

The State Does Not Govern Alone: Custom, Power, and Decolonial Local Politics

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ABSTRACT - This article examines traditional governance as an epistemology of local politics in Indonesia from a decolonial perspective. Existing studies on adat and traditional authority often position traditional governance as cultural heritage, informal institutions, or supplementary mechanisms within the modern state. Such approaches tend to overlook traditional governance as a knowledge system that produces authority, legitimacy, territorial governance, ecological ethics, and collective order. Using a critical-conceptual method supported by comparative illustrative evidence from Indonesia, this article analyzes several forms of adat-based governance, including Ammatoa Kajang in South Sulawesi, Baduy in Banten, Desa Adat in Bali, adat institutions in Aceh, nagari in West Sumatra, and the national recognition of customary forests after Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012. The article argues that traditional governance in Indonesia should not be understood merely as a remnant of pre-modern authority, but as an epistemological source for rethinking local politics and governance. However, the legal recognition of adat through regional regulations, qanun, and state policies also reveals a persistent tension: adat is recognized, but often only after being translated into the legal-administrative language of the modern state. Therefore, decolonizing local politics requires moving beyond legal recognition toward epistemic justice, where adat is acknowledged not only as an object of regulation but also as a legitimate source of political knowledge and governance theory.

Keywords: *Traditional Governance, Adat, Local Politics, Decoloniality, Epistemic Justice*

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Introduction

Local politics in Indonesia has undergone significant transformation since the Reformasi era and the implementation of decentralization. A large body of scholarship has examined regional elections, decentralization, local elite relations, patronage, clientelism, natural resource conflict, village politics, and regional governance. These themes are important because they explain the reconfiguration of power after the weakening of centralized authoritarian rule. However, within this expanding field, traditional governance or adat-based governance remains insufficiently theorized. Adat is often discussed as cultural heritage, community identity, informal institution, or an object of legal recognition, rather than as a source of political knowledge capable of expanding theories of local politics. This tendency reflects an epistemological problem in local politics and government studies. Modern governance is commonly understood through the state, bureaucracy, positive law, public service, administration, institutional capacity, and legal-formal procedures. These concepts are important, but they become problematic when treated as the only valid standards for defining governance. As a result, forms of collective regulation that do not operate fully through formal state institutions are often perceived as less modern, less rational, less legal, or less institutionalized (Coel, 2017).

In Indonesia, traditional governance cannot be understood as an isolated local phenomenon. Various forms of adat-based governance continue to shape local politics, including Desa Adat in Bali, adat institutions and gampong in Aceh, nagari in West Sumatra, the Baduy community in Banten, and the Ammatoa Kajang customary law community in South Sulawesi. At the national level, the recognition of customary communities gained significant momentum through Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012, which challenged the classification of customary forests as state forests and affirmed that customary forests are located within the territories of customary law communities in the research by (Mendy & Sarr, 2025). Empirically, the politics of adat recognition has become increasingly visible. The Customary Territory Registration Agency reports thousands of customary territories and communities across Indonesia, with different stages of registration, verification, certification, legal recognition, and territorial mapping. These data show that adat is not merely an identity issue but also an issue of spatial governance, forest governance, coastal governance, and legal recognition. In this sense, adat has become a significant part of contemporary local politics in Indonesia (Bedner & Arizona, 2019).

However, formal recognition does not automatically resolve the deeper decolonial problem. In many cases, adat is recognized only after being translated into the legal language of the state through regional regulations, qanun, administrative decrees, or other formal categories. In other words, adat gains institutional space, but often through validation by the modern state. This raises a central question: is adat recognized merely as an object of state law, or is it also recognized as a legitimate source of political knowledge? This article uses a decolonial perspective to examine this problem. Decolonial theory argues that colonialism did not only leave economic and political legacies, but also shaped how the world is classified, including how legitimate knowledge is defined (Chambers, 2020). In this framework, the modern state, bureaucracy, formal legality, and administrative rationality cannot be treated as neutral categories. They are historically connected to modernity and coloniality (Mignolo & Bussmann, 2023). Quijano's concept of the coloniality of power shows how modern forms of domination continue to organize social classification, authority, and knowledge after formal colonialism (Quijano, 2024). Mignolo's work on coloniality of knowledge and epistemic disobedience further explains how Western

modernity universalizes itself while subordinating other forms of knowledge as local, traditional, or inferior (Mignolo, 2011). Santos' concept of epistemicide is also relevant because it explains how dominant knowledge systems can erase or marginalize other epistemologies (de Sousa Santos, 2024).

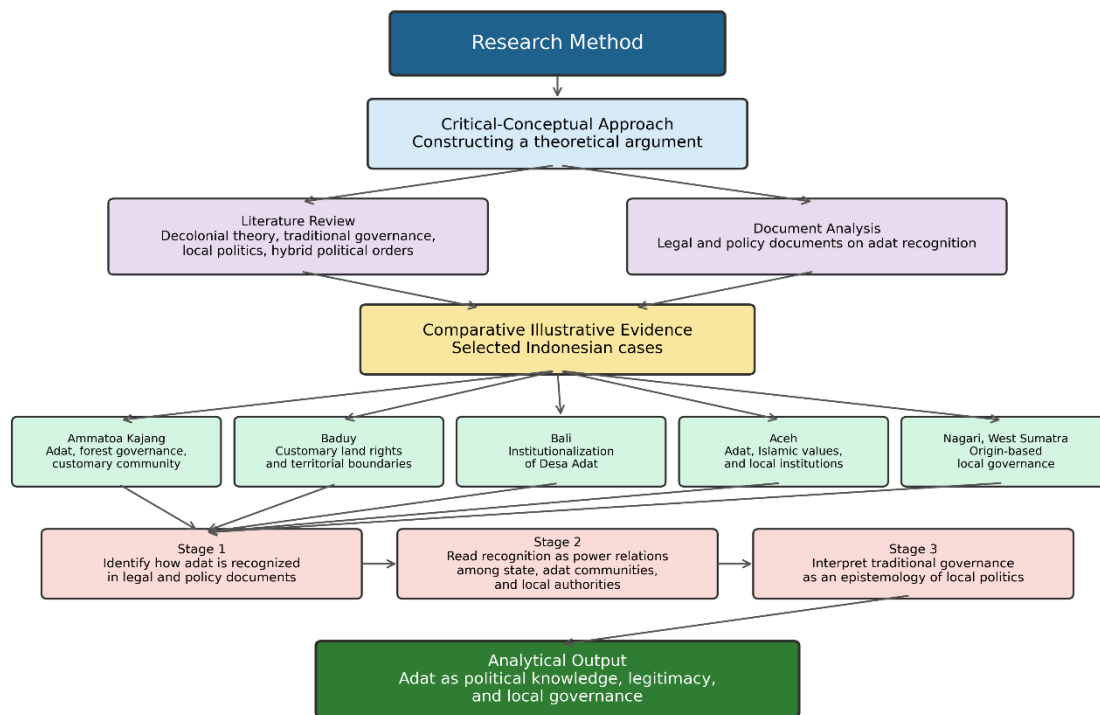
Based on this background, the article asks: How can traditional governance be understood as an epistemology of local politics in Indonesia from a decolonial perspective? This question is elaborated into three subsidiary questions. First, how is traditional governance positioned within Indonesian local politics? Second, how do various forms of adat recognition in Indonesia reveal the relationship between the state, adat, local authority, and territorial governance? Third, how can a decolonial perspective read traditional governance as a source of political knowledge and governance theory? The article argues that traditional governance in Indonesia is not merely a pre-modern residue, informal institution, or supplement to the state. Rather, traditional governance constitutes an epistemology of local politics: a knowledge system that shapes how communities understand authority, legitimacy, territory, ecology, justice, and collective life. At the same time, this article does not romanticize adat. Traditional governance remains an arena of local power that may contain authority relations, contestation, negotiation, hierarchy, and exclusion. The article contributes to contemporary local politics in three ways. First, it shifts the analysis of adat from informal institution to epistemology of governance. Second, it offers a decolonial critique of state-centric bias in local politics and government studies. Third, it argues that decolonizing local politics in Indonesia requires not only legal recognition but also epistemic justice for adat-based knowledge systems.

Method

This article uses a critical-conceptual approach supported by comparative illustrative evidence from several practices of traditional governance in Indonesia. The critical-conceptual approach is appropriate because the article does not seek to test variable relationships quantitatively. Rather, it aims to construct a theoretical argument about traditional governance as an epistemology of local politics. Methodologically, the article relies on literature review and document analysis. The literature reviewed consists of four main bodies of scholarship. The first is decolonial literature, especially concepts such as coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge, epistemic disobedience, epistemicide, and ecology of knowledges (de Sousa Santos, 2024; Mignolo, 2018; Quijano, 2024). The second concerns traditional governance, adat governance, and Indigenous governance. The third concerns local politics, especially local authority, state-society relations, and contestation of power at the local level. The fourth concerns hybrid political orders and non-state public authority, which help explain how public authority in postcolonial societies is often exercised not only by formal state institutions but also by customary, religious, communal, and informal actors (Boege, 2019).

In addition to conceptual literature, this article uses illustrative empirical evidence from several legal and policy documents in Indonesia. These documents include Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012 on customary forests, Law No. 6 of 2014 on Villages, Bulukumba Regency Regulation No. 9 of 2015 on the Ammatoa Kajang customary law community, Lebak Regency Regulation No. 32 of 2001 on the protection of Baduy customary land rights, Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019 on Desa Adat in Bali, and Aceh Qanun No. 9 of 2008 on the development of adat life and customs.

Methodological Framework of the Study



Source: Author's conceptualization.

Figure 1. Methodological Framework of the Study

Source: Author's conceptualization.

These cases are not selected to produce statistical generalization. Instead, they function as comparative illustrative evidence showing variations of traditional governance in Indonesian local politics. Ammatoa Kajang illustrates the relationship between adat, forest governance, and recognition of customary law communities. Baduy illustrates the relationship between customary land rights, territorial boundaries, and local legal protection. Bali illustrates the institutionalization of Desa Adat within regional governance. Aceh illustrates the relationship between adat, Islamic values, local institutions, and social life. Nagari in West Sumatra is used as a conceptual illustration of the relationship between customary communities and origin-based local governance.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, it identifies how adat is recognized in legal and policy documents. Second, it reads such recognition as an arena of power relations among the state, customary communities, and local authorities. Third, it interprets traditional governance as an epistemology of governance through a decolonial perspective. Through this approach, the article does not merely describe the existence of adat, but analyzes how adat produces political knowledge, legitimacy, and local governance.

Result and Discussion

Adat as an Arena of Legal Recognition and Local Politics in Indonesia

Traditional governance in Indonesia cannot be adequately understood as an institutional form that exists entirely outside the state. Nor can it be reduced to a residual cultural practice that

survives at the margins of modern government. Rather, *adat* occupies a complex and politically charged position: it is simultaneously rooted in community-based authority and increasingly mediated through the legal-administrative apparatus of the state. This dual position makes *adat* an important arena for examining the relationship between local power, legal recognition, territorial authority, and the politics of knowledge in contemporary Indonesia.

The scale of customary territorial claims in Indonesia shows that *adat* recognition is not a marginal issue. According to the Customary Territory Registration Agency, as of 2025 there were 1,633 registered customary territory maps, covering approximately 33.6 million hectares across 32 provinces and 180 regencies/cities in Indonesia. These figures indicate that *adat* is not confined to isolated cultural enclaves or remote communities. It is embedded in a broad national landscape of territorial claims, local authority, resource governance, and legal contestation. In this sense, *adat* is not merely about identity or cultural preservation; it is also about who has the authority to define land, forest, territory, and collective rights.

Yet this extensive mapping of customary territories has not been matched by equivalent legal recognition. By August 2025, only around 18.9% of mapped customary territories had obtained formal legal recognition through regional regulations or local government decrees (Databoks, 2025). This gap between mapped customary territories and legally recognized territories reveals the political nature of recognition. Customary authority may be historically rooted and socially legitimate within local communities, but it still requires state validation to become legally visible. This condition shows that the problem is not merely the absence of *adat*, but the unequal terms under which *adat* becomes recognized by the state.

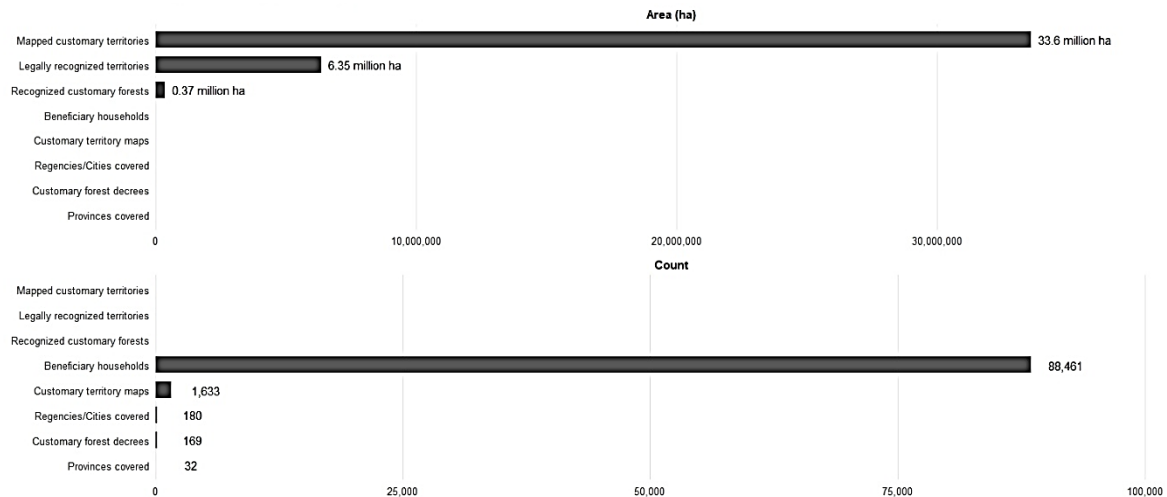


Figure 1. Adat Recognition and Customary Governance in Indonesia

Source: Author's compilation based on BRWA and Databoks, 2025.

Figure 1 shows that the scale of mapped customary territories is far larger than the area that has obtained formal legal recognition. The contrast between 33.6 million hectares of mapped customary territories and the relatively limited legally recognized territories illustrates that recognition is not merely an administrative matter. It is a political process shaped by state validation, bureaucratic procedures, and regional legal capacity. Similarly, the 169 customary forest decrees covering approximately 366,955 hectares demonstrate that post-MK 35 recognition

has produced concrete legal outcomes, but its scale remains limited compared with broader customary territorial claims.

The post-Reformasi period has intensified this relationship between customary authority and state recognition. Decentralization opened new spaces for local governments to recognize customary communities, customary territories, customary villages, and *adat* institutions. However, such recognition did not simply restore pre-existing customary authority. It also reconfigured *adat* by translating it into legal categories that are legible to the state. In this sense, *adat* became part of local politics not merely because customary communities continued to exist, but because their authority, territory, and institutional forms had to be negotiated through laws, regulations, administrative procedures, and regional political processes. Recognition, therefore, is never a purely technical act. It is a political process through which the state defines which forms of *adat* are visible, legitimate, governable, and administratively acceptable.

A major turning point in this process was Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012. The decision challenged the long-standing classification of customary forests as state forests and opened a legal pathway for recognizing customary forests as forests located within the territories of customary law communities. This decision was significant not only because it changed the legal status of customary forests, but also because it disrupted the state's monopoly over the definition of forest territory. For decades, forest governance in Indonesia had been shaped by a strongly state-centered logic in which forests were mapped, classified, licensed, and administered primarily through state institutions. The Court's decision unsettled this arrangement by affirming that customary communities possess a constitutional basis for claiming territorial authority over forests that are historically, socially, and normatively embedded in their collective life (Asnawi Mubarak et al., 2023; Hidayat et al., 2018).

However, the implications of Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012 should not be read too simplistically. The decision did not automatically return all customary forests to customary communities. Instead, it created a legal opening that still required further administrative and political processes (Myers et al., 2017; Vaughan et al., 2017). Customary communities continued to face the burden of proving their existence, demonstrating institutional continuity, mapping their territories, and securing recognition from regional governments. This condition shows the ambivalence of legal recognition. On the one hand, the decision strengthened the position of customary communities vis-à-vis the state. On the other hand, it also reinforced the requirement that *adat* must become legible within the legal grammar of the state before it can be formally recognized.

The slow and selective implementation of customary forest recognition illustrates this ambivalence. BRWA reported that, by November 2025, 169 ministerial decrees on customary forests had been issued, covering approximately 366,955 hectares and benefiting more than 88,461 customary households. This figure is politically significant because it shows that the recognition of customary forests has concrete material consequences for local communities. Recognition can affect access to land, livelihood security, territorial authority, and protection from extractive pressures. However, when compared with the 33.6 million hectares of mapped customary territories, the recognized customary forest area remains very limited. The contrast

demonstrates that legal recognition creates opportunities, but it also exposes the slow, selective, and bureaucratic character of state recognition.

At the regional level, this politics of recognition appears in various forms. In South Sulawesi, Bulukumba Regency enacted Regional Regulation No. 9 of 2015 concerning the affirmation, recognition, and protection of the rights of the Ammatoa Kajang customary law community (Sampean & Sjaf, 2021). This regulation is important because it does not merely treat Ammatoa Kajang as a cultural community; it recognizes the community as a legal-political subject with rights, institutions, and territorial claims. The regulation therefore places Ammatoa Kajang within the formal architecture of local governance. Yet this formal recognition also reveals a deeper political process: the authority of Ammatoa Kajang becomes recognized not solely through internal communal legitimacy, but through its articulation within regional legal instruments. In other words, *adat* authority is not erased, but it is reframed by the state.

A similar dynamic can be seen in the case of the Baduy community in Banten. Lebak Regency enacted Regional Regulation No. 32 of 2001 concerning the protection of Baduy customary land rights in the research by (Arisanto, 2026). This regulation recognizes the significance of *hak ulayat* and provides a legal framework for protecting the territorial integrity of the *Baduy* community (Hakim & Srihadiati, 2025). The Baduy case demonstrates that *adat* recognition is closely tied to land, boundaries, and territorial authority. It is not merely about preserving tradition, clothing, ritual, or cultural identity. It is about protecting a spatial order through which the community organizes its relationship with land, settlement, mobility, social norms, and ecological responsibility. The political significance of this recognition lies in the fact that customary territory becomes a site where local authority, state law, and community identity intersect (Alden Wily, 2018).

In Bali, the recognition of *Desa Adat* through Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019 provides another important example. Unlike cases where *adat* is framed primarily around Indigenous territorial claims or customary forests, Bali's *Desa Adat* illustrates the institutionalization of customary governance within a broader regional governance framework. *Desa Adat* is not simply a cultural association. It has social, religious, spatial, and regulatory functions in Balinese society. Its formal recognition indicates that local governance in Bali cannot be understood only through the administrative village or the state bureaucracy. Rather, governance is produced through the coexistence, overlap, and negotiation between *desa dinas* and *Desa Adat*. This arrangement shows that the state does not govern alone; it governs alongside customary institutions whose authority is rooted in ritual obligation, communal belonging, territorial organization, and moral regulation.

Aceh provides yet another configuration of *adat* recognition. Qanun Aceh No. 9 of 2008 concerning the development of *adat* life and customs regulates the preservation, development, and protection of *adat* within Acehnese society in the research by (Trisna, 2023). The Acehnese case is distinctive because *adat* is embedded within a broader regional political order shaped by special autonomy, Islamic values, local institutions, and post-conflict governance. The recognition of *adat* in Aceh therefore cannot be separated from the region's historical and political specificity. It shows that *adat* may operate not only as a cultural resource but also as a mechanism for social regulation, conflict settlement, community authority, and local identity formation. In this sense, *adat* becomes part of the political infrastructure through which local order is maintained.

Taken together, these cases show that *adat* in Indonesia has become an arena of recognition politics. Yet recognition politics should not be understood merely as the benevolent inclusion of customary communities into the legal order. Recognition is also a site of negotiation, translation, and power. The state recognizes *adat*, but it also defines the conditions under which *adat* can be recognized. Customary communities gain protection, but they must often demonstrate their authenticity, institutional continuity, territorial boundaries, and conformity with legal criteria established by the state. This produces a paradox: *adat* is acknowledged as a source of local authority, but its legitimacy is often filtered through the modern state's administrative rationality.

This paradox is central to a decolonial reading of local politics. From one perspective, the legal recognition of customary communities represents an important corrective to the long history of state-centered governance that marginalized Indigenous and customary forms of authority (Woyames Dreher, 2024). Recognition can provide legal protection, strengthen territorial claims, and create space for local communities to defend their rights. However, from another perspective, recognition may reproduce the coloniality of knowledge when the state remains the ultimate arbiter of what counts as valid custom, legitimate authority, and recognizable community. In such cases, *adat* is not allowed to speak entirely in its own epistemic terms. It must first be translated into the language of law, territory, institutions, maps, documents, and administrative procedures.

Therefore, *adat* recognition in Indonesia should be understood as an ambivalent political process. It is empowering because it opens legal space for customary communities (Hidayat et al., 2018). At the same time, it is limiting because it subjects *adat* to the classificatory power of the state. This is why legal recognition alone is insufficient for decolonizing local politics. The deeper issue is not only whether the state recognizes *adat*, but also whether *adat* is recognized as a legitimate way of knowing and governing. A decolonial approach shifts the question from “Has *adat* been legally recognized?” to “Whose knowledge defines governance, territory, authority, and justice?”

In this sense, *adat* is not merely an object of regulation. It is a political epistemology through which communities define collective life, social obligation, ecological relations, and territorial belonging. The national data on mapped customary territories, the limited percentage of legal recognition, the gradual recognition of customary forests, and the regional cases of *Ammatoa Kajang*, *Baduy*, *Bali*, and *Aceh* all demonstrate that *adat* is located at the intersection of law, power, territory, and knowledge. It is precisely this intersection that makes traditional governance central to the study of local politics in Indonesia. The state may recognize *adat*, but it does not exhaust the meaning of *adat*. Nor does it monopolize the production of governance. The state does not govern alone. Customary communities, through their own institutions, memories, norms, and territorial relations, continue to produce alternative forms of authority that challenge the state-centered imagination of local politics.

Traditional Governance as Local Authority beyond the State

Traditional governance in Indonesia reveals that local authority is not produced only through the state, electoral institutions, bureaucratic offices, or formal administrative procedures. In many local contexts, authority emerges from older and more socially embedded sources: collective memory, customary norms, genealogical relations, territorial belonging, ritual

legitimacy, moral recognition, and long-standing relations between communities and their living environment. This does not mean that customary authority exists in isolation from the state. Rather, it shows that local authority in Indonesia is often plural, layered, and negotiated. The state may provide legal recognition, administrative categories, and regulatory frameworks, but it does not exhaust the sources of legitimacy through which communities organize social order.

This point is important because modern political analysis often equates public authority with formal state institutions. In such a view, legitimate authority is assumed to originate from elections, law, bureaucracy, and administrative hierarchy. Traditional governance complicates this assumption. In customary communities, authority may be recognized not because a leader occupies an elected office, but because the leader embodies historical continuity, moral responsibility, ritual knowledge, genealogical legitimacy, or the capacity to maintain social and ecological balance. This kind of authority is not easily captured by the language of modern bureaucracy. It is not merely “informal” in the sense of being weak, secondary, or unstructured. Rather, it is grounded in a different political epistemology: one in which legitimacy is produced through embedded social relations and collective recognition.

The case of Ammatoa Kajang in South Sulawesi illustrates this point clearly. Bulukumba Regency Regulation No. 9 of 2015 does not only recognize the Ammatoa Kajang customary law community; it also indicates the existence of customary institutions, leadership structures, and collective rights. This legal recognition is important because it shows that Ammatoa Kajang is not simply treated as a cultural group or symbolic heritage community (Akbal & Umar, 2019). It is recognized as a customary law community with institutional authority and social legitimacy. However, the significance of Ammatoa Kajang cannot be understood only through the regional regulation itself. The regulation makes customary authority visible to the state, but the authority of Ammatoa Kajang is rooted in a longer history of communal recognition, customary norms, and moral order.

In this context, Ammatoa is not simply a “traditional leader” in a decorative or ceremonial sense. The figure of Ammatoa represents a form of authority that is deeply connected to the preservation of social order, customary law, ecological restraint, and collective discipline. The authority of Ammatoa is not merely coercive; it is moral and normative. It operates through the community’s recognition of *pasang*, customary obligations, and shared understandings of how life should be governed. This means that governance in Ammatoa Kajang is not reducible to formal administrative rule. It is also a form of moral regulation that organizes how people relate to one another, to land, to forests, and to inherited norms.

The importance of this case lies in the fact that customary authority does not disappear when the state recognizes it. Rather, recognition creates a new field of negotiation. On the one hand, regional regulation strengthens the legal standing of the customary community. On the other hand, it also reframes customary authority within the legal language of the state. This produces a dual structure of legitimacy. Internally, authority is grounded in community recognition and customary norms. Externally, authority becomes legible through regional legal instruments. Ammatoa Kajang therefore shows that traditional governance operates in a space where internal legitimacy and state recognition intersect, but are not identical.

A similar complexity can be seen in Bali through the institution of *Desa Adat*. Bali Provincial Regulation No. 4 of 2019 formally recognizes *Desa Adat* as a customary village with important roles in regulating social, religious, cultural, and territorial life in Balinese society. The significance of *Desa Adat* lies in the fact that Balinese local governance cannot be fully understood through the administrative village alone. In Bali, governance is shaped by the coexistence of *desa dinas* and *Desa Adat*. The former represents the formal administrative apparatus of the state, while the latter is rooted in customary, religious, and communal obligations.

This coexistence demonstrates that local governance in Bali is not monopolized by state bureaucracy. *Desa Adat* has authority over matters related to customary norms, religious life, communal space, ritual obligations, and social discipline. Its authority is not merely cultural, because it affects everyday life, regulates collective obligations, and shapes community participation. It is also not simply private or informal, because it has been formally recognized within the provincial legal framework. *Desa Adat* therefore occupies an intermediate position: it is both a customary institution and a recognized component of local governance (I Putu Gede Sridana et al., 2026).

This arrangement challenges the assumption that the state is the sole producer of public order. In Bali, social order is maintained not only through formal laws and administrative regulations, but also through customary norms, ritual authority, communal sanctions, and shared obligations. Local authority is therefore produced through an overlap between state legality and customary legitimacy. This overlap is politically significant because it shows that the state does not govern alone. It governs alongside institutions whose authority emerges from historical continuity, religious practice, community belonging, and moral regulation.

Aceh provides another configuration of customary authority. Aceh Qanun No. 9 of 2008 regulates the development and protection of *adat* life and customs, including customary rights over land, forests, seas, rivers, lakes, and other resources. In Aceh, *adat* cannot be separated from the region's broader political history, special autonomy, Islamic values, and post-conflict governance. Customary authority operates within a complex institutional environment where local government, religious norms, community institutions, and customary mechanisms interact.

The Acehnese case shows that *adat* functions not merely as cultural memory but also as an instrument of social governance. It can provide mechanisms for conflict resolution, social regulation, communal discipline, and protection of local rights. The existence of *adat* institutions in Aceh demonstrates that public authority can emerge through multiple normative orders. State law, Islamic values, and customary norms may overlap, interact, and at times compete. This makes Aceh a useful case for understanding local authority as hybrid rather than singular.

The concept of hybrid political orders is helpful here. Boege, Brown, Clements, and Nolan (2008) argue that in many postcolonial societies, political order is not produced exclusively by modern state institutions. Instead, it emerges through the interaction of state structures, customary authorities, community norms, religious institutions, and informal practices. Similarly, (Lund, 2006) concept of "twilight institutions" helps explain how public authority is often exercised by institutions that are neither fully state nor fully non-state. These concepts are useful for reading Indonesia because they show that authority in local politics often exists in-between formal and informal, legal and customary, bureaucratic and communal.

However, the Indonesian cases also require a decolonial extension of these theories. Hybrid governance is not only an institutional arrangement. It is also an epistemological question. The issue is not simply that state and customary institutions coexist. The deeper question is whose knowledge defines what counts as legitimate governance. If customary authority is only recognized when it fits state categories, then the state remains the dominant epistemic authority. A decolonial reading therefore asks whether traditional governance is merely incorporated into the state, or whether it is allowed to reshape the meaning of governance itself (Dadze-Arthur, 2022).

From this perspective, *Ammatoa Kajang*, *Desa Adat* in Bali, and *adat* institutions in Aceh show that traditional governance is not simply an object of recognition. It is a source of local authority with its own normative foundations. It produces rules, obligations, sanctions, leadership structures, and mechanisms of collective order. It shapes how communities define belonging, responsibility, territory, justice, and proper conduct. These are political functions, even when they are not always expressed in the language of modern politics.

At the same time, traditional governance must not be romanticized. Customary authority can reproduce internal hierarchy, gender exclusion, elite domination, generational inequality, or unequal access to decision-making. In some cases, customary elites may negotiate with state actors, investors, tourism interests, or conservation regimes in ways that do not always represent the broader community. This means that *adat* is not automatically democratic, egalitarian, or emancipatory. It is a field of power. It can protect community autonomy, but it can also structure internal exclusion. It can defend local knowledge, but it can also be appropriated by dominant actors.

This critical caution is important for a decolonial approach. Decolonial analysis should not replace state-centrism with romantic traditionalism. The point is not to claim that customary authority is inherently superior to state authority. Rather, the point is to recognize that modern state institutions are not the only legitimate sources of governance. A decolonial approach must therefore do two things at once: first, challenge the marginalization of customary knowledge by modern state-centered epistemologies; and second, critically examine how power operates within customary institutions themselves.

Traditional governance should therefore be understood as an arena of local politics rather than as a remnant of the past. It is a living field in which legitimacy, authority, norms, territory, conflict, and collective obligations are continuously produced and negotiated. Its political significance lies not only in the fact that it has survived modernization, decentralization, and state formation, but also in the fact that it continues to shape how local communities govern themselves and relate to the state.

In this sense, traditional governance expands the conceptual scope of local politics in Indonesia. Local politics is not only about regional elections, political parties, bureaucratic offices, local elites, or state institutions. It is also about customary authority, territorial belonging, moral legitimacy, ecological responsibility, ritual obligation, and communal recognition. The existence of traditional governance shows that the state does not govern alone. Local authority is produced through multiple sources, and *adat* remains one of the most important of them.

By reading traditional governance as local authority beyond the state, this article argues that *adat* should not be seen merely as a cultural supplement to modern governance. It should be treated as a political formation that produces its own forms of legitimacy and order. This does not mean placing *adat* outside critique. Rather, it means taking *adat* seriously as a site where power, knowledge, and governance intersect. Such a perspective allows local politics in Indonesia to be understood not only as a field of institutional competition, but also as a field of epistemic struggle over who has the authority to define governance, community, territory, and justice.

Adat, Territory, and Ecological Governance

The relationship between *adat* and territory is central to understanding traditional governance in Indonesia. In many customary communities, territory is not merely a physical space that can be measured, mapped, owned, or administered. It is a lived environment through which social order, ecological responsibility, historical memory, and collective identity are produced. Land, forests, rivers, seas, water sources, agricultural areas, sacred sites, and settlement spaces are not treated as separate objects of governance. They are part of an integrated moral and ecological order. For this reason, traditional governance should be understood not only as a system of social regulation but also as a system of territorial and ecological governance.

This territorial dimension gives *adat* a distinctive political meaning. In modern administrative systems, territory is commonly defined through boundaries, certificates, maps, permits, zoning, and jurisdictional authority. These instruments are important for legal administration, but they often reduce territory to an object of management. Customary governance operates through a different spatial logic. Territory is understood through ancestral history, collective memory, ritual obligation, patterns of use, ecological knowledge, and shared norms of responsibility. In this sense, territory is not only occupied; it is inherited, remembered, protected, and morally regulated.

This distinction is important for local politics because many conflicts involving customary communities are not simply disputes over land ownership. They are struggles over the meaning of territory itself (Kansanga et al., 2019). A forest may be read by state agencies as a conservation zone, production forest, concession area, or administrative category. The same forest may be understood by a customary community as ancestral land, a sacred space, a source of water, a livelihood base, a moral boundary, and a site of intergenerational responsibility. These different readings produce different forms of authority. Whoever has the power to define territory also has the power to determine how it may be used, protected, exploited, or inherited.

National data on customary territories reveal the scale of this issue. The Customary Territory Registration Agency shows that millions of hectares of customary territories in Indonesia have entered processes of mapping, registration, verification, and recognition. In relation to customary forests, BRWA also reports increasing formal recognition, although the legally recognized area remains limited compared to the broader scale of customary territorial claims. These data indicate that territory is not a secondary issue in *adat* politics. It is one of the main sites through which customary communities negotiate livelihood, ecological protection, and local authority.

The Baduy case illustrates how customary territory functions as a basis of ecological and social order. Lebak Regency Regulation No. 32 of 2001 protects Baduy customary land rights in Kanekes Village, including the recognition of customary territory and territorial boundaries. The significance of this case is not only that the Baduy community possesses a legally recognized territory, but that the territory itself sustains a distinctive way of life. Settlement patterns, agricultural practices, mobility, social boundaries, and ecological restrictions are all connected to the community's customary order. The territory is therefore not simply land as property; it is the spatial foundation of collective existence.

Aceh provides another important example because *adat* governance extends across land, forest, river, lake, coastal, and maritime spaces. Aceh Qanun No. 9 of 2008 includes the protection of customary rights over land, swamps, forests, seas, rivers, lakes, and other domains. This formulation shows that customary governance is not limited to village life or terrestrial territory. It also includes ecological domains that sustain community life and local authority. In this sense, *adat* governance in Aceh provides a broader understanding of territory as a network of ecological spaces rather than a single bounded land area.

Ammatoa Kajang also demonstrates the ecological significance of traditional governance. The recognition of the Ammatoa Kajang customary law community is closely related to forest governance and the protection of the community's living territory (Government of Bulukumba Regency, 2015). In the Kajang context, the forest is not merely a material resource. It is tied to moral discipline, restraint, simplicity, and communal responsibility. The forest becomes part of the ethical order of the community. This shows that ecological governance is not only about technical conservation. It is also about regulating human conduct, limiting excessive extraction, and maintaining balance between community life and the natural environment.

These cases suggest that *adat*-based ecological governance operates through a different understanding of the relationship between humans and nature (Keong & Onuma, 2021). Modern environmental governance often relies on scientific assessment, zoning, regulatory enforcement, conservation planning, and institutional management. These instruments are useful, but they can treat nature as an external object to be managed. Customary ecological governance, by contrast, tends to treat nature as relational. Land, forest, river, and sea are embedded in social obligations, spiritual meanings, ancestral relations, and collective duties. Human beings are not merely resource users; they are members of a moral community whose survival depends on maintaining balance with the environment.

This is where traditional governance acquires epistemological significance. It provides a way of knowing territory that is different from the dominant administrative logic of the modern state. The state often simplifies territory into governable categories: forest zone, village boundary, protected area, concession area, or administrative jurisdiction. James C. Scott (1998) argues that modern states often seek to make complex social realities legible through simplified categories. In the context of customary territories, such simplification can obscure local ecological knowledge, social obligations, and moral relations embedded in place. Customary governance resists this simplification by insisting that territory is not only a technical object but also a social, historical, and ethical field.

This does not mean that customary ecological governance should be romanticized. Customary systems may also contain internal conflicts, unequal access to resources, elite capture, gendered exclusions, or changing practices under pressure from markets, tourism, conservation projects, and development programs. However, these limitations do not erase the epistemological value of *adat*. Rather, they show that customary ecological governance must be analyzed as a living and contested political field. It is neither a perfect ecological alternative nor a backward remnant. It is a dynamic mode of governance shaped by norms, power, adaptation, and negotiation.

The political value of *adat*-based ecological governance lies in the way it links authority with obligation. In many modern systems, authority over land and resources may be granted through licenses, concessions, or administrative decisions to actors who have little long-term responsibility for local ecological consequences. In customary governance, territorial authority is often tied to communal duties: maintaining water sources, protecting forests, regulating access, respecting sacred spaces, preserving agricultural cycles, and sustaining the conditions of life for future generations. This link between authority and obligation is one of the most important contributions of traditional governance to debates on local politics and ecological justice.

For this reason, ecological governance should not be treated as a separate environmental issue outside politics. In Indonesia, struggles over forests, land, rivers, and seas are also struggles over authority, legitimacy, and knowledge. They concern who has the right to decide how territory is used, whose knowledge counts in defining ecological protection, and whose obligations are recognized in governing shared environments. *Adat* makes visible forms of ecological authority that are often overlooked by state-centered approaches to local politics.

Therefore, the study of local politics must move beyond elections, parties, bureaucratic competition, and local elites. It must also examine how communities govern territory, how ecological obligations are institutionalized, how customary norms regulate resource use, and how territorial belonging shapes political authority. In this sense, *adat*, territory, and ecological governance are inseparable. *Adat* provides the normative framework; territory provides the spatial foundation; ecological governance provides the practical arena where communal responsibility is enacted.

Traditional governance thus expands the meaning of local politics. It shows that politics is not only about who occupies formal office, but also about who defines territory, who regulates access to ecological resources, who carries responsibility for environmental continuity, and who has the authority to maintain the moral order of community life. This is what gives *adat* its epistemological value: it offers a way of understanding governance as the regulation of life, territory, and ecological relations, not merely as the administration of institutions.

The Coloniality of Legal Recognition

The discussion above shows that *adat* has entered Indonesian local politics through multiple forms of legal recognition, territorial claims, and ecological governance. However, a decolonial reading requires moving beyond the surface of recognition. The central question is not simply whether *adat* has been recognized, but under what epistemic conditions such recognition becomes possible. Legal recognition may protect customary communities, but it may also

reorganize *adat* according to the categories, procedures, and rationalities of the modern state. This is where the coloniality of legal recognition becomes visible.

The coloniality of legal recognition refers to the condition in which customary authority is acknowledged only after it becomes intelligible to the state (Balaton-Chrimes & Stead, 2017). In this process, *adat* must often be translated into categories that the state can administer: community, territory, institution, leadership, boundary, rights, and legal subjectivity. These categories are not neutral. They determine what aspects of *adat* can be seen, documented, verified, and protected. At the same time, they may exclude forms of knowledge that are oral, relational, spiritual, flexible, or embedded in everyday practice. Recognition therefore does not merely “find” *adat* as it exists. It actively produces a state-legible version of *adat*.

This process is closely related to what James Scott (1998) describes as the state’s attempt to make complex social realities legible. Modern states govern by simplifying social life into categories that can be recorded, mapped, measured, regulated, and administered. In the context of *adat*, this means that customary communities are often required to present themselves through documents, maps, institutional structures, genealogies, territorial boundaries, and formal evidence of continuity. Such requirements may be necessary for legal protection, but they also reshape the terms through which customary life becomes politically recognizable. What cannot be documented may become invisible. What cannot be mapped may become administratively weak. What cannot be translated into legal language may be treated as informal, uncertain, or insufficiently valid.

From a decolonial perspective, this is not merely a technical problem of bureaucracy. It is an epistemological problem. Quijano’s concept of the coloniality of power helps explain how modern systems of authority continue to organize hierarchies of knowledge, legitimacy, and social classification after formal colonialism (Quijano, 2000). In this sense, legal recognition may reproduce coloniality when the modern state remains the central authority that decides which knowledge counts, which community is authentic, which territory is valid, and which institution deserves recognition. *Adat* may be acknowledged, but the power to define the conditions of acknowledgment remains largely with the state.

Mignolo’s notion of coloniality of knowledge is also useful here. Coloniality does not only operate through direct domination; it also operates through the control of epistemic authority, that is, the power to determine what is recognized as valid knowledge (Mignolo, 2011). When *adat* is recognized only after being translated into legal-administrative categories, customary knowledge is not necessarily accepted on its own terms. It is accepted after passing through the epistemic filters of the state. This creates an unequal relationship between state knowledge and customary knowledge. State knowledge appears as universal, rational, and authoritative, while customary knowledge is treated as local, particular, and in need of verification (Weir, 2023).

This does not mean that legal recognition should be rejected. For many customary communities, legal recognition can provide protection against land dispossession, extractive concessions, bureaucratic neglect, and the denial of collective rights. It can strengthen community claims, create institutional visibility, and open access to legal remedies. The problem is not recognition itself, but recognition that operates without epistemic transformation. When recognition simply incorporates *adat* into the existing logic of the state, it risks becoming a form of

domestication. *Adat* is allowed to exist, but only within boundaries defined by modern legal rationality.

Domestication occurs when the radical potential of *adat* is softened, narrowed, or redirected into categories that do not disturb dominant governance frameworks. Customary authority may be acknowledged as long as it does not challenge state sovereignty over territory. Customary ecological knowledge may be celebrated as local wisdom as long as it does not question extractive development. Customary institutions may be recognized as cultural heritage as long as they remain compatible with administrative order. In this sense, recognition can function as inclusion and control at the same time. It includes *adat* within the legal system, but it may also discipline *adat* by defining the acceptable limits of customary authority.

This is why Santos' critique of epistemicide is relevant. Epistemicide refers to the destruction, silencing, or delegitimation of knowledge systems by dominant epistemologies (Santos, 2014). In the case of *adat*, epistemicide does not always take the form of outright elimination. It may operate more subtly through translation, standardization, bureaucratization, and selective recognition. Customary knowledge may remain present, but only in forms that have been adjusted to the dominant language of law, administration, and development. What is lost is not necessarily the existence of *adat*, but its epistemic autonomy.

A decolonial approach therefore requires shifting the discussion from legal recognition to epistemic justice. Legal recognition asks whether the state acknowledges customary communities. Epistemic justice asks whether customary communities are allowed to define governance, territory, authority, ecology, and justice through their own knowledge systems. The difference is crucial. A community may be legally recognized but epistemically subordinated. It may possess formal recognition while still being required to justify itself through categories external to its own worldview. Conversely, epistemic justice demands that customary communities be treated not only as beneficiaries of protection, but also as producers of political knowledge.

This shift has important implications for local politics. If *adat* is treated merely as an object of regulation, then local politics remains state-centered. The state grants recognition, designs procedures, verifies community status, defines boundaries, and determines the scope of customary authority. But if *adat* is treated as a source of knowledge, then local politics becomes epistemically plural. Governance is no longer defined solely by bureaucratic legality, but also by customary norms, ecological obligations, collective memory, moral authority, and community-based understandings of justice (DePuy et al., 2022).

Such an approach does not imply that *adat* should be placed beyond critique. Epistemic justice is not the same as romanticizing tradition. Customary institutions may reproduce hierarchy, exclusion, patriarchy, elite domination, or internal conflict. A decolonial approach must therefore remain critically reflexive. It must challenge the marginalization of *adat* by modern state knowledge while also examining power relations within customary systems themselves. The point is not to replace state authority with uncritical traditional authority. The point is to create a more plural field of governance in which different systems of knowledge can be debated, evaluated, and taken seriously.

The coloniality of legal recognition thus lies in its ambivalence. Recognition can protect, but it can also discipline. It can make *adat* visible, but it can also reshape *adat* into a state-legible object. It can open political space, but it can also preserve the state's authority to define what counts as legitimate governance. For this reason, decolonizing local politics requires more than adding *adat* to existing legal frameworks. It requires questioning the epistemic hierarchy that places modern state knowledge above customary knowledge.

In this sense, the challenge is not merely to recognize *adat*, but to transform the terms of recognition itself. *Adat* should not only be asked to fit into the state's categories of governance. The categories of governance themselves must be opened to *adat*'s ways of knowing, regulating, remembering, and relating to territory. Only then can legal recognition move beyond administrative inclusion and become a pathway toward epistemic justice.

Traditional Governance as an Epistemology of Local Politics

Traditional governance can be understood as an epistemology of local politics because it offers a distinct way of knowing, organizing, and legitimizing collective life. In this article, epistemology does not refer merely to abstract theory or philosophical reflection. It refers to the practical ways through which communities define authority, produce legitimacy, regulate social relations, govern territory, understand ecological responsibility, and determine what counts as justice. From this perspective, *adat* is not simply a set of inherited customs, ritual practices, or informal rules. It is a knowledge system through which communities make political order meaningful.

This argument is important because local politics is often analyzed through institutions that are already legible to the modern state: elections, political parties, regional bureaucracies, village administrations, formal elites, public policies, and legal frameworks. These are certainly important arenas of local politics. However, they do not exhaust the field of political life. In many Indonesian contexts, political order is also produced through customary authority, communal obligations, moral sanctions, territorial belonging, ecological restraint, ritual legitimacy, and collective memory. These forms of political life are not peripheral to governance. They are part of how communities organize authority and regulate social existence.

To call traditional governance an epistemology of local politics is to argue that *adat* does more than regulate behavior. It shapes the categories through which people understand power, responsibility, belonging, and obligation. In state-centered governance, authority is often associated with office, mandate, legality, and bureaucratic hierarchy. In customary governance, authority may emerge from moral standing, ancestral continuity, ritual capacity, social trust, ecological knowledge, and the ability to preserve communal balance. This difference matters because it shows that legitimacy is not a universal category with a single institutional source. Legitimacy is produced within specific historical, cultural, territorial, and moral worlds.

Traditional governance also produces a different understanding of political subjectivity. Modern governance often imagines the political subject as an individual citizen, voter, rights-holder, or administrative beneficiary. Customary governance frequently imagines the subject relationally: as a member of a community, a bearer of obligations, a participant in inherited norms, and part of a wider network of human and non-human relations. This does not mean that

individual rights are irrelevant, but it shows that political life may also be organized through relational responsibility. In many customary contexts, the self is not detached from land, kinship, ancestors, community, or ecological surroundings. Governance, therefore, is not only about institutional rule; it is also about sustaining relations.

This relational understanding gives *adat* its epistemological significance. It challenges the assumption that governance is primarily a matter of administration, regulation, and institutional performance. Traditional governance suggests that governance is also about meaning: how a community understands proper conduct, legitimate authority, social harmony, ecological limits, and collective survival. In this sense, *adat* expands the concept of governance from the management of public affairs to the moral and ecological ordering of life.

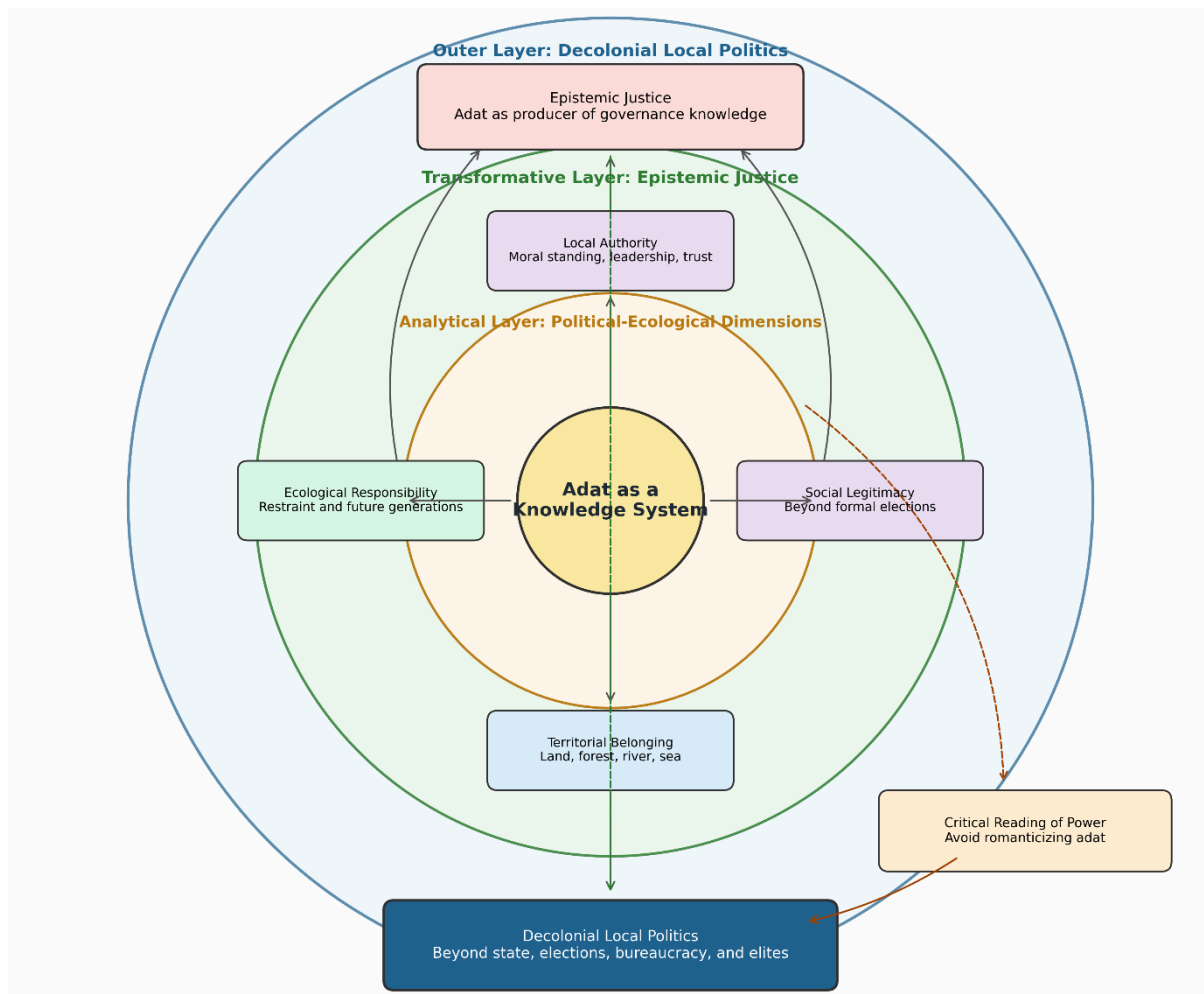


Figure 2. Traditional Governance as an Epistemology of Local Politics

Source: Author's conceptualization.

Several analytical dimensions can be drawn from this understanding. The first is legitimacy beyond formal legality. Traditional governance shows that authority may be recognized even when it does not originate from electoral competition or bureaucratic appointment. Such legitimacy is produced through long-term social recognition, moral credibility, customary continuity, and the perceived capacity to maintain communal order. This does not make customary authority automatically democratic, but it does show that legality and legitimacy are

not identical. A legal institution may lack social legitimacy, while a customary institution may possess deep communal legitimacy even before formal recognition by the state (Chlouba, 2020).

The second dimension is governance as social regulation. *Adat* often provides mechanisms through which communities regulate conflict, obligation, conduct, access, and responsibility. These mechanisms may include customary deliberation, mediation, social sanctions, ritual obligations, and communal decision-making. They should not be dismissed as merely informal practices. They are part of a normative infrastructure through which social order is maintained. In this sense, traditional governance performs functions that are political, even when they are not always expressed through the language of formal politics.

The third dimension is territorial and ecological knowledge. Traditional governance often links authority to place. Land, forests, rivers, seas, and settlement spaces are not merely resources to be administered; they are part of the community's social and moral universe. This means that territorial governance is also ecological governance. Customary communities may understand environmental protection not only as conservation policy, but as a moral obligation embedded in collective life. This provides an alternative to technocratic approaches that separate ecological management from social meaning.

The fourth dimension is collective memory as political knowledge. In customary governance, memory is not simply a record of the past. It functions as a source of authority and orientation. Oral histories, ancestral narratives, inherited prohibitions, ritual practices, and remembered boundaries help define what the community considers legitimate, forbidden, obligatory, or just. This form of memory is political because it shapes present claims over authority, territory, identity, and responsibility. It also challenges the assumption that valid political knowledge must always appear in written, bureaucratic, or statistical form.

The fifth dimension is normative pluralism. Traditional governance demonstrates that local politics is not governed by a single normative order. State law, customary norms, religious values, kinship obligations, ecological ethics, and local moral expectations may coexist, overlap, and sometimes conflict. This pluralism is not simply institutional complexity. It is an epistemological condition in which different systems of knowledge compete to define what governance means. A decolonial reading is therefore concerned not only with the coexistence of institutions, but with the hierarchy among knowledge systems.

This is where the argument differs from a conventional “local wisdom” approach. Describing *adat* as local wisdom often risks reducing it to a cultural resource that can be selectively used to support state policy, environmental programs, or development agendas. By contrast, understanding traditional governance as an epistemology of local politics places *adat* in a stronger theoretical position. It is not merely a repository of useful values. It is a system of political reasoning. It produces concepts of authority, obligation, territory, justice, and collective life that may challenge state-centered categories of governance.

This perspective also differs from approaches that treat traditional governance simply as an informal institution. The term “informal” may be analytically useful, but it can also imply that customary governance is secondary to formal institutions. A decolonial approach questions this hierarchy. The issue is not whether *adat* is formal or informal according to state categories. The

issue is whether *adat* possesses its own normative and epistemic foundations for governing collective life. From this viewpoint, traditional governance is not a weaker version of modern governance. It is a different mode of governance (Pahl-Wostl, 2019).

In the Indonesian context, this argument helps reinterpret the relationship between *adat* and local politics. Ammatoa Kajang, Baduy, *Desa Adat* in Bali, *adat* institutions in Aceh, and *nagari* in West Sumatra should not be treated merely as empirical examples of cultural persistence. They point to a broader theoretical problem: local politics in Indonesia is not constituted solely by state institutions and electoral processes. It is also constituted by customary norms, territorial attachments, moral authority, ecological obligations, and communal forms of decision-making. These elements produce political order even when they do not always resemble the institutional forms recognized by modern political science.

However, this article also emphasizes that recognizing *adat* as an epistemology of local politics does not mean idealizing it. Traditional governance is not automatically egalitarian, democratic, inclusive, or emancipatory (Chotib H. M, 2024). It may contain hierarchy, exclusion, patriarchy, elite capture, or unequal access to decision-making. Some customary institutions may be appropriated by local elites or strategically mobilized in conflicts over land, development, tourism, conservation, or political power. Therefore, the task is not to romanticize *adat* as a pure alternative to the state. The task is to take it seriously as a site of knowledge and power.

A critical decolonial approach must therefore hold two positions at once. First, it must challenge the marginalization of customary knowledge by modern state-centered frameworks. Second, it must critically examine how authority operates within customary systems themselves. This dual move is necessary because decolonization is not achieved by simply reversing the hierarchy and declaring traditional governance superior to modern governance. Rather, decolonization requires opening the field of political analysis to multiple epistemologies while maintaining critical attention to domination, exclusion, and contestation.

The concept of epistemic justice is central here. Epistemic justice means that customary communities are not treated only as objects of policy, beneficiaries of recognition, or cultural groups to be preserved. They are treated as producers of knowledge about governance, territory, ecology, authority, and justice. This shifts the position of *adat* in academic analysis. Instead of asking only how the state recognizes *adat*, we must also ask how *adat* challenges and expands the very categories through which governance is understood (Budi Priambodo, 2018).

This has major implications for the study of local politics. If local politics is defined only through formal competition for power, then much of customary governance remains analytically invisible. But if local politics is understood as the broader organization of authority, obligation, territory, and collective life, then traditional governance becomes central. It shows that politics is not only about who wins elections, who controls bureaucracy, or who dominates formal institutions. Politics is also about who defines legitimate authority, who regulates social obligations, who determines ecological responsibility, and whose knowledge counts in shaping communal life.

Traditional governance therefore expands the conceptual field of local politics. It shifts attention from formal institutions to lived authority; from administrative legality to social

legitimacy; from resource management to ecological obligation; from individual citizenship to relational belonging; and from policy implementation to epistemic struggle. This does not replace the study of state institutions, but it prevents the state from monopolizing the meaning of politics.

In this sense, *adat* should be understood as a living political epistemology. It is living because it continues to change, adapt, and negotiate with state law, market forces, religious norms, development projects, and internal community dynamics. It is political because it organizes authority, obligation, territory, and collective order. It is epistemological because it offers a way of knowing and governing that cannot be reduced to the categories of modern administration.

The central contribution of this article is therefore to reposition traditional governance from the margins of local politics to its theoretical center. *Adat* is not merely what remains after the expansion of the modern state. It is one of the ways through which local politics is produced, contested, and imagined. The state does not govern alone because governance is also produced through memory, territory, moral authority, ecological relations, and customary norms. Recognizing this does not mean abandoning critique. It means expanding the analytical imagination of local politics so that customary knowledge can be understood not as a residue of the past, but as a source of political theory.

Conclusion

This article has shown that traditional governance in Indonesia can be understood as an epistemology of local politics. Using a decolonial perspective, the article critiques the state-centric tendency in local politics and government studies that often positions *adat* as cultural heritage, informal institution, or supplement to the modern state. Such a view reflects the coloniality of knowledge because it treats the modern state, bureaucracy, positive law, and formal legality as the primary standards of legitimate governance. Empirical evidence from Indonesia shows that *adat* is not a marginal phenomenon. Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/PUU-X/2012, Law No. 6 of 2014 on Villages, Bulukumba's regional regulation on *Ammatoa Kajang*, Lebak's regulation on *Baduy* customary land rights, Bali's regulation on *Desa Adat*, and Aceh's *qanun* on *adat* life demonstrate that traditional governance has become part of local political arenas and national governance. BRWA's data on customary territories and customary forests also show that *adat* is directly connected to territorial recognition, spatial governance, and ecological justice.

However, legal recognition of *adat* remains ambivalent. On the one hand, it provides important protection for customary communities. On the other hand, *adat* is often considered legitimate only after being translated into the language of state law and administration. Therefore, decolonizing local politics cannot stop at legal recognition. It must move toward epistemic justice, namely the recognition of *adat* as a legitimate source of political knowledge and governance. This article contributes to contemporary local politics by arguing that traditional governance is not merely an object of policy but also a source of theory. Traditional governance shows that authority can emerge from community recognition, moral legitimacy, collective history, ecological relations, and customary norms. Thus, local politics does not only occur within the state, bureaucracy, elections, and political parties, but also within customary spaces, customary territories, customary forests, *adat* institutions, and everyday practices of collective life.

Future research can develop this article into a multi-sited empirical study through in-depth comparison among several customary communities in Indonesia. Such research could examine how customary authority is negotiated with regional governments, how customary knowledge influences local policy, and how customary communities respond to pressures from the state, the market, tourism, conservation, and development.

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