The Socio-Cultural Construction of the Bati People: An Ethnography of Identity Struggles within Socio-Ethnic Folklore toward Social Existence

Pieter Jacob Pelupessy[1*], Syafrizal[2]

[1] Faculty of Social Sciences and Government, Universitas Pattimura, Indonesia
[2] Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: pieter.pelupessy@lecturer.unpatti.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study explores the socio-cultural construction of the Bati people, an ethnic group residing in Ambon-Maluku, Indonesia, whose social identity has long been shaped and contested through external stigmatization and internal cultural resilience. Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach, the research unpacks how the Bati people articulate their identity struggles through socio-ethnic folklore, which serves as a medium for cultural preservation and social recognition. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with selected informants and supported by document analysis. The findings reveal that the Bati people possess a unique socio-cultural framework that is both inherited and reinterpreted across generations. However, their collective identity has often been marginalized by dominant narratives that portray them through pejorative discourses, such as the label "manusia ilang-ilang" (vanishing people), associated with deviant and criminal behavior. Such stigmatization has limited their participation in broader inter-communal relations. Nevertheless, through folklore and oral traditions, the Bati continuously reconstruct their cultural identity, reaffirming their existence within the multi-ethnic social fabric of Ambon-Maluku. This article contributes to the broader discourse on identity politics, folklore studies, and cultural resilience in marginalized ethnic communities.

Keywords: Socio-Cultural Construction, Bati People, Ethnography, Identity Struggles, Socio-Ethnic Folklore, Social Existence

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is inherently a multiethnic nation. Anthropological literature describes that the country is home to more than three hundred distinct ethnic groups, each possessing its own unique cultural identity and over two hundred indigenous languages (Geertz, 1981). This diversity extends to variations in religious beliefs and economic adaptations, ranging from semi-nomadic shifting cultivation, sago cultivation, and wet-rice farming to other localized livelihood systems. From a sociological standpoint, Geertz further explains that the social fabric of Indonesia encompasses a broad spectrum of community structures—from small, isolated villages to large, modern cities—each characterized by varying kinship systems, including matrilineal, patrilineal, and mixed lineage patterns.

Although approximately ninety-five percent of the population adheres to Islam, many indigenous belief systems persist and refuse to vanish entirely. These local religions often coexist alongside, or are absorbed into, the major established faiths. Nevertheless, numerous other ethnic groups across the archipelago remain unclassified and largely unknown. Such groups are often arbitrarily categorized within existing ethnic labels, resulting in the erasure or oversimplification of their distinct identities. The Bati people, who inhabit the customary

territory known as *Tana (Land) Bati* or *Tana Esuriun*—a forested area demarcated by traditional boundaries (*etar* and *watas nakuasa*) in East Seram Island, Maluku—appear to be one such marginalized and misrecognized group.

The limited recognition of the Bati community is likely a consequence of the lack of comprehensive academic research dedicated to their existence. The absence of prior ethnographic or historical studies has disrupted the analytical continuity needed to understand and document the Bati as a distinct ethnic entity. Consequently, this community remains socially and academically invisible. Such circumstances resonate with Pelras's (1996) argument that the absence of foundational research on certain ethnic groups or regional histories is often due to multiple barriers—ranging from limited local institutional interest, inconsistent governmental policies, and inadequate technological or methodological resources, to the perceived lack of practical benefits for local authorities and communities. These factors collectively hinder the planning and execution of sustained ethnographic inquiry.

The question of identity for an ethnic group such as the Bati is intrinsically tied to their everyday social practices and continues to influence their engagement with contemporary issues that shape their social existence. As Poole (1999) asserts, the dynamics of identity formation intersect with multiple dimensions of life—economic, political, sociocultural, and artistic. Among these, the domain of art and expressive culture holds particular significance, as it serves as a primary space where an ethnic group articulates and performs its identity in contrast to others. While economic and political practices may exhibit cross-ethnic similarities, artistic and aesthetic expressions remain deeply rooted in cultural specificity and symbolic distinction.

In this context, the present article focuses on the art and expressive traditions of the Bati people, specifically their socio-ethnic folklore, as a key site through which cultural identity is constructed, negotiated, and sustained. The analysis centers on the folklore content and its embedded socio-cultural meanings as reflections of identity formation and resistance. This conceptual approach aligns with the theoretical perspectives of Hall and Ubed A. S. (1984), who emphasize that identity is never complete but exists as an ongoing process of becoming—formed internally within the self and shaped externally through social interaction. Accordingly, identity is understood as both a subjective construct, grounded in personal and cultural values through which individuals and groups perceive themselves, and an objective social reality that manifests through the diverse patterns of human life and experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. The Enigma of the Bati People

For decades—if not centuries—the name "Bati" has circulated through oral traditions and social rumors across Ambon and the wider Maluku region, often shrouded in mystery. This mystification largely stems from a lack of understanding among outsiders about who the Bati people truly are. Misinterpretations have given rise to myths portraying them as *manusia ilang-ilang*—beings capable of vanishing at will. This supernatural stereotype has perpetuated a deep social stigma. Whenever unfortunate events such as child abductions, murders, or assaults occur in the region, blame is often directed toward the Bati, frequently without any factual evidence.

Such baseless accusations have persisted for generations, solidifying into a powerful negative stigma that hinders the Bati community's ability to articulate and express their own identity within broader society. The widespread image of the Bati as "evil" or "criminal" people—those who bring harm to others—has rendered them socially marginalized and symbolically excluded within the socio-cultural landscape of Eastern Seram, Maluku.

Nevertheless, perspectives within certain local communities differ. Some groups recognize the *Orang Bati* (with a single "t") as an indigenous ethnic group or customary community (*masyarakat adat*) that actively interacts and coexists with others in the region. These communities inhabit a customary territory known as *Tana (Land) Bati* or *Tana Esuriun*, defined by *etar* and *watas nakuasa*—traditional territorial demarcations—within the rainforest interior of Eastern Seram Island. The Bati possess a distinctive cultural tradition known as *Esuriun Orang Bati*, encompassing customary knowledge, moral systems, and cosmological beliefs.

In contrast, some local narratives describe the *Batti* (with double "t") as supernatural, invisible entities that cannot be perceived through ordinary human senses. This dual understanding—between *Orang Bati* as real human communities and *Batti* as mythical beings—illustrates the complex intersection of folklore, identity, and stigma within Maluku's cultural imagination.

2. A Brief Overview of the Bati People

The terms *Orang Bati*, *Suku Bati*, and *Masyarakat Adat Bati* all refer to the same ethnocultural community, whose name and identity are rooted in customary law and ancestral designation. The ancestral wisdom of the Bati's forebears continues to guide contemporary life through values embedded in the *Esuriun* tradition.

Negative perceptions toward the Bati are believed to arise from several factors. Chief among them is the community's historical marginalization and limited capacity to publicly assert their identity within broader

Indonesian society. This limited visibility has constrained their participation in interethnic interaction, thereby reinforcing social boundaries and misconceptions. Yet, interethnic interaction serves as a crucial process of mutual recognition, enabling communities to understand and appreciate one another's cultural heritage.

The Bati people hold deep reverence for their ancestors, known as *Tata Nusu Si*, meaning "the pure-hearted ones," or *Mancia Lamino di Gavin*. As a customary community, the Bati desire equal recognition and treatment comparable to other indigenous groups across the archipelago.

Academic discussions of the Bati remain scarce. One of the few ethnographic references appears in Sachse (2002), who studied Seram Island and noted that the island's inhabitants descended from the mountain-dwelling *Alifoeroe* (or *Alifuru*)—a term referring to upland peoples comprised of smaller tribes with distinct dialects, customs, and traditions. Major ethnic clusters in Seram include *Patasiwa* and *Patalima*, each historically located in the island's eastern region and defined by complex systems of social organization rather than formal tribal names. Colley (1961) documented that these two groups were once antagonistic, influenced by the rivalries between the Ternate and Tidore sultanates, which competed for political control in the region since the fifteenth century.

Barth (1969) emphasized the *Pela* alliance system in Seram during the Dutch colonial era, identifying *Alifuru* communities as the mountain dwellers who practiced intricate intergroup alliances. However, Barth's ethnography did not explicitly mention the Bati by name. Earlier, Taurn (1918) classified Seram's population into two major groups: coastal dwellers and highlanders. The coastal groups, often of mixed origin and influenced by Malay culture, exhibited higher levels of acculturation and socioeconomic development, whereas the highlanders preserved the island's original cultural traits.

Interestingly, when Bati individuals interact with outsiders, they often identify themselves as *Orang Geser*, *Orang Bula*, or *Orang Seram Timur*. As noted by Pelupessy (2012), this strategic self-identification serves as a form of social self-defense, intended to avoid stigma or disbelief surrounding their true ethnic identity. Many Bati believe that revealing their actual identity might provoke fear or skepticism among outsiders. This strategy of concealment reflects a conscious negotiation between survival, identity, and social exclusion.

3. Theoretical Foundation: Social Constructionism

The theoretical foundation of this study draws primarily from Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's seminal work *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966). Berger, a sociologist at the New School for Social Research in New York, and Luckmann, from the University of Frankfurt, formulated a systematic theory of how reality is constructed through social interaction and shared meaning. Their framework challenges positivist traditions, asserting that reality is not an objective given but a human product continually shaped through dynamic processes of interpretation and interaction—"reality is socially constructed."

This theory aligns with the constructivist paradigm, which views social reality as a product of human cognition and agency. Individuals are seen as active creators of meaning rather than passive recipients of structural constraints. As Hidayat (2009) notes, from a constructivist ontological perspective, social reality is relative and context-dependent, defined by actors within specific socio-cultural settings.

Berger and Luckmann's ideas are heavily influenced by phenomenological traditions, particularly those of Alfred Schutz—himself a student of Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology. Through this lineage, Berger and Luckmann synthesized phenomenology's concern with subjective meaning and intentionality with sociological analysis. Their thought also resonates with Weber's focus on *verstehen* (subjective understanding), Durkheim and Parsons' structuralism, Marx's dialectical analysis, and Mead's symbolic interactionism. As Poloma (1994) later summarized, social constructionism represents a synthesis between structuralism and interactionism, emphasizing that reality emerges through the continuous negotiation of meaning in social contexts.

The philosophical roots of constructivism can be traced to Giambattista Vico, an Italian epistemologist who argued that to "know" something is to understand how it is made. Later developments by Jean Piaget and Ernst von Glasersfeld expanded constructivism into cognitive theory, positing that knowledge is actively constructed rather than passively absorbed. Suparno (1997) further classified constructivism into three variants:

1. Radical Constructivism, which asserts that knowledge exists only as mental constructions and may not necessarily reflect objective reality;
2. Hypothetical Realist Constructivism, which sees knowledge as an evolving hypothesis approximating external reality; and
3. Pragmatic Constructivism, which views knowledge as an interpretive representation of reality grounded in social practice.

Applying Berger and Luckmann's framework to the Bati context allows for understanding how social stigma and myths—such as the *ilang-ilang* narrative—constitute a socially constructed reality that shapes the group's external image and internal self-conception. The identity of the Bati people thus emerges not merely from cultural inheritance but from an ongoing dialectical process of negotiation between self-perception, social labeling, and historical marginalization.

The Bati People

The designation attached to the Bati ethnic group—subsequently paralleled with the term *Orang Bati*—constitutes the fundamental identity of this community, both within their internal sociocultural sphere and in the perception of external groups. This identity is not incidental but rather the outcome of a long and complex customary process, imbued with sacred traditional values that must be preserved, upheld, and transmitted across generations. From the historical narratives of *Esuriun Orang Bati*, it is known that the ancestors of the Bati people once inhabited Mount Batti, where two main social groups resided: the *Patasiwa* community in Samos and the *Patalima* community in Soabareta.

These two social groups were historically aware of their differences and had experienced long-standing conflicts. In the broader history of the Alifuru people of Seram, the *Patasiwa* and *Patalima* factions were often engaged in intergroup conflict. These confrontations, which shaped social experiences in Seram, eventually led to a transformative realization among the early generations of the Bati people. Through deliberation and reconciliation at Mount Batti, both factions reached an agreement—referred to as *mafakat sinabu*—to unite under a single collective identity, "Bati." The name *Bati*, therefore, symbolizes the unity between two formerly divided groups (*Pelupessy, 2012*).

The system of values embedded in Bati culture, known as *Esuriun Orang Bati*, emphasizes the core virtue of being *Mancia Lamino di Gavin*, or "a person with a pure heart." This principle embodies the spirit of solidarity and communal resilience. The moral force derived from this principle enables the Bati people to endure and sustain their way of life, reflecting what Boulding (1964) identifies as a synthesis between ideas and the social norms that sustain them.

The close relationship between Bati values and their lived philosophy of *roina kakal* (brotherhood) forms what may be described as the "Batti ideology." This ideology has been deeply internalized within both individual and collective spheres, influencing how the community asserts its cultural identity and seeks external recognition. Such an ideological foundation reflects what Bierstedt (1970) conceptualizes as a combination of shared ideas and normative systems—a worldview that guides self-perception, aspiration, and the pursuit of social harmony.

Ethnography

In its simplest form, ethnography can be understood as the systematic study of culture, society, and human behavior through direct observation, participation, and qualitative analysis. Ethnography seeks to provide an in-depth and holistic understanding of a cultural group's social life, beliefs, and practices, often through the researcher's immersion in everyday community activities.

According to Kamarusdiana (2019), recent scholarly attention toward studies of social life has grown considerably due to the inherent richness and diversity of social structures, which serve as a repository of local wisdom. Communities that continue to uphold local and traditional values represent a particularly compelling subject of inquiry. Indonesia, as a pluralistic, multicultural, and multiethnic nation, provides fertile ground for such studies. Anthropologists such as Koentjaraningrat and Malalatoa have estimated that Indonesia is home to between 577 and 660 ethnic groups, distinguished primarily by language, social interaction, and cultural expression.

Social research in Indonesia can take several methodological forms—including historical studies, sociological analyses, and anthropological approaches—all of which serve as analytical frameworks for understanding the nation's complex social fabric. Within this context, ethnography occupies a central position as a branch of anthropology that seeks to describe, interpret, and analyze the cultural systems of specific communities. Koentjaraningrat defines ethnography as a comprehensive description of an ethnic group's cultural system, encompassing social norms, values, and practices that collectively shape their way of life.

Therefore, ethnographic inquiry emphasizes the study of culture as an integral component of social systems, often through the exploration of localized traditions that together represent the broader cultural mosaic of a nation.

Identity Struggles

At a glance, the concept of "identity struggle" refers to the ongoing process of self-discovery and self-definition, often involving questions about who we are, what we believe in, and how we relate to the world around us. This process is particularly significant during adolescence and early adulthood, but it also applies to ethnic communities navigating their place within plural societies.

In this discussion, identity struggle pertains to how an ethnic group maintains cultural continuity, achieves recognition from other groups, and preserves its core values through continuous cultural transmission. As Syafrizal (2023) notes in *Identity Struggles in Central Sumatra: Women in the Spiral of History toward Matriliny in the Concept of Social Anthropology*, identity negotiation in Indonesia reflects a natural process—an acknowledgment of ethnic diversity as a social reality. Diversity, therefore, is not merely tolerated but essential, with each ethnic group possessing unique cultural markers that distinguish it from others.

Geertz (1981) reinforces this view by noting that Indonesia is home to roughly 300 distinct ethnic groups, each with its own cultural identity, language, religious beliefs, and modes of economic adaptation. These range from semi-nomadic agriculture and sago cultivation to wet-rice farming, trading, and artisanal industries. Geertz also highlights variations in kinship systems—matrilineal, patrilineal, and mixed—as well as diverse forms of political organization from tribal communities to royal structures. Despite Islam being the predominant religion, local traditions and belief systems persist, reflecting deep-rooted syncretism within Indonesian society.

Thus, identity struggles among Indonesia's ethnic groups—including the Bati people—are shaped by historical encounters, cultural pluralism, and social negotiation, all of which contribute to their distinctive yet interconnected existence.

Socio-Ethnic Folklore

Socio-ethnic folklore refers to an analytical approach within the social sciences that explores how cultural and ethnic factors shape human behavior, social interaction, and community structures. It examines how ethnic identity—whether individual or collective—affects people's lived experiences in social contexts. In a culturally diverse nation such as Indonesia, folklore embodies both differentiation and unity, serving as a marker of ethnic uniqueness and a medium of intergenerational knowledge transmission.

According to Michalopoulos and Xue (2021), folklore consists of traditional beliefs, customs, and stories preserved and transmitted across generations, often orally. It represents a vital component of collective culture, encapsulating shared moral values and cultural wisdom. As Monita Precillia (2024) explains, folklore—like tradition—is a genre of the past perpetuated through oral or performative transmission. It may appear in various forms: spoken narratives, ritual practices, or mnemonic artifacts.

Folklore typically exhibits several defining characteristics:

1. **Oral transmission**, passed down verbally from generation to generation;
2. **Traditional structure**, maintaining stable forms over time;
3. **Anonymity**, with unknown authorship;
4. **Formulaic expression**, adhering to recurring patterns;
5. **Functional value**, serving educational, emotional, or moral purposes;
6. **Prelogical reasoning**, which may diverge from conventional logic; and
7. **Collective ownership**, belonging to a specific community.

Bronner (2016) emphasizes that folklore reveals fundamental human needs, desires, and anxieties often unexpressed through other means. In Indonesia, folklore such as *Malin Kundang* or *Timun Mas* serves as a vehicle for moral instruction and cultural continuity, even though the original authors are unknown (*Arjon et al., 2023*). Nugroho (2023) asserts that folklore—whether oral, semi-oral, or material—forms an essential part of cultural identity. Yet, misunderstandings persist among the public, where "culture" is often narrowly equated with "art," thereby overlooking the broader anthropological significance of cultural expression.

Social Existence

Social existence can be defined as the condition and role of individuals within a social group or community, encompassing how they are recognized, interact, and contribute to their social environment. It also involves the formation of self-identity through social interaction, shaped by societal norms, values, and expectations. In this sense, existence is not merely "to be" but "to be in relation"—a conscious awareness of one's being within a shared world.

As Sary Eva Yanti (2015) explains, existence can be understood in four interrelated ways:

1. that which exists;
2. that which possesses actuality;
3. that which is experienced; and
4. that which represents a state of fulfillment or perfection.

Yanti and Abidin further argue that existence is a dynamic process of "becoming," derived from the Latin *existere*, meaning "to stand out" or "to transcend." Human existence, therefore, is fluid rather than static—subject to growth, regression, and transformation, depending on one's capacity to actualize potentialities. Existence is inherently historical and future-oriented, shaped by both personal agency and collective experience.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a **qualitative research approach** to explore the socio-cultural construction of the *Orang Bati*, focusing on the ethnographic dimensions of identity struggle within socio-ethnic folklore and their collective

pursuit of social existence. As a qualitative inquiry, the research seeks to reveal general principles underlying various social phenomena and the cultural patterns that structure human life.

Through this approach, the analysis of social and cultural manifestations was conducted by centering attention on the cultural life of the Bati community to gain a comprehensive understanding of the underlying phenomena. These phenomena were subsequently interpreted and analyzed through relevant sociocultural theories.

Following Koentjaraningrat (1985), an accurate analysis of social and cultural phenomena requires rigorous and comprehensive data preparation. Similarly, Yumagulova et al. (2023), Deterding and Waters (2021), and Ranney et al. (2015) emphasize the importance of **case study methods** in understanding specific phenomena in-depth. Accordingly, this article adopts a case study approach focusing on the socio-cultural construction of the Bati people, the ethnography of identity struggle, and the social existence of *Orang Bati* within their socio-ethnic folklore.

The primary data were collected through **in-depth interviews, documentary analysis**, and **field observation**. Table 1 summarizes the research methods and data sources applied in this study.

Table 1. Methods of Analysis

Methods	Sources	Criteria / Details
Interview	Respondents	- Residing in the Maluku–Ambon region (or continuously living among the Bati community). - Engaging in regular social interactions with both Bati and non-Bati individuals. - Actively involved in traditional and communal Bati activities.
Documentary analysis	Policy documents	- Archival materials such as laws and government regulations. - Official reports from local governments or academic institutions. - Statistical data and reports concerning Bati demographic and economic development.
Observation	Field observations	- Observation of social interaction processes within the Bati community. - Observation of intra-community social relations. - Documentation of public infrastructure such as roads, markets, and schools.

DISCUSSION

The Cultural Construction of the Bati People: A Distinct Identity among Maluku Ethnic Groups

The *Orang Bati* identity remains a subject of mystery and misconception in Ambon–Maluku. The secrecy surrounding this group arises from a lack of understanding among outsiders about the meaning of *Orang Bati* and *Orang Batti*. Local communities have long perpetuated myths labeling them as *manusia ilang-ilang* (the "disappearing people"). When cases of missing persons, abductions, or murders occur, the Bati are often scapegoated—an unfounded stigma that has persisted for generations.

While some outsiders regard the Bati as dangerous or malevolent, others describe them as kind and generous, known for helping those in need. In reality, the *Orang Bati* are an **indigenous ethnic community** possessing their own identity, territory, and cultural system.

Through an ethnographic approach, this study reveals several key findings:
1. The Bati community has never explicitly differentiated between *Orang Bati* and *Orang Batti* when speaking to outsiders, primarily to avoid social stigma.
2. Outsiders generally have little to no direct social contact with the Bati, even when physically nearby.
3. Most outsiders avoid entering Bati territories in Eastern Seram due to fear and longstanding myths about the community.

Identity Struggles within Bati Socio-Ethnic Folklore toward Social Existence

The *Masyarakat Adat Bati* (Bati Indigenous Community) live communally in villages (*wanuwea*) within their customary territory (*watas nakuasa*) and clan lands (*etar*). Their **cultural and existential integration** is achieved through *adat* (customary law). The naming of *Orang Bati* as a distinct identity was established through traditional

ritual and ancestral agreement. According to Pelupessy (2012), the ancestral wisdom of the Bati people—rooted in *Esuriun Orang Bati* values—must be preserved by future generations.

The long-standing mystery surrounding *Orang Bati* arises because they rarely disclose the meaning of their identity to outsiders, while outsiders themselves lack direct experience or understanding of Bati culture. Pelupessy notes that the Bati people deeply revere their ancestors, referred to as *Tata Nusu Si* or *Manusia Batti*, regarded as people of pure heart (*Mancia Lamino di Gavin*).

The present-day Bati population is ethnically diverse, comprising descendants of several indigenous Seram tribes collectively identifying as *Suku Alifuru Bati* (the Alifuru-Bati tribe). Jehandut (2024) observes that the current Bati community includes both indigenous Seram inhabitants and those who migrated from other regions. Historically, the Bati people emerged from two major social groups—*Patasiwa* and *Patalima*—who reconciled after long-standing conflict.

Oral histories also recount that some Bati ancestors arrived aboard the *Kapal Safina Tun Najal*, believed to have originated from the Middle East. Other narratives speak of Chinese ancestry, recounting the story of the *Kapal Cina Namba* (Chinese Namba Ship) that sank near Mount Bati. Its wreck, now fossilized in stone, is considered a sacred site within *Tana Bati*. Survivors of that shipwreck were reportedly rescued by the Bati ancestors—a story that remains central to their collective memory.

As Jehandut (2024) describes in *Jurnal Flores Lifestyle*, Seram Island—part of Maluku Province—is home to many indigenous groups with rich traditions. The Bati stand out for their distinct heritage, reflected in:

1. **History and Origins** – The Bati trace their roots to mountain-dwelling ancestors who later migrated to coastal regions. Their presence dates back to prehistoric times, and they continue to uphold traditional customs and rituals.
2. **Language and Culture** – The Bati possess their own language, *Bahasa Bati*, a crucial element of cultural identity. Their ceremonies, songs, and dances—passed down through generations—depict agricultural life, ritual practices, and community values.
3. **Belief and Spirituality** – The Bati's spiritual life centers on ancestral reverence, with the belief that ancestral spirits protect and guide their lives. Rituals and ceremonies play a vital role in maintaining harmony between the physical and spiritual realms.

Recent Developments among the Bati People

Like all living beings, societies evolve over time. The Bati community is no exception; its development spans social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions. According to Abu Bakar Walima (2017), a key indicator of transformation within the Bati community is their growing collective voice demanding recognition of ancestral land rights and access to natural resources.

This shift reflects a broader change in worldview—what Walima terms *Bati intellectual awakening*—where community members have begun to articulate their collective interests and future sustainability. However, the *Orang Bati* continue to face widespread misunderstanding. A segment aired by Trans7's *On the Spot* program sensationalized the Bati as "frightening forest beings," reinforcing long-standing stereotypes and instilling fear among other Maluku inhabitants.

Such portrayals provoked strong reactions among Bati descendants and scholars in Ambon and Seram, who condemned these depictions as irresponsible and demeaning. As Walima argues, the Bati were portrayed as savage and cannibalistic—false accusations that have perpetuated discrimination and fear.

More recently, Christ Belseran and Martha Dianti (2023) documented ongoing challenges faced by the Bati community amid extractive industrial expansion. The peace of Bati ancestral lands was disrupted by the entry of oil and gas companies—PT Balam Energy Limited and PT Bureau Geophysical Prospecting (BGP)—into their sacred territories. In protest, on 26 July 2022, members of *Masyarakat Adat Bati Kilusi* and *Bati Tabalean* performed a **traditional ritual of resistance**, adorning themselves with red cloths (*kain berang*) and declaring *sasi adat* (customary prohibition) over the forest to block unauthorized drilling.

Community members expressed deep emotional distress at the desecration of their sacred land, particularly Mount Bati. As one Bati youth, Zainudin Kelsaba, asserted: "Mount Bati cannot be disturbed by anyone. As long as we live here, we will defend the Bati land as the sacred land of our ancestors."

These events underscore that the Bati people's struggle for existence is not only cultural but also political and environmental—an enduring testament to their resilience and commitment to preserving ancestral heritage in the face of modern exploitation.

Lenny Patty, Chairperson of the *Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara* (AMAN) Maluku, stated that AMAN continues to provide assistance and strengthen the struggle of indigenous communities in Maluku, particularly the Bati people. She explained that although the current situation in Maluku *de facto* acknowledges the existence of indigenous peoples, in practice, government policies often contradict this recognition by denying indigenous communities their legal and territorial rights.

"The government formally recognizes indigenous peoples, yet in reality, its policies negate and constrain the interests of these communities," Patty emphasized.

The *Save Bati* movement has also carried out protests at the offices of the East Seram Regency Government (*Kantor Bupati* and *DPRD Seram Bagian Timur*), as well as at the Governor's Office and the Maluku Provincial Parliament (*DPRD Maluku*). The movement further extended its demonstrations to the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources (ESDM) in Jakarta, calling for the protection of the Bati ancestral lands.

According to Patty, these areas must be preserved and safeguarded, as cultural heritage cannot be replaced or recreated. "What exists today represents the living social fabric of the Bati people—something that must be protected rather than transformed," she concluded.

Figure 1. "Save Bati" Protest in Front of the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources (ESDM) Office, Jakarta

Figure 2. The Bati Forest: The Living Space of the Bati Indigenous Community

Respondent Data Analysis

Table 2. Methods, Sources, and Respondent Findings

Method	Source	Respondent Findings
Interview	Respondents	The socio-cultural construction of the Bati people can be understood through several interrelated dimensions: (1) Historical and genealogical aspects, which relate to oral traditions describing winged humans and large ape-like beings with bat-shaped wings—representations that symbolize the mythical origins and identity of the Bati as a "flying tribe." (2) Linguistic and cultural aspects, which emphasize the dual role of the forest not only as a source of livelihood but also as a sacred landscape. The Bati customary forest (*hutan adat Bati*) is perceived as a spiritually charged domain central to their cosmology. (3) Mythological aspects, reflecting narratives of winged beings and sacred places such as Mount Bati, where the community locates its ancestral sanctity. (4) Belief and spiritual aspects, highlighting the interconnectedness of human, ancestral, and natural worlds through sacred practices and taboos.

Documentary analysis	Policy documents and public records	Archival and documentary sources reveal the emergence of the "Save Bati" movement, a grassroots mobilization advocating for the protection of Bati customary lands and forests. The movement has engaged in formal protests directed at multiple levels of government, including the East Seram Regency Office, the Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) of both East Seram and Maluku Province, and the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources (ESDM) in Jakarta. These documents illustrate the institutional dimension of Bati resistance against extractive industries and environmental degradation, reflecting a broader struggle for indigenous recognition and ecological sovereignty.
Observation	Field observations	Field observations indicate that members of the Bati community act collectively and unanimously to defend their sacred forest territories from external encroachment. The Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago (AMAN)–Maluku Chapter continues to provide advocacy and capacity-building support for the Bati people. Significant transformations were observed in the Bati community's worldview, particularly their growing awareness of socio-political rights and environmental stewardship. Acts of resistance include demonstrations, peaceful protests, and symbolic or ritual practices grounded in indigenous cosmology, all of which represent a synthesis of modern activism and traditional spirituality.

The analysis of various data sources—including the socio-cultural construction of the Bati people, their identity as reflected in socio-ethnic folklore toward social existence, as well as findings from interviews, documentary reviews, and field observations—reveals that the cultural construction of the Bati consists of several core aspects: (1) history and origins, (2) language and culture, (3) mythology, and (4) belief and spirituality. The identity of the Bati people as expressed through socio-ethnic folklore encompasses a range of interrelated symbolic representations, including: (a) winged humans or large ape-like beings with bat-shaped wings; (b) the Bati as a "flying tribe" or "flying people"; (c) the Bati customary forest as a sacred territory; (d) depictions of hybrid beings—part human, part long-tailed ape—associated with myths of child abduction; (e) the sacred site of Mount Bati; and (f) spiritual and territorial protection as expressions of collective identity.

Analysis of respondent interviews further demonstrates that the socio-cultural construction of the Bati people can be examined through four primary dimensions. First, the **historical and genealogical dimension**, which connects the Bati's origin narratives to mythical depictions of winged humans, flying beings, and hybrid creatures, symbolizing the intersection between myth and identity. Second, the **linguistic and cultural dimension**, which highlights the dual perception of the forest—as both an economic resource and a sacred space. The Bati customary forest (*hutan adat Bati*) is thus conceptualized as a sacred landscape integral to their cosmology and social order. Third, the **mythological dimension**, which portrays the Bati as flying beings who maintain the forest as a sacred domain and as a refuge embodying both protection and spiritual reverence. Fourth, the **belief and spiritual dimension**, which links the Bati's cosmological worldview to their relationship with nature, ancestral spirits, and the metaphysical guardianship of their land.

Documentary evidence supports these ethnographic findings. Records of the *Save Bati* movement document a series of protests at local and regional government offices—including the offices of the Regent and Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) of East Seram, the Governor's Office of Maluku, and even the national Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources (ESDM) in Jakarta. These actions articulate a collective resistance against policies and extractive projects perceived as threats to their ancestral territories.

Field observations reinforce this narrative. The entire Bati community demonstrates a unified stance in defending their forest and customary land from external interference. According to statements from the Chair of the Indigenous Peoples' Alliance of the Archipelago (AMAN) Maluku, continuous advocacy and capacity-building efforts have been undertaken to strengthen the Bati's struggle for recognition and protection. This has led to a significant transformation in the community's collective consciousness, particularly in their awareness of their socio-political rights and the long-term importance of environmental stewardship. The Bati now engage in multifaceted forms of resistance—ranging from public demonstrations and organized protests to symbolic and spiritual (magical) acts—asserting their agency as an indigenous group striving to preserve both their natural environment and cultural existence.

CONCLUSSION

The findings of this study resonate strongly with contemporary **identity theory**, particularly the notion that identity is a dynamic process of construction, negotiation, and performance rather than a fixed essence (Hall, 1996; Jenkins, 2008). The Bati people's continuous rearticulation of their identity through folklore, rituals, and oral narratives exemplifies how cultural identity operates as a site of both resistance and adaptation. Their folklore functions not merely as a symbolic repository of tradition but as a discursive space through which collective memory, ancestral values, and social belonging are continually reconstituted. In this context, the Bati's socio-ethnic folklore operates as what Bhabha (1994) terms a "third space" — a hybrid zone where cultural meanings are negotiated, allowing the Bati to sustain coherence amid marginalization and cultural assimilation pressures from dominant ethnic groups in Maluku.

From a **postcolonial and indigenous resilience** perspective, the Bati's experience reveals the persistence of subaltern agency in peripheral societies. The marginalization of the Bati reflects the broader postcolonial dynamics of epistemic exclusion, where certain communities remain invisible in state narratives and academic discourse. Yet, rather than erasure, the Bati demonstrate what Alfred and Corntassel (2005) describe as *resurgent indigeneity* — a form of cultural and political renewal grounded in the reaffirmation of ancestral knowledge and environmental stewardship. Their resistance to external labeling and their defense of customary territories exemplify indigenous resilience as a form of cultural sovereignty. Thus, the Bati case not only enriches the ethnographic understanding of identity formation in Eastern Indonesia but also underscores the critical need to decolonize anthropological representation by situating indigenous voices and epistemologies at the center of cultural analysis.

This study carries several important implications for anthropology, policy, and indigenous studies. Anthropologically, the case of the Bati underscores the importance of localized ethnography as a tool for revealing hidden dimensions of identity politics and cultural endurance among small, often overlooked communities. It demonstrates how socio-ethnic folklore can serve as a methodological gateway to understanding the internal logic of indigenous worldviews and social reproduction. From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the urgency of integrating indigenous cultural frameworks into regional development, education, and conservation agendas to ensure that cultural diversity is not merely preserved but empowered. For indigenous studies, the Bati experience reaffirms that identity and resilience are interdependent processes shaped by the constant negotiation of history, territory, and narrative ownership. Recognizing these dynamics is crucial for fostering inclusive governance and for advancing decolonial approaches that privilege indigenous epistemologies and self-representation within Indonesia's multicultural landscape.

REFERENCES

Abu Bakar Walima. (2017). *The Bati people, suing and cursing.* Kompasiana. https://www.kompasiana.com/abubakarwalima/59f99958c252fa45ee665752/orang-bati-menggugat-dan-mengutuk

Alfonsius Jehandut. (2024). *Introducing the uniqueness of Bati, the indigenous tribe of Seram Island, Maluku.* Jurnal Flores. https://www.jurnalflores.co.id/lifestyle/77612176576/memperkenalkan-keunikan-bati-suku-asli-pulau-seram-maluku

Arjon, C. M., Paath, D. K., & Kartika, N. I. (2023). Designing a pop-up book about the legend of the crying stone. *Hope Together Polytechnic Journal, 3*(1), 69. https://doi.org/10.30591/paravisual.v3i1.4959

Barth, F. (1969). *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organization of culture differences.* Bergen Oslo: Universitets Forlaget; London: George Allen and Unwin.

Basrowi, & Sukidin. (2002). *Qualitative research methods from a micro perspective.* Surabaya: Insan Cendekian.

Bayu Aji Nugroho. (2023). *Indonesian folklore.* Mulawarman University Press.

Bierstedt, R. (1970). *The social order.* New Delhi: Tata McGraw Hill Publishing Company Limited.

Boulding, K. E. (1964). *The meaning of the twentieth century.* New York: Harper & Row.

Bronner, S. J. (2016). *Folklore: The basics* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315688381

Christ Belseran, & Martha Dianti. (2023). *The Bati people fight to protect customary forests from threats from oil and gas companies.* Mongabay. https://www.mongabay.co.id/2023/07/03/orang-bati-berjuang-jaga-hutan-adat-dari-ancaman-perusahaan-migas/

Cooley, F. L. (1961). *Altar and throne in Central Moluccan society* [Doctoral dissertation, Yale University]. Translated as *Pulpit and throne: The relationship between religious and governmental institutions in Central Maluku* (1st ed.). Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 1987.

Dedy N. Hidayat. (2003). *The social construction of the broadcasting industry: A theoretical framework for observing competition in the broadcasting sector.* Paper presented at "Broadcasting Law, KPI, and Press Freedom," Salemba, March 8, 2003.

Geertz, H. (1981). *Diverse cultures and communities in Indonesia.* Jakarta: Yayasan Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial & FIS-UI.

Harjito. (2006). *Indonesian literary literacy.* Semarang: Media Contact.

Iga Sakinah Mawarni, & Andi Agustang. (2021). Community social construction of the social reality of the Si Semba' tradition in the era of globalization: A research study in the Kandeapi Tikala area, North Toraja. *Pinisi Journal of Sociology Education Review, 1*(2), 1–10.

Kamarusdiana. (2019). Society and culture: Community and cultural framework in ethnographic studies. *SALAM: Journal of Social and Cultural Sharia, 6*(2).

Koentjaraningrat. (1985). *Introduction to anthropology.* Jakarta: Aksara Baru.

Malalatoa, M. J. (1995). *Encyclopedia of ethnic groups in Indonesia.* Jakarta: Department of Education and Culture.

Margaret Poloma. (1994). *Contemporary sociology.* Jakarta: PT Raja Grafindo Persada.

Monita Precillia. (2024). The role of folklore in the formation and maintenance of the cultural identity of the Kumun Debai community: An ethnographic analysis. *Jurnal Sendratasik, 13*(2).

Noname. (2018). Theoretical understanding of social construction theory. *Jurnal Inovasi, 12*(2). https://journal.binadarma.ac.id/index.php/jurnalinovasi/issue/view/99

Sary Eva Yanti. (2015). *The existence of Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI) Palembang in the era of online media* [Undergraduate thesis, UIN Raden Fatah Palembang].

Stuart, H., & Abdilla, S. U. (1996). *Ethnic identity politics: The struggle for signs without identity.* Magelang: Indonesiatera.

Suparno. (1997). *Constructivist philosophy in education.* Yogyakarta: Kanisius.

Syafrizal. (2017). *Sociocultural and socioeconomic changes of Ocu people: Impressions of the transmigration program in Indonesia* [Doctoral dissertation, National University of Malaysia].

Syafrizal. (2019). Exploratory study: Cultural recommendations in the form of new local wisdom of the Ocu people, post-transmigration development. In *Proceedings of the 8th International Seminar on Archaeology, History, Language, and Culture in the Malay Realm* (Vol. 1). Ancasa Residences, Port Dickson, Malaysia, July 27–28, 2019.

Taurn, D. O. (1918/2001). *Patasiwa and Patalima: About Seram Island in Maluku and its inhabitants – A contribution to the science of nations.* (Trans. Hermelin). Ambon: Department of National Education, Directorate General of Culture, Center for the Study of History and Traditional Values.

Yumagulova, L., Parsons, M., Dicken, E., Lambert, S., Vergustina, N., Scott, J. C., Michell, P., & Black, W. (2023). Indigenous perspectives on climate mobility justice and the displacement–mobility–immobility continuum. *Climate and Development, 1*–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.202358