Sentani Folklore: A Reflection of Power Relations and Politics

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Abstract

This research proceeds from the premise that folklore not only represents the social life of the Sentani people but also serves as a discursive space where the community negotiates authority, legitimizes leadership, and voices criticism of power practices through symbols, metaphors, and cultural narratives. The study aims to analyze how power relations are represented in Sentani oral literature, identify the forms of political criticism embedded within it, and explain the function of oral literature as a mechanism of social control in indigenous life. A qualitative approach is employed, integrating the perspectives of the anthropology of literature and political literature. Folklore data—comprising folktales, oral chants, folk songs, and traditional expressions—were gathered through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with tribal chiefs, community elders, and members of the Sentani community across various islands and villages in Lake Sentani between January and February 2026. Analysis was conducted using a hermeneutic approach, integrating theories of oral literature, Gramsci's theory of hegemony, and Foucault's theory of power to interpret the relationship between the texts and the socio-cultural contexts in which the folklore is produced and transmitted. The study posits that Sentani folklore constitutes a cultural arena serving not merely as a medium for transmitting values and collective memory, but also as a space for negotiating power and articulating political criticism rooted in cosmology and customary norms. Consequently, this research seeks to broaden the scope of Papuan folklore studies, shifting from a culture-preservation orientation toward an interpretation that positions oral literature as a socio-political practice of indigenous communities. The study's contribution lies in the development of an analytical framework linking folklore, power, and cultural politics within the

context of the Sentani community.

Keywords: cultural politics, folklore, power relations, political criticism, Sentani community.

Introduction

The Sentani people have a folklore tradition that is relatively better preserved than that of other communities in Papua. Folklore is a cultural heritage passed down from one generation to the next through stories, chants, songs, sayings, games, rituals, paintings, carvings, and various other forms of cultural expression (Kamma, 1975; Yektiningtyas, 2011; Yektiningtyas, Ferdinandus, Suhirman & BrGinting, 2024). Folklore is a cultural identity that must be preserved because it embodies moral values, local knowledge, history, and a community's worldview. However, folklore does not merely serve as a form of entertainment or a vehicle for conveying moral messages. It embodies how a community understands life, builds social relationships, interprets authority, and determines what is considered right, wrong, appropriate, and inappropriate. Thus, folklore can be viewed as a cultural space where a community stores and negotiates various ideas about social life (Dundes, 1984; Danandjaja, 2002).

This study views one of Sentani folklore as a medium for understanding power relations and politics within society. Many folktales—including myths, legends, and fables—depict power, domination, fear, agency, and resistance within their narratives. For example, in the fable "The Cassowary and the Sparrow" (Yektiningtyas, 2018), the story is told of a cassowary that oppresses small birds and is ultimately defeated by a sparrow—a bird considered weak but clever. The social segregation between the upper class (the *ondofolo* family) and the lower class (the *yobhu yoholom*) also forms the backdrop for the differences in the motifs of bark paintings and carvings between the *ondofolo* and the *yobhu yoholom*. Common people are not permitted to paint or possess the motifs of the *ondofolo*. Conversely, the *ondofolo*, as the highest traditional leader of the Sentani, may possess these *yobhu yoholom* paintings. *Ondofolo* painting motifs are related to tribal myths and history. Meanwhile, the common people are only permitted to paint motifs derived from their surroundings, such as flora and fauna. Violations of these customary rules will result in curses, such as illness and death (Pepuho, Hendambo, Wally, Ongge, interview, 2024). Even though regulations have been a bit lose in modern times, people are still afraid to violate them. This study not only views folklore as a mirror reflecting social conditions but also considers the possibility that folklore helps shape the way a society understands power and its social relationships.

This view opens up the possibility of interpreting folklore through a political lens. Politics, in this context, is not understood solely as activities related to the state, government, political parties, or the competition for office. Politics can be present in more fundamental relationships—namely, those concerning power: who holds authority, who occupies a dominant position, who must submit, how power gains legitimacy, and how groups in subordinate positions respond to that power (Gramsci, 1971). From this perspective, folklore can serve as a space for representing

various forms of power relations. Characters, power, conflict, resistance, actions, symbols, and the resolution of a story can reveal how a society conceives of power, injustice, domination, resistance, and liberation (Foucault, in Afandi, 2015).

A political reading of folklore is important because a story never exists in a completely empty social space (Abrams, 1979; Lehtonen, 2000; Teuw, 2003; Yektiningtyas, 2011). Stories are passed down by communities that possess specific historical experiences, social structures, values, and power relations. Therefore, what is narrated, how characters are portrayed, who emerges victorious, who is punished, and what actions are deemed correct can serve as entry points for understanding the social and political perspectives embedded within them. In other words, folklore not only reflects existing power relations but also plays a role in maintaining, legitimizing, negotiating, or even challenging those power relations. From "The Cassowary and the Sparrow" (Yektiningtyas, 2019) that tells the story of a greedy cassowary that oppresses small birds but is ultimately defeated by a seemingly weak sparrow, a reader can learn something. This fable not only addresses greed and moral courage but also invites interpretations regarding power, domination, fear, solidarity, agency, resistance, and liberation. The story offers a glimpse into how groups in subordinate positions can build strength through unity and strategy. At the same time, the story also raises broader questions about how power exerts its influence, why oppressed groups may live in fear, and how seemingly powerful authority can be challenged.

This perspective is relevant when interpreting other aspects of Sentani folklore. These cultural heritages are inseparable from the community's collective experiences, kinship ties, environment, history, beliefs, and traditional social and leadership structures. Therefore, Sentani folklore can be viewed not merely as a cultural legacy of the past, but as a cultural text that holds knowledge about how the community understands the relationships between individuals and groups, between the powerful and the vulnerable, and between authority and the people.
Based on the background, the research questions are as follows.

(1) How are power relations represented in the folklore of the Sentani community?
(2) How are forms of political criticism of power practices constructed and conveyed through Sentani folklore?
(3) How does folklore function as a mechanism for social control and power negotiation in the life of the Sentani indigenous community?

The Sentani community has a unique power structure. The Sentani community is led by an *ondofolo*, who is assisted by five tribal chiefs (khote). Meanwhile, the *khote* are assisted by five *akhona*. These traditional positions are hereditary. The *ondofolo* is metaphorized as a banyan tree (*welenggo*) that protects small animals. The *ondofolo* has a duty to protect his community. A proverb states, "*welenggo hebenale ekhe kingkong*," which can be literally translated as "where there is a banyan tree, there birds sing in abundance." This proverb implies that when a leader governs his people well, they live in peace and prosperity (Yektiningtyas & Mawene, 2022). As those who are led and protected, the people are obligated to respect the *ondofolo*. To them, the *ondofolo* is a representative of the gods who is never wrong. Only two words come from his mouth: *onomi* (blessing) and *pelo* (curse). *Onomi* is bestowed upon those who respect him and

do good, while *pelo* is bestowed upon those who disobey him. This belief causes the community to act with great caution. Whether they like it or not, they will show respect and obey his commands. Pepuho, Ongge, and Ohee (interview February 2026) recounted that not all ondofolos acted wisely. Several stories describe how an ondofolo acted arbitrarily. Since the community could do nothing, they resigned themselves to their belief that "hu jokho erele" (the gods' eyes are always watching). The community's belief in divine justice led to the ondofolo's cosmological punishment: a mystical intervention came to the defense of the weak. However, as Pepuho and Hendambo noted (interview, March 2026), some members of the community could not fully accept the *ondofolo*'s arbitrary deeds, decisions, and actions—for example, regarding the distribution of land, farm produce, and land releases. This form of community resistance also emerged implicitly through folklore, such as myths, legends, as well as fables, chants, and folksongs that served as satire and criticism.

To examine the folklore of the Sentani people in this study, a hermeneutic approach was used—that is, the method and art of interpreting texts, symbols, or human actions so that their meaning can be understood in a contemporary context. This approach recognizes that understanding does not occur directly but is influenced by the cultural, linguistic, and historical backgrounds shared by the author and the reader. Ricoeur's (1976) hermeneutic approach is considered more suitable for the nature of the Sentani society and folklore. Sentani folklore is rich in symbolism, mythology, cosmology, and traditional structures that align with the three approaches proposed by Ricoeur. First is the theory of textual autonomy (distancing). According to Ricoeur, a written text exists independently of the author's original intent, its original sociocultural context, and its intended audience. A text possesses its own independent meaning and is open to anyone to interpret anew. Second, "The Symbol Gives Rise to Thought." According to Ricoeur, a symbol possesses a wealth of hidden meanings that trigger and stimulate the intellect to engage in boundless philosophical reflection. There are several characteristics of symbols, namely (1) double meaning, meaning that a symbol is not an ordinary sign, but rather a form of expression that has a literal meaning on the surface while also containing a second meaning that is not immediately apparent; (2) a surplus of meaning, meaning that a symbol cannot be exhausted or confined by a single, rigid conceptual definition; and (3) it is not a ready-made doctrine, meaning that a symbol does not dictate truth instantly, but acts as an initial stimulus to keep human thought working. Third, the dialectic of explanation and understanding. After dissecting folklore structurally, the analysis must explore the existential meaning, local wisdom, mythology, and traditional values it contains as they relate to real life.

Gramsci's (1971) concept of power centers on cultural hegemony, in which the ruling class maintains power not solely through physical coercion, but through moral and intellectual leadership and the voluntary consent of society, achieved through social institutions. Hegemony is a form of domination, influence, or complete power exercised by one social group, state, or party over another. This power is exercised not through physical coercion or violence, but through persuasion, ideology, and culture, so that the dominated party accepts it voluntarily. According to Gramsci, hegemony is the way a ruling group maintains power not through physical coercion, but by fostering voluntary consent from society. The ruling class's ideology and values are disseminated through culture and common sense so that they are accepted as normal. There

are three main concepts of hegemony, i.e. (1) moral and intellectual leadership, in which the ruling class leads through cultural values and ideas, not just weapons, (2) spontaneous consent, in which the people voluntarily accept the rules of the dominant group because they consider them legitimate and correct, and (3) a balance of power, in which hegemony is combined with domination or physical coercion, but the element of persuasion is far greater.

Meanwhile, Foucault (2006) views power not as something that is possessed, held by rulers, or imposed from above in an oppressive manner. According to Foucault, power is everywhere, spread throughout networks of social relations, and is always closely linked to the production of knowledge. The following are Foucault's key concepts of power, i.e. (1) power is not possessed but exercised—it is not an object or commodity that can be bought or owned, but rather a strategy that operates through actions and interpersonal relationships, (2) power is everywhere—it is not centered solely on the state or government, but permeates all social structures, institutions, and even everyday life, (3) the relationship between knowledge and power, in which knowledge and power mutually shape one another—what is considered "truth" is created by systems of power to legitimize specific forms of domination, and (4) power is productive, meaning that it not only prohibits or punishes but also produces reality, forms of behavior, habits, and specific subjects.

Methodology

This qualitative study was conducted in January–February 2026. Folklore data were collected from Yektiningtyas's previously published works, namely *Traditional Sentani Expressions: Documentation and Revitalization* (2019), *Understanding Ehabla: Oral Traditions of the Sentani People of Papua* (2022), *Environment-Based Folktales for Sentani Children (2022), and Asei Island: A Hidden Gem in Lake Sentani, Tourism Potential and Projections in Jayapura Regency* (2025), and *Sentani Folklore: Documentation and Dissemination of the Folklore of the Sentani People, Papua* (2026). The data were then enriched with new information from several villages and islands in Lake Sentani, Jayapura Regency—namely Asei Island, Waena Village, Harapan Village, Hobong, and Yoboi—through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with traditional leaders and elders of the Sentani community. In detail, the data used in this study are as follows.

Table 1. The Data

No.	Folklore Data
1	Myth: Tete Habu
2	Myth: Kepala suku dan sepasang suami istri
3	Legend of Lake Sentani
4	Legend: Punahnya Kampung Kleblouw
5	Fable: Kasuari dan burung pipit
6	Felekhoi
7	Folksongs

No.	Folklore Data
8	Traditional Sayings
9	Bark paintings (*malo*)
10	Carvings (*ohomo*)

Those research data were analyzed using Ricoeur's (1976) theory of textual analysis, reinforced by Gramsci's (1971) and Foucault's (2006) theories of power relations.

Results and Discussion

1. Representations of Power Relations in Sentani Folklore

The representation of power relations in folklore, forms of political criticism, and folklore as a social function in negotiating power within the Sentani indigenous community were analyzed through textual analysis, based on the premise that texts possess their own independent meaning and are open to anyone to interpret them freely and in new ways (Reicoeur, 1976). However, the results of this analysis were further discussed in a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) held in February 2026, attended by traditional leaders (*ondofolo* and other tribal chiefs) and community elders to gather feedback, ensuring the final results remain valid. The circular motifs (*fouw*) in Sentani paintings and carvings serve as the clearest medium for examining power relations within Sentani folklore. The center of the circle represents the *ondofolo* while the expanding concentric circles outward symbolize the tribal chief (*khote*), the chief's assistants (*akhona*), and the outermost circle represents the common people (*yobhu yoholom*) (Yektiningtyas, 2011; Yektiningtyas & Mokay, 2026).



Figure 1. Motif of f*ouw* as the basic motifs of bark paintings, carving, body tatoo that symbolize power relation of *ondofolo* and his people. Doc. Yektiningtyas, 2011

This fouw motif serves as a standard for depicting anything in paintings and carvings (fig. 1). The *ondofolo* has duties such as ensuring peace and prosperity and is entitled to be respected and obeyed by the community. The *ondofolo* is regarded as a "god" who utters only two words, namely a blessing and a curse. Through knowledge continuously conveyed via pictorial motifs,

stories, and chants, the community understands its place and always respects its traditional leader. This is what Gramsci (1971) and Siswati (2017) refer to as "hegemony"—a form of domination, influence, or complete power exercised by one social group, state, or entity over another. This power is exercised not through physical coercion or violence, but through persuasion, ideology, and culture, so that the dominated party accepts it voluntarily. In this context, the representation of power relations in Sentani folklore is closely tied to the traditional hierarchical structure centered on the *ondofolo*. The "fouw" motif, consisting of concentric circles, represents the hierarchical relationship between the *ondofolo, khote, akhona,* and *yobhu yoholom.* This structure positions the *ondofolo* as the center of traditional authority while fostering a sense of respect and obedience toward the leader. Meanwhile, Foucault (2006) and Afandi (2015) refer to this as the power-knowledge relationship, in which knowledge and power are closely intertwined. What is considered "truth" is created by systems of power to legitimize specific forms of domination. This legitimization of power is evident in various stories of figures who died for disobeying the *ondofolo*'s orders—for example, in the mythical tale "The Story of the Husband and Wife Who Sold Their Land"—and in characters who suffered misfortune for violating the rules set by traditional leaders in "The Legend of Lake Sentani."

2. Forms of Political Criticism of the Exercise of Power in Sentani Folklore

The position of traditional leaders, who must be respected, often gives rise to arbitrary behavior on their part. On the other hand, this behavior sparks resistance, rejection, and even rebellion, which are expressed through criticism in the form of humor, satire, and metaphors (Gramsci, 1971). Some Sentani folklore also recounts myths and legends depicting leaders who are arrogant, greedy, unjust, and act arbitrarily. Their actions cause suffering for the community. Below is an excerpt from a song that tells of the suffering of a community that can no longer farm or hunt because their land has been sold by the traditional leader.

Mekhai nebham khelewamaene
Khelai nibhi mokhowoyaene
Yoho yonggo nine fewounge
Ibho ingse randa fewjeunge
...
Dobonsolo reyara kla mba
Ebunsolo refam klha mba
Mana ya khale hirale
Khani bham kla bham mephaele

I like to work with my right hand
I like to work with my left hand
To meet my village people's needs
To make them prosperous and happy
…
Dobonsolo, I do not have forests anymore
Ebunsolo, I do not have land

Now I am suffering
No land, no forest

This song tells the story of a community questioning the loss of the land and forests where they used to farm and hunt—land that was sold off by their leaders. In another story, the arbitrary behavior of traditional leaders sparks resistance among the people, as depicted in the fable "The Cassowary and the Sparrow." A leader (metaphorically represented by a proud cassowary) oppresses small birds, which symbolize a powerless community, such as sparrows. This oppression causes the birds to unite and fight back against the cassowary. The cassowary eventually falls, its wings broken, and can no longer control the small birds' food supply. Generally, fables featuring animal characters like this seem simple and are often used for entertainment and taught to children. However, they may contain criticism or satire directed at traditional power structures in society (Yektiningtyas & Dewi, 2023). In Sentani folklore, such criticism does not always result in political punishment. Not all communities are willing or dare to retaliate directly against their leaders' actions. Violations of customary norms can bring about disaster, loss of wealth, illness, or ruin. This means that, for the Sentani people, human power and that of their leaders are limited by customary norms and the cosmological order. An *ondofolo* who had an affair with another *ondofolo*'s wife provoked the wrath of the gods, causing a massive flash flood to submerge an entire village and all its inhabitants—as recounted in the legend "The Submergence of Kleblouw Village." Meanwhile, an *ondofolo* named "Tete Habhu" forced the community to hunt pigs because he believed that pig's blood stored in a *habhu* (a container made from sago palm fronds) would transform into a baby boy. This attitude became a source of anxiety and conflict within the community. They wanted to resist but did not dare. In line with what Foucault (2006) stated regarding power and knowledge, their belief that the *ondofolo* was an incarnation of a god left them with no choice but to remain silent and obey his commands out of fear. Here, power operates through the production and acceptance of "truth," not merely through physical coercion. Ultimately, Tete Habhu, the *ondofolo*, died under mysterious circumstances. For the people of Sentani, this cosmological punishment represents divine intervention that prevents injustice from befalling the common people (interview with Pehuho, Ongge, 2025). This story is also compelling because it shows that people do not always accept arbitrary power. This silent resistance is answered by nature, whose eyes never close (*hu jokho erele*) (Yektiningtyas & Mawene, 2019).

3. The role of folklore as a mechanism for social control and the negotiation of power in the lives of the Sentani indigenous community

Through Sentani folklore, the role of folklore as a form of social control is evident both explicitly and implicitly. Sentani folklore serves to teach the boundaries of behavior considered appropriate and inappropriate for members of society, including leaders. For example, in the stories "Tete Habhu" and "The Destruction of Kleblouw Village" mentioned above, there is a recurring pattern: a leader commits a wrongdoing, the community warns him, but the leader ignores the warning. Since the community can do nothing more, consequences ensue, and the leader is punished by nature. Stories like these then serve as lessons for the community and are

passed down from generation to generation. Thus, the stories become a form of social education, reminding people that a leader must not abuse their power beyond acceptable limits. Interestingly, as recounted by Pepuho, Ohee, and Ongge (interview, February 2026), such social control does not necessarily require written rules. Stories, collective memory, and the consequences experienced by the figures in question serve as the community's means of upholding norms. Several mysterious events also occurred in the modern era during the 2020s. A traditional leader died suddenly after receiving proceeds from the sale of land. A story then spread among the community suggesting that the leader may not have followed the proper traditional procedures when selling the land, leading nature to punish him.

Folklore as a check on power. These stories seem to suggest that while leaders do possess power, that power has its limits. Although the Sentani people believe that traditional leaders are incarnations of the gods (Yektiningtyas & Mokay, 2026), this does not mean they can do as they please. The Sentani people believe that *Hu Jokho Erele* (The Eyes of the Gods are always watching) (Yektiningtyas & Dewi, 2023). For them, the gods will serve as fair judges. In situations where a traditional leader acts arbitrarily, the community, through the *abhu akho* (traditional advisor), warns the leader (Modouw, interview, January 2026). This demonstrates the existence of a social mechanism that allows the community to reprimand and even correct those in higher positions. Therefore, folklore not only depicts power structures but also reveals that (1) traditional authority must be subject to the community's social and moral norms and (2) the mysterious death of a traditional leader can be interpreted as a symbol that transgressions against the limits of power will ultimately face cosmological consequences.

Folklore also serves as a space for negotiating power. Negotiation does not always mean that the community openly resists its leaders. In folklore, negotiation can take the form of advice, reprimands, criticism, satire, reminders of customs, and the granting or withdrawal of legitimacy to a leader. For example, in the story "Tete Habu," the community issues a warning. In other words, the community is essentially saying, "You are indeed the leader, but there are boundaries that must not be crossed." Thus, there is a process of bargaining regarding how power should be exercised. Various folksongs express disappointment over the loss and destruction of nature due to its sale by traditional leaders. Pepuho, Ohee, and Ongge (interview, January 2026) explained that the Sentani people recognize conditional legitimacy of power. Felekhoi, a female advisor to the *ondofolo*, employed a strategy in the election of a new ondofolo by not nominating the eldest son as *ondofolo*, as he was considered to lack good leadership and often acted arbitrarily toward the common people (*yobhu yoholom*). The story of "Felekhoi" confirms that an ideal leader should not only possess a certain status or lineage but must also demonstrate wisdom, the ability to protect the community, and adherence to shared norms. Folklore can serve as a kind of "moral test" for a leader. In practice, however, this concept is not easily put into action.

Folklore can also serve as a "moral court." When a community lacks formal mechanisms to punish a leader, folklore can provide a space where the leader's behavior is evaluated and judged morally. Wicked leaders are not merely portrayed as "bad people." The stories assign consequences to their actions. In this way, the next generation receives the message that (1)

good leaders are respected and accepted, (2) leaders who stray will be warned, and (3) leaders who continue to stray will lose their legitimacy or face divine retribution. In this regard, folklore helps uphold the standards of leadership that society considers ideal.

Conclusion

From this paper, several important conclusions can be drawn. Sentani folklore is not only a cultural heritage that serves as a repository of stories, knowledge, and the collective memory of the community, but also a cultural space where power relations are represented, critiqued, constrained, and negotiated. Power relations are primarily represented through a hierarchical structure centered on the *ondofolo*, as reflected in the *fouw* motif. However, the *ondofolo*'s authority is not absolute. This power is always constrained by customary laws, moral norms, the interests of the community, and cosmological order. Criticism of power practices is conveyed through symbolic forms such as satire, humor, metaphors, songs, myths, legends, and fables. These forms allow the community to express dissatisfaction and resistance to arbitrary leadership without always having to engage in open confrontation. Thus, folklore serves as a medium for the community's critical voice while also serving as a means to demonstrate that power that strays from the norm will ultimately lose its legitimacy or face moral and cosmological consequences.

Furthermore, folklore functions as a mechanism for social control and the negotiation of power. Through stories and collective memory, the Sentani people uphold norms regarding the behavior of an ideal leader and serve as a reminder that status and lineage do not in and of themselves guarantee the legitimacy of leadership. Such legitimacy is conditional and depends on wisdom, the ability to protect the community, and adherence to customary norms. Thus, Sentani folklore does not merely reflect power structures but serves as a cultural mechanism that allows power to be continuously legitimized, criticized, limited, and negotiated. It is here that folklore plays a crucial role in maintaining a balance between the authority of leaders, customary norms, and the interests of the community.

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