conferred *honor*, while *amanah* defined the responsibilities attached to that *honor* and *marwah* represented the dignity that had to be maintained through the recipient's subsequent conduct.

The *Warkah* and *Amanah* as Central Communicative Moments

The reading of the *warkah* emerged as a central communicative moment in the public recognition of the title. Field observations showed that the warkah was read solemnly by the designated customary authority using an official Malay register and following established ceremonial procedures. During this stage, participants directed their attention toward the customary authority, the recipient occupied the prescribed ceremonial position, and conversational interruptions were absent. The *warkah* identified and publicly articulated the customary decision concerning the recipient. A LAM Riau leader described the title-conferral ritual as fundamentally involving "pengakuan dan do'a" [recognition and prayer], through which the recipient was placed in a distinctive social position associated with commendable conduct and achievement. The observational, interview, and documentary evidence consistently indicated that public

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reading of the *warkah* marked a transition between the prior customary decision and its public recognition within the ceremonial setting.

The subsequent delivery of *amanah* shifted the communicative emphasis from recognition toward responsibility. Field observations recorded the use of high-register Malay, petatah-petitih, customary expressions, analogies, advisory pantun, and religious references during this stage. The *amanah* was delivered by the Chairperson of LAM Riau or a Datuk designated by the customary assembly and contained expectations concerning leadership, responsibility, honesty, social service, appropriate conduct, and preservation of *marwah*. Unlike the warkah, which articulated the title and its recognition, the *amanah* concentrated on what the recipient was expected to do after receiving the title. The two communicative moments therefore performed empirically distinguishable roles within the same ritual sequence: the *warkah* publicly established the recipient's recognized customary status, whereas the *amanah* articulated the behavioral and moral obligations accompanying that status.

Meaning Construction Through Interaction and Collective Recognition

The field findings showed that meaning was constructed through interaction among customary authorities, the title recipient, LAM Riau as an institution, and the attending community. Customary authorities produced and communicated meanings through formal language, *pantun, petatah-petitih*, the *warkah*, prayers, and *amanah*. The recipient publicly received the title together with the expectations attached to it, while the attending community participated through presence, attention, acceptance of the ceremony, and recognition of the conferred title. This process extended beyond the central act of title declaration. Prior deliberation established agreement regarding the prospective recipient; the ceremonial acts publicly communicated the decision; the *warkah* formalized recognition; the *amanah* articulated expected conduct; and community acknowledgment sustained the recipient's social position after the ceremony. The findings therefore revealed that the meaning of the title emerged through the relationship between customary utterances, institutional acts, recipient acceptance, and collective recognition rather than through words alone.

The interactional process simultaneously communicated cultural values to participants beyond the title recipient. Observations and interviews repeatedly identified *amanah*, *marwah*, politeness, leadership, responsibility, *musyawarah*, *mufakat*, solidarity, and religiosity within the ritual discourse. *Pantun* and *petatah-petitih* were particularly prominent as verbal forms for conveying advice and appropriate conduct. The Secretary of the LAM Riau Customary Council explained, "*Kalau pantun dan petatah-petitih itu sebagai penuntun budi, menjaga marwah orang Melayu dalam menyampaikan nasihat, untuk*

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membentuk karakter sebagai tunjuk ajar dalam masyarakat Melayu." [*Pantun* and *petatah-petitih* serve as guides to proper conduct, preserve Malay dignity in giving advice, and form character as customary guidance within Malay society.] (Datuk Alang Rizal). Field observations further showed that participants encountered customary etiquette, forms of leadership, traditional expressions, and the relationship between Malay custom and Islamic values through participation in the ceremony. The communicative event therefore provided a setting in which both the recipient and the attending community encountered and reaffirmed culturally recognizable values.

Communicative Context of the Title-Conferral Event

The meanings identified above occurred within a highly structured communicative context. The title-conferral setting was formal, solemn, and governed by customary respect. Participants included LAM Riau officials, customary authorities, the title recipient, family members, community representatives, and invited attendees. The communicative purposes included conferring and publicly recognizing the title, communicating *amanah*, and articulating customary values. Communication proceeded sequentially from opening and preparatory acts through recognition and moral instruction to ritual closure. Malay constituted the principal customary linguistic medium, while Indonesian was used in particular segments. The communicative repertoire included *pantun, petatah-petitih*, customary speeches, *warkah*, prayers, advice, and symbolic acts. Interaction was regulated by norms of politeness, respect for customary authorities, prescribed speaking procedures, and adherence to ceremonial protocol. Thus, the field data showed that the meanings of ritual utterances depended on who delivered them, to whom they were addressed, when they occurred in the ceremonial sequence, and how participants responded within the established customary setting.

Figure 1 illustrates the empirical process through which meanings associated with Malay customary titles are progressively constructed, negotiated, and internalized through verbal communication and social experiences within the Riau Malay Customary Institution. The model demonstrates that verbal communication serves as the initial mechanism of meaning construction, through which customary expressions, ritual pronouncements, moral advice, and culturally embedded messages communicate the philosophical, social, moral, and spiritual significance of the conferred titles. Rather than functioning merely as ceremonial recognition, the conferral process establishes a communicative framework through which recipients interpret their newly acquired customary status, understand the responsibilities associated with it, and develop awareness of their roles within the Malay cultural community.

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Figure 1. Empirical Process of Meaning Construction in Malay Customary Title Conferral



The findings further indicate that meaning construction extends beyond the ceremonial event through a gradual process of value internalization and social interaction. The symbolic recognition communicated during the conferral ceremony becomes socially meaningful when it is reinforced through communal acknowledgment, customary expectations, and the recipients' subsequent conduct. Within this process, verbal communication facilitates the transition from symbolic designation to social legitimacy, moral responsibility, spiritual awareness, and cultural identification. Consequently, customary titles are not understood as static symbols of prestige but as culturally embedded identities that influence how recipients perceive themselves, interact with community members, and fulfill their social obligations. Cultural identity thus represents an evolving outcome of the relationship between ritual communication, shared interpretations, and the practical enactment of customary values.

Based on these empirical findings, the study proposes a Verbal Communication and Value Internalization-Based Model of Meaning Construction in Malay Customary

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Title Conferral. The model contributes to the understanding of customary title conferral in three interconnected ways. First, it conceptualizes the meaning of Malay customary titles as a multidimensional construction encompassing philosophical, social, moral, and spiritual dimensions rather than merely representing honorary distinction. Second, it identifies ritual verbal communication as a mechanism through which culturally transmitted values are interpreted and potentially internalized, enabling customary titles to acquire significance beyond their ceremonial articulation. Third, it develops an empirically grounded explanatory model that connects verbal communication, symbolic meaning, social legitimacy, moral responsibility, spiritual values, and cultural identity formation within a progressive process of cultural meaning construction.

The theoretical contribution of this model lies in its integration of the ethnography of communication with the culturally specific philosophical foundations of Malay customary traditions. In particular, the principle of adat bersendi syarak, syarak bersendi Kitabullah (custom is grounded in Islamic law, and Islamic law is grounded in the Qur'an) provides an interpretive framework through which customary legitimacy, moral responsibility, and spiritual commitments become interconnected. From this perspective, customary title conferral can be understood as a culturally situated communicative practice in which ritual language, customary symbols, communal recognition, and Islamic ethical principles collectively shape the meaning of cultural identity. The proposed model therefore extends discussions in cultural communication and Islamic communication studies by illustrating how locally embedded communicative practices contribute to the reproduction, negotiation, and continuity of cultural values within Malay society.




Figure 2. Malay Customary Title Conferral Ceremony

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Figure 2 illustrates the traditional Malay customary title conferral ceremony (*Penabalan Gelar Adat*) as a culturally significant ritual that reflects the integration of verbal communication, customary symbolism, and collective recognition within the Riau Malay community. The ceremony represents a communicative process through which customary authorities formally confer honorary titles while transmitting cultural values, moral responsibilities, and social expectations to the recipients. Through ritual pronouncements, traditional expressions, and the symbolic acknowledgment of customary status, the conferral process constructs shared meanings concerning honor, leadership, legitimacy, and social responsibility. From an ethnography of communication perspective, this ceremony functions not merely as a formal recognition of individual status but also as a cultural mechanism for preserving Malay identity, reinforcing communal solidarity, and transmitting ethical principles rooted in adat bersendi syarak, syarak bersendi Kitabullah. Consequently, the conferral of customary titles signifies an ongoing relationship between ritual communication, cultural legitimacy, and the internalization of customary values within Malay society.

Taken together, the empirical findings reveal a sequential pattern of meaning construction in Malay customary title conferral: consensus → public recognition → recognition of customary status → moral responsibility → collective acknowledgment. The title was not treated by participants merely as an honorific designation. Its meaning was progressively constituted through deliberation, customary language, the public reading of the warkah, the delivery of amanah, the recipient's acceptance, and recognition by the customary community. Across these stages, amanah and marwah consistently connected social recognition with expectations of leadership, responsibility, exemplary conduct, and service. The empirical evidence therefore identifies title conferral as a communicative process in which an individual's newly recognized customary status become

2. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that meaning in Malay customary title conferral is constructed progressively through an ordered sequence of communicative practices rather than residing inherently in individual utterances or ceremonial symbols. Customary deliberation establishes consensus, the announcement of the customary decision makes recognition public, the *warkah* articulates customary status, *amanah* attaches responsibilities to that status, and ritual closure reinforces collective acknowledgment. This pattern supports contemporary perspectives that understand communication as a process of sense- and meaning-making through which common

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meanings and cultural orientations are produced and reproduced in social interaction (Weder et al., 2023). It also develops the symbolic-interactionist proposition that language, symbols, and recurring interactions contribute to shared meaning and collective identity (Sakdiah & Sahlaya, 2025). However, the present findings identify a more specific process of sequential meaning construction: each communicative stage adds a distinct layer of meaning—consensus, public recognition, recognized status, moral obligation, and collective acknowledgment—to what has been established previously. Malay customary title conferral therefore does not merely communicate a status that already exists. The ordered ritual itself participates in constructing that status by connecting culturally patterned language, institutional procedure, moral expectations, and collective acknowledgment within a single communicative process.

The findings further show that ritual utterances acquire significance from the culturally organized communicative situations in which they are performed. The meaning of *pantun, petatah-petitih*, customary speeches, prayers, *warkah*, and *amanah* depends upon participants, purposes, sequence, message forms, interactional norms, communicative genres, and the culturally recognized positions of speakers and recipients. Contemporary ethnography-of-communication scholarship similarly emphasizes that culturally meaningful ways of speaking must be interpreted within broader social and ethical relations, while cultural discourse research demonstrates how recognizable discursive resources circulate through language socialization and collective membership (Ward & Spencer, 2024; Boromisza-Habashi, 2024). Indonesian evidence provides an important contextual comparison: Enjang (2022) shows that customary values among the Baduy shape linguistic practices, communicative norms, and symbolic messages, while Hakim et al. (2025) demonstrate that Indigenous language use in traditional rituals contributes to cultural identity and intergenerational continuity. The LAM Riau findings extend these perspectives by highlighting communicative authority: culturally meaningful language becomes socially consequential not simply because of what is said, but because of who speaks, to whom, at which ritual stage, under what customary authorization, and before which recognizing community.

The *warkah* provides the clearest evidence that ritual language can participate in producing social consequences rather than merely describing them. Its public reading articulates an institutionally authorized customary decision and identifies the recipient's recognized status within a solemn ritual setting. This finding is consistent with the performative understanding of language and particularly with House et al.'s (2021) integrative model, which demonstrates that interactional structures, speech acts, and ritual are analytically interconnected and that speech acts operate within particular

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positions in ritualized interaction. Yet the LAM Riau evidence also qualifies an interpretation that locates performative force exclusively in the *warkah* or declaration itself. Before the *warkah* is read, the prospective title holder has already passed through customary deliberation and institutional authorization; afterward, the declaration is reinforced through formal conferral, recipient participation, *amanah*, and community acknowledgment. The findings therefore reveal distributed performativity: the transformation of customary status is accomplished through an interconnected sequence of authorized communicative acts rather than by one isolated utterance. Performative force consequently emerges from the convergence of culturally appropriate language, institutional authorization, ritual procedure, participant positioning, and collective witnessing.

The relationship among *gelar, amanah,* and *marwah* reveals a further dimension that cannot be adequately explained if customary ritual is interpreted primarily as cultural preservation. The title communicates recognition and honor, but *amanah* transforms that recognition into expectations concerning leadership, responsibility, honesty, service, politeness, and exemplary conduct, while *marwah* represents the dignity that must subsequently be protected through the recipient's behavior. Research in Indonesian customary communities demonstrates that culturally embedded language can reproduce social values and community worldviews (Enjang, 2022), while recent ethnographic research shows that Indigenous language practices sustain identity, cultural knowledge, and intergenerational continuity (Hakim et al., 2025). The present findings extend this literature by showing that ritual communication operates prospectively as well as retrospectively: it does not merely transmit values inherited from the past but projects normative expectations onto the title holder's future conduct. This process can be conceptualized as the moralization of customary status, whereby publicly recognized honor becomes inseparable from continuing responsibility. The relationship *gelar* → *amanah* → *marwah* thus explains how customary recognition is transformed into an enduring moral expectation linking individual status with responsibility toward the wider Malay community.

Collective recognition further explains why institutional authorization alone does not exhaust the social meaning of a customary title. LAM Riau and customary authorities possess the institutional capacity to deliberate upon and confer the title, but field evidence demonstrates that the recipient and community also participate in sustaining its meaning. The recipient accepts the title together with its *amanah*, while community members witness the ritual and subsequently recognize the title within social relations. This distinction can be illuminated by Haack et al. (2021), who differentiate individual

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judgments of propriety, institutionalized collective validity, and consensus among evaluators, emphasizing that institutionalized validity and social consensus are analytically distinct and may not necessarily coincide. Applied cautiously to the customary context, this distinction helps explain why institutional authorization and collective recognition should not be treated as synonymous. In LAM Riau, customary authority establishes the legitimate institutional basis of the title, whereas recipient acceptance and communal acknowledgment sustain its social significance. Social legitimacy is therefore communicatively produced through the convergence of institutional authorization, ritual enactment, recipient acceptance, and collective recognition, linking the title holder's newly recognized position to the expectations and evaluative practices of the customary community.

Taken together, these findings provide an integrated explanation of meaning construction in Malay customary title conferral. They complement contemporary ethnography-of-communication scholarship concerning culturally situated communicative practice (Ward & Spencer, 2024; Boromisza-Habashi, 2024), studies demonstrating relationships among customary language, cultural values, and identity (Enjang, 2022; Hakim et al., 2025), House et al.'s (2021) integration of interaction, speech acts, and ritual, and Haack et al.'s (2021) distinction between institutionalized validity and consensus. The empirical process can consequently be represented as ritual utterances → culturally situated interaction → institutional authorization → recognized customary status → moral responsibility → collective recognition. Rather than proposing a universal theory, this study offers three empirically grounded conceptual refinements: sequential meaning construction, explaining how meaning accumulates across interconnected ritual stages; distributed performativity, explaining how status transformation emerges through a sequence of institutionally authorized communicative acts; and moralization of customary status, explaining how *amanah* and *marwah* transform recognition into continuing responsibility. Meaning is thus constructed when culturally patterned utterances are situated within an ordered ritual, performed under customary authority, accepted by the recipient, invested with moral expectations, and collectively recognized by the customary community.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that meaning in Malay customary title conferral at the Riau Malay Customary Institution (LAM Riau) is constructed through an ordered and culturally situated process of ritual communication rather than through isolated utterances or ceremonial symbols. The process develops through customary deliberation, announcement of the customary decision, reading of the *warkah* and title conferral,

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delivery of *amanah*, and ritual closure accompanied by collective recognition. Within this sequence, *pantun*, *petatah-petitih*, customary speeches, prayers, *warkah*, and *amanah* perform interconnected communicative functions that produce symbolic, philosophical, social, moral, and spiritual meanings. Meaning is therefore constructed through the interaction of customary authorities, the title recipient, LAM Riau, and the participating community within culturally recognized communicative norms. The title consequently signifies more than ceremonial honor or formal social recognition; it establishes a culturally meaningful status connected to leadership, responsibility, service, and the preservation of *marwah* within the Malay customary community.

The study contributes to the understanding of ethnography of communication and ritual communication by identifying three interconnected processes through which customary status becomes socially meaningful. First, sequential meaning construction demonstrates that meaning accumulates across successive communicative stages rather than being produced by a single ritual utterance. Second, distributed performativity shows that the transformative force of title conferral emerges from the combination of customary deliberation, institutional authorization, ritual speech, *warkah*, recipient participation, and collective acknowledgment. Third, moralization of customary status explains how the relationship among *gelar*, *amanah*, and *marwah* transforms social recognition into continuing moral and social responsibility. These findings indicate that ritual communication does not merely preserve or transmit inherited cultural values; it also participates in constructing socially recognized status, defining expectations for future conduct, and sustaining Malay cultural identity through the interaction of language, institutional authority, ritual practice, and community recognition.

The study is limited to the communicative practices surrounding Malay customary title conferral within the institutional and cultural context of LAM Riau and therefore does not claim that the identified processes operate identically across all Malay communities or other customary institutions. Nevertheless, the findings provide a basis for comparative research on title-conferral practices in different Malay regions and other Indonesian customary communities. Future studies may examine how differences in customary authority, local linguistic traditions, generational participation, and sociocultural settings influence the construction and recognition of customary status. Further research may also investigate how ritual meanings are maintained, negotiated, or transformed when customary communication moves beyond face-to-face ceremonial settings. For LAM Riau and related customary institutions, the findings underscore the importance of maintaining culturally meaningful communicative forms—particularly *warkah*, *amanah*, *pantun*, *petatah-petitih*, and customary language—because these forms

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function not simply as ceremonial heritage but as communicative mechanisms through which cultural values, social responsibility, and collective identity are continuously reproduced.

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