

Traditional Leadership and Cultural Conflict Mediation: The Case of Pandji Pragiwaksono and Rambu Solo' in Toraja

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Abstract: This study examines Indigenous Toraja leadership as a mediator in digital era cultural conflicts, specifically addressing the controversy sparked by comedian Pandji Pragiwaksono's 2013 stand-up material on the sacred Rambu Solo' funeral ritual, which resurfaced in early 2026. The research aims to integrate contingency and behavioral leadership theories with Indigenous practices to develop a culturally adaptive framework for sustaining dark tourism destinations in multicultural societies. The case highlights tensions between national digital influence and local cultural values, threatening social harmony and tourism authenticity. Using a qualitative case study approach with secondary data from February 2026 events, the analysis reveals that Toraja Indigenous reconciliation effectively mediated the conflict through contingency fit applying restorative leadership suited to digital-adaptive challenges and behavioral emphasis on harmony via rituals like Ma'Buak Burun Mangkali Oto'. This multilevel process regulated distress, empowered community, and fostered mutual growth, ultimately preserving Rambu Solo's sacredness and supporting sustainable tourism. The study's novelty lies in synthesizing classical leadership theories with Indigenous practices in the Indonesian context, an underexplored area. Findings suggest that Indigenous leadership offers robust strategies for building learning-oriented communities and culturally sensitive tourism, enhancing social capital preservation and resilience in the face of digital-cultural conflicts.

Keywords: Behavioral Leadership; Contingency Theory; Cultural Conflict; Indigenous Leadership; Sustainable Dark Tourism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership is a pervasive yet complex phenomenon that operates across multiple domains of human life, including politics, business, education, and cultural communities. Despite its omnipresence, a comprehensive understanding of leadership, particularly in its moral and relational dimensions, remains a significant academic challenge (Kempster & Jackson, 2021; Berkovich & Eyal, 2021). In the digital era, characterized by boundless connectivity and rapid information flows, leadership extends beyond influence and direction to include the capacity to respond adaptively to unintended consequences, including the viral resurgence of past content that can trigger cultural tensions (Boonstra, 2023).

This phenomenon is concretely manifested in the case of comedian Pandji Pragiwaksono, whose 2013 stand up comedy material about the Rambu Solo' ritual, the sacred funeral ceremony of the Toraja people, went viral again in late 2025 and sparked a wave of protests from the Toraja Indigenous community (Kompas, 2026; DetikSulsel, 2026). In the performance titled "Mesakke Bangsaku," Pandji satirized the Rambu Solo' by highlighting its high costs and elaborate practices. While intended as social commentary, this was widely perceived by the Toraja community as disrespectful to a sacred tradition rooted in ancestral reverence and the Aluk To Dolo belief system (Metro TV, 2026). The 1 minute 44 second

video clip that spread widely on social media not only refreshed the collective memory of the Toraja people but also ignited a national debate about the boundaries of freedom of expression, respect for local culture, and the role of Indigenous leadership in resolving conflicts in the digital age.

This conflict has dimensions far deeper than a mere interpersonal dispute. The Rambu Solo' is not merely a funeral ceremony; it is the core of Toraja cultural identity, building social capital through ancestral reverence and strong community bonds (Baan et al., 2022). As a central element of Toraja dark tourism, the authenticity and sacredness of the Rambu Solo' form the foundation for the sustainability of a globally recognized tourist destination. UNESCO has even designated Tana Toraja as a World Intangible Cultural Heritage due to its customary rituals, including the Rambu Solo' and Ma'nene' (UNESCO, 2020). Threats to this cultural authenticity not only disrupt social harmony but also have the potential to erode tourist trust and the economic sustainability of tourism, which relies on cultural authenticity (Light, 2017; Gjerald et al., 2025; Gaonkar & Sukthankar, 2025).

The core problem addressed in this study is the fundamental tension between national digital influence and the preservation of Indigenous cultural integrity in multicultural societies (Rosalina et al., 2023). On one hand, digital platforms enhance communication and democratize information. On the other hand, these same platforms can inadvertently undermine sacred traditions, creating conflicts that require culturally sensitive mediation. Without approaches rooted in local wisdom, such conflicts risk deepening social polarization, weakening trust, and encouraging unsustainable tourism practices driven by cultural commodification (Gjerald et al., 2025; Sangha et al., 2025).

This study argues that classical leadership theories, particularly contingency theory and behavioral theory, provide useful frameworks for understanding the effectiveness of Indigenous leadership in resolving such conflicts. Contingency theory emphasizes the importance of aligning leadership style with situational demands (Fiedler, 1978), while behavioral theory highlights the balance between concern for people and task outcomes, as reflected in relational harmony and cultural preservation (Blake & Mouton, 1964). However, the application of these theories in the context of Indigenous leadership in Indonesia, especially in mediating digital cultural conflicts, remains extremely limited.

To address gaps in the existing literature, this study proposes a new framework called Indigenous Mediation Leadership, which integrates classical leadership theories with Indigenous practices. This framework explains how leadership operates across multiple levels, from individual and digital influence to broader cultural and social contexts, while fostering

adaptive and learning oriented communities (Dam et al., 2025; Dawson et al., 2024; Sangha et al., 2025; Utomo et al., 2026). Although previous studies have applied leadership theories in crisis management and tourism contexts, research exploring their integration with Indigenous mediation in digital cultural conflicts, particularly regarding dark tourism sustainability in Indonesia, remains scarce (Light, 2017; Rosalina et al., 2023).

The novelty of this research lies in its fresh empirical anchor: the 2026 Pandji reconciliation process as a rare case of Indigenous leadership mediating digital era cultural tensions. By synthesizing contingency approaches, including situational restorative fit, and behavioral approaches, including high people concern through ritual, this study extends previous work to propose a research worthy framework for culturally sensitive leadership in interconnected worlds. This contributes to knowledge advancement by bridging classical theories with Indigenous practices, offering implications for policymakers, tourism stakeholders, and leadership education in multicultural contexts. The paper proceeds with a literature synthesis, case analysis, discussion of implications for sustainable dark tourism, and conclusions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Classical leadership theories provide a foundation for understanding leadership as a transformative process across complex and interconnected contexts. Trait theory emphasizes personal attributes such as integrity, resilience, and responsibility as key determinants of effective leadership (Bakari et al., 2017). In Indigenous settings, these traits function as ethical anchors that sustain trust and cultural legitimacy, particularly in sensitive heritage contexts (Zhang et al., 2024). However, its individualistic focus is limited, as Indigenous leadership reflects collective values and shared responsibility (Milena et al., 2021; Wolfgramm et al., 2016). In dark tourism, these traits help prevent commodification by prioritizing authenticity and cultural respect (Sandefur & Deloria, 2018; Sangha et al., 2025).

Behavioral theory shifts attention to leadership actions, particularly the balance between concern for people and task outcomes (Blake & Mouton, 1964). High concern for people through empathy, inclusivity, and dialogue supports restorative approaches that foster trust and long-term harmony (Saeed et al., 2014). In dark tourism, this is reflected in rituals and participatory practices that emphasize healing and cultural preservation, while reducing the risk of commodification (Biran & Hyde, 2013; Sumanapala & Wolf, 2023; Light, 2017).

Contingency theory highlights the importance of aligning leadership style with situational demands (Fiedler, 1978). Adaptive and relational leadership is particularly effective in dynamic, multicultural, and digital contexts, enabling flexible responses that balance ethics, cultural values, and external pressures (Zhang et al., 2024; Biran & Hyde, 2013). Indigenous governance exemplifies this through community-led, context-sensitive approaches, although traditional models often overlook Indigenous relational dimensions (Sangha et al., 2025; Carr et al., 2016).

These perspectives converge in restorative justice, which emphasizes harmony restoration, relational mediation, and the preservation of social capital and authenticity (Bakari et al., 2017; Boonstra, 2023; Gjerald et al., 2025). In dark tourism, restorative approaches promote equity, community resilience, and sustainable cultural practices (Light, 2017; Sumanapala & Wolf, 2023; Utomo et al., 2026; Sangha et al., 2025).

Synthesizing these theories, the study proposes the Indigenous Mediation Leadership framework, integrating ethical traits, people-centered behaviors, and situational adaptability. This framework addresses gaps in applying classical leadership theories to Indigenous and digital-cultural contexts, contributing to culturally sensitive leadership and sustainable dark tourism (Sangha et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2024).

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative single case study design to examine the Toraja Indigenous reconciliation process involving comedian Pandji. The case study approach was chosen for its ability to explore real world phenomena in depth within their natural context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). As Yin (2018) asserts, the case study is highly appropriate for answering "how" and "why" questions about contemporary events where the researcher has limited control over the subjects' behavior.

The selected case, the customary trial and restorative proceedings at Tongkonan Layuk Kaero, Sangalla District, Tana Toraja, South Sulawesi, represents a bounded contemporary event where a digital era cultural conflict was resolved through Indigenous mediation mechanisms. Tongkonan Layuk Kaero itself is not merely a physical structure; it is a symbol of family and community ties that has stood for hundreds of years, making it a meaning laden space for the resolution of customary conflicts (Mangolo & Kristanto, 2023). This case was purposively selected due to its uniqueness and richness as a tangible manifestation of Indigenous leadership in responding to cultural shocks triggered by digital media, a

phenomenon rarely documented systematically in Indonesian academic literature.

The research focus is on leadership dynamics, restorative outcomes, and implications for cultural preservation, drawn from publicly documented events occurring in February 2026. Secondary data sources used include: (1) news reports from leading national media outlets, including Kompas, Kompas.id, DetikSulsel, Antara, Suara Merdeka, and Media Indonesia, that provided in depth coverage of the customary court proceedings; (2) public statements from Pandji Pragiwaksono and customary stakeholders posted via social media channels and press releases; (3) documentation of the customary process broadcast by television media, including Metro TV and Kompas TV; and (4) official documents from the Archipelago Indigenous Peoples Alliance, commonly known as AMAN, as the facilitator of the customary process.

These materials were purposively sampled based on relevance, credibility, and information richness. Triangulation across multiple independent sources, for instance, cross verifying details from Kompas, Tempo, and Instagram posts from AMAN affiliates, enhances data trustworthiness, reduces reporter bias, and strengthens internal validity. As suggested by Yin (2018), triangulation of evidence sources is a crucial strategy for building construct validity in case study research.

Data analysis applied theory synthesis, including descriptive comparison, integrative thinking, and constructive framing of contingency and behavioral approaches. The analysis process proceeded in several stages: first, data reduction through the identification of key events in the reconciliation process; second, data presentation in the form of chronological and thematic narratives; third, conclusion drawing through patterns emerging from the data linked to the theoretical framework. This approach allows the researcher not only to describe events but also to interpret them through the lens of established leadership theories (Fiedler, 1978; Blake & Mouton, 1964).

This study acknowledges the inherent limitations of using secondary data, including potential bias in media reporting and limited access to the internal perspectives of the main actors. However, the richness and diversity of the data sources used, encompassing various types of media with different viewpoints, are intended to minimize these limitations. Furthermore, the focus on publicly documented events allows for replicability and verification by other researchers, which is an important characteristic of credible qualitative research.

4. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Conflict Dynamics and Customary Reconciliation Process

The controversy began when a 1 minute 44 second video clip from Pandji Pragiwaksono's 2013 stand up performance titled "Mesakke Bangsaku" resurfaced virally on social media in late 2025, igniting intense public debate. In this material, Pandji satirized the Rambu Solo' tradition by highlighting its high costs and elaborate practices. This social critique, although intended as comedy, was widely perceived by the Toraja community as disrespectful to a sacred tradition rooted in ancestral reverence and the Aluk To Dolo belief system. Pandji himself later acknowledged that the jokes made approximately nine years earlier were ignorant of the deep meaning and cultural values of the Toraja people.

The incident quickly escalated into official complaints, police reports, and national attention, illustrating how digital media can amplify cultural sensitivities and revive past content as a conflict trigger. The Toraja Youth Alliance reported Pandji to the National Police Criminal Investigation Agency in November 2025 for alleged insult to the Rambu Solo' funeral culture. The Minister of Human Rights, Natalius Pigai, even encouraged the Police to apply restorative justice in resolving this case, reminding the public to respect human rights in thinking and expression.

This conflict was resolved through a customary reconciliation process, a customary court, held on 10 and 11 February 2026 in Tana Toraja, facilitated by the Archipelago Indigenous Peoples Alliance (AMAN). This process, known as Ma'Buak Burun Mangkali Oto', which literally means "given space for recovery," involved traditional leaders from 32 customary regions and followed a restorative framework that prioritized harmony over punishment. The customary judges leading the proceedings comprised respected traditional figures, including Saba' Sombolinggi, Eric Crystal Ranteallo, Yusuf Sura' Tandirerung, Maksi Balalembang, Lewaran Rantela'bi, Nura Massora Salusu, and Romba Marannu Sombolinggi. Pandji attended voluntarily, issued a public apology, acknowledged his limited cultural understanding, and accepted symbolic sanctions as a form of customary responsibility. These sanctions took the form of one pig and five chickens with different feather colors, interpreted not as a fine but as a "restorative tool" to restore relations between humans, nature, ancestors, and the Creator.

Notably, this process was reciprocal. The Head of the AMAN Toraya Regional Executive Board, Romba Marannu Sombolinggi, emphasized that in this process, not only did Pandji offer an apology, but the Toraja Indigenous community also apologized for various things that should not have occurred in the conflict dynamics, including offensive words or attitudes. This

reflects an understanding that cultural conflicts in the digital era often involve misunderstandings and provocations from both parties.

Theoretical Analysis: Indigenous Leadership as Mediator

The findings of this study confirm that traditional Toraja leadership effectively resolves digital cultural conflicts through adaptive and restorative mechanisms. From the perspective of contingency theory (Fiedler, 1978), the reconciliation process demonstrates strong situational fit: the restorative style applied was highly suited to the relational and cultural nature of the conflict. As affirmed by the Secretary of Tongkonan Kada, Daud Pangurangan, "the legal process in Toraja differs from typical positive law. Law in Toraja speaks of restoration." The Chair of AMAN Toraya, Romba Marannu Sambolinggi, added that the customary court aimed to open an equal communication space so that all parties could understand each other, and the Toraja community wanted to ensure a collective voice in the recovery process, not merely a unilateral decision that could prolong the issue. This approach aligns with previous research findings on the effectiveness of local wisdom in conflict resolution (Wolfgramm et al., 2016; Handayani et al., 2020) and reinforces the argument that adaptive leadership is crucial in dynamic, multicultural, and digital contexts (Zhang et al., 2024; Biran & Hyde, 2013).

From the perspective of behavioral theory (Blake & Mouton, 1964), this process reflects high concern for people alongside cultural preservation. The customary ritual served to regulate emotional distress, empower the community, and foster mutual growth. This approach, oriented toward empathy, dialogue, and symbolic trust repair, is consistent with the 9,9 leadership model of Blake and Mouton (1964), which emphasizes the balance between concern for people and task outcomes (Saeed et al., 2014). The Pandji reconciliation process was not merely a legal case settlement but also a restoration of broader social relationships. This finding strengthens the argument that restorative approaches enhance inclusivity and reinforce restorative outcomes in multicultural heritage contexts (Biran & Hyde, 2013; Sumanapala & Wolf, 2023).

At a broader level, this reconciliation operated across individual, communal, and societal dimensions, preserving the sacred integrity of the Rambu Solo' while reinforcing cultural legitimacy. This supports sustainable dark tourism by maintaining authenticity and resisting commodification pressures (Light, 2017; Baan et al., 2022). As Pandji stated after the procession, "when the media sees it, the public also understands how beautiful Toraja is, and the Toraja people also exemplify how beautiful it is to resolve problems through good dialogue." This case also demonstrates how restorative justice fosters individual transformation

and collective cohesion, countering cultural erosion in digital environments (Wolfgramm et al., 2016; Handayani et al., 2020).

Indigenous Mediation Leadership Framework

Based on these findings, this study proposes an Indigenous Mediation Leadership framework that integrates: (1) ethical traits, including integrity, resilience, and collective responsibility, that serve as ethical anchors sustaining trust and cultural legitimacy (Bakari et al., 2017; Sandefur & Deloria, 2018); (2) people oriented behaviors, including empathy, inclusivity, and dialogue, that support restorative approaches and long term harmony (Saeed et al., 2014); and (3) situational adaptability that enables flexible responses balancing ethics, cultural values, and external pressures (Zhang et al., 2024).

This framework goes beyond the previous application of classical leadership theories into Indigenous contexts by acknowledging that Indigenous leadership is not merely about individual attributes or behaviors, but about an entire system of communal values and practices that have been tested over centuries. As demonstrated by the Toraja case, Indigenous leadership operates through collective deliberation, ancestral reverence, and a commitment to restoring harmony, elements often absent in conventional leadership models (Mangolo & Kristanto, 2023; Amsal, 2025).

The implications of this framework for sustainable tourism are significant. By preserving cultural authenticity through Indigenous mediation, dark tourism destinations like the Rambu Solo' can maintain their appeal without sacrificing cultural integrity. This approach aligns with research findings on the importance of traditional leadership and community participation in maintaining local control over cultural resources (Sangha et al., 2025; Rosalina et al., 2023). Furthermore, this framework offers a model for other Indigenous communities in Indonesia and beyond in facing similar challenges in the digital era, where the boundaries between local culture and global influence are increasingly blurred.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examines how traditional Toraja leadership mediated a digital-era cultural conflict involving Pandji Pragiwaksono, whose 2013 satire of the Rambu Solo' resurfaced online and was perceived as disrespectful. The case was resolved through Indigenous reconciliation facilitated by Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara in February 2026. Findings show that traditional leadership was effective due to strong contingency fit with the relational nature of the conflict, high behavioral concern for restoring harmony, and the activation of

traits such as integrity and collective responsibility. The process combined dialogue and symbolic restitution to restore social balance. Overall, the reconciliation operated from individual accountability to collective healing, successfully preserving cultural integrity while supporting sustainable dark tourism by prioritizing authenticity over commodification in a digital environment.

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