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Traditional Speech of *Pamale* (Engagement Ceremony) of Loura Culture, Southwest Sumba: An Ethnography of Speaking

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to describe and analyze the forms, social functions, and cultural meanings of traditional speech in the Pamale engagement ceremony of the Loura people in Southwest Sumba. Employing a qualitative approach with the ethnography of communication method, this study examines ritual communication practices through Dell Hymes' SPEAKING model. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with Ata Panewe (traditional spokespersons), and audio-visual documentation. The findings reveal that Pamale traditional speech is dominated by semantic parallelism (ritual parallelism), utilizing standardized word pairs as a manifestation of the Loura cosmology. Functionally, this speech acts as a performative speech act that legitimizes the customary legal status of the couple and serves as an instrument for conflict mitigation through the use of euphemisms during Belis (bride price) negotiations. The cultural meaning within this speech represents a total social fact that transforms material economic value into symbolic honor for the clan (Kabizu). The study concludes that Pamale traditional speech is not merely an oral tradition but a legal instrument and a guardian of social harmony that binds the Loura community amidst the currents of modernization.

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1. Introduction

Language is not merely a medium of communication but also a cultural resource through which communities construct social relationships, negotiate identities, transmit collective knowledge, and preserve cultural heritage. In indigenous communities, language is closely embedded in customary practices, traditional beliefs, kinship systems, and collective worldviews. This relationship is particularly evident in traditional ceremonies, where speech functions not only to convey information but also to perform social actions, establish customary authority, and reinforce communal values. Recent studies have demonstrated that traditional communication plays an important role in maintaining cultural identity, transmitting social norms, and sustaining indigenous traditions (Purba, 2025; Rattu et al., 2025; Syahputra, 2026).

The relationship between language and culture can be examined through the ethnography of communication developed by Hymes (1972, 1974), which emphasizes the importance of understanding language within its sociocultural context. Through the SPEAKING model—Setting and Scene, Participants, Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre—communication can be analyzed in relation to its participants, purposes, interactional structures, and cultural conventions. This framework is particularly relevant to ritual communication, where speech is governed by established social roles and customary norms. Recent studies have demonstrated its applicability in analyzing indigenous ceremonies and culturally embedded communicative practices (Anshori et al., 2026; Manafe et al., 2026; Wungubelen et al., 2024). Furthermore, ritual speech constitutes a form of social action through which commitments, obligations, and social relationships are established and maintained (House et al., 2021). Research on Sasak wedding discourse and the Basiacuang marriage tradition also demonstrates how ceremonial language encodes customary obligations and strengthens social cohesion (Muliani & Ate, 2026; Syahputra, 2026).

In Indonesia, traditional oral practices remain essential to the cultural identity of indigenous communities, particularly in Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara, where customary traditions and Marapu-related beliefs influence social and ceremonial life. Previous studies have explored the symbolic meanings of Marapu agricultural rituals (Djoh et al., 2023), communication practices in royal funeral ceremonies (Wungubelen et al., 2024), conceptual meanings in traditional ritual speech (Kamuri & Mone, 2024), and the spiritual dimensions of the Wiaha Manu ritual through the SPEAKING framework (Manafe et al., 2026). Other research has examined the relationship between ritual practices, cultural values, and social harmony in the Pamalle tradition (Misseri Cordia et al., 2024). These studies establish the importance of ritual communication in reproducing cultural knowledge, collective identity, and customary relationships.

Within this cultural context, the Loura community of Southwest Sumba maintains a traditional engagement ceremony known as Pamale, which formalizes the relationship between two families before marriage. The ceremony involves customary spokespersons known as wunang or Ata Panewe, who mediate communication concerning marriage arrangements, customary obligations, and belis (bride-price) negotiations. The traditional speech delivered during this ceremony is characterized by specialized expressions, semantic parallelism, symbolic references, and conventionalized forms of communication. Such expressions communicate respect, responsibility, kinship, and ancestral authority, while ceremonial objects, including horses, buffalo, chickens, and betel and areca nuts, represent culturally established values and social commitments. These symbolic practices reflect the relationship between language, metaphor, and the construction of cultural meaning (Lakoff

& Johnson, 1980). Similar characteristics have been identified in research on the Seblang ritual of the Osing community, which highlights the role of symbolic and formal language in maintaining cultural identity (Izahaslina and Ridwan, 2026).

Beyond their symbolic meanings, traditional speeches perform important social functions by facilitating customary negotiations, legitimizing agreements, maintaining relationships, and preventing potential conflicts between families. Ritualized communication provides an established mechanism for regulating social interactions and reinforcing customary institutions (House et al., 2021). However, the continuity of indigenous oral traditions faces challenges associated with modernization and declining intergenerational transmission. Rattu et al. (2025) identified the vulnerability of the Tatambaken oral tradition in relation to changing social conditions, while Meighan (2024) emphasized the potential of traditional ecological knowledge and technology in supporting indigenous language revitalization. Similarly, Hakim et al. (2025) highlighted the importance of community participation and digital initiatives in sustaining linguistic identity. These findings underline the importance of documenting traditional speech as a means of preserving linguistic knowledge and intangible cultural heritage.

Despite these contributions, existing research on Sumbanese traditions has predominantly focused on religious rituals, agricultural ceremonies, funeral practices, and broader sociocultural meanings (Djoh et al., 2023; Kamuri & Mone, 2024; Misseri Cordia et al., 2024; Wungubelen et al., 2024). Limited attention has been given to the linguistic characteristics and communicative mechanisms of traditional speech in the Loura Pamale engagement ceremony. Moreover, previous applications of the SPEAKING framework have examined different ceremonial contexts rather than integrating the communicative structure, social functions, and symbolic meanings of Pamale ritual speech (Manafe et al., 2026; Wungubelen et al., 2024). Therefore, further investigation is necessary to understand how traditional speech operates within customary negotiations and contributes to the maintenance of kinship relations and cultural identity.

To address this gap, this study examines traditional speech in the Pamale engagement ceremony of the Loura community in Southwest Sumba through Hymes' ethnography of communication framework. Specifically, it aims (1) to identify and interpret the meanings embedded in traditional speech and (2) to analyze the social functions and cultural meanings conveyed through ritual utterances. By integrating the SPEAKING model with the analysis of linguistic expressions, social functions, and symbolic meanings, this study contributes to anthropological linguistics and the documentation of indigenous ceremonial discourse. It also provides insights into how traditional language practices sustain customary institutions, collective identity, and intangible cultural heritage.

2. Literature Review

The ethnography of communication provides a theoretical foundation for understanding language as a culturally situated social practice. Hymes (1972, 1974) emphasizes that communication must be examined within its sociocultural context through the SPEAKING model, comprising Setting and Scene, Participants, Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre. This framework enables researchers to investigate how communicative practices reflect social relationships, cultural expectations, and collective identities. Its application in Indonesian traditional ceremonies has been demonstrated by Wungubelen et al. (2024) in the Marapu royal funeral ritual and Manafe et al. (2026) in the Wiaha Manu ritual. Similarly, Izahaslina and Ridwan (2026) demonstrate how ritual language

reflects culturally established communication patterns and social norms.

Ritual language also functions as a medium for constructing symbolic meanings and performing social actions. Jakobson (1960) highlights the poetic function of language, while Halliday (1978) views language as a social semiotic resource. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain how metaphors shape cultural understanding, whereas Fox (1971, 1988) demonstrates the significance of semantic parallelism in eastern Indonesian ritual languages. From a speech act perspective, Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) explain how utterances perform actions and establish social commitments. House et al. (2021) further demonstrate the relationship between speech acts, interactional structures, and ritual practices. Empirical studies by Patiung et al. (2026), Keban et al. (2026), and Muliani and Ate (2026) similarly reveal how parallelism, symbolic expressions, and linguistic structures in traditional wedding ceremonies communicate customary obligations, strengthen kinship, and maintain social relationships.

Traditional speech also performs important social and cultural functions, including regulating interactions, transmitting customary knowledge, and reinforcing collective identity. Fishman (1991) emphasizes the importance of intergenerational language transmission for maintaining linguistic continuity. In Indonesian contexts, Djoh et al. (2023) examine the symbolic meanings of Marapu agricultural rituals, while Sarjono et al. (2023) and Tuti and Safitri (2024) demonstrate the contribution of ritual communication to cultural preservation and social continuity. Kamuri and Mone (2024) and Misseri Cordia et al. (2024) further highlight the conceptual and philosophical meanings embedded in Sumbanese traditions. Nevertheless, modernization presents challenges to the continuity of indigenous oral traditions. Meighan (2024) emphasizes the potential of technology in supporting language transmission, while Rattu et al. (2025) and Hakim et al. (2025) highlight the importance of community participation and intergenerational engagement in preserving indigenous linguistic heritage. Based on these perspectives, the present study examines Pamale traditional speech as a culturally embedded communicative practice by analyzing its SPEAKING components, symbolic meanings, and social functions in maintaining customary agreements, kinship relations, and the cultural identity of the Loura community.

3. Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using the ethnography of communication approach to examine the meanings, social functions, and cultural values embedded in the traditional speech of the Pamale engagement ceremony in the Loura community, Southwest Sumba. Following Hymes (1972, 1974), this approach views language as a socially and culturally situated practice rather than merely a linguistic system. It was therefore appropriate for investigating how ritual utterances are performed, organized, and interpreted within the community's customary traditions, particularly through the SPEAKING framework.

The research was conducted in the Loura community, Southwest Sumba Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, where the Pamale ceremony remains part of the customary marriage tradition. The participants consisted of four customary leaders (wunang or Ata Panewe) representing the bride's and groom's families. They were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement, knowledge, and experience in performing and interpreting traditional speeches during the ceremony. Their participation provided insights into the linguistic expressions, customary procedures, and cultural meanings associated with Pamale.

The research data consisted of verbal utterances delivered during the Pamale ceremony

and contextual information concerning the ceremonial setting, participants, symbolic objects, and interactional norms. Primary data were obtained through participant observation, audio-visual recordings, and semi-structured interviews with customary leaders, elders, and family representatives. Secondary data were drawn from relevant books, journal articles, cultural documents, and previous studies concerning ethnography of communication, ritual language, and Sumbanese traditions. The researcher served as the primary research instrument, supported by observation guidelines, interview protocols, recording devices, field notes, and documentation sheets to systematically capture verbal and non-verbal aspects of the communication event.

Data collection involved four procedures. First, participant observation was conducted by attending the Pamale ceremony to examine its communicative setting, sequence of activities, and traditional speech practices. Second, audio and video recordings were used to document ritual utterances and facilitate accurate transcription. Third, semi-structured interviews were conducted with customary spokespersons, elders, and family representatives to obtain explanations of the meanings, functions, and cultural significance of the utterances. Finally, document analysis was undertaken to examine available written and audio-visual materials relevant to the Pamale tradition and Loura cultural heritage.

Data analysis followed an iterative qualitative procedure. First, the recorded utterances were transcribed and, where necessary, translated into English while preserving their contextual and cultural meanings. Second, the data were organized according to the stages of the ceremony and coded using the eight components of Hymes' SPEAKING model: Setting and Scene, Participants, Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre. Third, the coded utterances were interpreted to identify their linguistic meanings, social functions, and symbolic-cultural significance by relating the findings to the ethnography of communication and relevant theories of language functions and symbolic meaning. Finally, the linguistic and cultural interpretations were synthesized to develop an integrated understanding of the role of traditional speech in the Pamale engagement ceremony.

To establish the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed methodological and source triangulation by comparing information obtained from observations, interviews, audio-visual recordings, and documentary materials. Member checking was also conducted by discussing preliminary interpretations with selected participants, particularly customary leaders, to verify the accuracy of the interpretations. Furthermore, detailed descriptions of the research context and communicative practices were provided to support the transferability and authenticity of the findings.

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the research objectives and procedures, and their voluntary consent was obtained before data collection. Audio-visual recordings were used exclusively for academic purposes. Particular attention was also given to respecting customary knowledge, cultural sensitivities, and community values to prevent misrepresentation or inappropriate use of traditional information.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Communicative Context of the Pamale Ceremony

The findings reveal that the Pamale engagement ceremony is not merely a preparatory stage before marriage but a culturally structured communication event that formalizes the union between two extended families. The ceremony is generally conducted during the daytime, usually between 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., at the bride's family residence or another

customary communal space. The physical setting and ceremonial arrangement symbolize respect for ancestral traditions and provide a sacred environment for the delivery of ritual speech.

The participants involved in the ceremony include the customary spokespersons (wunang or Ata Panewe), the bride's and groom's families, community elders, relatives, and local witnesses. An important characteristic of the event is that the parents of the bride and groom do not communicate directly; instead, all negotiations and formal utterances are conveyed through the wunang. This communicative convention reflects the social norms and hierarchical structure of the Loura customary system.

Using Dell Hymes' ethnography of communication perspective, the Pamale ceremony can be understood as a complete speech event in which language, social roles, ritual objects, and cultural expectations interact simultaneously. The findings indicate that the traditional speech delivered during the ceremony is inseparable from the broader cultural context in which it occurs. The utterances do not simply transfer information but also establish legitimacy, reinforce social relationships, and maintain the continuity of ancestral traditions.

Table 1. Communicative Structure of the Pamale Ceremony from the Perspective of the SPEAKING Model

SPEAKING Components	**Findings in the Pamale Ceremony**
Setting and Scene	Conducted in the bride's family house or customary venue within a sacred and formal atmosphere.
Participants	Customary spokepersons (wunang), the families of both parties, elders, relatives, and symbolic ancestral presence.
Ends	To formalize the engagement, negotiate and fulfill customary obligations, and strengthen kinship ties.
Act Sequence	Opening greetings, statement of purpose, negotiation of customary obligations, symbolic handover of objects, and closing affirmation.
Key	Solemn, respectful, poetic, and authoritative.
Instrumentalities	Oral Communication in the Loura language supported by symbolic ritual objects.
Norms	Communication follows customary rules, particularly the prohibition against direct negotiation between the parents of both families.
Genre	Traditional ritual speech and customary negotiation discourse.

These findings support Hymes' (1974) argument that communication should be analyzed not only in terms of linguistic forms but also through the social and cultural circumstances in which speech occurs. The Pamale ceremony demonstrates that ritual language is a socially organized activity governed by explicit norms regarding who may speak, to whom, and under what conditions.

Furthermore, the role of the wunang as the exclusive intermediary between families confirms that ritual communication functions to preserve social harmony and prevent direct conflict during customary negotiations. This finding is consistent with the work of Wungubelen et al. (2024), who found that Sumbanese ritual communication relies heavily on

designated speakers to maintain customary order and collective respect. The study also extends the findings of Misseri et al. (2024) by demonstrating that the values embedded in the Pamale tradition are not only reflected through ritual practices but are also systematically encoded in the communicative structure of the ceremony itself.

4.2 The Meanings of Traditional Speech in the Pamale Ceremony

Analysis of the ritual utterances shows that the traditional speech used in the Pamale ceremony contains multiple layers of meaning that go beyond literal interpretation. The speeches delivered by the wunang communicate promises, obligations, blessings, and commitments that bind not only the prospective bride and groom but also the two extended families involved in the customary agreement.

One recurring expression found in the ritual discourse emphasizes that the words spoken during the ceremony are "not merely words, but a vow held high before family and ancestors." This expression reflects the belief that language possesses performative power; speaking the ritual formula is itself an act that creates and legitimizes social reality. Through the utterance of these customary expressions, the engagement becomes socially and culturally valid.

Table 2. Utterance Meaning Identified

Function	Original Loura Speech	English Translation	Interpretation
Legitimization	*Ghetti nunggu di hetti ata paneghe bali mono bali ki padde ghetti dede nawe ghetti netti pata tanah*	"The spokespersons from both sides speak according to the customs handed down by the ancestors."	Emphasizes ancestral authority and legitimizes the ritual process.
Negotiation	*Ghina bado ne loddo appa dommo parema da ne kareba na ti'a gu marouna bukkugu*	"Three buffalo are presented together with one envelope as part of the agreed customary obligation."	Demonstrates negotiation and fulfillment of customary agreements.
Blessing	*Bana toma bana dukki zaggara marapu*	"May the ancestors bless and protect the newly established relationship."	Represents spiritual communication with ancestors.
Transition	*Papalai gai koro, paburu gai nauta, pakalaki kaba kidde*	"A pair of chickens and a thread-spinning tool are given as provisions for life."	Symbolizes livelihood, fertility, and transition into a new kinship group.

Table 2 demonstrates that Pamale ritual speech is not merely a verbal exchange but a culturally embedded communicative act. The selected excerpts reveal how ritual utterances function to legitimize agreements, negotiate obligations, invoke blessings, and symbolize social transition. These functions highlight the inseparable relationship between language, culture, and customary law in the Loura community.

The findings further reveal that many elements of the speech are deeply symbolic. The handover of animals, such as horses and buffalo, represents responsibility, honor, and the fulfillment of customary obligations. Likewise, ritual objects such as the kidde (thread-spinning tool), chickens, machetes, spears, betel leaves, and areca nuts carry metaphorical

meanings associated with livelihood, continuity, fertility, protection, and the transition to a new stage of life.

Table 3. Symbolic Meanings Identified

Symbolic Object	Cultural Meaning
Horses and Buffalo	Honor, responsibility, and fulfillment of customary agreements.
Kidde (thread-spinning tool)	Livelihood, industriousness, and the continuation of family life.
Pair of Chickens	Fertility, prosperity, and sustainability of the household.
Machete and spear	Commitment, protection, and social responsibility.
Betel and Areca Nut	Respect, unity, and communication between humans and ancestors.

The findings indicate that ritual speech in the Pamale ceremony functions as a symbolic cultural text rather than a simple communicative exchange. The frequent use of metaphorical expressions and symbolic objects supports Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) argument that metaphors shape the way communities conceptualize social reality. In the Pamale tradition, abstract concepts such as commitment, kinship, and social responsibility are represented through concrete cultural symbols that are widely understood within the Loura community.

These findings also align with Kamuri and Mone (2024) who found that ritual speech in Sumba reflects the cultural worldwide and symbolic reasoning of the Sumbanese community. However, while previous studies have primarily discussed the philosophical values contained in ritual traditions, the present study demonstrates how these meanings are actively constructed and transmitted through specific communicative practices and ritual utterances.

4.3 Social Functions and Cultural Significance of Pamale Traditional Speech

Beyond its symbolic content, the findings demonstrate that the traditional speech of the Pamale ceremony performs several essential social functions. First, it functions as a mechanism for legitimizing customary agreements, particularly the acceptance of marriage arrangements and the fulfillment of belis obligations. Second, it serves to strengthen kinship and social solidarity by publicly affirming the relationship between the two families. Third, it acts as a medium for the transmission of cultural values, introducing younger generations to the norms, beliefs, and responsibilities that define Loura identity.

Another important finding concerns the role of ritual speech in cultural preservation. Community elders explained that the utterances delivered during Pamale have been inherited from previous generations and are regarded as pusaka adat (customary heritage). Altering or omitting these expressions is generally discouraged because they are believed to embody the wisdom and authority of the ancestors. Consequently, the continued performance of ritual speech contributes directly to the preservation of the Loura language and oral tradition.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that modernization and changing language practices have created challenges for the continuity of this tradition. Younger community members often participate in the ceremony but may not fully understand the meanings of the ritual expressions. This situation highlights the growing importance of documentation and academic research in supporting the preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

The findings confirm Jakobson's (1960) and Halliday's (1978) theories that language

fulfills functions extending beyond the transmission of information. In the Pamale ceremony, ritual speech performs phatic, conative, interactional, and poetic functions by maintaining social relationships, directing communal behavior, and reinforcing collective identity.

The results also support Fishman's (1991) perspective on language maintenance and revitalization. As traditional speech becomes increasingly restricted to ceremonial contexts, the risk of language shift grows, particularly among younger generations. Nevertheless, the Pamale ceremony remains an important site for cultural transmission because it provides an opportunity for younger participants to experience and engage with their ancestral language and traditions.

Finally, this study extends previous research by integrating the analysis of speech-event components, symbolic meanings, and social functions within a single ethnography of communication framework. This integrated perspective demonstrates that the traditional speech of the Pamale ceremony is not simply a collection of ritual formulas but a dynamic cultural system through which the Loura community negotiates identity, maintains social order, and preserves its intangible cultural heritage in the face of contemporary social change.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Pamale engagement ceremony of the Loura community in Southwest Sumba constitutes a culturally embedded speech event in which language, ritual practices, social relationships, and customary values are closely interconnected. Through Hymes' Ethnography of Communication and the SPEAKING model, the findings reveal that traditional speech functions not merely as a means of communication but also as a performative instrument for legitimizing marriage agreements, fulfilling customary obligations, and strengthening kinship relations. The ritual communication is characterized by designated spokespersons (wunang), formalized speaking procedures, authoritative and poetic expressions, and established customary norms. Furthermore, the symbolic meanings of ritual utterances and ceremonial objects represent fundamental cultural values, including honor, responsibility, fertility, protection, social harmony, and ancestral continuity. These practices demonstrate the role of Pamale traditional speech in maintaining collective identity and transmitting indigenous knowledge across generations. Nevertheless, modernization and language shift pose challenges to the younger generation's understanding of these cultural expressions. This study contributes to anthropological linguistics and the ethnography of communication by documenting an understudied form of ritual discourse and highlighting the importance of preserving the Loura community's intangible linguistic heritage. Future research should investigate comparable ritual speech practices across Sumbanese communities and examine intergenerational transmission to strengthen the documentation and preservation of indigenous oral traditions.

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Authors' Contributions
Oktaviana M. Kodi: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft, and Writing – Review & Editing.
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All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Statement of the Use of AI
AI-assisted tools were used exclusively to support language refinement, grammatical correction, and improvements in academic writing style during manuscript preparation. These tools were not used to generate research data, conduct data analysis, or formulate research findings. The research conceptualization, design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions were undertaken by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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