

Traditional Naming Patterns Among the Muna Ethnic Community in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia: Symbolism, Social Function, and Vernacular Islamization

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the traditional naming patterns, focusing on how names function as carriers of cultural meaning, social structure, and religious identity. Drawing on qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews with four community informants, as well as participatory observation, and documentation of naming records, the study reveals that naming patterns not merely an act of identification but a complex cultural system that encodes historical memory, social hierarchy, and religious transformation. The findings show that naming system operates along three interrelated dimensions. First, symbolism is evident in the structure of names, where core elements refer to birthplace, birth circumstances, physical characteristics, parental traits, and significant historical events. Second, social function is marked through the use of prefixes *La*, *Wa*, and *La Ode/Wa Ode*, which distinguish gender and denote noble status within the traditional Muna social stratification. These prefixes serve as social markers that regulate interpersonal relations, inheritance rights,

and communal respect. Third, the study identifies a process of vernacular Islamization, whereby the Islamic declaration of faith, the shahada, is locally interpreted and embedded into the prefixes and naming logic. Islamic doctrine has been articulated through pre-existing cultural structures rather than replacing them, producing a localized form of Islamic identity. Theoretically, this study contributes to a multidimensional framework that integrates symbolic anthropology, structuralism, functionalism, and the anthropology of local Islam. Naming patterns function simultaneously as symbolic representations, social institutions, and religious adaptations. Empirically, the research documents a system of local knowledge that remains underrepresented in global academic discourse onomastics and Islamic studies. It is concluded that naming patterns illustrate the dynamic negotiation between tradition, social order, and religious identity, offering insight into how indigenous communities sustain cultural continuity while engaging with global religious currents.

Keywords: Muna, traditional naming, naming system, symbolism, social function, vernacular Islamization

INTRODUCTION

Naming patterns are a universal feature of human societies. Beyond serving as labels for identification, names operate as symbolic systems that encode meaning, identity, and social relations. Anthropologists have long argued that names are embedded in cultural frameworks and function as representations of social reality. In this sense, naming can be read as a cultural text through which individuals interpret their existence and position themselves within broader social structures. Geertz emphasized that culture is a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms, and naming is one of the most condensed expressions of such symbolism.^[1] A name does not merely identify a person but communicates values, expectations, and cosmological beliefs held by a community. Thus, naming practices constitute an entry point for understanding how a society constructs meaning.

Beyond symbolism, names also perform social functions. Alford noted that names act as markers of identity that link individuals to kinship, status, and community. In many traditional societies, names regulate social interaction by signalling gender, lineage, and position within the social hierarchy. Consequently, naming is not only a linguistic act but also a social mechanism. In the Indonesian context, naming patterns reveal a complex interplay between local traditions and religious influences. Indonesia's cultural diversity has produced distinct naming systems, each reflecting unique cosmological beliefs and social structures. These systems demonstrate how naming mediates between indigenous worldviews and external religious frameworks.

Among these, the Muna's naming patterns present a rich case for anthropological inquiry. The Muna maintain a structured system of prefixes such as *La*, *Wa*, and *Ode*,

which function as social classifiers. These elements illustrate how naming organizes social identity within a hierarchical and kinship-based society. Ethnographic observations indicate that Muna names are often derived from lived experiences surrounding birth, including economic conditions, environmental situations, and temporal markers. Such patterns show that naming is closely tied to everyday life and reflects a worldview in which social reality is inscribed into personal identity.

The symbolic dimension of Muna naming aligns with Turner's argument that symbols are multivocal and context-dependent.^[2] A single name can carry multiple layers of meaning, ranging from personal hopes to collective values. This multivocality allows naming to function as a flexible yet stable system of cultural expression. From a functionalist perspective, naming also contributes to social cohesion. Cultural practices sustain social order by reinforcing shared norms.^[3] In the Muna context, naming patterns regulate kinship ties, inheritance, and hierarchical relations, thereby maintaining the coherence of the social structure.

The introduction of Islam into the Muna region has reshaped naming preferences. Islamic teachings emphasize names with positive moral and theological meanings, leading to the adoption of Arabic-derived names alongside indigenous elements. This process reflects the adaptive capacity of local naming systems. The interaction between Islam and local culture in Indonesia is best understood through the concept of vernacular Islamization, or vernacular Islam as the indigenization of Islamic doctrines into local language, ritual, and social practice.^[4] In naming, this process appears as the synthesis of Islamic theology with pre-existing cultural categories.

In the Muna case, the prefixes *La* and *Wa* have been reinterpreted to correspond with the Islamic confession *Lā Ilāha Illā Allāh* and *Wa Asyhadu anna Muhammadan Rasūlullāh*. This reinterpretation demonstrates how Islamic symbols are

domesticated into local structures without erasing indigenous social functions. Despite these developments, existing studies on naming practices have largely focused on linguistic or religious dimensions, often neglecting naming as an integrated cultural system. Moreover, anthropological research on Eastern Indonesian communities remains limited compared to studies on Western Indonesia. This gap highlights the need for research that examines underrepresented regions such as Muna.

This study addresses the gap by examining Muna naming practices through the lenses of symbolism, social function, and vernacular Islamization. By integrating symbolic anthropology, structuralism, functionalism, and studies on Islam-local interaction, it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding naming as a multidimensional cultural system. Thus, three questions are raised: how do the name prefix structure function as a marker of social categories, what is the philosophical values of the prefixes *La* and *Wa* within vernacular Islam, and what bases are used for core names as contextual records?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Naming as a Symbolic System

From a symbolic perspective, names function as representations of culturally transmitted meanings rather than mere identity labels. Humans are animal symbolicum, meaning that cultural activities, including naming, are embedded in symbolic systems that shape social reality.^[5] Through symbols, humans transform immediate experience into structured meaning that can be communicated and reproduced across generations. In this framework, naming is not a neutral act but a cultural process of encoding the world. Symbols are multivocal and carry multiple meanings depending on context. A single name may simultaneously evoke kinship ties, aesthetic values, historical events, and religious hopes.^[2] In traditional societies, names are linked to prayers for the child's future, to community

ideals, and to collective memory. This multivocality allows naming to operate as a flexible system of cultural expression that adapts to changing circumstances without losing its core significance.

Consequently, analyzing naming requires an interpretive approach to uncover the layers of meaning embedded within it. Researchers cannot rely solely on linguistic structure but must examine how names are used, explained, and negotiated in daily life. In the Muna context, this perspective helps reveal how names such as *La Kote* or *Wa Mongkolo* function as condensed texts that narrate birth circumstances and social values.

Naming and Identity Construction

Names function as markers that position individuals within social structures. Identity forms through ongoing social interactions, where symbols such as names serve as primary points of recognition.^[6] From the moment a child is named, others begin to place that person within categories of gender, lineage, and community belonging. A name becomes the initial category through which a person is identified and classified in social life. Hall conceptualizes identity as constituted in discourse and practice.^[7] In this view, names are not static tags but elements in the ongoing constitution of self and other within a social field. They are uttered, recalled, and reinterpreted in interaction, shaping how individuals see themselves and how others recognize them. The performative use of names sustains and modifies identity over time.

In the Muna system, names mark belonging to kinship groups, communities, and cultural categories through prefixes like *La*, *Wa*, and *La Ode / Wa Ode*. These markers provide immediate social orientation in interaction. Thus, naming contributes to both personal identity and collective classification, linking individual biography to the broader social order.

Structuralism and Classification

Structuralist perspectives emphasize how humans organize the world through structured categories and oppositions. Classification systems provide the underlying logic of social order.^[8] Binary distinctions such as male/female, noble/commoner, and insider/outsider are expressed through language and ritual, creating a coherent map of social relations. Naming is one of the key mechanisms through which these oppositions are institutionalized. Classification aims to maintain order by defining boundaries and categories.^[9] Clear boundaries reduce ambiguity and guide appropriate behavior within the community. When categories are ambiguous, social life becomes unstable. Therefore, societies develop symbolic devices to mark and enforce distinctions consistently.

Among the Muna, prefixes such as *La*, *Wa*, and *Ode* function as classificatory markers that place individuals within recognized social positions. The system distinguishes gender and status at the level of address, structuring expectations for interaction. Thus, naming can be analyzed as part of a broader symbolic classification system that sustains social intelligibility and order.

Functionalism and Social Cohesion

Functionalist theory views cultural practices in terms of their contribution to social order. Radcliffe-Brown argues that social structures are maintained through practices that sustain integration and regulation.^[3] Naming serves as one such practice by regulating kinship ties, inheritance, and hierarchical relations. By embedding status and role information in names, communities reduce friction in everyday interaction. Cultural elements address both biological and social needs.^[10] Names regulate interaction by clarifying roles and responsibilities within the community. They help allocate rights and duties, signal obligations, and reproduce norms across generations. In this sense, naming is not

only expressive but also instrumental for social functioning.

In the Muna case, names that reference a father's character or a mother's condition during childbirth illustrate this function. Such names record social evaluations and expectations, guiding future conduct. Naming therefore possesses concrete social functions that reinforce shared norms and expectations, contributing to the cohesion and continuity of the community.

Islam and Local Cultural Integration

In Indonesia, Islam has historically developed in interaction with local cultural systems. Geertz (1960) demonstrates that Islamic practices take diverse forms depending on local context.^[11] Rather than imposing a uniform template, Islam is reinterpreted through existing language, ritual, and social structures. This produces localized expressions of faith that remain intelligible and legitimate to local communities. Religion and culture often produce syntheses rather than conflict.^[12] When Islamic values enter a community, they are articulated through available cultural idioms. Names, rituals, and kinship terms become sites where religious and cultural meanings are negotiated and integrated. The outcome is a plural Islam that respects local specificity.

This integration is evident in naming, where Islamic elements coexist with indigenous categories. Islamic vocabulary may be absorbed into pre-existing naming structures, creating hybrid forms that satisfy both religious and cultural criteria. Naming therefore becomes a field where religious and cultural meanings are integrated without erasing local identity.

Vernacular Islamization

Vernacular Islamization refers to the indigenization of Islamic doctrines, symbols, and practices within local cultural frameworks. Vernacular Islam as the adaptation of Islamic norms into local language, ritual, and social organization.^[4] The process does not replace indigenous

systems but rearticulates them through Islamic idioms, making Islam appear familiar and meaningful to local actors. Islamic categories are frequently mapped onto existing kinship and status structures, producing localized Islamic expressions.^[13] This mapping allows communities to maintain social continuity while accommodating new religious requirements. The result is a dynamic equilibrium between universal doctrine and particular practice. In naming, this appears when Islamic theological terms are incorporated into pre-existing prefixes and appellations. The case of the Muna illustrates this process: the prefixes *La* and *Wa* are interpreted in relation to the Islamic confession, linking local classification to Islamic meaning without dissolving the original social function of the names. Vernacular Islamization thus explains how Muna naming remains both Islamic and distinctly Muna.

Research Gap

Most previous studies examine naming through a single dimension, such as symbolism, identity, or religion, without integrating multiple theoretical perspectives. This produces a partial understanding that lacks a holistic analytical framework. Consequently, the interplay between symbolic meaning, social function, and religious adaptation remains under-theorized in the literature on Indonesian naming systems. In addition, research on Eastern Indonesian communities, particularly the Muna ethnic group, remains limited in global academic discourse. Despite their structured naming systems and rich oral traditions, these communities have not been systematically analyzed through the combined lenses of symbolic anthropology, structuralism, functionalism, and studies of Islam-local interaction. The gap is both theoretical and empirical.

This study addresses the gap by proposing an integrated framework that draws on multiple perspectives to analyze Muna naming practices as a multidimensional

cultural system. The approach allows for a comprehensive explanation of how meaning, structure, function, and religion intersect in naming. It also contributes empirical data that can enrich comparative studies of naming in Southeast Asia.

MATERIALS & METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach to examine naming practices among the Muna ethnic community. In addition to data collection methods, the study considered research ethics, including informed consent and data confidentiality, to maintain the trust of informants and ensure adherence to academic ethical standards. As emphasized by Creswell & Poth, ethical considerations form the moral foundation of qualitative research by respecting participants' dignity and autonomy.^[14] Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. A semi-structured interview approach provided flexibility for informants to express their perspectives, allowing deeper exploration of symbolic meanings and cultural interpretations that may not emerge through structured questioning.

Kvale & Brinkmann describe this method as "conversations with a purpose," where the researcher follows an interview guide while allowing space for new insights.^[15] Participant observation was conducted to understand naming practices within everyday life, as the researcher engaged directly in social activities to gain contextual and in-depth insights. According to Spradley (1980), this method enables researchers to learn the cultural scene "from the inside," capturing tacit knowledge and practices that participants may not articulate explicitly.^[16]

For the Muna context, this approach aligns with Koentjaraningrat's emphasis on understanding local customs through direct immersion in community life.^[17] To strengthen data validity, the study applied triangulation techniques, including source triangulation, methodological triangulation, and time triangulation. Denzin argues that

using multiple methods and sources reduces bias and increases the credibility of qualitative findings.^[18] The data analysis process was iterative, involving continuous reflection and verification. Following Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, the analysis followed a cyclical process of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, ensuring that findings are both descriptive and theoretically grounded.^[19]

RESULT

In-depth interviews with four informants indicate that naming practices among the Muna people follow a systematic, recurrent, and collectively understood pattern. The informants were La Moloku (83 years old), a customary elder and oral tradition keeper; La Hamidu (52 years old), a Civil Servant official; La Sumaili (85 years old), a male community figure; and La Ode Suhaeni (49 years old), an SMP teacher. The variation in age and social roles allowed the data to capture both historical and contemporary dimensions of the practice.

Name Prefix Structure as a Marker of Social Categories

All informants confirmed that a Muna name consists of two elements: a prefix and a core name. The prefix *La* is used for boys, while *Wa* is used for girls. For noble descendants, the prefix becomes *La Ode* for males and *Wa Ode* for females. Informants consistently stated that *La*, *Wa*, and *La Ode* / *Wa Ode* are not personal names, but markers attached before the core name. As La Moloku explained, “That is not a name, it is a sign. People immediately know whether it is a boy or a girl, and from which social group.” This pattern aligns with Lévi-Strauss’s concept of social classification^[8], which argues that humans organize reality through binary and hierarchical categories. In the Muna context, the gender and status distinctions are institutionalized directly within the linguistic structure of names. Douglas further notes that classification systems function to maintain social order by making boundaries and positions explicit.^[9]

Thus, name prefixes in Muna society operate not merely as labels but as mechanisms for recognizing social position in everyday interaction.

The Philosophy of the Prefixes *La* and *Wa* within Vernacular Islam

Informants explained that the prefixes *La* and *Wa* have a theological basis derived from the katoba advice given during the Islamic conversion ceremony. According to La Moloku and La Sumaili, *La* is associated with the phrase *Lā Ilāha Illā Allāh*, and *Wa* with *Wa Asyhadu anna Muhammadan Rasūlullāh*. Allah is analogized to fatherhood, hence male names begin with *La*. The Prophet Muhammad is analogized to motherhood; hence female names begin with *Wa*. This interpretation exemplifies vernacular Islamization as described by Ricklefs.^[4] Islam does not replace local structures but is articulated through existing linguistic and kinship categories. Peletz refers to a similar process as “mapping Islamic categories onto local social structures,” where universal doctrine is translated into local cultural logic.^[13] The finding also corresponds with Geertz’s analysis of the diversity of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago.^[11] Among the Muna, the shahada is not only memorized as a statement of faith but is transformed into a naming system that is reproduced each time a child is named. In this sense, Islamic theology is enacted through everyday naming practice.

Seven Bases for Core Names as Contextual Records

Informants identified seven bases used to determine the core name. These bases show that names function as contextual records of birth events and social relations: Place of birth: Names are given based on the location of birth, such as *La Kote* for a child born in Kote, *Wa Kota* for a child born in Kota, and *La Kolaka* for a child born in Kolaka. This practice reflects the function of names as geographic markers and territorial affiliations. Malinowski explains that in

traditional societies, names often bind individuals to specific places and social networks.^[10] In the context of Muna society, the assignment of core names is not arbitrary but results from the interpretation of the circumstances surrounding birth. The father's activity at the time of birth can be immortalized in a name. For instance, *La Aso* indicates that the father was selling garden produce, *La Remi* indicates that he was playing rummy, and *La Unda* indicates that he was shaking the posts of a house being dismantled. In addition, the child's physical condition is also frequently reflected in names. For example, *Wa Mongkolo* refers to a dark-skinned girl, *La Pute* to a fair-skinned boy, and *La Wungo* to a brown-skinned boy. This practice aligns with Turner's concept of physical symbolism, which views the body as a medium for conveying social meaning.^[2] The father's character can also serve as a basis for naming, functioning as an aspiration or moral reminder. For instance, *La Ode Adili* indicates that the father was known for being just in treating his children, *La Malasi* or *La Tahampalu* indicates that the father was a lazy man, and *La Insafu* indicates that the father had repented and resolved not to repeat wrongful actions. Thus, names operate as mechanisms for the intergenerational transmission of values, as described by Bourdieu in his theory of cultural reproduction.^[20] The mother's condition during childbirth, the month of birth according to both the Islamic and Gregorian calendars, and historical events surrounding birth also serve as bases for naming. This is evident in the names *Wa Hali*, which indicates that the mother experienced a difficult delivery; *Wa Ode Zulqaidah*, which indicates that she was born in the month of Dhu al-Qi'dah; *La Romusa*, which indicates that he was born during the Romusa forced labor period; and *La Pemilu*, which indicates that he was born during a general election. These names function as collective oral archives that preserve local historical memory.

These findings align with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which posits that language and naming practices shape how societies understand experience, making names "mini-texts" that encode information about place, time, physical condition, kinship relations, and historical events.^[21] Overall, the Muna naming system integrates three layers of meaning: social categorization through name prefixes, theological interpretation through the shahada, and contextual meaning through core names. This integration makes naming a cultural practice that is simultaneously symbolic, social, and historical.

DISCUSSION

Naming as a Symbolic System

The interview data show that names among the Muna function as a symbolic system. Core names such as *La Kote*, *La Aso*, and *Wa Mongkolo* transform concrete experiences into linguistic signs that carry meaning. Cassirer argues that humans are animal symbolicum, beings who live within a universe of symbols they create themselves.^[5] Within this framework, Muna naming is not merely identification, but a process of condensing social experience into symbolic form. Turner reinforces this through the concept of symbol multivocality.^[2] A single name can carry multiple layers of meaning depending on context. For example, *La Pute*, which literally means "white," also represents aesthetic values and the community's way of categorizing physical differences. Thus, the Muna naming system functions as a cultural text that can be read to understand the community's cognitive logic and collective values.

Naming as a Mechanism of Social Function

The prefixes *La*, *Wa*, and *La Ode/Wa Ode* operate as mechanisms of social classification. Lévi-Strauss explains that humans organize the world through binary and hierarchical structures.^[8] In Muna society, the oppositions of male/female and

noble/commoner are institutionalized directly in the structure of names. Cultural classification aims to create social order by establishing mutually recognized boundaries.^[9] Names such as *La Ode Adili* and *La Malasi* or *La Tahampalu* record social evaluations of the father's character and simultaneously enforce norms about expected behavior. From a functionalist perspective, cultural practices persist because they contribute to social integration.^[3] Malinowski adds that cultural elements also fulfill social needs, in this case the need to recognize position and role within the kinship structure.^[10] Marking gender and status through names allows social interaction to proceed according to collective expectations without requiring additional formal institutions.

Vernacular Islamization in Muna Naming

The analogy of the prefixes *La* and *Wa* with the shahada demonstrates a process of vernacular Islamization. Ricklefs explains that Islamization in the Nusantara occurred through the indigenization of Islamic doctrine into local language, ritual, and social structure.^[4] In the Muna case, Islamic theology is articulated through existing categories rather than replacing them. Peletz describes this process as the mapping of Islamic categories onto local kinship structures, producing a localized form of Islam.^[13] The analogy of Allah as father and the Prophet Muhammad as mother in the katoba advice reinforces this finding. A similar process appears in hybrid names such as *Wa Ode Zulqaidah* and *La Romusa*, where Arabic elements and historical events are absorbed into the Muna linguistic framework. Islam in Indonesia developed in diverse forms according to local context.^[11] Muna naming provides empirical evidence that Islamization proceeds as a reworking of local meaning, not a total replacement.

Integration of the Three Dimensions

The Muna naming system demonstrates that symbolism, social function, and vernacular

Islamization do not operate in isolation but reinforce one another in a coherent cultural system. The symbolic dimension provides the logic of meaning, where names condense birth events, kinship relations, and values into linguistic signs, consistent with Cassirer's view of humans as animal symbolic who live within self-created symbolic universes.^[5] Without this symbolic base, names would lose their capacity to carry layered cultural meanings.

The social function dimension translates that symbolic logic into everyday interaction and social order. As Lévi-Strauss^[8] and Douglas^[9] argue, classification systems maintain social intelligibility by making gender, status, and kinship positions explicit. In Muna society, prefixes like *La*, *Wa*, and *La Ode / Wa Ode* perform this function directly, regulating recognition and expected conduct. Radcliffe-Brown further explains that such practices persist because they contribute to social integration, ensuring that naming serves not only expression but also structural stability.^[3]

Finally, the dimension of vernacular Islamization articulates Islamic theology through the existing Muna framework. Ricklefs^[4] and Peletz^[13] describe this as the mapping of universal Islamic categories onto local linguistic and kinship structures, producing a localized Islam that remains meaningful to its practitioners. In Muna, the interpretation of *La* and *Wa* through the shahada illustrates how Islamic doctrine is enacted in daily practice without replacing indigenous categories. Geertz captures this process as the diversification of Islam according to local context.^[11] The integration of these three dimensions explains why Muna naming remains both resilient and adaptive, maintaining its core structure while absorbing new historical and religious elements.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion in this study, it is concluded that the traditional naming patterns constitute a cultural system

that integrates symbolism, social function, and vernacular Islamization. First, names function as a symbolic system. The prefixes *La*, *Wa*, and *La Ode/Wa Ode*, together with core names referring to place, events, traits, and time of birth, encode collective experiences and values into linguistic form. Second, names perform a social function. The structure of names regulates the recognition of gender, noble status, kinship, and an individual's position within social interaction. Thus, names operate as a mechanism for social classification and regulation. Third, vernacular Islamization is evident in the local interpretation of the shahada attached to the prefixes *La* and *Wa*, as well as in the incorporation of Arabic names and the Islamic calendar into the Muna naming structure. This process shows that Islam is articulated through local cultural frameworks. Theoretically, this study demonstrates that the analysis of naming requires a multidimensional framework combining symbolic anthropology, structuralism, functionalism, and the study of Islam-local interactions. Empirically, this research documents the richness of the Muna community's local knowledge system, which remains limited in global academic literature. Further research is recommended to compare the Muna naming system with other ethnic groups in Eastern Indonesia in order to understand variations in the articulation of symbolism, social function, and vernacular Islamization across different cultural contexts.

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