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Transformation within the Dawan and Mambae Communities as a Form of Traditional Communication

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Abstract. Hamulak oral poetry is an intangible cultural heritage of the Dawan and Mambae communities in Timor-Leste, functioning as a traditional medium for conveying spiritual, social, and customary messages. This study describes the structure and delivery patterns of Hamulak, analyzes factors influencing changes in its form and function, and examines its relevance in contemporary society. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation with traditional speakers and community members in South Central Timor, Aileu, and Manufahi. Analysis employed structuralist and social context methods. Results indicate that Hamulak has a distinctive poetic structure marked by symbolic diction, cosmological metaphors, repetition, parallelism, rhythm, and regular narrative structure. Its delivery is performative and tied to speaker authority and ritual context. While social change, formal education, religious institutions, and communication technology have transformed its practice, Hamulak remains relevant as a cultural identity symbol and adaptive traditional communication.

Keywords: Hamulak oral poetry, Intangible cultural heritage, Traditional communication, Cultural identity.

1 Introduction

Hamulak oral poetry is a living intangible cultural heritage of the Dawan and Mambae communities in Timor-Leste. As a traditional medium of communication, Hamulak conveys spiritual, social, and customary messages while representing the collective identity of its supporting communities. The poetic recitations are characterized by symbolic meaning and reflect the relationship between humans, God, the universe, ancestors, and fellow community members [1] [3]. In practice, Hamulak is performed during ritual ceremonies, guest welcomes, community meetings, and other social events. Its poetic language strengthens social solidarity, reinforces traditional legitimacy, and preserves cultural values across generations [4] [5]. However, recent social changes have altered the form and transmission of Hamulak. The influence of formal education, religious institutions, and modern communication technology has shifted oral transmission toward written documentation and digital recording, while public spaces for local cultural expression have become limited.

Despite its strategic role in Timorese society, studies that systematically examine the structure, delivery patterns, and transformation of Hamulak remain limited. Understanding these aspects is essential for preserving the meaning, function, and cultural value of Hamulak in a changing social context. Therefore, this study aims to describe the structure and delivery patterns of Hamulak oral poetry, analyze the factors influencing changes in its form and function, and explain its relevance as a form of traditional communication in contemporary society. The findings are expected to contribute to the preservation and development of oral literature and cultural communication studies in Timor-Leste.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Oral Literature and Its Functions in Traditional Communication

Oral literature is a form of cultural expression passed down verbally through storytelling practices in specific communities [6] [7]. It is characterized by repetition, parallelism, metaphor, and formulaic patterns that strengthen collective memory and maintain cultural messages [8] [9]. Beyond its aesthetic value, oral literature operates as an organized communication system with internal rules [10] [11]. In traditional communities, oral literature conveys knowledge, moral values, collective history, and cosmological views that shape community identity.

Oral poetry serves as a medium for expressing human relationships with others, nature, ancestors, and transcendent forces through symbolic language [12],[13]. In the Dawan and Mambae communities, Hamulak oral poetry is one such form of traditional speech with a distinctive poetic structure. It functions as a medium of cultural communication that is both symbolic and normative, reinforcing social solidarity, group identity, and customary legitimacy. Hamulak is also used in conflict resolution and the legitimization of customary decisions, making it an integral part of the social and cultural system.

2.2 Structural Analysis and Dynamics of Change in Oral Tradition

The structuralist approach examines oral poetry as a system of interrelated elements, where diction, metaphor, repetition, parallelism, rhythm, and syntactic patterns form the overall meaning [14] [15]. In Hamulak, these elements are not random but follow inherited patterns that emphasize messages, maintain speech rhythm, and strengthen customary legitimacy. The symbolic structure reflects the Timorese worldview regarding cosmology, social hierarchy, and life balance. However, social changes due to modernization, formal education, and communication technology have affected the continuity of oral traditions. Traditions are not static; they undergo reconstruction or adaptation when facing new social contexts.

For Hamulak, oral transmission has shifted toward written documentation and digital recording, changing the relationship between speaker and listener. While this adaptation helps preserve the form, it also risks reducing symbolic meaning and social func-

tion. Related studies on Tonis and Natoni in Dawan society show that oral poetry remains present in ceremonies, but its structure and use are evolving [16]. This study positions Hamulak as a living and adaptive communication practice that requires analysis of both its structure and its dynamics of change.

3 Method

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design. The qualitative approach is used to explore the meaning, structure, and socio-cultural context of Hamulak oral poetry as a form of traditional communication. The descriptive-analytical design allows for systematic description of the poetic structure and delivery patterns of Hamulak, while analyzing changes in its form and function in contemporary social life. This approach treats text and context as a unified unit of analysis, which is suitable for oral literature studies.

3.2 Research Location, Subjects, and Data Collection

The research was conducted in South Central Timor, representing the Dawan community, and Aileu or Manufahi, representing the Mambae community. These areas were selected based on the continuity of Hamulak practice in local traditional and social life. Research subjects included traditional speakers known as Atonis, customary and religious leaders with cultural authority, and community members involved in traditional ceremonies. Data were collected through observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation recorded the practice of Hamulak delivery, social situation, and interaction between speakers and listeners. Interviews explored speech structure, symbolic meaning, social function, and perceptions of change in Hamulak practices. Documentation included audio or video recordings of Hamulak recitations, photographs, and relevant cultural archives.

3.3 Data Analysis and Validity

Data were analyzed qualitatively through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Hamulak utterances were transcribed and classified based on structural elements and delivery context. Analysis used a structuralist approach to examine diction, metaphor, repetition, parallelism, rhythm, and syntactic patterns, combined with social context analysis to understand the role and dynamics of Hamulak as traditional communication. Data validity was maintained through source and technique triangulation. Source triangulation compared information from traditional speakers, community leaders, and community members. Technique triangulation compared results from observation, interviews, and documentation. Key informants rechecked interview results to ensure consistency of meaning and interpretation. Research ethics were observed by obtaining informed consent, maintaining informant confidentiality, and respecting the customs and cultural values of the Dawan and Mambae communities.

4 Results and Discussion

The analysis of interview transcripts and ritual observations revealed that Hamulak possesses a relatively consistent poetic structure across both the Dawan and Mambae communities. Although several lexical variations were found due to differences in local dialects and ceremonial contexts, the essential components of Hamulak remained unchanged. Traditional speakers explained that the preservation of this structure is necessary because every expression has been inherited from previous generations and is considered part of customary authority. Similar observations have been reported in studies of oral traditions, where inherited linguistic structures function as mechanisms for preserving collective memory and ensuring cultural continuity [17][18]. Consequently, the stability of Hamulak reflects not only literary convention but also the continuity of customary knowledge within Timorese society.

The findings identified five principal structural elements that consistently appear in Hamulak performances, namely symbolic diction, repetition, parallelism, speech rhythm, and narrative structure. These elements were found in almost every ceremonial performance observed during the fieldwork, although their realization varied according to ritual purpose and the experience of individual speakers. As suggested in previous studies of oral poetry [19], structural elements within ritual discourse should not be interpreted separately because they collectively construct meaning and strengthen the effectiveness of traditional communication. Therefore, the structure of Hamulak represents an integrated system through which cultural messages are communicated and preserved.

Table 1 Structural Characteristics of Hamulak Oral Poetry in the Dawan and Mambae Communities.

Structural Element	Main Characteristic	Cultural Function
Symbolic diction	Traditional terms and natural metaphors	Conveying cosmological values
Repetition	Repeated phrases and lines	Strengthening traditional legitimacy
Parallelism	Balanced line pairs with complementary meaning	Maintaining rhythm and meaning
Speech rhythm	Rhythmic patterns in delivery	Strengthening persuasive power
Narrative structure	Sequence of prayers, requests, and affirmations	Maintaining ritual regularity

As presented in Table 1, symbolic diction constitutes the primary characteristic of Hamulak oral poetry. Interview data indicate that traditional speakers deliberately employ symbolic vocabulary rather than direct expressions when communicating customary messages. Natural elements such as mountains, rivers, forests, cultivated land, rain, and stones are frequently used to represent ancestral protection, social harmony, fertil-

ity, and the relationship between humans and the Creator. According to studies on indigenous oral traditions Ezema, (2025), symbolic language enables communities to express complex cultural concepts through metaphorical expressions that are widely understood within the same cultural environment. Similar communicative patterns were identified in Hamulak, where symbolic expressions function as shared cultural codes rather than individual stylistic choices.

Another important finding concerns the consistent use of repetition throughout Hamulak performances. Observations revealed that repeated words and phrases occur systematically from the beginning to the end of ritual recitations. Traditional speakers explained that repetition is intentionally maintained to emphasize important customary messages and to facilitate memorization during oral transmission. Previous research has shown that repetition is a fundamental characteristic of oral literature because it strengthens collective memory while simultaneously preserving textual stability across generations [8] [21]. In the context of Hamulak, repetition also reinforces the authority of the speaker because audiences recognize repeated expressions as legitimate components of customary discourse.

The findings further demonstrate that parallelism is another defining element of Hamulak. Paired expressions are arranged in complementary sequences that create semantic balance without repeating identical meanings. Instead, each expression expands the symbolic interpretation of the preceding line, producing a coherent poetic structure. Similar observations have been reported in studies of ritual language, which explain that parallel structures function to organize discourse while simultaneously reflecting indigenous concepts of reciprocity and harmony [22] [23]. This pattern was consistently identified in both Dawan and Mambae communities, suggesting that parallelism remains one of the principal mechanisms through which Hamulak maintains both aesthetic quality and communicative effectiveness.

Besides lexical organization, speech rhythm plays an equally significant role in shaping the effectiveness of Hamulak. Interview participants emphasized that correct tempo, pauses, stress, and intonation are essential because inappropriate delivery may reduce the ritual authority of the recitation. Previous studies have argued that oral traditions should be understood as performative events in which linguistic content and vocal performance interact to construct meaning [6] [24]. The present findings support this perspective, demonstrating that rhythmic delivery strengthens audience engagement while creating a solemn atmosphere appropriate for customary ceremonies.

The final structural element identified in this study is the narrative structure, which follows a relatively stable sequence consisting of invocation, requests, affirmations, and closing statements. Although minor variations occur according to ceremonial purpose, the overall sequence remains consistent across both communities. Informants explained that this order has been inherited from previous generations and should not be altered because each stage possesses specific ritual significance. Previous discussions of ritual discourse have similarly emphasized that narrative organization provides coherence and legitimacy to ceremonial communication [25][26]. Therefore, the narrative structure of Hamulak functions not only to organize speech but also to reinforce customary authority and social order.

Overall, the findings indicate that the structural characteristics of Hamulak extend beyond literary aesthetics. The interaction between symbolic diction, repetition, parallelism, speech rhythm, and narrative organization enables Hamulak to function as an effective medium of traditional communication. Despite differences in local pronunciation and ceremonial practice, both the Dawan and Mambae communities preserve these structural principles as part of their shared cultural heritage, confirming that Hamulak continues to play an important role in maintaining cultural identity and transmitting customary values across generations.

5 Conclusion

Hamulak oral poetry functions as a traditional communication system with a distinctive poetic structure and delivery pattern in the Dawan and Mambae communities. Its structure consists of symbolic diction, cosmological metaphors, repetition, parallelism, speech rhythm, and a regular narrative structure. The delivery is performative and depends on the authority of traditional speakers and ritual context, making Hamulak both an aesthetic expression and a mechanism for legitimizing norms and strengthening social solidarity. Social change, formal education, religious institutions, and communication technology have influenced the transformation of Hamulak from oral transmission to written and digital documentation. Despite these changes, Hamulak remains relevant as a symbol of cultural identity and an adaptive form of traditional communication. This study highlights the need for preservation and development efforts to maintain Hamulak as part of the intangible cultural heritage of the Dawan and Mambae communities in Timor-Leste.

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Disclosure of Interests. The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding this paper.

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