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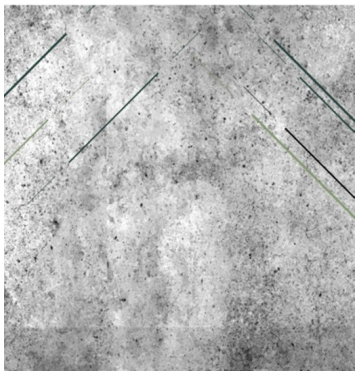
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Beyond Separatism: The Governance of Symbolic Meaning and Nation-Building in Postcolonial Maluku

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Abstract

Research on nation-building has primarily examined how states consolidate sovereignty through territorial integration, institutional development, and national identity formation, while securitization theory explains how particular issues become constructed as security threats. However, less attention has been paid to how securitized political meanings become institutionalized as part of nation-building. Addressing this gap, this article examines how the Indonesian state transformed the political meaning of the Moluccan cultural expression *Mena-Muria* through institutional securitization practices. The study employs interpretive process tracing, combining historical analysis, semi-structured interviews with 15 purposively selected participants, court decisions, police testimonies, and documentary evidence to reconstruct this process. The findings show that *Mena-Muria* was institutionally reinterpreted as an indicator of political threat, whereas other Moluccan cultural symbols, including *Nunusaku* and *Siwalima*, continued to be recognized as cultural heritage rather than security concerns. These findings demonstrate that sovereignty is reproduced not through the suppression of cultural identity but through the selective regulation of symbolic meaning. To explain this process, the article proposes symbolic governance as a middle-range theoretical framework describing how states institutionalize, stabilize, and regulate the political meanings of cultural symbols. By bridging the literatures on nation-building and securitization, the article argues that nation-building in postcolonial states also operates through the selective governance of symbolic meaning.

Keywords: Nation-Building; Symbolic Governance; Securitization; Sovereignty; Maluku.

Introduction

Nation-building and state-building represent related but analytically distinct processes. State-building concerns the construction and strengthening of governmental institutions and the capacity of the state to exercise authority, whereas nation-building concerns the formation and reproduction of a political community whose members understand themselves as belonging to a shared nation (Anderson, 1991; Connor, 1994; Fukuyama, 2004; Mylonas, 2012). In postcolonial settings, however, these processes frequently intersect because state institutions participate directly in defining the symbolic boundaries of national membership. This article focuses on this intersection. Rather than treating institutional capacity itself as nation-building, it examines how state institutions participate in nation-building by authoritatively classifying cultural expressions as compatible with, or potentially challenging to, the national political community.

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Yet evidence from multinational and postcolonial societies suggests that nation-building extends beyond the governance of territory. Across cases such as Catalonia, Kashmir, and Sri Lanka, states regulate not only territorial boundaries but also the symbolic foundations of political belonging by determining which identities, historical narratives, and cultural symbols are recognized as legitimate components of the national community and which become associated with political threat (Brubaker, 1996; Keating, 2001; Shani, 2007). The regulation of cultural meaning is more precisely understood as an exercise of state authority. It becomes relevant to sovereignty when such classifications distinguish legitimate national allegiance from expressions associated with competing claims to political authority. This article therefore examines how institutional authority over symbolic meaning contributes to the reproduction of sovereignty.

This intersection between institutional authority and symbolic belonging becomes particularly visible when cultural expressions are interpreted as security concerns. Securitization scholarship provides an analytical lens for examining how objects, practices, or identities become constructed as threats to a political order. The Copenhagen School conceptualizes securitization as a process through which an issue is presented and accepted as an existential threat requiring exceptional measures (Buzan et al., 1998). Subsequent approaches have demonstrated that security meanings may also be reproduced through routine professional, administrative, legal, and bureaucratic practices rather than through exceptional speech acts alone (Balzacq, 2011; Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2011). This broader understanding is particularly relevant to Maluku because the political significance attached to selected cultural expressions did not end with the military defeat of the RMS but continued to be reproduced through institutional practices long after the original conflict.

Seen from this perspective, an unresolved question connects the literatures on nation-building and securitization: what happens after a cultural expression has acquired a security meaning? Existing securitization research explains how threats are constructed and routinized, while nation-building research explains how states define and reproduce membership in the national political community. Less attention has been devoted to the institutional process through which a security interpretation attached to a culturally embedded symbol becomes durable and subsequently affects the symbolic boundaries of political belonging. This problem is especially visible in Maluku. Scholarship has extensively examined the RMS, Moluccan nationalism, diaspora politics, communal conflict, and reconciliation (Smeets & Steijlen, 2006; Steijlen, 1996), yet considerably less attention has been paid to how historically generated security meanings became attached to particular cultural expressions and continued to shape their institutional interpretation after organized rebellion had ceased.

The Moluccan case offers an especially revealing context for addressing this gap. Although the Republic of South Maluku (RMS) rebellion was militarily defeated in 1950, political contestation did not end with the suppression of armed resistance. Over time, selected Moluccan cultural expressions including customary practices (*adat*), historical narratives, regional songs, and particularly *Mena–Muria* became increasingly associated with the RMS, such that their public display was often interpreted as evidence of separatist sympathy. This development created a striking paradox: symbols understood locally as expressions of cultural heritage came to be interpreted institutionally as indicators of political disloyalty. The case allows analysis not only of how cultural icons become associated with threats to security, but also of how those associations persist beyond the immediate crisis period.

Against this background, this article asks: How have Indonesian state institutions historically interpreted, institutionalized, and reproduced the political meanings attached to selected Moluccan cultural symbols, and what does this process reveal about the relationship between securitization and nation-building in contexts of contested sovereignty? The article argues that selected cultural symbols became relevant to nation-building not simply because they carried alternative political meanings, but because state institutions progressively translated particular interpretations into legal and security categories. This process occurred through political association, securitizing interpretation, legal institutionalization, and bureaucratic reproduction. The resulting institutional meanings helped define the boundaries between culturally legitimate belonging and

politically suspect allegiance. The article conceptualizes this process as a specific form of symbolic governance.

The article adopts a constructivist and interpretive understanding of political meaning: cultural expressions do not possess fixed political significance independently of the social and institutional practices through which they are interpreted. Within this orientation, securitization theory provides the principal analytical lens for examining how particular expressions acquire security meanings (Balzacq, 2011; Buzan et al., 1998), while scholarship on symbolic power and state classification helps explain how authoritative classifications become institutionalized (Bourdieu, 1991; Grenfell, 2014; Scott, 1998). Building on these traditions, the article develops an institutional model of symbolic governance to describe how contested meanings are selected, translated into authoritative categories, and repeatedly reproduced through state practices. Nation-building constitutes the broader political process within which these institutional classifications shape the boundaries of legitimate national belonging.

The term symbolic governance has appeared in other fields to describe forms of governance operating through symbolic orders, representations, or classificatory practices. For example, Grek (2020) employs the concept to analyze the symbolic ordering effects of quantification within transnational education governance. The present article uses the term more narrowly. Its analytical object is neither symbolic policy in general nor cultural representation as such, but the institutional stabilization of political meanings attached to culturally embedded symbols under conditions of contested sovereignty. The contribution therefore lies not in claiming the term itself as novel, but in specifying an institutional mechanism through which symbolic classification, securitization, and nation-building become connected over time.

Method

This study adopts a constructivist-interpretive research orientation and employs a historical case-study design. Ontologically, it treats the political meanings attached to cultural symbols as socially and institutionally constructed rather than as intrinsic properties of the symbols themselves. Epistemologically, the analysis seeks to reconstruct how different actors understood, attributed, and institutionalized these meanings within particular historical contexts. This interpretive orientation is appropriate because the research question concerns processes of meaning-making, classification, and institutionalization rather than measuring predetermined variables (Schwartz-shea & Yanow, 2012). The study therefore examines sovereignty indirectly: not as an individual act of state power, but through how authoritative interpretations help reproduce the boundaries of legitimate political allegiance.

Maluku was selected as a single instrumental case because it represents one of Indonesia's longest and most complex encounters between postcolonial nation-building and ethnonational identity. Although the Republic of South Maluku (RMS) rebellion was militarily defeated in the 1950s, cultural symbols associated with Moluccan identity have continued to carry political significance, providing an appropriate setting for examining how sovereignty is reproduced through the governance of symbolic meaning.

The analysis draws upon multiple qualitative data sources. Primary data consist of 15 semi-structured interviews conducted between June 2024 and February 2026 with participants purposively selected for their knowledge of Moluccan customary institutions, political history, cultural practices, and legal or civic responses to RMS-related symbolism. Participants included [n] traditional leaders (raja negeri), [n] cultural practitioners, [n] youth/civil-society activists, [n] academics, and [n] legal experts. Interviews addressed three themes: the historical meanings attributed to selected cultural symbols; changes in their political interpretation; and experiences of state or societal responses to their public use. These interviews were triangulated with court decisions, government regulations and statements, historical sources, media reporting, and scholarly literature. Purposive selection therefore aimed not at statistical representation but at accessing interpretive communities with direct knowledge of the meanings and institutional treatment of the symbols

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under investigation.

The historical reconstruction covers the period from the political emergence of the RMS in 1950 to the contemporary post-Reformasi period, with particular attention to three analytically distinct phases: (1) the political appropriation of cultural symbols during and after the RMS rebellion; (2) their securitized interpretation within subsequent state security practices; and (3) their legal and bureaucratic reproduction in contemporary cases, particularly from the late 2010s onward. Earlier customary histories are used only to reconstruct pre-political meanings and are not treated as evidence of an unchanged or timeless cultural tradition. Instead, meanings are interpreted within the historical context in which they were articulated.

The analysis is informed by three complementary theoretical perspectives. Giorgio Shani's post-Westphalian conception of sovereignty provides the macro-level framework for understanding sovereignty as extending beyond territorial authority to include the governance of identity and political legitimacy (Shani, 2007, 2022) . Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory explains how historical experiences continue to shape contemporary understandings of cultural symbols (Halbwachs, 2011). Finally, scholarship on nationalism and identity politics provides the analytical basis for examining how symbolic meanings become sites of contestation between ethnocultural identities and state-produced national identities.

Analysis proceeded through four interpretive stages. First, the study reconstructed historically situated meanings attributed to Nunusaku, Siwalima, Mena-Muria, and pela-gandong before their incorporation into modern sovereignty disputes. Second, it identified episodes in which political actors attached new political meanings to these expressions. Third, it examined how executive, security, prosecutorial, and judicial actors interpreted these meanings and translated them into institutional categories. Fourth, it traced how repeated institutional interpretations affected contemporary practices of cultural expression and political belonging. Comparison across these stages was used to identify the mechanism developed here as symbolic governance: political association → securitizing interpretation → institutional stabilization → routinized reproduction. The analysis therefore does not assume this sequence in advance; it reconstructs it from interactions among documentary evidence, legal records, and interview interpretations.

Results

Cultural Meanings Before Political Contestation

Across the Moluccan archipelago, cultural symbols such as *Nunusaku*, *Siwalima*, *Mena–Muria*, and *pela-gandong* have long functioned as expressions of collective memory, kinship, reciprocity, and territorial belonging. This symbolic repertoire emerged from indigenous cosmologies and customary institutions that predated both the establishment of the Indonesian state in 1945 and the proclamation of the Republic of South Maluku (RMS) in 1950. Rather than representing fixed political identities, these symbols historically articulated relationships among villages, ancestral lineages, and moral obligations that sustained social cohesion across religious and territorial boundaries (Bartels, 1977, 2003; Chauvel, 1990; Cooley, 1962).

Historical and ethnographic sources indicate that the cultural expressions examined in this study were embedded in Moluccan social institutions before their later incorporation into modern nationalist politics. Their meanings were neither completely fixed nor uniform across time and place. Nevertheless, the available historical literature consistently associates *Nunusaku* with narratives of shared ancestry, *Siwalima* with historical forms of intergroup organization, pela-gandong with reciprocal social obligation, and *Mena-Muria* with ideas of mutual responsibility (Bartels, 1977, 2003; Cooley, 1962). For analytical purposes, these historically documented meanings constitute a pre-political reference point against which subsequent political reinterpretations can be examined; they should not be understood as evidence of an immutable or timeless Moluccan culture.

The same historical continuity is evident in *Mena-Muria*. Although contemporary political

discourse frequently associates the phrase with the RMS movement, interviews conducted for this study consistently indicate that its original meaning lay in customary ethics rather than separatist ideology. A legal scholar from Pattimura University explained that *Mena* ("front") and *Muria* ("back") embodied the principle of reciprocal protection *"if you protect my front, I will protect your back"* reflecting an ethic of mutual responsibility embedded within Moluccan customary life (Interview with legal scholar, June 2025). This interpretation was reinforced by cultural practitioner Vigel Fokaubun, who associated *Mena Muria* with *messe*, a customary value emphasizing solidarity and collective responsibility transmitted through oral traditions and customary practice (Interview with cultural practitioner, June 2025).

These interpretations were consistently shared by traditional leaders, who described *Nunusaku* as a symbol of shared ancestry, *Siwalima* as representing the historical coexistence of Moluccan communities, and *Mena-Muria* as expressing reciprocity rather than political separation. Their accounts clearly distinguished customary meanings from the political interpretations that emerged later, indicating that these symbols did not originate as expressions of separatism but acquired political significance only when competing actors began attaching rival political meanings to historically rooted cultural traditions.

These findings support Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolist argument that nations draw upon pre-existing myths, memories, values, and traditions rather than creating symbolic repertoires from scratch (Smith, 1986, 1991, 2009). The Moluccan case further demonstrates that historically embedded cultural symbols may retain their customary meanings as expressions of ethnic collective identity even after being incorporated into modern nationalist projects that attach additional political meanings to them. This distinction provides the empirical foundation for the next section, which examines how the RMS selectively reinterpreted elements of this symbolic repertoire within an alternative nation-building project.

Selective Political Appropriation and Symbolic Contestation

The historical meanings discussed in the previous section did not disappear with the emergence of modern nationalism. Rather than replacing pre-existing cultural meanings, political actors selectively appropriated elements of the Moluccan symbolic repertoire to construct competing understandings of nationhood and political belonging. Among these actors, the Republic of South Maluku (RMS) movement drew upon selected historical narratives, cultural expressions, and collective memories to reinforce claims of historical continuity and political legitimacy. Importantly, this process was selective rather than comprehensive. Not all Moluccan cultural symbols were incorporated into RMS political discourse, and their political significance evolved unevenly according to distinct historical trajectories. Historical scholarship consistently demonstrates that the emergence of the RMS resulted from the interaction of colonial legacies, military restructuring, regional political grievances, and competing visions of postcolonial citizenship rather than from Moluccan cultural traditions alone (Chauvel, 1990; Van Klinken, 2007).

The adoption of *Mena-Muria* within RMS-related political discourse did not replace its earlier customary meanings but added a competing layer of political signification. In customary interpretations reported by interview participants, the expression referred primarily to reciprocity, mutual protection, and collective responsibility. Within RMS-related political discourse, however, the same expression could also function as a marker of political solidarity and an alternative claim to collective political belonging. The resulting contestation therefore occurred among identifiable interpretive communities: RMS-affiliated or RMS-sympathetic actors who mobilized the expression politically; state and security institutions that increasingly associated it with separatism; and community, customary, and cultural actors who continued to understand it principally as cultural heritage. Interview evidence indicates that these interpretations do not map neatly onto Moluccan society as a whole, making it inappropriate to treat either the customary or political interpretation as universally shared.

These findings reinforce Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolist argument that nationalist

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movements selectively mobilize pre-existing myths, memories, values, and traditions rather than construct symbolic repertoires entirely anew (Smith, 1986, 1991, 2009). The Moluccan case extends this insight by showing that political appropriation does not necessarily eliminate prior cultural meanings. Instead, competing interpretations may coexist until particular meanings acquire greater institutional authority. The following section examines how state institutions progressively translated selected political associations into security and legal interpretations.

Institutional Reinterpretation and the Production of Security Meaning

The political appropriation of cultural symbols did not, by itself, transform those symbols into objects of state security. As demonstrated in the previous section, Moluccan cultural expressions continued to circulate with multiple meanings across different interpretive communities. They acquired security significance only when Indonesian state institutions selectively incorporated particular cultural expressions into legal and bureaucratic practices. Consistent with securitization theory, security threats are socially and institutionally constructed through practices that define what constitutes a threat to a sovereign political order (Buzan et al., 1998). In postcolonial contexts, these practices simultaneously reproduce sovereignty by regulating identity, political belonging, and symbolic meaning (Shani, 2007, 2022). In Maluku, this occurred through routine institutional practices including police surveillance, criminal investigation, prosecution, and judicial interpretation through which selected cultural expressions gradually acquired new political meanings as indicators of separatist activity.

This mechanism is evident in two cases concerning alleged involvement with the Republic of South Maluku (RMS): District Court Decision No. 453/Pid.B/2019/PN Amb (the Pelpina Siahaya case) and District Court Decision No. 211/Pid.B/2020/PN Amb (the Abner Litamahuputty case). Although they involved different defendants and factual circumstances, both cases showed remarkably similar institutional interpretations of particular symbolic expressions. This recurring pattern suggests that the association between selected cultural symbols and alleged separatist affiliation had become institutionalized through routine legal practice. What became institutionalized was not the symbol itself but the political meaning repeatedly attached to it through legal interpretation.

The process began with securitizing interpretations by executive and security actors rather than with a final institutional determination. In the Abner Litamahuputty case, a police witness testified that the exchange of *Mena* and *Muria* was understood as 'identical with the RMS.' At this stage, the relevant analytical development was the attribution of security meaning by a state actor: the expression was interpreted as evidence of potential separatist affiliation before judicial assessment. Prosecutorial proceedings subsequently translated this interpretation into an evidentiary narrative, while judicial decisions provided a separate institutional arena in which the evidentiary claims were assessed. These stages should therefore be analytically distinguished. Police interpretation indicates securitization; prosecutorial reasoning formalizes the allegation; and judicial treatment determines whether and how such interpretations acquire legal recognition.

A similar pattern appeared in the 2018 detention of Glendy Somawe. Unlike the previous cases, which proceeded to trial, this incident illustrates that institutional reinterpretation operated even before formal criminal investigation. Somawe was detained after wearing a T-shirt bearing the words *Mena-Muria*, which police interpreted as a symbol associated with the RMS. The detention was based not on demonstrable separatist activity but on the assumption that the expression indicated a particular political affiliation. As previous studies have shown, this episode illustrates how the stigma surrounding the RMS enabled cultural symbols to function as indicators of political threat even in the absence of accompanying political action (de Fretes, 2022; 2023; 2024).

Taken together, these cases show not the production of a 'symbolic threat' in the abstract, but the institutional production of security meanings attached to particular symbols. Police and security actors initially interpret cultural expressions through existing narratives of separatism; prosecutors may subsequently incorporate those interpretations into evidentiary narratives; and

judicial proceedings may accept, qualify, or reject their legal relevance. Repetition across these institutional settings can gradually stabilize an association between a cultural expression and political suspicion. The analytical object of symbolic governance is therefore the institutionalization of an interpretation, rather than the symbol itself becoming intrinsically threatening (Shani, 2007; 2022).

The effects of this institutionalization of security meaning extend beyond formal legal proceedings. As particular cultural symbols become repeatedly associated with legal and security narratives, they reshape public perceptions of state authority and the boundaries of legitimate cultural expression. For many Moluccans who do not support the RMS but continue to embrace their cultural identity, these institutional interpretations create uncertainty regarding how cultural symbols may be expressed without provoking political suspicion. Nation-building therefore unfolds not only through legal regulation but also through the everyday negotiation of the boundaries between cultural belonging and political loyalty.

Negotiationg Cultural Belonging Under Symbolic Governance

The institutionalization of security meanings attached to cultural symbols extends beyond formal legal proceedings. As these interpretations are reproduced through police investigations, prosecutorial reasoning, and judicial processes, they may also influence how cultural expressions are perceived and performed in public life. Consequently, symbolic governance operates not only through institutional classification but also through its broader effects on the conditions under which cultural identity is publicly expressed. In this context, the boundaries between cultural belonging, political loyalty, and citizenship become subject to continual negotiation in everyday life.

Interview findings indicate that most participants continue to interpret Moluccan cultural symbols as elements of customary heritage rather than as expressions of the political agenda of the Republic of South Maluku (RMS). A legal scholar from Pattimura University described *Mena-Muria* as a principle of reciprocity emphasizing mutual responsibility among Moluccan communities, while cultural practitioner Vigel Fokaubun similarly associated the expression with *messe*, a customary value of solidarity and collective responsibility. Traditional leaders likewise consistently interpreted *Nunusaku*, *Siwalima*, and *pela-gandong* as components of collective memory and cultural identity rather than as political symbols. These findings demonstrate that the original cultural meanings of these symbols have endured despite their reinterpretation within political and legal contexts.

The persistence of these meanings, however, has not eliminated caution in their public expression. Several participants acknowledged that certain symbols particularly *Mena-Muria* are frequently interpreted differently by both state authorities and the wider public. One youth activist recalled how a colleague (the Glendy Somawe incident) was detained for wearing a T-shirt bearing the words *Mena-Muria*, while other participants explained that certain cultural expressions are deliberately avoided in public settings to reduce the risk of being interpreted as expressions of support for the RMS. Individuals therefore do not necessarily alter their understanding of cultural symbols; rather, they adjust how, when, and where those symbols are expressed in response to the possibility of institutional interpretation.

This negotiation concerns not primarily the meaning of cultural symbols but the conditions under which they may be expressed safely. Within customary settings and local communities, cultural symbols continue to function as expressions of ancestral heritage and social solidarity. In broader public spaces, however, the same symbols are expressed more cautiously because of the possibility that they may be interpreted as indicators of alternative political agendas. Cultural belonging and political belonging therefore do not exist in a relationship of simple opposition but are continually negotiated through everyday social practice.

From this perspective, negotiated belonging should not be understood as a compromise between loyalty to the state and attachment to cultural identity. Rather, it is an ongoing social process through which individuals continually adjust the public expression of their cultural

identities in response to the political meanings produced and legitimized by state institutions. Symbolic governance therefore does not erase pre-existing cultural meanings; instead, it creates the conditions under which the relationship between cultural identity, citizenship, and political loyalty must be continually negotiated.

The findings demonstrate that the political and institutional transformation of Moluccan cultural symbols has been selective rather than uniform. As summarized in Table 1, *Mena-Muria* underwent the clearest trajectory from customary meaning to political appropriation, securitizing interpretation, and institutional reproduction, whereas *Nunusaku*, *Siwalima*, and *pela-gandong* continued to be understood primarily as expressions of cultural heritage and collective identity.

Tabel 1. Historical Transformation of Selected Moluccan Cultural Symbols

Symbol	Cultural meaning	Political/security trajectory	Institutional evidence	Contemporary status
Mena-Muria	Reciprocity, mutual protection, collective responsibility	Politically appropriated in RMS-related discourse and later interpreted as an indicator of separatist affiliation	Police interpretation; prosecution and court cases; Glendy Somawe detention	Public expression becomes more cautious, although many participants continue to regard it as cultural heritage
Nunusaku	Shared ancestry and historical continuity	No comparable securitizing trajectory identified in this study	No comparable legal/security evidence presented	Continues primarily as cultural heritage and collective memory
Siwalima	Historical coexistence, cooperation, reciprocity	No comparable securitizing trajectory identified in this study	No comparable legal/security evidence presented	Continues primarily as a cultural symbol
Pela-gandong	Mutual assistance and solidarity across religious and territorial boundaries	No comparable securitizing trajectory identified in this study	No comparable legal/security evidence presented	Continues primarily as a customary expression of solidarity

Source: Author's synthesis based on Bartels (1977, 2003), Cooley (1962), Chauvel (1990), de Fretes (2022, 2023, 2024), court decisions, and interviews (2024–2026).

Discussion

Nation-Building Beyond Territorial Integration

The findings clarify the relationship between state institutions and nation-building without collapsing state-building into nation-building. Governmental institutions, legal capacity, policing, and judicial procedures belong primarily to the institutional domain of state-building, which concerns the development and consolidation of state institutions and capacities (Fukuyama, 2004). Nation-building, by contrast, concerns the construction and reproduction of a national political community and the boundaries of legitimate belonging (Anderson, 1991; Connor, 1994; Shani, 2007). The Moluccan case demonstrates how the first can affect the second: institutional practices become relevant to nation-building when their classifications differentiate forms of cultural expression understood as compatible with national membership from expressions associated with competing political allegiance. This study therefore contributes not by redefining all institutional activity as nation-building, but by identifying one mechanism through which state practices shape symbolic boundaries of national belonging.

Within the specific cases examined here, the relevant arena of contestation concerns the political meanings attached to cultural symbols that simultaneously function as expressions of customary heritage, collective memory, and Moluccan identity. Cultural symbols such as *Nunusaku*, *Siwalima*, and *Mena-Muria* all possess historical roots that long predate contemporary sovereignty disputes. However, this study shows that these symbols did not follow identical political trajectories. Whereas *Nunusaku* and *Siwalima* have remained largely understood as elements of Moluccan cultural heritage, Mena-Muria was first politically reinterpreted by segments of the RMS movement before state institutions reconstructed it through legal and security practices as an indicator of alleged separatist affiliation. This distinction demonstrates that the Indonesian state does not regulate Moluccan cultural symbols indiscriminately. Rather, it selectively regulates the political meanings attached to particular symbols once they become associated with competing sovereignty claims.

The empirical sequence reconstructed in this study further demonstrates that this transformation unfolds through a gradual institutional process across different state arenas rather than through a single act of repression. Cultural symbols are first politically reinterpreted by non-state actors before being progressively reclassified through police investigations, prosecutorial argumentation, and judicial interpretation, as illustrated by the Pelpina Siahaya and Abner Litamahuputty cases. Through these routine institutional practices, the state does not regulate Moluccan cultural identity as a whole. Instead, it selectively stabilizes the political meanings attached to particular cultural symbols by distinguishing between cultural expressions regarded as compatible with Indonesian nationalism and those interpreted as indicating alternative claims to sovereignty. Nation-building therefore operates not only through governing territory and populations but also through regulating symbolic boundaries that define legitimate forms of political belonging.

These findings extend Giorgio Shani's post-Westphalian critique of sovereignty (Shani, 2022). Rather than conceptualizing sovereignty solely in relation to authority exercised over geographically bounded territory, the Moluccan case shows that institutional practices also shape the reproduction of sovereignty by determining which cultural symbols are recognized as legitimate components of the national community. Cultural symbols acquire political consequences not only through their intrinsic or historically embedded meanings, but also through their mobilization by political actors and through the ways state institutions classify, reinterpret, and stabilize those meanings within broader narratives of national unity and state integrity. Sovereignty, therefore, is reproduced not only through territorial and institutional arrangements but also through contestation over symbolic meanings associated with political belonging.

These findings should not be interpreted as suggesting that nation-building in postcolonial states necessarily entails suppressing cultural diversity. The Indonesian state continues to recognize and promote numerous expressions of Moluccan culture, including customary institutions, local traditions, and officially recognized cultural symbols. What is regulated is not Moluccan culture as a whole but particular symbols that become institutionally associated with competing projects of political legitimacy. This selectivity suggests that existing theories of nation-building require greater attention to the institutional processes through which states regulate the political meanings attached to cultural symbols.

Taken together, the Moluccan case exposes a theoretical problem that the nation-building literature has not sufficiently addressed. Existing scholarship has extensively examined how states integrate territory, construct institutions, cultivate national identities, and mobilize cultural symbols, language, and collective memories within ethnonationalist projects. However, it has paid comparatively less attention to how states institutionally regulate the political meanings attached to particular cultural symbols once those symbols become implicated in contests over sovereignty. Addressing this more specific gap requires moving beyond a conception of nation-building centered primarily on territorial integration and identity formation toward one that also recognizes the governance of contested symbolic meaning as an important dimension of postcolonial nation-building. The following section develops this argument through the concept of symbolic governance, understood here as an institutional mechanism through which contested meanings attached

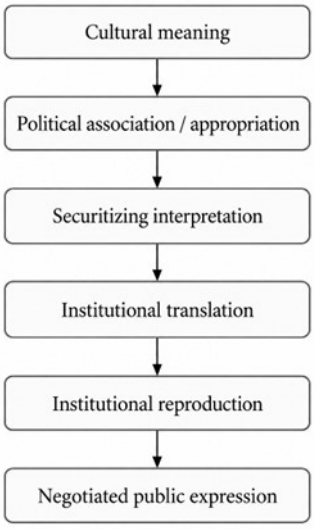
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to cultural symbols become incorporated into the ongoing reproduction of sovereign authority.

Governance of Symbolic Meaning: An Institutional Mechanism of Nation-Building

Existing approaches to nation-building have yet to fully explain how states manage cultural symbols once those symbols become associated with competing claims to sovereignty. Scholarship on nationalism has provided comprehensive accounts of territorial integration, institutional development, and the construction of national identity (Anderson, 1991; Connor, 1994), while securitization theory explains how particular issues become constructed and reproduced as security threats (Bigo, 2002; Buzan et al., 1998; Huysmans, 2011). At the same time, several adjacent approaches including symbolic politics, cultural governance, state classification, governmentality, the politics of recognition, and symbolic power have demonstrated how symbols, cultural categories, and systems of classification become implicated in the exercise of political authority (Bennett, 2000; Bourdieu, 1991, 2014; Foucault, 1991; Kaufman, 2006; Scott, 1998; Taylor, 1994). Yet these perspectives address different dimensions of symbolic meaning and political governance rather than the specific process examined here: how the political meaning of a culturally embedded symbol becomes selectively reinterpreted, securitized, institutionally stabilized, and incorporated into the routine reproduction of sovereignty. To address this more specific gap, this article uses the term governance of symbolic meaning to describe an institutional mechanism linking contested symbolic meaning, securitization, and the reproduction of sovereignty within nation-building projects (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Process of the Governance of Symbolic Meaning



Source: *Author's conceptualization based on the study findings, informed by Buzan et al. (1998), Bigo (2002), Balzacq (2011), Bourdieu (1991, 2014), Scott (1998), and Shani (2007, 2022).*

The governance of symbolic meaning overlaps with these approaches but operates at a distinct analytical level. Symbolic politics primarily explains how myths, memories, and culturally resonant symbols shape political mobilization and conflict (Kaufman, 2006), whereas cultural governance examines the incorporation of culture into governmental programmes and institutions (Bennett, 2000). Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power illuminates how authoritative actors, including the state, can produce and impose categories of perception that become socially recognized as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1991, 2014; Scott, 1998), while state classification highlights how administrative institutions render social realities legible through authoritative categories (Scott, 1998). Foucault's concept of governmentality, by contrast, directs attention to the rationalities, forms of knowledge, and routine techniques through which conduct and populations become objects of governance (Foucault, 1991). The politics of recognition focuses on the political conse-

quences of recognizing and misrecognizing identities and groups (Taylor, 1994). The governance of symbolic meaning draws on these insights but concerns a narrower process: the selective institutional transformation of the political meanings attached to culturally embedded symbols when those symbols become implicated in competing claims to sovereignty.

The Moluccan case demonstrates that the governance of symbolic meaning operates through three interconnected institutional processes. The first is identification of politically contested symbols, whereby state institutions recognize which culturally embedded symbols have become associated with competing sovereignty narratives through police observation, public reporting, and other forms of bureaucratic practice. The second is institutional reinterpretation, in which police investigations, prosecutorial reasoning, and judicial interpretation translate these symbols into legal and security categories. At this stage, cultural symbols cease to be understood solely as expressions of local identity and instead acquire authoritative institutional meanings as indicators of potential threats to state sovereignty. Classification therefore constitutes one operation within symbolic governance, rather than the entire process. The third is symbolic stabilization and regulation, through which these institutionalized interpretations are continuously reproduced in administrative, legal, and security practices. Repetition transforms an initially contested interpretation into a relatively durable institutional assumption about political loyalty and legitimate cultural expression. Through these interconnected processes, the state gradually stabilizes the political meanings attached to particular cultural symbols and differentiates symbols recognized as legitimate expressions of cultural diversity from those interpreted as markers of alternative political allegiance.

It is important to emphasize that the governance of symbolic meaning should not be equated with cultural repression or forced assimilation. The findings of this study demonstrate that the Indonesian state continues to recognize and incorporate numerous expressions of Moluccan culture into broader narratives of Indonesian nationhood through customary institutions, provincial symbols, and cultural preservation. What becomes subject to regulation is therefore not Moluccan culture as a whole but the political meanings attached to particular symbols once those symbols become associated with competing projects of political legitimacy. This selective character constitutes an important distinction between symbolic governance and broader concepts of cultural governance or governmentality: its analytical object is not culture or conduct in general, but the political meaning attributed to specific cultural symbols located at the intersection of cultural identity and contested sovereignty. The governance of symbolic meaning is therefore selective, distinguishing between forms of cultural diversity regarded as compatible with the national project and symbolic expressions interpreted as challenging sovereign authority.

The principal contribution of governance of symbolic meaning is neither to propose a new type of nationalism nor to replace existing theories of securitization, symbolic power, classification, or governmentality. Its contribution is to identify a specific institutional mechanism through which these otherwise separate dynamics intersect in contexts of contested sovereignty. Symbolic governance explains how culturally embedded symbols are selectively identified, assigned security meanings, translated into authoritative legal and bureaucratic classifications, and subsequently stabilized through routine institutional practices. In this respect, everyday securitization explains how security is reproduced through routine practices, while symbolic power and state classification illuminate the state's capacity to impose legitimate categories of perception. Symbolic governance extends these insights by explaining how their intersection produces durable and differentiated boundaries of political belonging within the longer-term process of nation-building. Its distinctive analytical outcome is therefore not simply the classification or securitization of a symbol, but the institutional stabilization of its political meaning as an indicator of legitimate or suspect political belonging. More broadly, it demonstrates that nation-building in postcolonial states unfolds not only through territorial integration and institutional development but also through the selective governance of symbolic meaning.

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Beyond the Civic-Ethnic Dichotomy: Contestation Over Symbolic Meaning in Nation-Building

The Moluccan case also invites a reconsideration of one of the most influential assumptions in nationalism studies: that nation-building can be understood primarily through the distinction between civic and ethnic nationalism. Since Meinecke (1970) differentiation between *Staatsnation* and *Kulturnation*, later developed by Kohn (1944) and Smith (1991), debates on nationalism have largely revolved around whether national integration is principally grounded in political institutions and citizenship or in shared history, culture, and ethnic identity. While this framework has made a fundamental contribution to the study of nationalism, the findings of this research suggest that it remains insufficient for explaining how states govern cultural symbols that simultaneously function as collective heritage and as contested markers of political legitimacy.

The empirical findings indicate that the principal contestation in Maluku does not occur between Indonesian citizenship and Moluccan cultural identity as mutually exclusive forms of belonging. Most participants continue to identify themselves as Indonesian citizens while maintaining strong attachments to customary institutions, local history, and Moluccan cultural symbols. What is contested, therefore, is not the existence of these identities but the political meanings attached to particular symbols. Symbols such as *Nunusaku*, *Siwalima*, and *Mena-Muria* become sites of contestation because different actors, including the RMS movement, state institutions, and local communities attribute competing political meanings to the same symbolic repertoire. Nation-building in this context thus involves not the replacement of ethnocultural identity by civic loyalty but the regulation of the symbolic meanings that mediate the relationship between them.

This argument complements Smith's ethno-symbolist insight that nations draw upon pre-existing myths, memories, values, and symbols (Smith, 1986, 1991, 2009). The Moluccan case further shows that these symbolic resources remain open to reinterpretation after their incorporation into nationalist projects. The governance of symbolic meaning operates at a different analytical level from civic and ethnic nationalism. Whereas civic and ethnic nationalism concern bases of national belonging and political legitimacy, the governance of symbolic meaning concerns the institutional processes through which contested meanings attached to cultural symbols are classified, interpreted, and stabilized through routine state practices.

The theoretical implications of this argument may extend beyond the Moluccan case. Across postcolonial societies and regions marked by contested sovereignty, cultural symbols may simultaneously embody historical heritage and acquire meanings tied to competing political claims. Comparable analytical questions may therefore arise in cases such as Catalonia, Kashmir, Aceh, and Papua, although their historical trajectories differ substantially. These comparisons do not equate the cases; they highlight a shared analytical problem: how states institutionally regulate contested meanings attached to cultural symbols at the intersection of collective identity and competing claims to sovereignty. In this sense, the governance of symbolic meaning complements existing nationalism scholarship by identifying an institutional process through which contested symbolic meanings may become incorporated into the reproduction of political belonging and sovereign authority.

Scope, Conditions, and Theoretical Implications of Symbolic Governance

The governance of symbolic meaning developed in this article is not intended as a universal explanation of all processes of nation-building. Rather, it is proposed as an institutional mechanism that explains how states may contribute to the reproduction of sovereign authority through the regulation of symbolic meaning under specific historical and political conditions. The findings suggest that this mechanism is particularly relevant in postcolonial societies, or in societies characterized by contested sovereignty, where historically embedded cultural symbols become incorporated into competing projects of political legitimacy. Symbolic governance therefore does not replace existing theories of nation-building but extends them by introducing a symbolic dimension that has received comparatively limited attention.

Based on the findings of this study, three conditions appear particularly relevant to the governance of symbolic meaning. The first is the existence of a historically embedded symbolic repertoire, that is, cultural symbols that possess collectively recognized meanings prior to the emergence of political contestation. This condition is consistent with the ethno-symbolist argument that nations do not create symbols ex nihilo but instead reinterpret myths, memories, and traditions that already exist within society (Smith, 1986, 1991, 2009). In the Moluccan context, symbols such as *Nunusaku*, *Siwalima*, and *Mena-Muria* had long formed part of Moluccan cultural identity before acquiring political significance within conflicts over sovereignty (Bartels, 1977, 2003; Chauvel, 1990; Cooley, 1962).

The second condition is the reinterpretation of these symbols within competing sovereignty narratives. Political reinterpretation by non-state actors alone, however, is insufficient to produce symbolic governance. The mechanism emerges only when state institutions subsequently incorporate these symbols into bureaucratic, legal, and security practices. In the Moluccan case, this process became evident through successive stages of intelligence surveillance, police investigation, prosecutorial reasoning, and judicial interpretation, which collectively transformed cultural symbols into indicators of potential threats to the state. The governance of symbolic meaning therefore arises not simply because political symbols exist but because their meanings become institutionally stabilized through routine state practices.

The third condition is institutional capacity to regulate symbolic meaning. States require bureaucratic, legal, and security institutions capable of consistently reproducing particular interpretations of cultural symbols through routine governance. In the Indonesian context, previous research shows that the state has a long-standing tradition of classifying, managing, and incorporating cultural diversity into broader projects of national identity (Jones, 2005). This study's findings show that the same institutional capacity may also operate in the security domain when cultural symbols become associated with competing claims to political legitimacy. What is regulated, therefore, is not culture itself but the political meanings attached to particular cultural symbols.

These three conditions also define the concept's scope. Symbolic governance is not expected to emerge in every instance of ethnic conflict or cultural diversity. In multicultural societies where political legitimacy and sovereignty are not fundamentally contested, cultural symbols are likely to remain expressions of cultural identity without undergoing institutional reinterpretation within the security domain. By contrast, the mechanism becomes relevant when cultural symbols sit at the intersection of collective memory and competing claims to political authority. Symbolic governance should therefore be understood as an analytical framework for explaining symbolic contestation within nation-building rather than as a general theory of state-culture relations.

The theoretical implications extend well beyond the Indonesian context. Although each case possesses its own historical and political configuration, comparable dynamics may emerge wherever cultural identity and competing sovereignty claims become closely intertwined. Similar analytical questions may therefore arise in other postcolonial societies or regions characterized by contested nationhood. Symbolic governance provides a conceptual framework for comparing these nation-building processes without overlooking the historical specificity of individual cases.

Taken together, this article argues that nation-building unfolds not only through territorial integration, institutional development, and the construction of national identity but also through the regulation of the political meanings attached to cultural symbols. The literature on nationalism has provided robust explanations of the sources of national identity, while securitization theory explains how threats are socially constructed. This article complements both traditions by identifying a mechanism that has received comparatively little scholarly attention: the process through which political meanings produced through securitization become institutionalized, stabilized, and routinely reproduced as part of nation-building. In this sense, symbolic governance functions as a conceptual bridge connecting scholarship on nationalism, sovereignty, securitization, and the politics of culture, thereby explaining how postcolonial states reproduce sovereign authority through the governance of symbolic meaning.

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Conclusion

This study demonstrates that nation-building in postcolonial states unfolds not only through territorial integration, institutional consolidation, and the construction of national identity but also through the regulation of the political meanings attached to cultural symbols. Drawing upon the Moluccan case, the article shows that the Indonesian state does not regulate cultural symbols indiscriminately. Rather, it selectively governs the political meanings attached to particular symbols once they become associated with competing claims to sovereignty. On the basis of these findings, the article conceptualizes the governance of symbolic meaning as an institutional mechanism through which contested political meanings attached to cultural symbols become stabilized and incorporated into the reproduction of political belonging and sovereign authority within nation-building.

This article's contribution extends well beyond the Moluccan case itself. Conceptually, symbolic governance provides an analytical framework for understanding how cultural symbols become objects of institutional governance when situated at the intersection of collective memory, cultural identity, and competing claims to political legitimacy. The concept therefore offers a basis for comparative research across postcolonial and multinational societies confronting similar dynamics, including Catalonia, Kashmir, Aceh, Papua, and other contexts in which cultural symbols become intertwined with contestations over sovereignty. Future research may further examine the scope conditions of governance of symbolic meaning, particularly by investigating how variations in political systems, institutional capacity, and historical trajectories shape the ways states regulate symbolic meaning within nation-building processes.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the findings also carry important policy implications for culturally diverse societies. Security approaches that automatically equate cultural symbols with political threats risk reinforcing stigma, deepening social alienation, and narrowing the legitimate space for cultural expression within democratic life. Conversely, policies that distinguish more proportionately between cultural heritage, identity expression, and political activities that genuinely threaten state sovereignty may strengthen public trust in state institutions while safeguarding cultural diversity as an integral component of national identity. In this sense, governance of symbolic meaning not only advances scholarship on nation-building and sovereignty but also offers a conceptual perspective for developing forms of security governance that better attend to the cultural dynamics of postcolonial societies.

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