

Social Transformation of Leadership in Ethnic Groups of Indonesian Society: A Study of the Authority and Power of Traditional Leadership in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of traditional leadership in rural societies has become increasingly significant in the post-industrial era, yet limited attention has been given to how authority is reconfigured within customary institutions. This study examines the transformation of traditional leadership among four ethnic communities in South Sulawesi, Indonesia—Bugis, Makassar, Mandar, and Toraja by analysing how digitalisation, information openness, and shifting social expectations reshape authority and power. Using a qualitative approach with an embedded single-case study design, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. The findings reveal that traditional authority is not diminishing but being reconfigured into a hybrid form that combines inherited legitimacy, formal-legal positioning, and recognition-based authority grounded in competence and adaptive capacity. Comparative analysis shows differentiated patterns: adaptive hybridisation among Bugis and Makassar leaders, contextual flexibility among Mandar leaders, and selective conservatism among Toraja leaders. This study argues that authority transformation in the post-industrial era is not a linear shift from ascribed to achieved status, but

a dynamic process of reconfiguration shaped by digital change, community participation, and sustainability concerns. These findings contribute to the literature by advancing a hybrid perspective on authority in non-Western rural contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

The transformation of traditional leadership in rural societies has become increasingly significant in the context of the post-industrial era, where digitalisation, information openness, and shifting social expectations reshape patterns of authority and governance. Social transformation, understood as changes in social structures, cultural values, and institutional arrangements, can occur gradually or abruptly and often involves shifts in social institutions, patterns of behaviour, and dominant ways of thinking (Nonci et al., 2023; Wagoner & Power, 2022). Such transformation is commonly driven by technological development, economic restructuring, political change, and evolving cultural values (Hilbert, 2020; Keeves et al., 2021). It may generate both positive outcomes, such as improved welfare and social progress, and negative consequences, including inequality and social tension (Halim et al., 2017; Louis & Montiel, 2018). In post-industrial societies, knowledge, information, and communication technologies increasingly influence not only economic activities but also social relations and leadership practices (Rost, 1997; Rost & Smith, 1992; Roztocki et al., 2019).

The transition toward post-industrial society is characterised by several key features, including the dominance of service-based economic sectors, the centrality of digital technology and information, increased flexibility in work and social interaction, heightened environmental awareness, and significant socio-cultural

change (Bastos et al., 2021; Meng et al., 2023; Rundshagen, 2013; Witt & Gross, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). These transformations have profound implications for leadership, including in traditional and customary communities, where authority has historically been rooted in inherited status, social hierarchy, and normative continuity.

Traditional leadership is generally characterised by hierarchical structures, strong authority, reliance on experience, and the preservation of established norms and customs (Tadesse & Debela, 2024; Yusup, 2022). Such leadership often manifests in authoritarian decision-making, clear hierarchical control, conservatism, assertiveness, and the maintenance of social order (Acharya & Berry, 2023; Du et al., 2020; Fernandopulle, 2021; Huang et al., 2022; Joullié et al., 2021; McLaren et al., 2023; Pizzolitto et al., 2023; Specchia et al., 2021; Van Kleef & Cheng, 2020). Although traditional leadership remains effective in certain cultural contexts, increasing social complexity and rapid technological development have encouraged shifts toward more collaborative, participatory, and adaptive leadership models.

A crucial dimension of this transformation lies in the changing relationship between authority and power. While power refers to the capacity to influence or control outcomes, authority refers to the legitimate exercise of that power within a recognised social order (Haugaard, 2018; Joullié et al., 2021). In Weberian terms, authority is grounded in legitimacy derived from

tradition, legal structures, or charisma. In many customary societies, authority remains deeply embedded in lineage, cultural systems, and *adat* institutions, making it relatively resistant to rapid structural change. However, under post-industrial conditions characterised by digitalisation and information openness, the basis of legitimacy is increasingly renegotiated, as communities demand greater transparency, participation, and accountability.

Recent studies indicate that leadership in the post-industrial era is increasingly characterised by collaboration, adaptability, competence, and public recognition rather than solely by hierarchical control (Behie et al., 2023; Kniffin & Patterson, 2019; Rost, 1997). Digital technologies expand access to information and reshape the visibility and accountability of leaders, thereby altering the basis upon which authority is recognised and maintained (Hilbert, 2020; Roztocki et al., 2019; Verma et al., 2022). However, existing literature tends to examine either the persistence of traditional leadership or the emergence of modern leadership models, with limited integration between the two perspectives.

Three major tendencies can be identified in previous studies. First, studies focussing on traditional authority emphasise the enduring dominance and legitimacy of customary leaders within communities (Milstead, 2004; Yusup, 2022). Second, studies on post-industrial leadership highlight competence, collaboration, and participatory governance, often suggesting a gradual displacement of traditional leadership (Harrell & Thye,

2018; Haugaard, 2018; Kniffin & Patterson, 2019; Rost, 1997; Rost & Smith, 1992). Third, some research emphasises the role of charisma, communication, and symbolic influence in shaping leadership effectiveness in contemporary contexts (Cicero & Pierro, 2007; Fiol et al., 1999). However, these strands remain fragmented and tend to position traditional and modern leadership as separate, even opposing, phenomena.

This fragmentation results in a critical gap, particularly in non-Western and rural contexts where traditional leadership systems continue to operate alongside modern governance structures. Much of the existing scholarship is based on Western organisational settings, while studies on customary leadership often focus on continuity rather than transformation. Consequently, there is still a limited understanding of how authority and power are reconfigured within traditional leadership systems facing digitalisation, participatory demands, and institutional change.

This study addresses this gap by examining the transformation of traditional leadership among four ethnic communities in South Sulawesi, Indonesia: Bugis (Ade Pitue), Makassar (Sombayya), Mandar (Tomakaka), and Toraja (Sokkong Bayu). These communities provide a relevant empirical setting in which traditional authority remains socially significant while simultaneously interacting with modern governance and digital transformation. Preliminary indications suggest that these communities exhibit distinct patterns in the construction of legitimacy, distribution of

authority, and adaptation to social change, indicating that leadership transformation does not occur uniformly across contexts.

The study argues that the transformation of traditional leadership in the post-industrial era does not represent a linear shift from traditional to modern authority. Instead, it involves a process of authority reconfiguration, in which traditional legitimacy coexists with formal-legal structures and recognition-based authority grounded in competence, education, and adaptive capacity. This process reflects a form of hybrid authority, where inherited status, institutional legitimacy, and socially constructed recognition operate simultaneously in shaping leadership practices.

Accordingly, this study addresses three research questions: (1) How does the post-industrial era influence the authority and power of traditional leaders? (2) What forms do authority and power take in traditional leadership under post-industrial conditions? (3) How is the sustainability of traditional leadership authority maintained in the post-industrial era? By answering these questions, this study makes three contributions. First, it advances theoretical understanding by conceptualising leadership transformation as a process of authority reconfiguration rather than replacement. Second, it provides a comparative analysis of how different ethnic communities negotiate leadership transformation in distinct ways. Third, it contributes empirical insights from a non-Western rural context, thereby enriching broader debates on leadership, social transformation, and institutional resilience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Transformation and Leadership Change

Social transformation refers to fundamental changes in social structures, cultural values, and institutional arrangements that shape patterns of interaction and behaviour within society (Nonci et al., 2023; Wagoner & Power, 2022). Such transformation is often driven by technological innovation, economic restructuring, and shifting social values (Hilbert, 2020; Keeves et al., 2021). In the context of post-industrial society, these changes are increasingly influenced by the dominance of information, communication technologies, and knowledge-based systems (Rost, 1997; Rost & Smith, 1992; Roztocki et al., 2019).

Existing studies consistently show that social transformation significantly reshapes leadership patterns, particularly in terms of authority, decision-making processes, and legitimacy (Bastos et al., 2021; Witt & Gross, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). However, most of this literature is situated in organisational and urban contexts, with limited attention to how these transformations affect leadership structures embedded in traditional and rural communities. This indicates a critical gap in understanding how social transformation operates within culturally grounded leadership systems.

Authority and Power in Traditional Leadership

The concepts of authority and power are central to understanding leadership transformation. Power refers to the capacity

to influence or control outcomes, whereas authority refers to the legitimacy of that power within a recognised social system (Haugaard, 2018; Joullié et al., 2021). Classical sociological perspectives, particularly Weber's typology, distinguish between traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic authority as ideal types that structure leadership legitimacy.

In traditional leadership systems, authority is typically grounded in inherited status, lineage, and customary norms, often reinforced through hierarchical and conservative structures (Tadesse & Debela, 2024; Yusup, 2022). Such systems emphasise continuity, obedience, and the preservation of established social order (Du et al., 2020; Fernandopulle, 2021; McLaren et al., 2023).

However, recent studies indicate that authority is increasingly shaped by competence, communication, and public recognition, suggesting a shift towards more dynamic and negotiated forms of legitimacy (Behie et al., 2023; Kniffin & Patterson, 2019). Importantly, this shift should not be interpreted as a replacement of traditional authority, but rather as a transformation within it. Despite this, existing studies often treat authority as a static category and fail to explain how traditional authority adapts to changing technological and social conditions.

Post-industrial Society and Leadership Transformation

Post-industrial society is characterised by the increasing importance of information,

services, and technology in shaping economic and social life (Rost, 1997; Rost & Smith, 1992). This transformation leads to changes in communication systems, social interaction, and institutional arrangements, which in turn influence leadership practices (Meng et al., 2023; Roztocki et al., 2019). Leadership in this context tends to emphasise collaboration, flexibility, and adaptability rather than hierarchical control (Kniffin & Patterson, 2019).

Digitalisation plays a crucial role by expanding access to information, increasing transparency, and reshaping the visibility of leadership (Hilbert, 2020; Verma et al., 2022). However, most studies on post-industrial leadership are based on organisational and Western contexts, with limited attention to traditional leadership systems in rural societies. This creates a gap in understanding how digital transformation interacts with customary institutions and culturally embedded authority systems.

Research Gap and Conceptual Positioning

A review of the literature reveals three dominant tendencies. First, studies on traditional leadership emphasise continuity and stability, focussing on the enduring legitimacy of customary authority (Milstead, 2004; Yusup, 2022). Second, studies on post-industrial leadership highlight competence, collaboration, and participatory governance, often suggesting a decline or displacement of traditional leadership (Harrell & Thye, 2018; Kniffin & Patterson, 2019; Rost, 1997). Third, some studies emphasise the role of charisma and symbolic influence in shaping leadership effectiveness in

contemporary contexts (Cicero & Pierro, 2007; Fiol et al., 1999).

However, these perspectives remain fragmented and rarely address how traditional authority adapts to post-industrial conditions. In particular, there is limited understanding of how authority and power are reconfigured within leadership systems that operate simultaneously within customary and modern institutional environments.

In the Indonesian context, traditional leadership is closely linked to adat institutions, which regulate social norms, conflict resolution, and community governance. Studies of customary leadership in regions such as Sulawesi indicate that traditional authority remains resilient, while simultaneously adapting to external influences, including state governance and digital transformation. This suggests that leadership transformation in Indonesia must be understood as a process embedded in cultural and institutional contexts, rather than as a simple transition toward modern leadership models.

Conceptual Framework: Authority Reconfiguration and Hybrid Leadership

Building on these gaps, this study adopts a conceptual perspective that views leadership transformation as a process of authority reconfiguration rather than simple replacement. In this perspective, traditional authority does not disappear but interacts with formal-legal structures and emerging forms of recognition based on competence, education, and adaptability.

This process leads to the emergence of hybrid authority, where multiple sources of legitimacy, traditional, institutional, and recognition-based, co-exist and interact in shaping leadership practices. Such hybridity reflects the dynamic nature of leadership in the post-industrial era, particularly in rural and non-Western contexts where customary institutions remain socially relevant.

This framework provides a basis for analysing how different communities respond to social transformation and how leadership systems adapt to changing technological, social, and institutional conditions, which is shown in Figure 1.

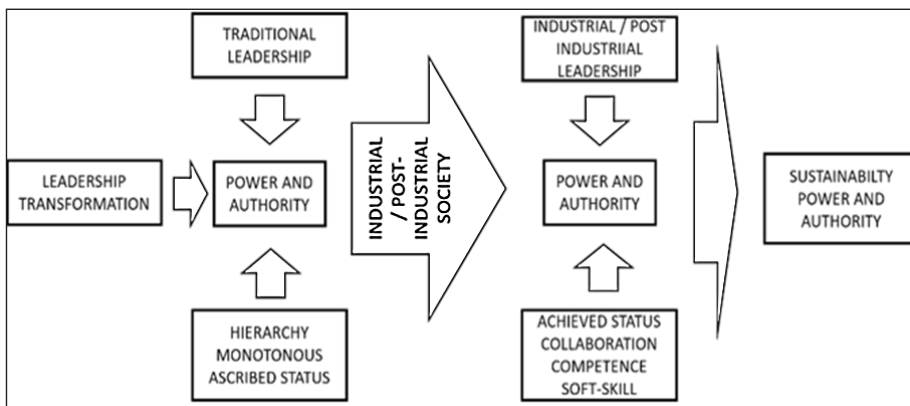


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of leadership transformation

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach using an embedded single-case study design to examine the dynamics of authority and power in traditional leadership undergoing social transformation in the post-industrial era, following Yin (2018). The main unit of analysis is traditional leadership, which is elaborated into four embedded sub-units representing ethnic diversity in South Sulawesi: Bugis (Ade Pitue), Makassar (Sombayya), Mandar (Tomakaka), and Toraja (Sokkong Bayu). This design allows for in-depth exploration of each leadership system within its socio-cultural context while enabling systematic cross-case comparison.

Research Site and Context

The study was conducted in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, a region characterised by the persistence of diverse traditional leadership

systems that coexist with processes of modernisation and digitalisation. This context is analytically significant because it reflects the intersection between customary institutions and contemporary socio-technological change.

The research is grounded in three key dimensions of social transformation. First, the structural transition from agrarian to post-industrial society reshapes economic orientation, social relations, and institutional arrangements. Second, the increasing penetration of digital technology into traditional communities alters communication patterns, information flows, and mechanisms of leadership legitimacy. Third, the interaction between customary authority and formal governance generates processes of institutional adaptation, negotiation, and potential hybridisation of power.

The geographical distribution of the four ethnic leadership systems in South Sulawesi is illustrated in Figure 2.

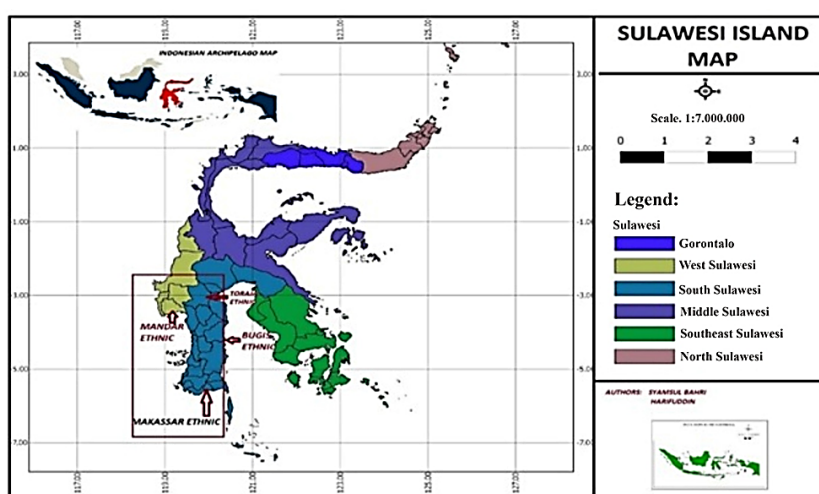


Figure 2. Map of Sulawesi Island, Indonesia

Informant Selection

Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: recognised legitimacy as traditional leaders, social and cultural recognition by the community, experience in responding to social and technological changes, and willingness to participate in the study. Four key informants were selected, each representing one ethnic leadership system. This selection prioritises depth and representativeness of authority structures rather than statistical generalisation, which is consistent with qualitative case study research. The characteristics of the informants are presented in Table 1.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using four complementary techniques to ensure depth and triangulation. Moderate participant observation was conducted to examine leadership practices and social interactions in their natural context. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out using an interview guide derived from the conceptual framework of authority and power, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were

conducted to capture collective community perspectives on leadership legitimacy and transformation. In addition, a document and literature review were undertaken through the analysis of customary records, local archives, and relevant academic sources.

Data Analysis Procedure and Validity

Data analysis was conducted iteratively and cyclically following the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (2014), which emphasises the dynamic relationship between data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.

The first stage involved data reduction, including coding processes to identify meaningful units related to authority, power, and leadership transformation. These codes were then grouped into broader analytical categories such as legitimacy, authority structure, digital adaptation, and leadership sustainability. The second stage involved data display through matrices, tables, and thematic narratives to identify patterns and relationships across cases. The third stage involved conclusion drawing and verification, where findings were continuously refined through iterative comparison with empirical data.

Table 1
Characteristics of traditional leaders (key informants)

Ethnic Group	Leadership Institution	Age	Education Level	Digital Facilities
Bugis	Ade Pitue	70	Doctor	Smartphone
Makassar	Sombayya	58	Doctor	Smartphone
Mandar	Tomakaka	64	Magister	Smartphone
Toraja	Sokkong Bayu	67	Postgraduate	Smartphone

Source: Primary Data, 2024

To enhance credibility, validity procedures were embedded throughout the analytical process. Data triangulation was conducted by comparing information from interviews, observations, FGDs, and documents. Iterative validation was also applied to ensure consistency between data and interpretation, thereby strengthening the trustworthiness of the findings.

Researcher Reflexivity

Given the interpretive nature of qualitative research, the researchers acknowledge their positionality and familiarity with the socio-cultural context of South Sulawesi. While this proximity facilitates deeper contextual understanding, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to minimise potential bias, particularly in coding, interpretation, and conclusion drawing.

Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to ethical research principles. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

RESULTS

Influence of the Post-industrial Era on Authority and Power

The findings show that the expansion of digital technology has fundamentally reshaped the authority and power of traditional leaders across the four ethnic groups. The increasing use of smartphones and digital

media has enhanced access to information and facilitated real-time communication, resulting in greater openness and increased public literacy. This transformation has altered the relationship between leaders and communities, where authority that was previously exercised through hierarchical structures and customary norms is now increasingly mediated through interaction, communication, and responsiveness to community needs. As a result, traditional leaders are required to adapt their leadership practices to address the growing complexity of social, economic, and cultural challenges.

Empirical evidence across the Bugis, Makassar, Mandar, and Toraja communities indicates that digital technology initially functioned as a communication tool, particularly for coordination with government institutions, but has gradually evolved into a strategic instrument for leadership, social interaction, and information dissemination. In the Bugis and Mandar contexts, this transition is reflected in the use of digital communication to coordinate community activities and facilitate decision-making processes. In the Makassar context, authority is also reinforced through symbolic representation and digital visibility, where traditional leaders maintain hierarchical legitimacy while simultaneously engaging in modern communication platforms. In contrast, Toraja leadership demonstrates a more selective adaptation, particularly in ritual contexts where customary authority remains dominant and less influenced by digital intervention.

Forms of Authority and Power in the Post-industrial Era

The results demonstrate a significant transformation in the form of authority and power, shifting from ascribed authority based on lineage and customary status toward achieved authority grounded in competence, education, and social recognition. This shift is reflected in changes in decision-making processes, the construction of legitimacy, and the distribution of power.

Decision-making, which was previously determined solely by customary rules and hierarchical authority, has become more participatory and context sensitive. For instance, the scheduling of rituals, which traditionally followed fixed customary calendars, is now adjusted based on practical considerations such as community availability, weather conditions, and socio-economic activities. This indicates that authority is no longer absolute but negotiated and responsive to contextual conditions.

At the same time, authority is increasingly shaped by recognition rather than inheritance alone. Educational background, communication skills, and digital literacy play a crucial role in shaping leadership legitimacy. Leaders such as Ade Pitue and Sombayya illustrate how higher education contributes to more rational and adaptive leadership practices, enabling them to integrate traditional legitimacy with contemporary demands. Furthermore, digital platforms have become an important arena for constructing authority, as traditional leaders engage in online communication, collaborate with

content creators, and utilise digital media to disseminate information. This demonstrates that authority is increasingly constructed through visibility, interaction, and public recognition.

In addition, authority and power are becoming more distributed and less centralised. Community members are increasingly involved in decision-making processes, and authority is shared with various actors, including government institutions, experts, and digital intermediaries. This reflects a transition toward more collaborative and networked forms of leadership in the post-industrial era, which aligns with the broader process of authority reconfiguration identified in this study.

Comparative Patterns across Ethnic Groups

Although the transformation of authority occurs across all four ethnic groups, the patterns of change are not uniform and reflect distinct socio-cultural characteristics. In the Bugis community, authority transformation is characterised by a collective and adaptive pattern, where traditional legitimacy is integrated with competence-based authority and deliberative decision-making. In the Makassar community, authority remains relatively centralised but is symbolically reinforced through digital visibility, reflecting a hybrid form that combines hierarchical authority with modern representation.

In contrast, the Mandar community demonstrates a pragmatic and flexible pattern,

where leadership adapts to community needs and technological opportunities in a more contextual manner. Meanwhile, the Toraja community exhibits a selective and conservative pattern, particularly in maintaining ritual and cosmological authority, while adopting technological change in a limited and strategic way. These variations indicate that leadership transformation is shaped by cultural structures, institutional arrangements, and varying degrees of openness to social change. Table 2 shows the comparative transformation of authority and power in Toraja community.

Sustainability of Authority and Power

The findings further indicate that the sustainability of traditional leadership is determined by the ability to integrate social, economic, and environmental dimensions. From a social perspective, legitimacy is maintained through moral responsibility, trust, and concern for community welfare. From an economic perspective, traditional leaders play a role in addressing inequality and supporting community livelihoods.

From an environmental perspective, sustainability is embedded in customary values that emphasise harmony with nature and ecological balance.

Importantly, the sustainability of authority is increasingly dependent on the capacity of leaders to combine traditional legitimacy with modern competencies, including education, digital literacy, and adaptive leadership skills. This demonstrates that the continuity of traditional leadership is not based solely on preserving tradition, but on the ability to remain relevant within a dynamic and complex social environment.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the transformation of traditional leadership in the post-industrial era is best understood as an evolutionary process of social change that occurs gradually and contextually, rather than as a linear replacement of traditional systems (Kasińska, 2023; Safonov et al., 2018). While classical perspectives emphasise the stability of traditional authority based on inherited legitimacy, the results indicate that leadership is increasingly

Table 2
Comparative transformation of authority and power

Ethnic Group	Traditional Authority	Post-industrial Authority	Key Transformation
Bugis	Hierarchical, adat-based, collective	Hybrid (formal and recognition-based), collaborative	Adaptive hybridisation
Makassar	Centralised, symbolic, aristocratic	Hybrid with symbolic reinforcement via digital media	Symbolic-digital hybrid
Mandar	Flexible, community-based	Pragmatic, participatory, competence-based	Contextual flexibility
Toraja	Ritual, hierarchical, cosmological	Selective adaptation, preservation-oriented	Selective conservatism

characterised by adaptability, participation, and responsiveness to changing social conditions.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings both confirm and extend Weberian concepts of authority. Traditional authority, rooted in customs, continuity, and inherited status, remains a foundational source of legitimacy. However, the empirical evidence suggests that authority is no longer singular and hierarchical, but is increasingly reconfigured into more distributed, negotiated, and competence-based forms. This finding supports the argument that leadership transformation in the post-industrial era should not be interpreted as a transition from traditional to modern authority, but rather as a process of authority reconfiguration, in which multiple sources of legitimacy coexist and interact.

This study further advances the concept of hybrid authority, where inherited status, institutional legitimacy, and recognition-based authority operate simultaneously. Unlike dominant perspectives that assume the erosion of traditional leadership under modernisation, the findings demonstrate that traditional leadership remains resilient and adaptive. This contributes to the broader literature by showing that leadership transformation in non-Western rural contexts does not follow a linear modernisation trajectory, but instead reflects a context-dependent process shaped by cultural and institutional factors.

In line with contemporary leadership studies, the findings indicate a shift toward more collaborative and participatory

leadership practices (Bodenhausen & Curtis, 2016; Komal et al., 2023). Authority is no longer monopolised by traditional leaders but is increasingly distributed across multiple actors, including community members, government institutions, and knowledge holders. This aligns with the concepts of distributed and shared leadership, which emphasise collective decision-making and relational forms of power.

From a digital transformation perspective, this study highlights the role of technology in reshaping authority structures. Digital platforms expand access to information, increase transparency, and alter the visibility of leadership (Hilbert, 2020; Verma et al., 2022). Traditional leaders are no longer confined to customary spaces but are increasingly engaged in digital environments, where authority is constructed through communication, interaction, and public recognition. This finding supports the notion of networked authority, in which power is mediated through digital connectivity and social networks.

However, the findings also suggest that transformation is not uniform across all contexts. The comparative analysis reveals distinct patterns among the four ethnic groups, reflecting varying degrees of adaptation and resistance. While Bugis and Makassar leadership systems demonstrate hybridisation between traditional and modern authority, Mandar leadership exhibits greater flexibility and pragmatism, and Toraja leadership maintains a more selective and conservative approach,

particularly in preserving ritual authority. This indicates that leadership transformation is shaped by cultural values, institutional structures, and the degree of openness to change.

In terms of sustainability, the study shows that the continuity of traditional leadership depends on the integration of social, economic, and environmental dimensions (Ferdig, 2007; Kniffin & Patterson, 2019; Purwanto, 2024). Leaders who can combine cultural legitimacy with adaptive competencies such as digital literacy, communication skills, and collaborative capacity are more likely to maintain their authority in the post-industrial era. This suggests that sustainability is not merely about preserving tradition, but about maintaining relevance in dynamic social environments.

Overall, this study contributes to literature in three key ways. First, it introduces the concept of authority reconfiguration as a framework for understanding leadership transformation beyond the dichotomy of traditional versus modern authority. Second, it demonstrates that hybrid authority provides a more accurate explanation of leadership dynamics in post-industrial contexts. Third, it provides empirical evidence from a non-Western rural setting, thereby enriching global discussions on leadership, social transformation, and institutional resilience.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of a

qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm means that the analysis is inherently influenced by the researchers' reflexivity and subjectivity. Although various procedures were employed to ensure data validity, the potential for bias in coding, categorisation, and interpretation cannot be eliminated.

Second, this study adopts a cross-sectional design, capturing the dynamics of leadership transformation at a specific point in time. As such, it does not fully account for the longitudinal evolution of authority and power in traditional leadership systems, which may develop differently over time.

Third, the study does not comprehensively incorporate macro-level factors, such as state policies, global economic dynamics, and the broader digital ecosystem, which may also shape the transformation of traditional leadership in more complex ways.

Future research is therefore recommended to address these limitations by adopting longitudinal approaches, expanding the geographical scope beyond South Sulawesi, and integrating multi-level analysis that considers both local and macro-level dynamics. In addition, quantitative or mixed-method approaches may be useful to examine community perceptions of leadership legitimacy and to further validate the patterns identified in this study.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the transformation of traditional leadership in the post-industrial era does not reflect the

decline of customary authority, but rather a process of authority reconfiguration, in which traditional and contemporary forms of legitimacy coexist and interact. Authority is no longer derived solely from inherited status and customary norms, but is increasingly shaped by competence, education, communication capacity, and digital engagement.

The comparative analysis across the Bugis, Makassar, Mandar, and Toraja communities shows that leadership transformation is context-dependent. While some leadership systems exhibit hybridisation between traditional and modern authority, others demonstrate more flexible or selective adaptation, reflecting differences in cultural structures, institutional arrangements, and openness to change.

Theoretically, this study contributes by advancing the concepts of authority reconfiguration and hybrid authority as a framework for understanding leadership transformation in non-Western rural contexts. These findings challenge the dominant assumption that modernisation leads to the erosion of traditional leadership, and instead highlight the adaptive capacity and resilience of customary institutions.

Practically, the findings suggest that strengthening the sustainability of traditional leadership requires enhancing adaptive capacity, particularly in digital literacy, communication skills, and collaborative governance. Policy efforts may focus on integrating traditional leadership structures into formal governance systems while

supporting capacity-building initiatives that enable traditional leaders to remain relevant in rapidly changing social environments.

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