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Constructing Territorial Identity: Strategic Narrative in Aceh's Maritime Boundary Disputes

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Abstract

Territorial disputes concerning maritime boundaries have grown increasingly intricate in the context of subnational autonomy, especially in areas with special administrative status. The communication strategies employed by the Aceh government regarding maritime territorial claims exemplify a distinctive instance of strategic narrative construction within Indonesia's decentralized governance framework. This study investigates how the Aceh government formulates strategic narratives in territorial claims, scrutinizing the discursive patterns, rhetorical strategies, and power dynamics inherent in their political communication related to maritime

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boundary disputes. This research utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in accordance with Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, examining official documents, press statements, and public speeches delivered by Aceh government officials from 2018 to 2024. The data were subjected to analysis through textual examination, discursive practice evaluation, and contextualization of social practices. The analysis uncovers three predominant narrative strategies: (1) historical legitimacy narratives that invoke pre-colonial sovereignty, (2) legal-constitutional narratives that underscore special autonomy rights, and (3) economic security narratives that emphasize resource sovereignty. The government employs particular linguistic devices, including metaphorical expressions, intertextuality, and strategic ambiguity, to construct legitimacy while addressing multiple audiences. Aceh's strategic narrative construction illustrates a sophisticated discursive management of territorial claims within constitutional limitations. The findings enhance the understanding of subnational political communication in territorial disputes and provide insights for conflict resolution through narrative mediation.

[Sengketa teritorial terkait batas maritim semakin pelik dalam konteks otonomi daerah, terutama di wilayah dengan status administratif khusus. Strategi komunikasi yang digunakan oleh pemerintah Aceh terkait klaim teritorial maritim merupakan contoh khas konstruksi narasi strategis dalam kerangka tata kelola pemerintahan Indonesia yang terdesentralisasi. Penelitian ini menyelidiki bagaimana pemerintah Aceh merumuskan narasi strategis dalam klaim teritorial, meneliti pola wacana, strategi retorika, dan dinamika kekuasaan yang melekat dalam komunikasi politik mereka terkait sengketa batas maritim. Penelitian ini menggunakan Analisis Wacana Kritis (CDA) sesuai dengan kerangka tiga dimensi Fairclough, memeriksa dokumen resmi, pernyataan pers, dan pidato publik yang disampaikan oleh pejabat pemerintah Aceh dari tahun 2018 hingga 2024. Data tersebut dianalisis melalui pemeriksaan tekstual, evaluasi praktik wacana, dan kontekstualisasi praktik sosial. Analisis ini mengungkap tiga strategi naratif yang dominan: (1) narasi legitimasi historis yang menyerukan kedaulatan pra-kolonial, (2) narasi hukum-konstitusional yang menggarisbawahi hak otonomi khusus, dan (3) narasi keamanan ekonomi yang menekankan kedaulatan sumber daya. Pemerintah menggunakan perangkat linguistik tertentu, termasuk ekspresi metaforis, intertekstualitas, dan ambiguitas strategis, untuk membangun legitimasi sambil berbicara kepada banyak audiens. Konstruksi narasi strategis Aceh menggambarkan manajemen diskursif yang canggih atas klaim teritorial dalam batasan konstitusional. Temuan ini meningkatkan pemahaman komunikasi politik subnasional dalam sengketa teritorial dan memberikan wawasan untuk penyelesaian konflik melalui mediasi naratif.]

Keywords: critical discourse analysis; political communication; strategic narratives; subnational governance; territorial disputes

Introduction

The province of Aceh, known for its extensive history as a maritime sultanate and its prolonged conflict with the central government of Indonesia, faces intricate challenges in managing its maritime boundaries. Maritime boundary disputes encompass not only legal and geographical aspects but also profound dimensions of political identity.¹ This research investigates how strategic narratives are constructed within the context of Aceh's maritime boundary disputes, particularly in the effort to establish and maintain a territorial identity distinct from the national narrative of Indonesia. The construction of territorial identity through strategic narratives presents an intriguing phenomenon for study, especially in regions with special autonomy like Aceh. These narratives serve not only as tools for political communication but also as mechanisms to legitimize territorial claims and mobilize public support. In the era of decentralization and regional autonomy, this dynamic becomes increasingly complex as it involves interactions among local, national, and even international interests.²

Territorial disputes have historically been acknowledged as intricate geopolitical issues that necessitate advanced communication strategies.³ Within the realm of maritime boundary conflicts, both state and subnational entities are progressively utilizing the construction of strategic narratives to validate their claims, garner support, and oversee international relations.⁴ The situation in Aceh Province, Indonesia,

¹ Marta Magalini et al., "First Provenance Evidence for Lapis Lazuli Artefacts from Arabia: Analytical Study of Beads from the Umm an-Nar Tomb DH7-1 at Dahwa, Sultanate of Oman," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 174 (February 2025): 106131, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2024.106131>.

² Sadaf Sultan Khan, "The Writing on the Wall: Identity, Placemaking and Territoriality in Karachi's Graffiti Culture," *Wellbeing, Space and Society* 7 (December 2024): 100214, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wss.2024.100214>.

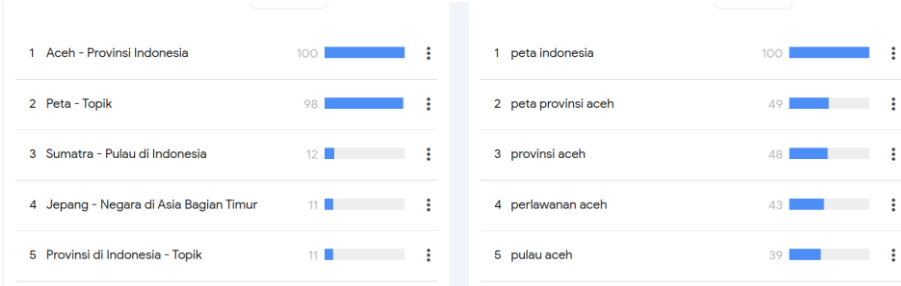
³ Markus Kornprobst, "Framing, Resonance and War: Foregrounds and Backgrounds of Cultural Congruence," *European Journal of International Relations* 25, no. 1 (March 7, 2019): 61–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066117741675>.

⁴ Laura Roselle Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, *Strategic Narratives Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013).

serves as a notably illustrative case of how subnational administrations maneuver through territorial claims via meticulously crafted political communication.⁵

The strategy employed by the Aceh government regarding maritime territorial disputes illustrates the convergence of multiple elements: the decentralization process in Indonesia, the special autonomy granted to Aceh after the 2005 Helsinki Peace Agreement, and the province’s longstanding maritime identity.⁶ In contrast to typical state-level territorial disputes, the situation in Aceh features a subnational entity functioning within constitutional limitations while simultaneously asserting historical and legal rights to maritime areas.

Figure 1. Trending Data on the issue of the four islands belonging to Aceh



Source: Google Trends

As defined by Miskimmon, strategic narratives are described as “a mechanism for political figures to create a collective understanding of the past, present, and future of international relations in order to influence the actions of both domestic and international entities.”⁷ In the context of territorial conflicts, these narratives fulfill various roles:

⁵ Bustami Bustami, Katimin Katimin, and Elly Wanisyah Harahap, “Husaini M. Hasan dan Konsep Islamic State dalam Konteks Sosial Politik Aceh,” *SINTHOP: Media Kajian Pendidikan, Agama, Sosial dan Budaya* 2, no. 2 (December 31, 2023): 80–89, <https://doi.org/10.22373/sinthop.v2i2.3995>.

⁶ Edward Aspinall, *Islam and Nation: Separatist Rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs31-3i>.

⁷ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, *Strategic Narratives Communication Power and the New World Order*.

validating assertions, undermining adversaries, rallying domestic backing, and swaying global perspectives.⁸

The conceptual foundation of this research is based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA),⁹ specifically Fairclough's¹⁰ three-dimensional model, which investigates discourse through the lenses of text, discursive practice, and social practice.¹¹ This methodology facilitates an in-depth examination of how language shapes reality, simultaneously mirroring and perpetuating power dynamics.¹²

Prior investigations into territorial disputes have largely concentrated on state-level entities and conflicts between nations.¹³ There has been insufficient focus on subnational territorial assertions and the distinct communication obstacles they pose.¹⁴ This research aims to fill this void by exploring how a subnational government endowed with special autonomy status formulates strategic narratives regarding territorial claims.¹⁵

Most previous research on the maritime disputes of Aceh tends to adopt an international law approach, conventional geopolitics, or

⁸ Jelena Subotić, "Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 4 (January 2015): 610–627, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12089>.

⁹ James Paul Gee and Michael Handford, *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003035244>.

¹⁰ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London and New York: Longman, 2019), [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(96\)89194-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(96)89194-6).

¹¹ Deborah Schiffrin Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003432173-15>.

¹² John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches, Fifth Edition* (London: SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429469237-3>.

¹³ Paul F. Diehl Gary Goertz, *Territorial Changes and International Conflict* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2021).

¹⁴ Eric M. Eisenberg, "Ambiguity as Strategy in Organizational Communication," *Communication Monographs* 51, no. 3 (September 2, 1984): 227–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758409390197>.

¹⁵ Nic DePaula, "Political Ideology and Information Technology in Government Online Communication," *Government Information Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (January 2023): 101747, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2022.101747>.

political economy.¹⁶ These studies typically analyze the legal and strategic aspects of maritime boundary disputes. However, they often overlook the discursive dimensions and narrative constructions employed by political actors in Aceh to establish territorial legitimacy.¹⁷

Ridwan Arifin study on Indonesia's maritime diplomacy touches upon communication aspects; however, its analysis remains macro-level and does not specifically delve into how provincial political discourse, particularly in Aceh, contributes to the formation of territorial identity.¹⁸ Similarly, the research by Wiku Adisasmito, which examines maritime boundary conflicts in the Strait of Malacca, places greater emphasis on regional security rather than the discursive construction of territorial identity.¹⁹

Previous studies have predominantly analyzed maritime boundary disputes from the perspective of central governments or bilateral relations between countries.²⁰ There exists a significant gap in understanding how political actors at the provincial level, particularly in Aceh with its special autonomy context, develop and implement distinct political communication strategies within the narrative of maritime disputes.²¹ Ritesh Shah and Mieke Lopes Cardozo's research on Aceh's special autonomy does touch upon local political aspects;

¹⁶ Barbara Quimby, "Emerging Customs: Small-Scale Fishing Practices in Aceh, Indonesia," *Applied Geography* 59 (May 2015): 125–30, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apgeog.2014.11.026>.

¹⁷ Putri Amelia, Artya Lathifah, and I Nyoman Astawa Yasa, "Analysis of the Impact of Maritime Sector Development in Supporting Indonesian Navy Ship Operations," *Procedia Computer Science* 197, no. 2021 (2022): 317–25, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2021.12.146>.

¹⁸ Ridwan Arifin, Margaretha Hanita, and Arthur Josias Simon Runturambi, "Maritime Border Formalities, Facilitation and Security Nexus: Reconstructing Immigration Clearance in Indonesia," *Marine Policy* 163, no. June 2023 (May 2024): 106101, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2024.106101>.

¹⁹ Wiku Adisasmito et al., "Indonesia and Global Health Diplomacy: A Focus on Capacity Building," *The Lancet Global Health* 7, no. 2 (February 2019): e181–82, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(18\)30524-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(18)30524-2).

²⁰ María Catalina García Ch. and Joyeeta Gupta, "Environmental and Sociocultural Claims within Maritime Boundary Disputes," *Marine Policy* 139, no. March 2021 (May 2022): 105043, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2022.105043>.

²¹ Jan Kubeš and Zoltán Kovács, "Provincial Gentrification in the Global North – A Literature Review," *Cities* 157, no. November 2024 (February 2025): 105586, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2024.105586>.

however, it has not comprehensively analyzed how this autonomy influences the construction of territorial narratives in the maritime context.²² This gap is crucial as Aceh possesses unique political characteristics shaped by a history of conflict and Peace, which can affect perspectives on territorial issues.

Previous studies generally regard maritime boundary disputes as technical-legal issues or as competitions for strategic resources.²³ However, from the perspective of critical discourse analysis, territorial disputes also involve complex processes of collective identity construction and political legitimacy. Research by Yifan Lu and Satoshi Yamazaki on identity construction in territorial conflicts in Indonesia indeed employs a constructivist approach. However, its focus is on land conflicts and has not explored the maritime dimension, particularly about strategic narratives within the context of special autonomy in Aceh.²⁴

This gap is critical considering: First, the political complexity of Aceh's special autonomy status creates a unique political dynamic in the center-region relationship, particularly regarding maritime territorial issues. Second, the strategic significance of Aceh's waters holds high strategic value within the context of regional geopolitics, international trade, and maritime security.²⁵ Third, there is a theoretical necessity for the development of political communication Theory in the context of maritime territorial disputes in developing countries with asymmetric decentralization systems.

This research that addresses this gap will contribute to: First, a profound understanding of how territorial identity is constructed through political discourse at the sub-national level. Second, an analysis of the political communication strategies employed in the context of

²² Ritesh Shah and Mieke Lopes Cardozo, "Education and Social Change in Post-Conflict and Post-Disaster Aceh, Indonesia," *International Journal of Educational Development* 38 (September 2014): 2–12, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2014.06.005>.

²³ Andreas Østhagen, "Troubled Seas? The Changing Politics of Maritime Boundary Disputes," *Ocean & Coastal Management* 205 (May 2021): 105535, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2021.105535>.

²⁴ Yifan Lu and Satoshi Yamazaki, "Fish to Fight: Does Catching More Fish Increase Conflicts in Indonesia?," *World Development* 170 (October 2023): 106337, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2023.106337>.

²⁵ García Ch. and Gupta, "Environmental and Sociocultural Claims within Maritime Boundary Disputes."

maritime disputes. Third, the development of a theoretical framework to comprehend the intersection between regional autonomy, territorial identity, and maritime diplomacy.

The inquiries that direct this investigation are: (1) In what manner does the Aceh government formulate strategic narratives concerning maritime territorial conflicts? (2) Which discursive strategies and linguistic tools are utilized within these narratives? (3) In what ways do these narratives mirror and perpetuate power dynamics within Indonesia's multilevel governance framework?

In the context of contemporary Indonesia, this research holds significant relevance due to the ongoing dynamics of decentralization and the challenges associated with territorial dispute management. The construction of strategic narratives is crucial not only for comprehending local political dynamics but also for anticipating potential conflicts and developing effective resolution mechanisms. Furthermore, this study is pertinent to the global discourse on regional autonomy, territorial identity, and political communication in the era of digitalization and globalization.

Methods

This research utilizes a qualitative research methodology, with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) serving as the main analytical framework. CDA is especially effective for investigating how language shapes social reality and perpetuates power dynamics within political contexts.²⁶

Data were systematically gathered from various sources to guarantee thorough coverage of the Aceh government's communication concerning maritime territorial disputes. Documents and speeches that specifically address maritime territorial claims, boundary disputes, or issues of resource sovereignty. The analysis adheres to Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework: Textual Analysis (Micro-level): Lexical selections and semantic domains. Grammatical constructions and syntactic arrangements. Rhetorical strategies and figurative expressions. Modality and evaluative language. Discursive Practice Analysis (Meso-level): Intertextuality and interdiscursivity. Genre norms and communicative objectives.²⁷ Contexts of production and

²⁶ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*.

²⁷ Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*.

consumption. Audience design and strategic communication. Social Practice Analysis (Macro-level): Political and institutional contexts. Power dynamics and ideological aspects. Historical and cultural contexts. Dynamics of multilevel governance.²⁸

This study examines publicly accessible documents and statements. All sources are appropriately credited, and the analysis upholds objectivity while recognizing the researcher's interpretative function in discourse analysis.²⁹

Results

The examination indicates that the strategic narrative formulation by the Aceh government in maritime territorial conflicts functions through three interrelated narrative strategies, each utilizing unique discursive patterns and linguistic tools.

Historical Legitimacy Narratives

Historical legitimacy narratives³⁰ play a crucial role in the construction of territorial identity in Aceh, particularly within the context of maritime boundary disputes. These narratives effectively link the historical legacy of the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam with contemporary territorial claims, thereby creating a profound legitimacy for Aceh's maritime interests. The narrative strategies employed encompass historical sovereignty narratives, Islamic identity, local wisdom, special autonomy, and historical resistance.³¹ The mechanisms of identity construction operate through the institutionalization of narratives, symbolic mobilization, and the narrativization of space, transforming geographical areas into places imbued with meaning.

²⁸ Gee and Handford, *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*.

²⁹ Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, Fifth Edition.

³⁰ May Darwich and Jutta Bakonyi, "Port Infrastructures and the Making of Historical Time in the Horn of Africa: Narratives of Urban Modernity in Djibouti and Somaliland," *Cities* 159 (April 2025): 105781, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2025.105781>.

³¹ Fierman Sjafrinal Agustus et al., "Strengthening the Papua Steering Committee Strategy: Reducing Instability for Accelerated Development in Papua, Indonesia," *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 11, no. October 2024 (2025): 101413, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101413>.

The primary narrative strategy centers on establishing historical legitimacy by invoking pre-colonial sovereignty and traditional maritime boundaries. This narrative is evident in the examined documents and speeches. Frequent mentions of the kingdom era and ancestral heritage.³² Maritime regions are referred to as ancestral homeland and heritage territory. References to historical texts, colonial cartography, and customary legal frameworks.³³

The sea in question is not unfamiliar territory for the people of Aceh. For centuries, Acehnese fishermen have navigated these waters as an integral part of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam.³⁴ The employment of possessive phrases (“the sea in question”) asserts claims of ownership, while the use of temporal references (“for centuries”) creates a sense of continuity and legitimacy through historical context.³⁵

The impacts of historical legitimacy narratives include strengthening regional social cohesion, local political legitimacy, and the complexities of regional diplomacy.³⁶ The digital era introduces a new dimension to the evolution of narratives through the digitization of collective memory and social media as arenas for narrative construction. Key challenges include tensions with Indonesian national identity, complexities of international law, and regional geopolitical dynamics. Moving forward, the sustainability of narratives and their integration with sustainable development will be crucial for the successful construction of Aceh’s territorial identity. A deep

³² Kamaruzzaman Bustamam-Ahmad, “A Study of Panglima La’ot: An ‘Adat Institution in Aceh,” *Al-Jami’ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 55, no. 1 (June 26, 2017): 155–88, <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2017.551.155-188>.

³³ Ali A. Guenduez and Tobias Mettler, “Strategically Constructed Narratives on Artificial Intelligence: What Stories Are Told in Governmental Artificial Intelligence Policies?,” *Government Information Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (January 2023): 101719, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2022.101719>.

³⁴ Febri Nurrahmi, “The Narrative of Identity in the Coverage of Aceh’s Flag,” *Jurnal Studi Komunikasi (Indonesian Journal of Communications Studies)* 2, no. 2 (July 14, 2018): 213–31, <https://doi.org/10.25139/jsk.v2i2.780>.

³⁵ Piotr Żuk, “Soft Power and the Media Management of Energy Transition: Analysis of the Media Narrative about the Construction of Nuclear Power Plants in Poland,” *Energy Reports* 9 (December 2023): 568–83, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.egyr.2022.11.192>.

³⁶ Nidhi Nagabhatla et al., “Water, Conflicts and Migration and the Role of Regional Diplomacy: Lake Chad, Congo Basin, and the Mbororo Pastoralist,” *Environmental Science & Policy* 122, no. April (August 2021): 35–48, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2021.03.019>.

understanding of historical legitimacy narratives in the construction of Aceh's territorial identity is essential for informed policy-making, effective diplomacy, and preventive conflict management in the context of complex maritime boundary disputes.

Legal-Constitutional Narratives

The second significant narrative strategy highlights legal and constitutional frameworks, with a particular focus on Aceh's special autonomy status. This narrative is evident in documents, frequently intertwined with assertions of historical legitimacy. Citations about Law No. 11/2006 regarding the Government of Aceh and the relevant Constitutional provisions.³⁷ A focus on constitutional rights and special authority. The application of legal terminology and a formal register.³⁸

According to the Aceh Government Law, this province possesses special authority over the management of natural resources, including maritime areas that have historically and legally been part of Aceh. The narrative effectively intertwines legal authority ("according to the law") with historical assertions ("historically and legally") to create a multifaceted legitimacy.³⁹

Critical discourse analysis of legal-constitutional narratives in the construction of territorial identity in Aceh reveals significant complexities in the relationship between special autonomy, historical claims, and contemporary maritime governance.⁴⁰ The construction of territorial identity through strategic narratives reflects broader tensions within Indonesian federalism and the challenges of balancing regional aspirations with national unity. The findings indicate that legal-constitutional narratives serve as powerful tools for territorial legitimization; however, they also create contradictions and challenges

³⁷ Pemerintahan Aceh, Undang Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 11 Tahun 2006 Tentang Pemerintahan Aceh, issued 2006.

³⁸ Natalya Sergeeva and Evangelia Kapetanaki, "Corporate Social Responsibility as a Strategic Narrative: The Cases of UK Project-Based Organisations," *Project Leadership and Society* 3, no. October (December 2022): 100073, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.plas.2022.100073>.

³⁹ Nurrahmi, "The Narrative of Identity in the Coverage of Aceh's Flag."

⁴⁰ Désirée Gmür and Tobias Haller, "Resetting the Forestry Commons: Constitutionality as a Conflict Resolution Strategy in African Woodlands," *Forest Policy and Economics* 153 (August 2023): 102965, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2023.102965>.

that necessitate careful navigation. Achieving success in resolving maritime boundary disputes requires not only legal clarity but also the political will to accommodate legitimate regional interests within a coherent constitutional framework.⁴¹ Strategic narratives in the context of Aceh's maritime boundaries reflect broader global trends in the construction of territorial identity, where traditional claims intersect with modern legal frameworks in complex negotiation processes. Understanding these dynamics through the lens of critical discourse analysis provides valuable insights for both theoretical understanding and practical policy development in maritime governance.

Economic Security Narratives

The maritime boundary disputes in Southeast Asia have evolved into a complex issue that encompasses geopolitical, economic, and territorial identity dimensions.⁴² Control over maritime areas is vital for a nation's economy, resources, and security. In the context of Indonesia, particularly in Aceh Province, economic security narratives play a crucial role in shaping territorial identity and legitimizing positions in maritime boundary disputes.

The third narrative strategy emphasizes economic development and resource security, positioning territorial claims within a wider discourse on development.⁴³ It integrates territorial claims with objectives related to economic development. There is a strong emphasis on resource sovereignty and economic security, as well as a focus on the welfare of future generations.⁴⁴ The establishment of clear maritime

⁴¹ Yi-Che Shih, "Ocean Governance in Practice: A Study of the Application of Marine Science and Technology Research Techniques to Maritime Law Enforcement in Taiwan," *Marine Policy* 163, no. 1 (May 2024): 106081, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2024.106081>.

⁴² Jasper Zhao Zhen Wu, "Languaging Territorial Assemblage: Regional Integration through Language Policy Practices in Southern China," *Language Sciences* 104 (July 2024): 101633, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2024.101633>.

⁴³ Antonio Baraybar-Fernández, Miguel Baños-González, and Rainer Rubira-García, "The Symbolic Power of the World's First Circumnavigation: An Approach from Political Communication," *Journal of Historical Geography* 81 (July 2023): 72–82, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2023.04.003>.

⁴⁴ Arifah Rahmawati et al., "The Negotiation of Political Identity and Rise of Social Citizenship: A Study of the Former Female Combatants in Aceh Since the Helsinki Peace Accord," *Jurnal Humaniora* 30, no. 3 (October 2, 2018): 237, <https://doi.org/10.22146/jh.v30i3.32653>.

boundaries is not solely a matter of sovereignty; it also pertains to the economic future of the people of Aceh, who rely on marine resources.⁴⁵

Economic security narratives have proven effective in revealing the complexities of territorial identity construction. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) uncovers the intricacies of discourse analysis, from linguistic foundations to critical engagement with social power and ideology, illuminating the significant role of language in shaping societal dynamics.⁴⁶ This research indicates that narratives serve not only as communication tools but also as instruments of power that shape socio-political realities. In the context of maritime disputes, a profound understanding of the discursive dimensions is essential for comprehending the dynamics of conflict and seeking sustainable solutions.

Linguistic Devices and Rhetorical Strategies

The government utilizes a deliberate form of ambiguity in its references to territory, employing phrases such as traditional territory that allow for flexible interpretation based on the audience and context.⁴⁷ Analysis indicates notable linguistic differences tailored to the specific audience: The domestic audience prioritises local identity, historical narratives, and emotional resonance. The national audience concentrates on constitutional rights and legal structures. The international context highlights international law and the pursuit of peaceful resolutions.⁴⁸

The maritime debates involving Aceh (both inter-provincial and international, such as incidents of island/ocean claims) transcend mere geographical boundaries. They serve as a platform for constructing territorial identity: strategic narratives that leverage historical memory,

⁴⁵ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Economic* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474483131.003.0006>.

⁴⁶ Amira Ghenai et al., "Exploring Hate Speech Dynamics: The Emotional, Linguistic, and Thematic Impact on Social Media Users," *Information Processing & Management* 62, no. 3 (May 2025): 104079, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ipm.2025.104079>.

⁴⁷ Izzatul Rizki et al., "Rhetorical Pattern of Political Advertisement in Aceh," *Studies in English Language and Education* 6, no. 2 (October 1, 2019): 212–27, <https://doi.org/10.24815/siele.v6i2.13851>.

⁴⁸ Guenduez and Mettler, "Strategically Constructed Narratives on Artificial Intelligence: What Stories Are Told in Governmental Artificial Intelligence Policies?"

legal legitimacy, victim/custodian narratives, the metaphor of the sea as a 'living space,' and emotional language to shape public opinion and influence policymakers. Recent studies and media coverage indicate that digital media and local actors play a pivotal role in framing this issue.

Discussion

Strategic Narrative Functions

The analysis indicates that Aceh's strategic narratives fulfill various concurrent roles within the intricate dynamics of multilevel governance and territorial conflicts. These narratives function not only as means of communication but also as formative practices that shape territorial reality while addressing the conflicting demands from various political tiers.

The construction of legitimacy through historical narratives of legitimacy operates as what Subotić refers to as "ontological narratives," narratives that describe the essential nature of the territory rather than simply who governs it.⁴⁹ By rooting its claims in pre-colonial history, the government of Aceh creates what Anderson identifies as an "imagined community" that extends into maritime areas. This historical depth functions to normalize present-day claims, framing them as a restoration of the past rather than an act of expansion.⁵⁰

Constitutional navigation within legal-constitutional narratives illustrates a complex management of what Keating refers to as the "autonomy paradox," the necessity to assert uniqueness while adhering to constitutional limitations.⁵¹ The government of Aceh adeptly utilizes legal discourse to create a framework for territorial claims within Indonesia's unitary system, employing special autonomy as a means to connect subnational identity with national sovereignty.

⁴⁹ Uriel Abulof and Markus Kornprobst, "Introduction: The Politics of Public Justification," *Contemporary Politics* 23, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1213073>.

⁵⁰ Aspinall, *Islam and Nation: Separatist Rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia*.

⁵¹ Michael Keating, *Rescaling the European State: The Making of Territory and the Rise of the Meso* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof>.

The management of multiple audiences, as highlighted in the economic security narratives, illustrates what Miskimmon refers to as “strategic narrative projection,” the process of constructing a shared understanding among diverse audiences.⁵² By contextualizing territorial claims within the framework of development, the government of Aceh establishes a connection with the national development discourse while preserving local legitimacy through assertions of resource sovereignty.

Strategic narratives play a crucial role in establishing a robust collective identity among the Acehnese community. Through this narrative, the maritime history and culture of the former Sultanate of Aceh are revitalized, linking the present with the glory of the past. It enhances the sense of solidarity within the community and legitimizes claims over disputed maritime territories. The second function is to legitimize Aceh's territorial claims regarding its maritime boundaries. Strategic narratives are employed to present a strong and coherent argument, encompassing historical, cultural, and political dimensions. By recounting the history of Aceh's maritime power, this narrative provides a moral and historical foundation for the claims made during negotiations or disputes, making them more acceptable to both the public and the involved parties.

Moreover, strategic narratives serve to control public perception at both domestic and international levels. This research indicates that such narratives are crafted to shape public opinion in favor of Aceh's position. By emphasizing specific aspects of history or maritime rights, this narrative directs how both the local community and external parties perceive the dispute, minimizing potential resistance and fostering support. Finally, strategic narratives are utilized as tools for negotiation and diplomacy. In the context of border disputes, this narrative is not merely a story but an integral part of diplomatic strategy. A compelling narrative can influence negotiations, enabling the Acehnese to assert their position more effectively. It aids in shaping the framework of discussions and affects how opposing parties view the dispute, often positioning Aceh as an entity with strong historical rights.

⁵² Subotić, “Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change.”

Discursive Innovation and Constraint

The results illustrate how subnational entities exhibit innovation despite existing structural limitations. The government of Aceh is unable to utilize the complete spectrum of sovereign state rhetoric in its territorial assertions, resulting in inventive discursive approaches that enhance agency while remaining within constitutional boundaries.⁵³

The complexity of intertextuality is highlighted by the numerous references that demonstrate what Kristeva recognized as the inherently dialogical character of discourse.⁵⁴ The government of Aceh deliberately engages with various textual authorities such as historical records, legal structures, and international law to create a multifaceted legitimacy that cannot be readily undermined on any singular basis.

Strategic ambiguity should be viewed as a resource instead of a sign of communicative failure. The strategic ambiguity present in territorial references exemplifies what Eisenberg referred to as a “strategic communication resource.”⁵⁵ This form of ambiguity facilitates adaptable interpretations in various contexts while preserving plausible deniability concerning constitutional overreach.

This research indicates that the territorial narrative of Aceh is the product of a dynamic interaction between innovation and constraints. The actors in Aceh not only innovate within their narratives but also strategize to overcome various existing challenges. They must strike a balance between asserting Aceh’s unique identity and remaining within the framework of narratives that are nationally and internationally acceptable. In conclusion, during maritime boundary disputes, discursive innovation enables Aceh to assert its territorial identity through narratives rich in history and symbolism. However, this process is constrained by the discursive limitations of national narratives, available resources, and public perceptions. This complex interaction shapes how Aceh claims its maritime space and constructs its territorial identity in the public domain.

Discursive innovation refers to the methods employed by actors in Aceh to create and introduce new narratives or approaches to

⁵³ Jan Zienkowski, *Articulations of Self and Politics in Activist Discourse: A Discourse Analysis of Critical Subjectivities in Minority Debates* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481319842460a>.

⁵⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

⁵⁵ Eisenberg, “Ambiguity as Strategy in Organizational Communication.”

discussing their territorial identity. The objective is to reinforce their claims and attain legitimacy. Several forms of discursive innovation identified in this study include: Firstly, the creation of new symbolism by actors in Aceh links maritime boundary disputes with powerful historical and cultural symbols, such as resistance to colonialism or the glory of the Aceh Sultanate in the past. It fosters a more emotional and compelling narrative. Secondly, the reinterpretation of Aceh's maritime history is revisited to demonstrate that Aceh has always possessed sovereignty over its maritime territory. This includes emphasizing Aceh's role as a center of trade and maritime power historically, which provides historical legitimacy to current claims. Thirdly, the utilization of legal language and international political discourse to bolster their claims in the eyes of the international community. The strategic narrative of Aceh adopts the language and legal frameworks of international law, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This renders Aceh's claims more credible and professional.

Power Relations and Hegemonic Negotiation

The analysis of discourse uncovers intricate power negotiations within the multilevel governance framework of Indonesia. The strategic narratives of Aceh both reinforce and contest the prevailing power dynamics.⁵⁶

Following Gramsci's notion of hegemony as a form of consent-based governance, the narratives from Aceh illustrate what can be referred to as "hegemonic accommodation," the acceptance of overarching constitutional structures while simultaneously creating avenues for independent action.⁵⁷ The government's persistent focus on operating within legal parameters exemplifies what Scott might identify as a type of "public transcript" that upholds superficial compliance while promoting potentially contentious assertions.⁵⁸

Counter-hegemonic elements, however, the narratives of historical legitimacy encompass what may be recognized as counter-hegemonic components, especially in their implicit challenge to post-

⁵⁶ Eisenberg.

⁵⁷ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, *Strategic Narratives Communication Power and the New World Order*.

⁵⁸ Scott, *Domination and the Economic*.

colonial boundary formation and their affirmation of pre-state territorial entitlements. These components are meticulously confined within permissible discourse yet possess the capacity for more radical interpretation.

In this context, power dynamics extend beyond mere military or economic strength; they also encompass the ability to shape and dominate public discourse. Several aspects that may be analyzed in this research include the following: Firstly, the Central Government vs. the Aceh Regional Government. This analysis will examine the power imbalance between the central government (Jakarta), which holds full authority over foreign policy and defense, and the Aceh regional government, which possesses specific rights in the management of natural resources. Secondly, internal and external actors beyond the government. This research may also explore the roles of oil and gas companies, local fishermen, or even international organizations with interests in the contested maritime area.

Hegemonic negotiation refers to the process in which one party (typically the more powerful one) seeks to establish a narrative or “truth” that is widely accepted, while the opposing party attempts to challenge or alter it. In the context of the maritime boundary dispute in Aceh, this can manifest in several ways: Firstly, the central government may employ a narrative centered on national development and state sovereignty to justify its decisions. Secondly, the Aceh local government and the indigenous community may utilize narratives that emphasize historical rights, cultural significance, or the uniqueness of Aceh to bolster their claims. Thirdly, this research will analyze how these narratives are employed to construct territorial identity. For instance, it will explore how narratives such as “Aceh as the guardian of the border” or “the source of Indonesia’s maritime wealth” are leveraged to mobilize support.

Implications for Territorial Dispute Theory

These results enhance the theoretical comprehension of territorial conflicts in multiple aspects. The case presents a challenge to state-centric methodologies in the analysis of territorial disputes by illustrating how subnational entities can emerge as influential participants in the construction of territory. It aligns with the arguments put forth by scholars such as Keating, advocating for a more

sophisticated comprehension of territorial politics within the context of multilevel governance.⁵⁹

The recognition of various concurrent narrative strategies supports the assertion made by Miskimmon that strategic narratives in modern politics are becoming more intricate and multi-dimensional, rather than being singular and cohesive.⁶⁰ The case illustrates how constitutional frameworks, which are designed to limit territorial claims, can be utilized as tools for their development through innovative interpretation and strategic communication.⁶¹

The conventional theory of territorial disputes tends to view such conflicts as a result of overlapping sovereignty claims derived from international law or historical treaties. This research indicates that collective identity in this context, specifically Aceh's identity as a "maritime nation" or "coastal nation," may serve as a fundamental cause of the dispute. Maritime claims encompass not only economic rights but also the affirmation of cultural and historical identity. It challenges theories that separate identity from the motivations behind disputes. The theory of disputes often overlooks how the conflicting parties actively construct and disseminate narratives to mobilize support. This study emphasizes that strategic narratives regarding ancestral heritage, historical rights, and threatened sovereignty are powerful political tools. These narratives shape public perception, justify claims, and undermine opposing arguments. Therefore, understanding territorial disputes necessitates an analysis of the discourse and rhetoric employed by the actors involved, rather than merely examining maps and legal documents.

Typically, territorial dispute theories concentrate on the role of the state as the primary actor. This research broadens the perspective by illustrating how non-state actors, such as separatist movements or local leaders, play a crucial role in shaping territorial identity. In Aceh, the narratives constructed by local leaders and pro-separatist groups regarding Aceh's historical rights over maritime areas significantly influence the position of the Indonesian central government in

⁵⁹ Keating, *Rescaling the European State: The Making of Territory and the Rise of the Meso*.

⁶⁰ Abulof and Kornprobst, "Introduction: The Politics of Public Justification."

⁶¹ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, *Strategic Narratives Communication Power and the New World Order*.

negotiations concerning the dispute. It indicates that territorial disputes are multi-actor phenomena, rather than mere interactions between states. Territorial disputes are often perceived as events awaiting a final resolution, whether through negotiation or arbitration. This research emphasizes that disputes are ongoing processes in which territorial identities are continuously constructed, negotiated, and maintained through narratives. Even after a dispute is formally deemed “resolved,” narratives regarding claims that are “lost” or “seized” may persist and potentially incite future conflicts. This indicates the necessity for a more dynamic and historical analysis of territorial disputes.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations must be recognized. Firstly, this analysis centers on governmental discourse without considering the reception of various audiences; future research should explore how these narratives are understood and challenged.⁶² Secondly, the study investigates solely one case; a comparative analysis with other subnational territorial claims would enhance the theoretical generalizability.⁶³

The observed temporal progression in narrative strategies indicates the importance of longitudinal studies that monitor the adaptation of strategic narratives to evolving conditions. Furthermore, the influence of media and civil society in enhancing, interpreting, or challenging these narratives warrants distinct examination.⁶⁴

Conclusion

This research illustrates that the strategic narrative formulation by the Aceh government in maritime territorial conflicts exemplifies an advanced type of political communication that adeptly addresses intricate multilevel governance issues while promoting territorial assertions. The examination identifies three main narrative approaches:

⁶² Jie Chen, “Impacts of Internet Literacy and Internet Contact on the Communication Effect of University Students’ Ideological and Political Education in China,” *Acta Psychologica* 247, no. November 2023 (July 2024): 104321, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2024.104321>.

⁶³ Rizki et al., “Rhetorical Pattern of Political Advertisement in Aceh.”

⁶⁴ Daniel W. Krugman et al., “Cancer Linguistics and the Politics of Decolonizing Health Communication in Coastal Tanzania: Reflections from an Anthropological Investigation,” *Social Science & Medicine* 354, no. January (August 2024): 117082, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2024.117082>.

historical legitimacy, legal-constitutional, and economic security, each utilizing unique discursive styles and fulfilling particular political roles. The results enhance academic comprehension in several significant domains. Firstly, they broaden the theory of territorial disputes beyond state-centric frameworks by showcasing how subnational entities can emerge as influential participants in territorial development through strategic messaging.

Secondly, they uncover the intricacies of modern strategic narratives, which function concurrently across various dimensions and audiences instead of offering singular, unified assertions. Additionally, the study highlights how constitutional structures designed to limit territorial claims can be transformed into tools for their development through inventive interpretation and strategic communication. The Aceh government exhibits notable discursive creativity within existing structural limitations, utilizing intertextual complexity and strategic vagueness as communicative tools. From a practical standpoint, these insights provide valuable perspectives for conflict resolution and governance in scenarios involving territorial disputes. The case indicates that establishing legitimate avenues for subnational territorial expression via special autonomy provisions and constitutional acknowledgment may assist in managing potentially destabilizing claims while preserving overall state unity.

The temporal progression of narrative strategies identified in this research reveals that strategic narratives are not static but rather dynamic and adaptable, responding to evolving political contexts and audience expectations. This adaptability presents both an opportunity for managing conflicts and a challenge for those aiming to comprehend or react to territorial claims. For policymakers, the findings underscore the necessity of grasping the communicative aspects of territorial disputes instead of concentrating exclusively on legal or military dimensions. Strategic narratives play a crucial role in shaping political realities and can either heighten or mitigate territorial tensions based on their construction and reception. Future investigations should broaden this analysis through comparative studies of other subnational territorial claims, exploring audience reception and contestation of these narratives, as well as examining how strategic narratives impact actual policy outcomes in territorial disputes. The Aceh case ultimately illustrates that in a time of multilevel governance and advanced political communication, territorial disputes increasingly entail intricate

narrative constructions that demand equally sophisticated analytical methods for effective understanding and resolution.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

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