

## Kulkul Traditional Communication Media in the Midst of the Use of WhatsApp Groups in the Subak Sebatu Organization

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the usage patterns of the traditional kulkul communication medium within WhatsApp groups within Subak organizations in Subak Sebatu, Tegallalang District, Gianyar Regency, Bali, specifically in Banjar Kebon. The study employed a qualitative approach using communication ethnography methods. Data were obtained through participant observation, in-depth interviews with pekaseh, prajuru, and krama Subak members, and documentation studies. Data analysis was conducted interactively through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results indicate that kulkul and WhatsApp groups do not exist in a mutually exclusive relationship, but rather form a complementary communication pattern. The kulkul continues to function as a communication medium with customary legitimacy, strengthening social solidarity, and serving as a symbol of the Subak community's cultural identity. Meanwhile, WhatsApp groups are used to improve coordination effectiveness, speed information dissemination, and administrative communication.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Kulkul is a traditional communication tool made of wood or bamboo with a certain sound, Kulkul has a meaning according to the social context of Balinese society. In the life of indigenous peoples, Kulkul is used to call residents to participate in meetings, mutual cooperation activities, religious ceremonies, and to give signs of an emergency. The communication system has developed for hundreds of years and has become an integral part of the social system of Balinese society. The uniqueness of Kulkul lies not only in its function as a medium of message delivery, but also in its symbolic value that represents local norms, discipline, togetherness, and wisdom that are inherited from generation to generation.

One of the community organizations that still uses Kulkul as a communication medium is Subak, which is a traditional organization that manages agricultural irrigation in Bali. Subak not only functions to regulate the distribution of irrigation water, but also manages social relations between farmers through deliberation mechanisms, mutual cooperation, and the implementation of religious rituals related to agricultural activities. Kulkul has an important function as a collective communication medium to inform the schedule of sangkep (meetings), irrigation canal maintenance activities, community service, water distribution, and the implementation of traditional ceremonies related to the agricultural cycle. The subak irrigation system can be referred to as an irrigation system with a form that is commensurate with the socio-cultural of the community, achieving its goals based on harmony and togetherness according to the foundation of Tri Hita Karana, and maintaining balance with the environment, (Pusposutardjo, 1997 and Arif, 1999).

On the other hand, the development of communication technology has brought changes to the pattern of community interaction, including in the Subak organization. The use of smartphones, social media, and instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp is increasingly being used as a medium for disseminating information. This implementation makes message delivery faster, easier and more efficient. This transformation has given rise to new dynamics in the Subak organizational communication system, where digital communication media has begun to run side by side with traditional communication media. This condition raises questions about how Kulkul's position as a traditional communication medium is maintained, interpreted, and functioned in the midst of the increasing use of modern communication technology.

Communication according to Rogers and D. Lawrence (in Hafied Cangara, 2003:19) states that communication is a process in which two or more people exchange information with each other, which in turn will arrive at a deep understanding of each other. Meanwhile, according to Ngalimun (2017: 19), communication comes from the Latin *communis* which means the same. *Communico*, *communicatio* or *communicare* which means make the same (make to common). In simple terms, communication can occur if there is a similarity in meaning between the delivery of the message (communicator) and the person receiving the message (communicator).

Various previous studies have generally discussed Subak from the perspective of irrigation systems, cultural preservation, organizational governance, environmental sustainability, and the philosophy of Tri Hita Karana. Another study also examined organizational communication in the management of Subak and the relationship between Subak management and the Government. Meanwhile, studies on Kulkul are more focused on its function in the lives of indigenous peoples and customary villages in Bali. However, research that specifically examines Kulkul as a traditional communication medium in Subak organizations, especially in the context of adaptation to the development of digital communication technology, is still relatively limited. These limitations show that there is an important research space to explain how traditional communication is maintained, adapted, or undergoes transformation in the Subak organization in the digital era in Subak Sabtu, Tegallalang District, Gianyar, especially Subak members who live in Banjar Kebon, Kedisan Village, Tegallalang District, Gianyar Regency, Bali.

This study is important because traditional communication is not only understood as a medium for conveying information, but also as a mechanism for preserving cultural values, strengthening social solidarity, and forming the collective identity of Balinese agrarian society. The sustainability of the use of Kulkul in the Subak environment reflects the ability of the local community to maintain a communication system based on local wisdom in the midst of accelerating social changes. In addition, this research is expected to contribute to the development of the study of traditional communication, organizational communication, and culture-based communication, as well as a reference in efforts to preserve intangible cultural heritage that is still alive in the community.

Meanwhile, James W. Carey (1989) through the perspective of Ritual Communication explained that communication is not only aimed at transmitting information (transmission view of communication), but also maintaining togetherness (sharing), building solidarity, and maintaining the culture of a society. In this perspective, traditional communication is understood as a cultural practice that continues to be reproduced through the social activities of the community so as to strengthen the collective identity and sense of belonging to the community.

Based on this description, this study aims to analyze the role of Kulkul as a traditional communication media in the Subak organization, identify the functions and meanings of communication contained in it, and explain how the traditional communication media adapts to the development of communication technology in the digital era. The results of the research are expected to enrich the literature on traditional communication in Indonesia as well as provide recommendations for the preservation of communication systems based on local wisdom in supporting the sustainability of the Subak Sabtu organization in Banjar Kebon, Kedisan Village, Tegallalang District, Gianyar Regency, Bali.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Research on kulkul as a traditional communication medium in the Subak organization uses the Communication Ethnography approach developed by Dell Hymes. This theory views that communication is not only understood as a process of conveying messages, but also as a social and cultural practice that is influenced by values, norms, and the context of the society in which communication takes place (Hymes, 1974). From a communication ethnography perspective, the use of language and communication symbols must be understood through communication situations, communication events, and communication acts. Therefore, the sound of kulkul is not only understood as an acoustic signal, but as a cultural symbol that has a collective meaning agreed upon by Subak members.

Dell Hymes (1974) developed a SPEAKING analysis model, namely Setting and Scene, Participants, Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre. The model allows researchers to comprehensively identify the context of communication that takes place in the Subak organization. Setting refers to the location of the use of kulkul, such as Balai Subak, Pura Subak, or rice fields area. Participants include pekaseh, prajuru, and krama Subak as communication actors. Ends are related to the purpose of communication, for example inviting meetings, coordinating mutual cooperation, or conveying information on water distribution. Act Sequence describes the order in which messages are delivered through a pattern of kulkul strokes, while Key describes the atmosphere of communication, such as normal, sacred, or emergency circumstances. Instrumentalities refers to the communication media used, namely kulkul as a traditional media that now coexists with digital media. Norms relate to customary rules that govern the use of kulkul, while Genre denotes types of communication, such as announcements, invitations, or ritual notifications. Thus, the ethnographic theory of communication is very relevant to explain how the meaning of Kulkul communication is constructed, understood, and practiced in the life of the Subak organization.

In addition to communication ethnography, this study also uses the theory of Ritual Communication proposed by James W. Carey (1989). Carey explained that communication is not solely aimed at transmitting information, but also maintaining togetherness, shared values, and the social identity of a community. In the context of Subak, the sound of Kulkul not only serves to call members to gather, but also strengthens the sense of belonging, solidarity, mutual cooperation, and sustainability of Tri Hita Karana values. Thus, communication through kulkul is a ritual practice that continues to reproduce the culture of the Subak organization from generation to generation.

This research also utilizes the perspective of Symbolic Interactionism developed by Herbert Blumer (1969). This theory explains that humans act based on the meanings they give to symbols that appear in social interactions. This meaning is formed through the process of communication and continues to undergo interpretation in daily life. In the Subak organization, the sound of Kulkul is a social symbol that is collectively understood by all members. Each punch pattern has a certain meaning that directs the actions of Subak members, such as attending sangkep, doing community service, or participating in traditional ceremonies. Thus, the meaning of kulkul is not attached to the tool, but is formed through social interactions that take place continuously in the Subak community.

The use of these three perspectives provides a strong conceptual foundation in explaining the function of kulkul as a traditional communication medium. Communication Ethnography focuses on the cultural context of communication, Ritual Communication explains the function of communication in maintaining social solidarity and cultural sustainability, while Symbolic Interactionism helps to understand the process of forming meaning towards the symbol of the sound of kulkul. The integration of these three theories allows this study to analyze kulkul communication more completely, both from cultural, social, and organizational aspects, so as to be able to explain the existence of traditional Subak communication in the midst of the development of digital communication technology.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The subject of the study was all groups of farmers in Subak Sabtu who lived in Banjar Kebon who were randomly interviewed. In terms of obtaining data, the researcher also randomly examined informants in the Banjar Kebon area, Kedisan Village, Tegallalang District, ranging from perbekel, bandesa, pekaseh, community leaders, traders, tourism actors, leaders of community organizations and the general public. The techniques and instruments of data collection in this study use three types, namely; Interview, is a data collection technique through the media of interview evidence. The technique is carried out by the author and informant (information source) using questions related to the matter to be researched. The researchers also used various research instruments such as recorder aids and cameras. The method of collecting observational data, namely the researcher not only measures the attitude of the informant, but can also be used to record various phenomena that occur. Documentation is a data collection technique by collecting and analyzing documents that have a relationship with the object of research.

This research uses a qualitative approach with an in-depth interview method or known as in-depth interview. Interviews in this qualitative research aim to obtain in-depth data (Bungin, 2006). This research was carried out in Subak Sabtu which is located in Banjar Kebon, Kedisan Village, Tegallalang District, Gianyar Regency, Bali.

## **RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The existence of Kulkul has a very important position in the Subak organization, which is a traditional organization of agricultural irrigation management based on the Tri Hita Karana philosophy. As a social-agrarian-religious organization, Subak not only regulates the distribution of irrigation water, but also coordinates deliberation activities (*sangkep*), mutual cooperation (*ayahan*), maintenance of irrigation networks, pest control, and the implementation of various agricultural rituals. All of these activities require a communication system that is able to reach all members effectively. Kulkul is still used in various activities in the Subak Sebatu organization in Banjar Kebon, Kedisan Village, Tegallalang District, Gianyar Regency.

According to Dharma Putra, Cahyani, and Joni (2016), Kulkul is a traditional communication medium used by the Balinese people to convey various information through sound patterns (*pressure*) that have a certain meaning in accordance with the social agreement of the community. However, the condition of Subak in Bali is currently facing various challenges. Modernization, urbanization, conversion of agricultural land, climate change, and declining participation of the younger generation have affected the sustainability of the Subak organization. Recent research also shows that there is a communication gap between Subak members who have WhatsApp and those who don't. Meanwhile, the development of digital technology has begun to change the internal communication pattern of farmers. At the same time, various communication innovations began to be introduced in agricultural activities without eliminating the importance of local values that were the basis of Subak's life.

This phenomenon also occurred in Subak Sebatu in Banjar Kebon, Kedisan Village, Tegallalang District, Gianyar Regency. As one of the agricultural areas as well as an international tourist destination, the Subak Sebatu area in Banjar Kebon, Kedisan Village, Tegallalang District faces considerable pressure due to the development of the tourism sector, as well as social changes in the community. This condition requires the Subak organization to have an increasingly adaptive communication system so that coordination related to water distribution, mutual cooperation activities, the implementation of ceremonies, and decision-making continues to run effectively. In practice, the Subak management began to use WhatsApp groups to speed up the delivery of information to members. However, the use of digital media does not replace the function of kulkul as a traditional communication medium. Kulkul is still sounded in various organizational activities because it has customary legitimacy, symbolic meaning, and social power that cannot be completely replaced by digital media.

The phenomenon of using these two-communication media shows that traditional communication and digital communication are not in a relationship that replaces each other, but form a complementary communication pattern. Kulkul continues to function as a symbol of customary authority and a media that unites the community, while WhatsApp groups are used to speed up the distribution of information and facilitate coordination between members. This condition shows that there is an interesting process of organizational communication adaptation to be studied from the perspective of communication science, especially traditional communication and culture-based organizational communication. In any official and unofficial activities, Pekaseh and residents of Subak Sebatu in Banjar Kebon always take advantage of these two media, if there are residents who do not have a WhatsApp group then they will be notified by their colleagues or neighbors. On the other hand, Subak residents also still use face-to-face communication to coordinate.

Subak Sebatu in Banjar Kebon, Kedisan Village, Tegallalang District, Gianyar Regency, is one of the agricultural areas that has an area of about 40 hectares and still maintains the traditional Subak irrigation system as well as becoming a tourism destination based on the terraced rice landscape. The existence of Subak Sebatu not only functions as an irrigation water management system, but also as a socio-cultural institution that regulates relations between farmers through the values of Tri Hita Karana. However, in recent years, Subak Sebatu has faced increasingly complex challenges due to increasing pressure on tourism development, land conversion, environmental changes, and changes in community communication patterns. So, the existence of WhatsApp groups is very effective in providing any information.

The Gianyar Regency Government through the Detailed Spatial Plan (RDTR) of Tegallalang District for 2024–2044 stipulates an area of Sustainable Food Agricultural Land (LP2B) covering an area of 784.45 hectares that must be protected from land conversion. In the document, it is emphasized that LP2B land is not allowed to be diverted into a built-up area, and is directed to continue to support the sustainability of the Subak irrigation system, subak roads, irrigation networks, and agricultural activities. This policy shows that the local government places Subak as a strategic asset that must be maintained in the midst of rapid regional development.

Nevertheless, the pressure on the existence of Subak is still ongoing. The Gianyar Regency Land Function Transfer Control Study (2024) shows that the food crop agricultural area in Tegallalang District has an area of around 829.84 hectares in 2022. Within two years, there was a land conversion of around 3.76 hectares or 0.45%, so that the area of irrigated rice fields was reduced to around 826.08 hectares in 2024.

In addition to land conversion, Subak Sebatu also faces challenges from the aspect of agricultural production. In 2025, several Subaks in Tegallalang District will experience rat pest attacks that cause large-scale crop failure. In Subak Patas, Keneran Village, for example, around 40 hectares of rice fields were affected and some farmers were reported to have suffered crop damage of up to around 95%, while in Subak Pujung Kaja, Sebatu Village, a number of farmers experienced crop failure for three consecutive planting seasons. This condition shows that the sustainability of Subak is not only influenced by development pressures, but also by ecological problems that have a direct impact on agricultural productivity and farmers' welfare.

On the other hand, the development of the tourism sector has paradoxical consequences. The Tegallalang terraced rice field landscape is an international tourist attraction that provides economic benefits for the community, but at the same time increases the economic value of the land so as to encourage the conversion of rice fields into villas, restaurants, and other tourist facilities. This phenomenon began to affect the social structure of the Subak community, including the decrease in the number of active farmers and the increasing need for the Subak organization to adapt to the social changes that occurred.

In these conditions, organizational communication is an important factor in maintaining the sustainability of Subak. Coordination regarding the distribution of irrigation water, planting schedules, pest control, mutual cooperation activities, maintenance of irrigation networks, and the implementation of ceremonies at Subak temple require an effective communication system and be able to reach all members. Although the use of WhatsApp groups has developed as a medium for rapid and practical information dissemination, traditional communication media in the form of Kulkul is still maintained as a means of communication that has customary legitimacy, symbolic value, and social power in mobilizing the participation of Subak customs. This phenomenon shows that the Subak Sebatu organization in Banjar Kebon, Kedisan Village, Tegallalang District does not abandon traditional communication, but integrates it with digital communication media to maintain the effectiveness of coordination while maintaining the organization's cultural identity.

As revealed by Rezeki and Hadiyanto (2021), farmer groups in Indonesia also show that the use of WhatsApp groups is related to increasing group cohesiveness. The WhatsApp group in Subak Sebatu, located in Banjar Kebon, is used as an organizational communication medium that is able to support the implementation of communication functions effectively. They used WhatsApp groups as the four main functions of organizational communication, namely informative functions, regulatory functions, persuasive functions, and integrative functions. The informative function is related to the delivery of information to members of the organization quickly, the regulatory function is used to convey the rules or policies of the organization, the persuasive function aims to build member participation and cooperation, while the integrative function plays a role in strengthening coordination and relationships between members of the organization.

In the context of the Subak Sabtu organization, these four functions can be seen in the use of WhatsApp groups as a medium for delivering sangkep schedules (meetings), distribution of irrigation water, notification of gotong royong activities (ayahan), coordination of the implementation of ceremonies at Subak Temple, and the delivery of various administrative information. Thus, WhatsApp groups function as a communication medium that increases the speed of information distribution while facilitating coordination between Subak members. This is in line with Firmansyah and Mubarokah (2025).

Through WhatsApp groups, Subak Sabtu members find it easier to discuss, exchange information, share experiences, and build cooperation in agricultural activities. These findings show that digital communication media not only serves as a means of disseminating information, but also strengthens social relationships within organizations. WhatsApp groups have evolved into digital social learning spaces. In the farming community, WhatsApp is used to share knowledge, spread agricultural innovations, discuss problems in the field, and build networks between community members. This shows that WhatsApp is not only a communication medium, but also a means of learning and capacity building for community members.

The existence of WhatsApp groups has a very important role for Subak members who no longer live in Banjar Kebon, either because they work outside the village, live in other areas, or have high mobility. In these conditions, face-to-face communication and information delivery through kulkul cannot always reach all members. Therefore, WhatsApp groups are a supporting communication medium that bridges the limitations of space and time without eliminating traditional communication functions.

For Subak residents who do not live in Banjar Kebon, WhatsApp groups have several special functions. First, as a medium for disseminating information in real time, so that members still get information even though they do not hear the sound of Kulkul directly. Second, as a remote coordination medium, which allows members to confirm attendance, express opinions, or coordinate with administrators without having to be on site. Third, as a medium for organizational documentation, because information, meeting decisions, photos of activities, and important documents are stored in the group so that they can be accessed again when needed. Fourth, as a medium to strengthen social attachment, because members who live outside Banjar can still follow the development of the organization and maintain a sense of belonging to Subak.

However, in the Subak Sabtu organization, the use of WhatsApp groups does not completely replace traditional communication media in the form of Kulkul. WhatsApp is more widely used for administrative communication and routine coordination, while Kulkul is still used in activities related to customs, rituals, and collective mobilization. Thus, the communication pattern that develops in the Subak Sabtu organization shows the integration between digital communication media and traditional communication media, where the two media have different but complementary functions in supporting the effectiveness of organizational communication.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that communication in the Subak Sebatu organization located in Banjar Kebon, Kedisian Village, Tegallalang District, Gianyar Regency, Bali has developed along with the advancement of information technology. The presence of WhatsApp groups provides convenience in conveying information, accelerating coordination, and increasing the effectiveness of communication between Subak members. Through digital media, administrators can convey information about sangkep schedules, irrigation water distribution, mutual cooperation activities, and administrative information quickly and documented.

So that the development of digital communication media does not eliminate the role of Kulkul as a traditional communication medium. Kulkul still has a strategic function as a medium that contains cultural values, customary legitimacy, and symbolic meanings that cannot be completely replaced by digital media. In the Subak Sebatu organization, Kulkul not only functions as a tool for conveying information, but also as a symbol of togetherness, cultural identity, and a binder of social solidarity between members.

Thus, the communication pattern that develops in the Subak Sebatu organization shows the integration between traditional communication media and digital communication media. Kulkul is mainly used in activities related to customs, rituals, and collective mobilization, while WhatsApp groups are used for administrative, informative, and coordinated communication. The two media are not in a relationship that replaces each other, but complement each other according to their function and context of use.

This conceptual finding shows that the Subak Sebatu organization is able to adapt to technological developments without abandoning the values of local wisdom. Therefore, the communication model applied in Subak can be understood as hybrid communication, which is a communication system that integrates traditional media and digital media to maintain organizational effectiveness while maintaining cultural identity. This model contributes to the development of the study of traditional communication, organizational communication, and culture-based digital communication, and shows that modernization does not necessarily eliminate local communication practices, but can go hand in hand through an adaptation process that is in harmony with the needs of society.

Based on the results of the research, there are several suggestions that can be submitted as follows;

1. For Subak Organizations

The management of Subak Sebatu in Banjar Kebon is expected to maintain the use of Kulkul as a traditional communication medium because it not only functions as a conveyor of information, but also as a symbol of cultural identity, customary legitimacy, and a strengthening of social solidarity between members. At the same time, the use of WhatsApp groups needs to continue to be optimized as a supporting communication medium for the delivery of information that is administrative, coordinated, and urgent. The integration of the two media can increase the

effectiveness of organizational communication without eliminating the cultural values that are the basis of Subak's life.

2. For Cultural Preservation

Kulkul needs to be seen not only as a cultural object, but as an intangible cultural heritage that represents the communication system of Balinese society. Therefore, efforts are needed to document the types of sounds (pressure), the meaning of communication, the procedures for use, and the cultural values contained in them so that they can be inherited to the younger generation as part of Balinese cultural identity.

3. For the Development of Communication Sciences

This research shows that traditional communication still has relevance in the midst of the development of digital technology. Therefore, the study of communication not only needs to focus on the development of digital media, but also on how traditional media is able to adapt and integrate with modern communication technology. The concept of hybrid communication in culture-based organizations can be a new perspective in the development of the study of organizational communication, traditional communication, and digital communication.

## ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future research can further investigate the effectiveness of integrating traditional communication media such as kulkul with modern digital platforms like WhatsApp Groups to enhance information dissemination within Subak organizations. In addition, comparative studies across different regions or cultural communities are recommended to examine how local wisdom-based communication systems can be sustained alongside technological advancements. Future studies may also explore the impact of this integration on community participation, cultural preservation, and organizational efficiency.

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