The Construction of Land Meaning in Land Management Among the Makawa Indigenous Community in LUWU Regency

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ABSTRACT:

Land holds a central position in indigenous communities, serving not only as an economic resource but also as a social, cultural, and spiritual entity that shapes collective identity. This study aims to analyze the construction of land meaning in land management practices among the Makawa Indigenous Community in Luwu Regency through the perspective of Berger and Luckmann's Social Construction Theory. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to understand the lived experiences and meanings attached to land by community members. Seven informants were purposively selected, comprising a customary leader, a community leader, two village officials, and three farmers actively involved in customary land management. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that the meaning of land is socially constructed through three interconnected processes. Externalization occurs when customary values, ancestral knowledge, and collective experiences are expressed in everyday land management practices. These practices become objectified through customary institutions, social norms, and collective agreements governing land use. Finally, internalization takes place as these shared meanings are transmitted across generations and become embedded in individual consciousness and community identity. The study concludes that land is understood not merely as an economic asset but as a living space representing ancestral heritage, spirituality, social solidarity, and cultural continuity. These findings demonstrate that indigenous land management is sustained through an ongoing process of social construction that reinforces both cultural resilience and the continuity of customary institutions.

Keywords: social construction; land meaning; land management; indigenous community; Makawa.

Introduction.

Land has long been recognized as more than a physical asset or an economic resource. For many indigenous communities, land represents a living space where historical memory, cultural identity, social relationships, and spiritual values are

continuously reproduced through everyday practices. Indigenous peoples perceive land as an inseparable part of their collective existence, making it fundamental to maintaining social cohesion, cultural continuity, and intergenerational knowledge transmission (Ojong, 2020). Rather than functioning solely as property, land embodies shared meanings that organize social life and shape interactions between humans, nature, and customary institutions.

Rapid economic development, globalization, and state-led land policies have increasingly transformed indigenous territories throughout the world. Expansion of mining, plantation industries, and infrastructure projects frequently redefines land according to market and legal perspectives, often neglecting indigenous understandings rooted in customary institutions and collective ownership (Hall et al., 2011). Such transformations have generated widespread disputes over customary land rights, environmental degradation, and the erosion of local knowledge systems (Moniaga, 2007). Previous studies demonstrate that conflicts surrounding indigenous territories are rarely caused solely by competing ownership claims but also emerge from fundamentally different interpretations of what land represents for indigenous communities (Bose, 2023).

Scholars have consistently argued that indigenous land should be understood as a social and cultural institution rather than merely an economic commodity. Bose (2023) showed that indigenous resistance to mining expansion in India was driven by the perception that forests and customary lands constitute spaces of identity, cultural continuity, and collective survival rather than exploitable natural resources. Similarly, Ojong (2020) emphasized that indigenous land rights extend beyond ownership claims toward broader territorial rights involving cultural identity, autonomy, and social reproduction. In Bolivia, Fontana (2015) demonstrated that land functions as a symbolic arena where collective identities and social recognition are continuously negotiated. These studies collectively indicate that the significance of land cannot be adequately understood through legal or economic approaches alone.

Despite these important contributions, previous research has predominantly emphasized macro-level issues, including land governance, legal recognition, agrarian conflicts, political struggles, and environmental management. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how indigenous communities themselves construct the meaning of land through daily social interaction and cultural practice. Consequently, the subjective processes through which land becomes socially meaningful remain insufficiently explored, particularly from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge.

This limitation is especially evident in studies concerning indigenous communities in Indonesia. Existing research has primarily examined customary land rights, legal pluralism, and institutional recognition, while relatively few investigations have explored the social construction of land meaning within indigenous communities themselves (Hidayat et al., 2026). As a result, the everyday processes through which customary values are produced, institutionalized, and transmitted across generations remain largely underrepresented in contemporary scholarship.

The Makawa Indigenous Community in North Walenrang District, Luwu Regency, provides a particularly valuable context for examining these processes. The community maintains a customary system governing land allocation, agricultural management, social organization, and environmental conservation. Land management is regulated through customary institutions led by the *Tomakaka*, supported by traditional leaders responsible for coordinating agricultural activities, customary rituals, conflict resolution, and collective decision-making. Within this system, land is not interpreted solely as private property but as an ancestral inheritance carrying social obligations, customary norms, spiritual significance, and collective identity. These values continue to influence agricultural practices and community life despite increasing pressures from modernization and external economic interests.

To understand these dynamics, this study adopts Berger and Luckmann's Social Construction Theory (1966), which conceptualizes social reality as being continuously created through the dialectical processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. This theoretical perspective enables a deeper understanding of how the Makawa Indigenous Community constructs, maintains, and reproduces the meaning of land through social interaction and customary practices rather than viewing land merely as a material object.

The novelty of this study lies in its micro-sociological analysis of indigenous land management. Unlike previous studies that primarily examine legal recognition, political conflict, or institutional governance, this research investigates how land meaning is socially constructed through everyday interactions and subsequently institutionalized within customary life. By focusing on the Makawa Indigenous Community, this study contributes empirical evidence to the sociology of knowledge while enriching discussions on indigenous land management, cultural resilience, and the reproduction of customary institutions.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the construction of land meaning in land management practices among the Makawa Indigenous Community in Luwu Regency through the dialectical processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization proposed by Berger and Luckmann.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to explore how the Makawa Indigenous Community constructs the meaning of land within its customary land management practices. The research was conducted in North Walenrang District, Luwu Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, where the Makawa Indigenous Community continues to maintain customary institutions governing land use, agricultural activities, and social life. The research site was purposively selected because it represents a community in which customary values and local knowledge remain actively practiced in land management. Seven informants were selected through purposive sampling, comprising one customary leader (*Tomakaka*), one community leader, two village officials, and three farmers directly involved in customary land management activities.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and customary knowledge regarding land management, while observations focused on everyday practices, customary ceremonies, and social interactions associated with land use. Documentary materials, including customary regulations, village records, and supporting documents, were used to complement and verify the information obtained from interviews and observations. The combination of these techniques enabled the researcher to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the social meanings attached to land within the Makawa Indigenous Community.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (2014), which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Throughout the analysis, the findings were interpreted using Berger and Luckmann's (1966) Social Construction Theory, focusing on the dialectical processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization through which the meaning of land is produced, institutionalized, and transmitted across generations. To ensure the credibility of the findings, source triangulation was applied by comparing information obtained from different informants and supported by observational and documentary evidence

Results

Externalization of Land Meaning in the Makawa Indigenous Community

The findings indicate that the construction of land meaning within the Makawa Indigenous Community begins through the process of externalization, in which individuals express their

subjective understanding of land through everyday social practices. Land is perceived not merely as a physical space for agricultural production but as an inseparable part of community life, connecting ancestral heritage, customary obligations, and collective responsibility. These meanings are continuously manifested through farming activities, customary rituals, land allocation, and collective decision-making coordinated by the *Tomakaka* as the customary leader. The interaction between community members and their customary institutions demonstrates that the meaning of land is produced through repeated social actions embedded in everyday life rather than through formal legal arrangements alone.

This finding supports Berger and Luckmann's (1966) proposition that externalization represents the process through which human beings project their subjective meanings into the social world. Within the Makawa Indigenous Community, customary values concerning land emerge from continuous interaction between individuals, customary leaders, and the surrounding environment. Land management practices therefore become expressions of collective consciousness that reflect inherited knowledge and shared cultural experiences. Rather than functioning solely as an economic activity, agricultural practices constitute a medium through which cultural values and customary norms are reproduced across generations. This finding also strengthens the argument of Ojong (2020) that indigenous territories should be understood as spaces where cultural identity and social reproduction are continuously maintained.

Objectivation of Land Meaning through Customary Institutions

The findings indicate that the objectivation of land meaning within the Makawa Indigenous Community occurs through the institutionalization of customary values into collective norms and social practices that regulate land management. Meanings initially developed through individual and communal experiences have evolved into objective social realities embodied in customary institutions, traditional leadership, and customary regulations governing land allocation, agricultural activities, forest utilization, and conflict resolution. The authority of the *Tomakaka* and other customary leaders legitimizes these rules, while community members collectively recognize and comply with them as binding social obligations rather than individual preferences. As a result, land is socially understood not merely as privately owned property but as a communal resource governed by customary principles, ancestral values, and collective responsibility. These institutionalized arrangements ensure that customary land management remains stable, socially accepted, and continuously reproduced within the Makawa Indigenous Community despite ongoing external social and economic changes.

The second stage of the social construction process is objectivation, during which meanings previously created through social interaction become institutionalized as objective social reality. The findings reveal that customary regulations governing land allocation, agricultural calendars, forest utilization, sanctions, and collective decision-making have become widely accepted as legitimate social institutions within the Makawa Indigenous Community. These customary arrangements are perceived not as individual preferences but as collectively recognized realities that regulate community behavior and ensure continuity of customary land management. Through continuous practice and social acceptance, customary institutions transform subjective meanings into objective norms that organize relationships between individuals, land, and the broader community.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), objectivation occurs when socially produced meanings become institutionalized and are subsequently experienced as objective reality. The Makawa case demonstrates that customary institutions function as mechanisms through which collective meanings are stabilized and reproduced over time. The authority of the *Tomakaka*, customary rules governing land use, and collective agreements regarding environmental management provide legitimacy to indigenous land governance. These findings

are consistent with Virtanen et al. (2025), who argue that indigenous governance systems contribute significantly to environmental sustainability because they institutionalize local knowledge and cultural values within everyday resource management practices.

Internalization of Land Meaning across Generations

The findings further demonstrate that the meaning of land is maintained through the process of internalization, whereby socially established values are transmitted to succeeding generations and incorporated into individual consciousness. Community members acquire customary knowledge through participation in agricultural activities, customary ceremonies, family interactions, and community life from an early age. Consequently, land is understood not only as inherited property but also as a symbol of identity, spirituality, social solidarity, and responsibility toward future generations. The internalization process enables customary values to remain resilient despite increasing external influences, including modernization and economic transformation.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) explain that internalization allows objective social reality to become part of individual consciousness through socialization. The findings indicate that the Makawa Indigenous Community continuously reproduces the meaning of land through intergenerational learning, thereby strengthening cultural resilience and preserving customary institutions. This finding also supports Howlett et al. (2025), who emphasize that indigenous knowledge should be understood as an integrated value system rather than merely technical environmental knowledge. In the Makawa context, land remains a central element of collective identity because customary values continue to be learned, practiced, and reaffirmed within everyday social life.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the meaning of land within the Makawa Indigenous Community is socially constructed through an ongoing dialectical process involving externalization, objectivation, and internalization. These interconnected processes explain how subjective experiences become collective institutions and subsequently shape individual consciousness across generations. The study therefore extends Berger and Luckmann's (1966) Social Construction Theory by providing empirical evidence that indigenous land management is sustained not only through customary regulations but also through the continuous reproduction of meanings embedded in everyday social interactions. Unlike approaches that conceptualize land primarily as an economic asset or legal object, this study shows that land functions simultaneously as ancestral heritage, cultural identity, spiritual space, and a mechanism for maintaining social cohesion within the Makawa Indigenous Community.

The findings demonstrate that the meaning of land within the Makawa Indigenous Community is not an inherent characteristic of the land itself but a socially constructed reality continuously produced through interactions among community members, customary leaders, and the surrounding environment. The process begins with externalization, whereby collective experiences, customary beliefs, and ancestral values are expressed through everyday land management practices, including agricultural activities, customary rituals, and collective decision-making. These practices reveal that land functions as a social institution rather than merely a productive asset, reflecting the community's shared understanding of identity, responsibility, and continuity. This finding reinforces Berger and Luckmann's (1966) proposition that social reality originates from human actions and interactions that gradually acquire collective meaning. Similarly, Ojong (2020) argues that indigenous territories represent spaces of cultural reproduction and collective identity rather than simply legally recognized property.

The study further reveals that repeated customary practices eventually become institutionalized through objectivation, transforming subjective meanings into objective social realities that regulate community behavior. Within the Makawa Indigenous Community, customary institutions, the authority of the *Tomakaka*,

traditional regulations, and collective agreements governing land allocation and environmental management are accepted as legitimate and binding social structures. These institutions function not only as mechanisms of social control but also as repositories of collective memory that preserve indigenous values across generations. Consequently, land management is embedded within an institutional framework that integrates ecological responsibility, customary authority, and social obligations. This finding supports Berger and Luckmann's (1966) argument that institutionalization stabilizes socially created meanings by presenting them as objective reality. It also aligns with Virtanen et al. (2025), who emphasize that indigenous governance systems maintain environmental sustainability by institutionalizing traditional ecological knowledge through customary institutions.

Another important finding concerns the process of internalization, through which customary values regarding land become embedded within individual consciousness and collective identity. The transmission of knowledge occurs through family interactions, participation in agricultural activities, customary ceremonies, and daily engagement with indigenous institutions, allowing younger generations to internalize the social meanings attached to land. Consequently, land is perceived not only as inherited property but also as a symbol of ancestral heritage, cultural identity, spirituality, and collective responsibility. The continuity of these values demonstrates that indigenous knowledge is sustained primarily through socialization rather than formal education or legal regulation. This finding is consistent with Berger and Luckmann's (1966) concept of internalization, whereby objective social reality becomes part of subjective consciousness. It also supports Howlett et al. (2025), who argue that indigenous knowledge should be understood as an integrated system of values continuously reproduced through everyday social practices.

Overall, this study extends previous research by demonstrating that the sustainability of indigenous land management depends not only on legal recognition or institutional arrangements but also on the continuous reproduction of socially shared meanings within the community. While earlier studies have predominantly examined customary land from the perspectives of legal recognition (Hidayat et al., 2026), political resistance (Bose, 2023), and territorial rights (Ojong, 2020), this research highlights the micro-sociological processes through which land acquires meaning and legitimacy in everyday life. The Makawa Indigenous Community illustrates that customary land management is maintained through the dynamic interaction of externalization, objectivation, and internalization, creating a resilient social system capable of preserving indigenous identity despite increasing pressures from modernization and socio-economic transformation. This finding contributes to the sociology of knowledge by providing empirical evidence that the durability of indigenous institutions is fundamentally rooted in the continuous social construction of meaning rather than solely in formal governance or legal protection.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the meaning of land within the Makawa Indigenous Community is socially constructed through the interconnected processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization, as conceptualized by Berger and Luckmann. Land is understood not merely as an economic resource but as a socio-cultural institution embodying ancestral heritage, spiritual values, collective identity, and communal responsibility. These meanings are continuously reproduced through customary practices, collective interactions, and intergenerational knowledge transmission, enabling indigenous land management to remain resilient despite contemporary social and economic changes.

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