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Lego–lego and informal politics— an exploration of cultural democracy in Bugis society, Indonesia

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This study examines how the Bugis concept of *lego–lego*, the veranda at the front of a traditional stilt house, serves as an indigenous public sphere that sustains everyday life democratic life. It seeks to reinterpret the idea of cultural democracy through the ethical values and spatial traditions that shape Bugis society. Drawing on a qualitative ethnographic approach, the research combines participant observation, semi-structured interviews with customary leaders and community members, and the analysis of local documents. The findings show that *lego–lego* provides a participatory setting where people come together to talk, listen, and reach shared understanding through practices such as *tudang sipulung*. These interactions are guided by Bugis moral principles; *siri'*, *pesse'*, *sipakatau*, and *sipakalebbi*, which nurture dignity, empathy, humanize, and respect to each other. The study argues that *lego–lego* embodies cultural democracy by linking informal acts of deliberation to collective decision-making beyond formal institutions. In doing so, it offers an indigenous perspective on democracy and broadens current discussions of deliberative and informal politics in Southeast Asia

KEYWORDS

Bugis, cultural democracy, informal politics, *lego–lego*, traditional public sphere

Introduction

The concept of democracy is closely related to the basic meaning of politics, namely, the management of the polis or city-state (Tebaldi and Calaresu, 2015). The polis is a symbol of human life space, in which individuals interact to organise together (Arnason et al., 2013). Through regulation, human togetherness is not limited to a collection or crowd of people, but also extends to society. The rules of life together become the ontological prerequisite for the political aspect of community life, which is then manifested in the practice of democracy. Democracy is a process of fulfilling the common will (*volonté générale*). The concept of democracy can be understood as an idealised space for the exchange of political interests (Syafhendry et al., 2023; Munck, 2016; Phelan, 1997). Through democracy, criticism of tyrannical practices, oligarchy, and authoritarian power is aired, and at the same time (Hanan, 2014; Kendall-Taylor et al., 2019). The democratic arena opens up space for individual expression in expressing aspirations and political interests freely, without fear of repression from those in power (Bennett et al., 2018; Bode et al., 2014). This, of course, enables intersubjective relations in the decision-making process for solving common problems. Thus, every regulation and public policy is the result of dialogue between members of society in an open public sphere. All members of the public have equal access and opportunity to

understand the policies that are decided to be implemented (Arneson, 2017; Fung, 2015). Channels of expression are available to make alternative views or opinions known and dialogue with other community members.

Democracy places each citizen in the position of an independent subject. One's existence is considered important, so one's attempt to dominate another is considered unethical. Even for Emmanuel Levinas (Hardiman et al., 2011), the essence of life together is the meeting of faces (*le visage*). 'Face' does not reside in biological meanings (Perpich, 2019). Face is interpreted as the complexity of human existence, where each individual has different ideals and political imaginations (Jubba et al., 2022; Cooper, 2014). Faces are present as subjects who refuse to be objectified and exist in political space as conscious entities, so acceptance of different views and efforts to understand these differences is a form of meeting between 'faces' (Krassoy, 2016; Rae, 2016; Saldukaitytė, 2019). In a democracy, the meeting between 'faces' can be realised, this is due to the ability of the democratic system to organise different political interests through spaces of interest discourse. The discourse of interests in democratic practice becomes the locus of political equality in society. The principle of political equality assumes that all members of society have the same qualifications and access to participate in decision-making.

In modern political literature, democracy is promoted as an adequate model of governance, hence the post-World War wave of democratisation in various parts of the world (Gunitsky, 2014; Harvey, 2016; Silander, 2019). This is a preventive measure to prevent the presence of new tyrants in the leadership of a nation-state, as many were present in the period of World War. Through political democracy, the organisation of social life is reconstructed within the horizon of public participation. The traditional pattern of relations between society and power holders, which presupposes the absence of the wider public in the decision-making process and the regulation of public interests, is no longer acceptable (Bekkers and Edwards, 2016; Rhodes, 2018; Taylor, 2021). Under the banner of democracy, state repression has no place, and any policy made by the government can be questioned. One can criticise and demand rationality from power holders in policymaking. Thus, political decisions can be intersubjectively legitimised. In other words, any policy or rule that is binding must be the result of a consensus process between subjects.

As one of the main instruments in modern political practice, the discourse of democracy opens up a discussion and research agenda that questions the development and conditions of democracy. Dahl (2020) argues that although for centuries democracy has been discussed, debated, supported, attacked, ignored, established, practised, destroyed, and then sometimes rebuilt, it does not seem to have produced an agreement on the fundamental issue, namely, what democracy is. Dahl tries to pose the ontological problem of democracy. The question indirectly questions two things, namely, the essence of democracy and the extent to which government practices can be called democratic, or in other words, how democratic is 'democracy' in countries that we call democratisation? Furthermore, Dahl's argument can be used to see how some people misunderstand democracy. Democracy is often seen in a very narrow and formal angle, which is only a matter of the circulation of the power elite, from one hand to another (Flinders, 2016; Gaxie, 2017; Mellamphy, 2021). The meaning of democracy is reduced only to the limits of electoral succession (Younus et al., 2025; Prianto and Yuslaini, 2024; Helms, 2020; Huq and Ginsburg, 2018). Other aspects, such as how the

articulation and role of the community in political spaces, in the process of making everyday life decisions, are sidelined in looking at democracy. The minimalist interpretation of democracy implies that the basic understanding of politics is also narrowed to the framework of power struggle, rather than to the framework of participation (*avoir-part*) by the community in life and the common good (*bonum publicum*).

In the Indonesian context, the rapid pace of democratisation in modern governance practices does not seem to be matched by a critical understanding of the practice of democracy itself. This condition, for the author, is caused by the application of democracy that is too formal. The practice of democracy is unable to penetrate the walls of an elite that is bureaucratic and full of tension. Political spaces cannot be presented in the form of simple interactions. Therefore, the author assumes that in the context of implementing democracy, there needs to be an in-depth exploration of democracy and its relevance to the socio-cultural characteristics of a community, so that the practice of democracy cannot be separated from the cultural roots of society. Cultural narrative in the study of democracy is the main theme that this article aims to discuss. This is in synergy with the indigenisation agenda, which is a series of efforts to contextualise democratic ideas with the cultural realities of the archipelago, especially in the lives of the Bugis. Indigenisation is similar to the term domestication (Prianto and Abdillah, 2020; Prianto et al., 2021). The issue of indigenisation in democracy studies certainly has implications for the formation of new structures in democratic practices in Indonesia, especially on the issue of demarcation between formal and informal democratic practices, so that the implementation of democracy can be understood by the wider community in daily political practice.

Discussions of democracy and the public sphere in Indonesia have flourished over the past two decades, yet the majority of the studies still revolve around formal and institutional politics such as elections, parties, and state administration (Adeney-Risakotta, 2015; Aziz and Hasna, 2020; Duile and Bens, 2017; Saud, 2020; Suherman and Putra, 2020). Analyses of local democracy often focus on elite networks or patron-client relations, leaving aside the quieter and more intimate spaces where ordinary citizens practise participation in their daily lives. Earlier works, such as Ansor (2016), Hidayati and Handoko (2022), Menchik (2019), Munir (2023), and Takdir (2020) review of Muslim engagement in public discourse and Prasutomo et al. (2019) in their study of Habermas's public sphere in Indonesia's multicultural setting, they have made valuable contributions. However, they remain tied to Western theoretical frameworks and concentrate on urban or media-based arenas. Far less attention has been paid to how indigenous moral values and spatial traditions generate their own forms of public life and collective reasoning in local communities.

At the theoretical level, the concept of cultural democracy, Hadley and Belfiore (2018) have provided an important language for understanding diversity and participation, yet it has seldom been examined in the context of ethnographic realities in Southeast Asia. Likewise, scholarship on everyday politics (Kerkvliet, 2013) and vernacular democracy (Tanabe, 2007) recognises the political depth of daily encounters, but rarely looks at domestic and communal settings such as the veranda or front porch as informal infrastructures of dialogue. In Eastern Indonesia, particularly among Bugis communities, research remains scarce on how ethical codes, such as *siri*, *pesse*, *sipakatau*, and *sipakalebbi*, together with architectural spaces like

lego-lego, sustain discussion, disagreement, and reconciliation. This absence reveals a gap between the theory of deliberative democracy and the lived democratic ethos found in everyday cultural practice.

The urgency of this study arises from a broader concern: Indonesian democracy, though procedurally mature, often struggles to capture the lived experiences and moral textures of everyday citizenship. Beyond ballots and institutions, democracy also unfolds in how people listen, respond, and act together in the spaces closest to their lives. By examining *lego-lego* as an indigenous public sphere, this study seeks to show how democratic life can grow from within communal traditions rather than be confined to formal design. Its novelty lies in viewing a domestic architectural space as a political forum, in bridging ethnography with political philosophy, and in expanding the discussion of deliberative and cultural democracy through a Southeast Asian lens.

Guided by this concern, the research asks how *lego-lego* functions as an indigenous public sphere within Bugis society, and in what ways Bugis ethical principles shape practices of deliberation and mutual recognition. The study aims to interpret *lego-lego* as a participatory site of cultural democracy, to analyse how local ethics inform the art of conversation and decision-making, and to illuminate how informal forms of deliberation can deepen our understanding of democracy beyond its Western and institutional boundaries.

Method

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach to understand *lego-lego* as a cultural practice in Bugis society that functions as an informal public space. Ethnography was chosen as the main method because it enables the researcher to observe directly the social dynamics, discursive practices, and meaning structures embedded in the *lego-lego* tradition. Within this approach, the researcher does not act merely as a passive observer but as a reflective subject who interprets social actions through the lens of political philosophy, particularly theories of the public sphere, deliberative democracy, and the intersubjectivity paradigm.

Fieldwork was conducted over an 8-month period across several regions in South Sulawesi, including Bone, Wajo, Soppeng, Sinjai, Barru, Pare-Pare, Sidrap, and Pinrang. These locations were selected because they represent diverse Bugis communities that continue to sustain *lego-lego* as part of their social and moral life. Data collection combined documentation, observation, and semi-structured interviews with customary leaders and community members involved in everyday veranda gatherings. Supplementary data were drawn from secondary sources, such as customary law texts and scholarly studies on Bugis culture. Observations were carried out during informal discussions, community meetings, and collective decision-making events to capture how ethical principles shape deliberative interactions.

All data were analysed using an ethnographic thematic approach that interprets symbols, language, and narratives found in *lego-lego* practices. This interpretive process was complemented by philosophical reflection to reveal the ethical and political dimensions underlying the practice: how *lego-lego* creates a participatory arena for dialogue, reciprocity, and informal democratic engagement within Bugis society. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process, ensuring respect for local customs, informed consent, and reflexivity in interpreting the findings.

Informal democracy: a critique of formal democracy

Many terms can be used to describe the implementation of democracy in the political practice of modern societies, each of which has a binary relationship with other terms, such as formal and informal democracy, which is the focus of the study in this sub-title. The use of both terms refers to how the process of organising collective life is shaped, whether partially by elitist forces and methods or otherwise through a process of participation of the wider community. Giorgio Agamben states that in a democracy, there is a clear separation between the constituting power and the constituted power (Sudibyo, 2019). Constituting power is characterised as the sovereignty of the people, the power of all people, and lies outside the official institutions of the state. The term represents the ability of each person to decide their political choices freely. In contrast, constituted power is synonymous with exclusive power, which is within the circle of official state institutions. The existence of constituted power is always tied to the structural framework of the state. The first term, 'constituting power' correlates with informal forms of democracy. The formation of social order is constructed through public forces that are not co-opted by state hegemony. The political life of the community comes in a simple form, accessible to the wider community and integrated with the cultural community. Each individual exists in political spaces, expresses political ideas, and is immersed in conversations about life together.

In contrast, the second term, 'constituted power', correlates with formal democracy. The idea of organising society or living together tends to reside in official state institutions. In addition, the problem-solving process and efforts to reach a consensus take place in formal spaces. Although the community is generally defined as a political entity, it does not have a sufficient space to organise life together. Bureaucratic methods remain the main choice in the formal democracy model. Individuals as political subjects are lost in the shadow of the 'logic of the majority', which is represented in a limited way in the electoral arena and representative politics by political elites. Under these conditions, it is as if the implementation of politics is disconnected from the complexity of the political imagination of individuals. Individuals as political subjects cannot express and speak freely about their personal opinions and views on social order. Even at an extreme point, the presence of individuals is interpreted only as an instrument of political struggle in general elections, or the 'voice' of individuals is limited to the calculation of voting on the agenda of changing power (see Table 1).

Limited public access and exclusionary political spaces in formal democracy modes are considered unable to bridge (bridging) the diversity of political imaginations in people's lives. Furthermore, criticism of the building of formal democratic practices opens the presence of alternatives to the development of democratic modes, one of which is cultural democracy.

Cultural democracy and understanding of the subject

Conceptually, cultural democracy is not new in modern political literature. The concept was introduced by Alain Touraine in the late 20th century. However, the narrative of cultural democracy in democracy studies is less explored. Cultural democracy arises from the reconstruction of democratic practices in the modern era. For

TABLE 1 Comparison of formal and informal democracy.

Formal democracy	Informal democracy
The hegemony of state power or official state institutions in the formation of social order.	Public power shapes political reality or common life.
Policies are made in a monologue by the state.	Political imagination is discussed and forms consensus in the form of policies or regulations (intersubjective paradigm).
Political dialogue takes place in formal spaces that are bureaucratic.	Conversations about life together are in informal spaces and involve every individual as a political subject.
Political achievements are in the succession of elections.	The political agenda is in informal politics and does not rest only on the change of power holders.

Source: processed from various sources.

Touraine, democratic practices in the modern era are unable to accommodate the different interests and backgrounds of various individuals, so a reformulation of democratic practices is needed. Cultural democracy is considered capable of affirming all individual rights within the bonds of solidarity and guaranteed by social institutions. This mode of democracy encourages great opportunities for all individuals to exist as independent subjects. Cultural democracy contains three main aspects: tolerance, recognition, and subjectivity (Kusumadewi, 2010). Tolerance in relation to democracy means that differences in background do not become a barrier to one's participation in political spaces. Instead, these differences are packaged in the politics of recognition. In this sense, everyone must recognise different opinions and political aspirations. The effort to understand is a form of recognition of one subject by another. Finally, cultural democracy contains the politics of the subject. This means that democracy is defined as a regime that opens up the possibility for everyone to live as an independent subject or individual (Kusumadewi, 2010; Touraine, 1997).

Phenomenologically, in the practice of cultural democracy, a person will experience himself as 'the other'. In the first stage, each subject feels the desire to 'be heard and to listen'. At this stage, each person expresses their political imagination and reveals their various political experiences. Furthermore, in the second stage, because they have felt the experience of wanting to be 'heard and listened to', there is a process of self-reflection; from this process, individuals finally want to 'hear' what others listen to. In the third phase, as a result of hearing and listening activities, each subject has knowledge in their mind of what the other wants. In the last stage, the subject tries to touch the desire of the other which is manifested in the knowledge in the subject's mind. The interaction between the subject and the desires of the subject or the other gives rise to an understanding of what others want. A deep understanding of political ideals and imagination among fellow subjects then becomes a condition of possibility for the birth of democracy in political reality (see Figure 1).

Furthermore, cultural democracy also opens up new research agendas that rely on an indigenisation approach to democracy studies. Indigenisation exists to contextualise democratic practices with cultural communities. Scientific ideas that come from outside the cultural community are reformulated in terms of the community.

According to Alatas (1993), indigenisation can have four meanings, depending on the context being addressed. At the metatheoretical level, indigenisation refers to the disclosure and analysis of worldviews, as well as the ontological, epistemological, and ethical assumptions underlying a scientific work. At the theoretical level, indigenisation refers to the generation of concepts and theories from a society's historical experiences and cultural practices. At the empirical level, indigenisation refers to focusing on issues that are more relevant to Third World countries. At the applied social science level, indigenisation refers to the establishment of solutions, plans, and policies by governmental and non-governmental organisations. Through the indigenisation approach, democracy is revived based on the historical experiences and cultural practices of the people; in the context of this article, the Bugis people, particularly the values contained in the *lego-lego*.

Cultural roots of *lego-lego* (veranda) in Bugis spatial philosophy

Traditional houses are one of the cultural artefacts that represent the creative ideas of a community, concerning the management and use of space. House building is not only a means of fulfilling physical needs but also a place for self-development. As a spatial building, the house is interpreted as the locus of various events and activities carried out by humans throughout their lives, so understanding the nature of space is important to humans. In the life of the Bugis community, the existence of a house is more than just a shelter for its inhabitants. The house becomes a sacred space where various phases of human life, such as birth, marriage, and death, unfold. Even social, political, and religious rituals fill the corners of the house. Each corner or room in the house, according to the Bugis community, is believed to have its own traditional values and messages. As in the concept of *sulapa eppa wala suji* (quadrilateral rhombus), which is a basic value concerning the life of the Bugis people, that is projected in the traditional houses of the Bugis people.

Sulapa eppa for the Bugis community is considered the most perfect form, which cosmologically represents the four natural *sarwa*, namely, air, water, fire, and land, that are inseparable from human life (Yunus, 2012), so the house for the Bugis people is considered perfect if it is rectangular (Naing, 2019). *sulapa eppa* is closely related to the four principles of human life as illustrated in the function of the house for the Bugis people, which is not only a comfortable place to live but also a sacred space that contains the existence of human creation or birth, human existence or existence in the world, the position of human relations with nature, and death or human departure from the world (Robinson and Paeni, 2005).

The Bugis house building is a reflection of Bugis culture. The building patterns and frameworks reflect the Bugis people's ideas about the spatial organisation of the universe (macrocosm) and human life in general. The Bugis cosmological view states that the house is a representation of the microcosm which is a replica of the macrocosm or the larger realm. Vertically, the division of space in Bugis houses is divided into three parts, namely, the upper (*rakkeang*), middle (*watang pola*), and lower (*awa bola*) (Yunus, 2012). This division is based on Bugis cosmology, which believes that the universe consists of three levels: the upper world (*botting langi*), the middle world (*ale kawa*), and the lower world (*uri liyu*) (Figure 2).

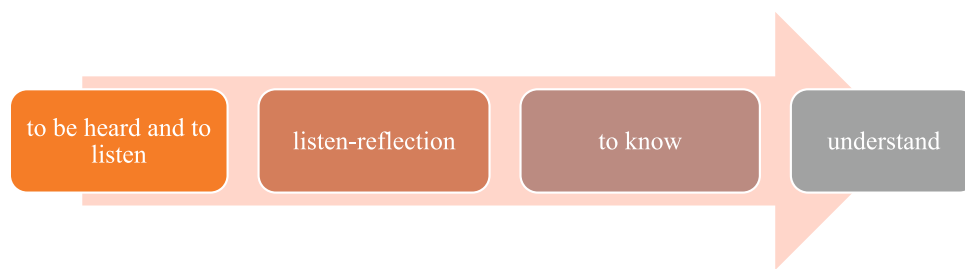


FIGURE 1
Cultural democracy scheme.

Philosophically, *rakkeang* is associated with the upper world (*boting langi*), making it the most sacred and holy space (Naidah Naing, 2020). In its function, *rakkeang* serves as a place to store various crops and sacred heirlooms. This is interpreted that everything that humans need in their lives comes from the upper world (*boting langi*). Furthermore, *Watang pola* or the middle room correlates with the depiction of the middle world (*ale kawa*). *Watang pola* is a space that is bustling with the hustle and bustle of human activities, so it is associated with the middle world (*ale kawa*), where humans live their lives from birth to death. And finally, *awa bola*, or the bottom of the Bugis house, is related to the depiction of the underworld (*uri liyu*). *Awa bola* is the place where livestock are kept, so it is often depicted as animalistic and far from 'sacred'. Furthermore, in terms of horizontal spatial arrangement, the Bugis also divide the house into three parts, namely, the front room (*lontang risaliweng*), the middle room (*lontang retengngah*), and the back room (*lontang rilaleng*). The division is based on the philosophical perspective of the Bugis tribe, which states that the house is a manifestation of humans. Bugis people reflect on the concept and structure of their houses as a reflection of themselves or the human body, as their inhabitants (Naidah Naing, 2020). The Bugis analogue the construction of a house to the human body, which consists of the face, abdomen, and legs.

Lego-lego (veranda) itself, which is the locus of research in this paper, is included in the series of front rooms in Bugis houses. *Lego-lego* is located at the very front of the house, above the main staircase (Wasilah and Hildayanti, 2016). *Lego-lego* is analogous to a human face. On the face, there are two important instruments, namely, the eyes and the mouth. The eyes are interpreted as an instrument of observation of phenomena and events in human life, thus reflecting the human heart and mind. On the veranda (*lego-lego*), Bugis people observe and read various natural events. In *lego-lego*, Bugis interact with nature, which is later transformed into information about natural signs. The structure of *lego-lego*, which has no walls, symbolises the openness of Bugis society. Through *lego-lego*, Bugis people greet each other. This condition demonstrates that *lego-lego* is a public space that can be accessed by anyone. Its location at the front, coupled with its tall structure, means that a person in the *lego-lego* can be seen, even at a distance. Furthermore, *lego-lego* can also be interpreted as a human mouth. The layout of *lego-lego* is presented vertically in Figure 3 and horizontally in Figure 4.

The physical form of the Bugis stilt house is a reflection of the human body and the influence of the structure of the cosmos, which consists of the head, body, and legs, meaning the unity of self and environment. Following Figure 3, it can be seen that the vertical

spatial layout is the head (*rakkeang*), the body of the house (*ale bola*), and the foot of the house (*awa sao*). The *lego-lego* space is integrated into the body of the house. The roof of the house (*rakkeang*) is a place attached to the sky and overshadows the house, a place to store heirlooms/sacred objects, a place to hide girls before marriage, a place for family celebrations, and a place to store rice. The body of the house (*ale bola*) is located between the floor and the attic, functioning as a place to live and for routine activities, divided into several rooms with their functions defined by the left, right, front, and back walls. The foot of the house (*awa sao*) is under the house and used to store carpentry, agricultural, and other tools; to keep pets; to store dirty water used for laundry; and to hold special activities such as meetings and marriages.

The application of the Bugis cosmos structure is formed from the four earth-forming components of water, earth, wind, and fire, which then form a rectangular geometric (*sulapa eppa*) as an element of human existence known as the *sulapa eppa* philosophy. The rectangular plan of the Bugis house means continuous self-improvement. From Figure 4, it can be explained that the horizontal spatial layout of the house body (*ale bola*) is divided into three core parts, namely, the following: (1) The front room (*lontang risaliweng*) is a formal semi-private space, as a place to communicate with outsiders who have been allowed to enter, a place to receive guests, sleep guests, deliberate, store seeds and lay bodies before burial; (2) The middle room (*lontang ritengngah*) is a semi-informal private space where social relations between family members and informal family activities occur. This room is where the head of the family and immature children sleep, where they eat and give birth; (3) The back room (*lontang rilaleng*) is a semi-informal private space, used as a bed for girls or parents (grandparents), and a place for family members who need protection from the whole family.

The value of the living room is higher than the front room, the bedroom is placed in the living room, and guests are not allowed to enter the living room without permission from the house owner. In Bugis houses, there are additional space elements in the form of *lego-lego* (terrace) and *dapureng* (kitchen). Architecturally, the function of *lego-lego* is a place to rest the stairs, a place for guests to sit before being invited in, a place to rest in the afternoon, and a place to watch events outside the house. The floor elevation of the *lego-lego* is lower than that of the main house. *Dapureng* is located at the back of the side, generally has its staircase, is used for cooking and storing cooking utensils, and is a place to eat. For the Bugis community, the orientation of the house is best facing east or the place where the sun rises (*enre-enre esso*) or fortune rises (*enre-enrekang dalle*). Thus, philosophically, the Bugis house is the embodiment of the following: (1) Continuous

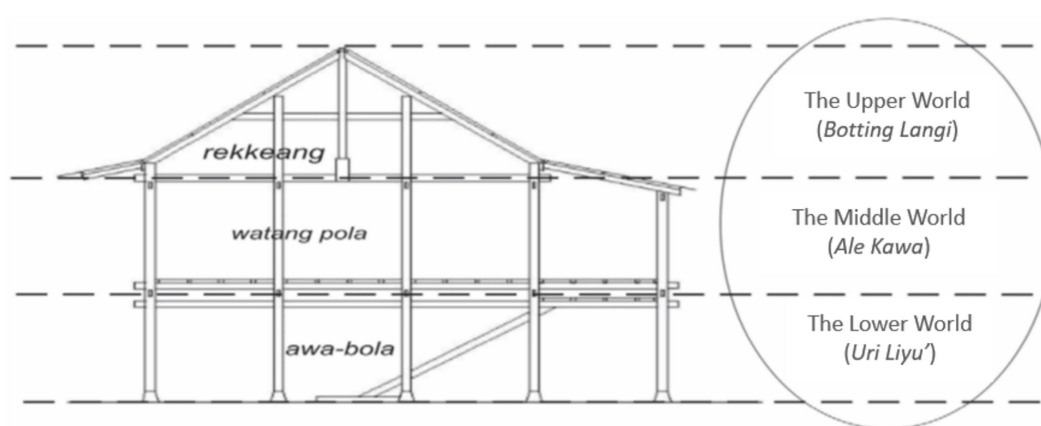


FIGURE 2
Bugis space structure and philosophy Sumber: Naing, 2021.

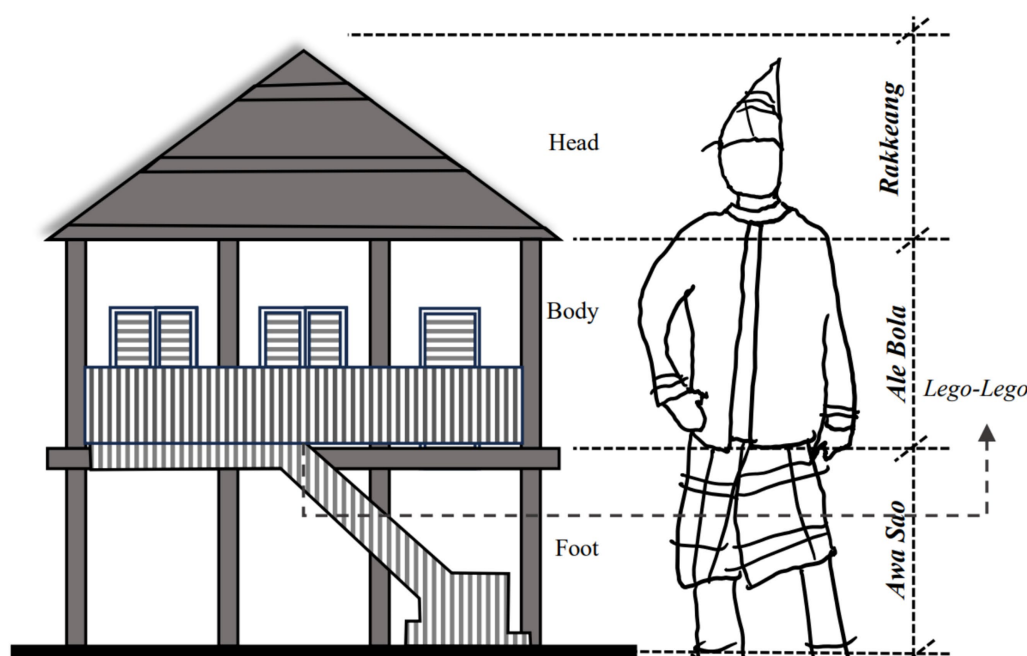


FIGURE 3
Vertical spatial layout of *lego-lego* in Bugis house.

self-improvement reflected through the rectangular plan (*sulapa eppa*), *sulapa appa* represents the four corners of the house, namely, the front, back, left, and right. So a house is said to be *genne'* (perfect) if it has four corners (Wardiman and Rosmini Maru, 2020). (2) The understanding or view of the unity of self with the environment is reflected in the shape of a three-part house, namely, the head, body, and legs; (3) A reflection of the existence of a wider level of nature, namely, the upper world, middle world, and lower world. At the same time, the *lego-lego* itself as a space connecting the macro cosmos (nature) to the micro cosmos (home) is (the transition of informal space to formal space). This space is also a transition from the bottom of the house (*awa bola*) to the body of the house (*ale bola*) which is reached using wooden stairs. Thus, *lego-lego* as a vestibule symbolises

the informal reception of guests before they are invited into the formal living room. In general, the spatial pattern of Bugis houses presents *lego-lego* as the main access to the primary space in the house, so this space is the starting space in Bugis houses (Jamaluddin et al., 2020). The open-concept *lego-lego* at the front is part of the main façade of the Bugis house, representing the communal tradition through the concept of togetherness, openness, and consensus in discussing matters in life and how to overcome them.

In the hierarchical structure of the spatial arrangement of Bugis houses, *lego-lego* is seen as a zone that has a central role in the social interaction activities of the community (Syam et al., 2018). The *lego-lego* space territory is an area that all family members and guests can access. This zone functions as an intervention boundary between the

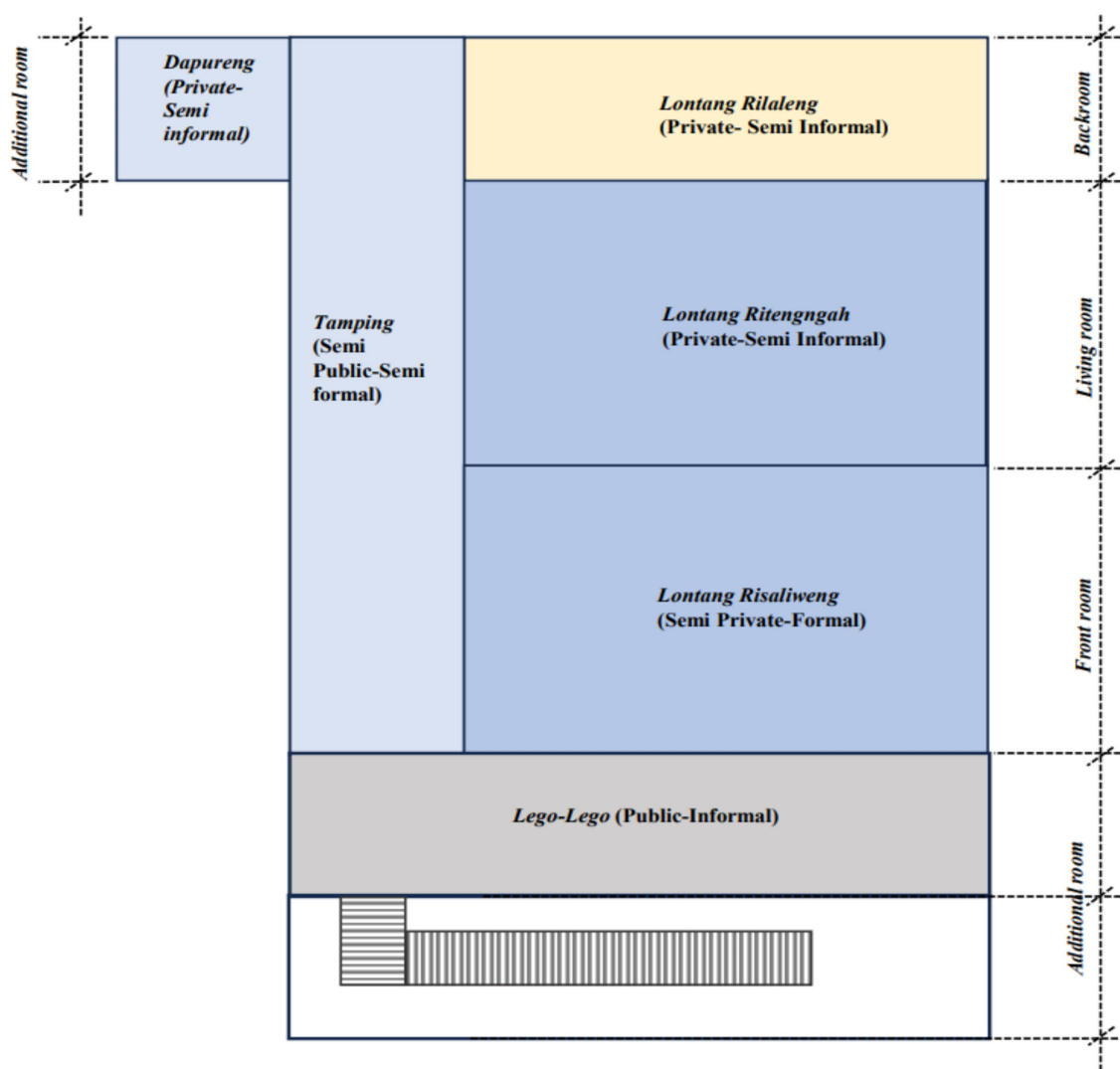


FIGURE 4
Spatial horizontal layout of *lego-lego* on the body of a Bugis house.

outer space and the inner space of the stilt house building. *Lego-lego* is the entrance before entering the main house which is also used informally as a relaxing area with the family (Abidah, 2016). The size varies but, in general, the length of the *lego-lego* follows the width and or one-quarter to one-twelfth of the width of the house. While the width of the *lego-lego* usually consists of one plot of stilt house modules. The position of the *lego-lego* varies, some place it at the front of the house lengthwise, the side, and the centre of the front of the house.

For the Bugis community, the organisation of the inner space of the house tends to be open. Apart from the *lego-lego*, the living room and the kitchen are also open. This reflects the culture and identity of the Bugis people, who prioritise hospitality to receive guests and carry out activities. In addition, since the majority of their livelihoods are farmers and fishermen, the spatial arrangement is more flexible in supporting their production activities. Overall, the concept of space formation in Bugis houses is based on the value of family life unity, body size, namely, the height of the husband and wife, and a close relationship with nature (Naing, 2023). The outer

space of the house can be in the form of a veranda. The importance of the outdoor space is emphasised as a social space in the local tradition.

Furthermore, another analogy for the front of the Bugis house is the mouth. The mouth becomes an instrument of communication in human daily practice. Through-the-mouth conversations in human life are possible. Similar to the mouth, *lego-lego* is identified as a room in the Bugis house that produces a lot of noise; this is because *lego-lego* is a communal sitting room, which contains warm conversations between Bugis people. *Lego-lego* functions as a communal space. A place where Bugis people discuss and talk to each other. From simple topics to complex ones. Historically, in *lego-lego* various life problems are discussed to find solutions. *Lego-lego* for the Bugis community is a relaxation space that fosters social solidarity. In this aspect, *lego-lego* symbolises a democratic political space. *Lego-lego* can present a model of a democratic discourse forum, an open space of interaction between subjects. So, it is not an exaggeration that the *lego-lego* conversation forum model can transform into one of the practices of cultural democracy.

Transformation of the veranda space (*lego-lego*): philosophical roots and its implications in the study and practice of democracy

In practical terms, democracy is not completely new to Bugis political life. The values embodied in democracy are compatible with the practices of the Bugis cultural community. Values such as appreciation of other people's ideas, mutual tolerance, and transparency are always present in the daily lives of Bugis people. The appreciation of transcendental values, especially those contained in the *lego-lego* space philosophy, can bridge modern political issues, especially in the practice and study of democracy. Nowadays, there are physical changes in the form of the architectural facade of Bugis stilt houses, especially on the *lego-lego* (terrace). These changes appear in the materials of the staircase elements, the dimensions of the columns and beams, the floor, and the roof into a concrete stage-shaped *lego-lego* model, reflecting modernity in architectural design. As a cultural phenomenon, *lego-lego* can intervene in modern democracy that seems structural and formal. *Lego-lego* is not only interpreted as a space or building but as a political space, where conversations between communities simply take place. Despite its simplicity, *lego-lego* can reflect the principles of culturally-based democracy, including:

Intersubjective paradigm

Lego-lego is a supporting instrument in shaping the social solidarity of the community. It forms strong bonds between individuals. Through *lego-lego* conversations, political practices based on the intersubjective paradigm are realised. The intersubjective paradigm is assumed to be an intra-subjective communication pattern characterised by the placement of communicating individuals as independent subjects. Conversations in *lego-lego*, like the intersubjective paradigm, reject the objectification of the subject. Conversations are conducted in two directions, listening to each other and considering each other's opinion. Like the practice of informal democracy, *lego-lego* features meaningful conversations with a simple model. Furthermore, the model of conversation in *lego-lego* correlates with the cultural democracy framework described in the previous sub-title. There is a process of listening to understand the presence of the 'other' in the conversation. This is a manifestation of a set of values understood by Bugis society in terms of human relations. These values include *siri*, *pesse*, *sipakatau*, and *sipakalebbi* (Hakim, 2020). The first two points (*siri* and *pesse*) are in the context of the awareness that Bugis people must have in conducting social life.

Philosophically, *siri* is a feeling of self-worth or shame or deep disappointment. A psychological reaction is present when seeing inhumane things happening in front of him. However, *siri* is not only present after an event or incident has occurred, it can also be a defence system that Bugis people have in order to avoid doing things that are embarrassing or inhumane. Furthermore, similar to *siri*, *pesse* is a consciousness of empathy in the Bugis mind that manifests itself in feelings of sadness when a human being suffers. *Pesse* makes one feel the pain of others *a priori* (outside of experience). *Pesse* encourages one to be altruistic, willing to sacrifice to save fellow human beings, thus forming social cohesion.

The last two points (*sipakatau* and *sipakalebbi*) are concepts born from *pappaseng* (Bugis advice). As concepts, *sipakatau* and *sipakalebbi* were born from the Bugis' understanding of human philosophy. The

Bugis divide human existence into three: *tau-tau*, *rupa tau*, and *tau*. Linguistically, *tau-tau* is defined as the shadow of man. *Tau-tau* is the lowest manifestation of one's existence as a human being. The term *tau-tau* is attached to someone whose behavior does not reflect themselves as a human being. The second term is *tau*. The term is linguistically paired with the word human, but meaningfully, *rupa tau* is the process of being a human who tries to behave like a human. And finally, *Tau*, which is the highest level of human existence. At the *Tau* stage, a person has become fully human. Someone who is called *Tau* means that they have been able to interpret their existence as a human being. One of the benchmarks of someone being called *Tau* is when they can humanise humans, to feel what other people feel.

The concept of humanising humans is found in the teaching of *sipakatau*. Simply put, *sipakatau* is a prescriptive moral framework that calls for respectful and compassionate behavior towards fellow humans. When someone can be said to be immoral if they behave badly towards others. Through the teaching of *sipakatau*, the way a person behaves towards others is used as a benchmark to distinguish humans from other entities in the world. Next is *sipakalebbi*, which is an attitude of respecting each other. *Sipakalebbi* stems from the understanding that all humans have the same tendency to want to be understood and respected. In a political context, *sipakatau* and *sipakalebbi* are ethical concepts that regulate how a 'good' person exists in shared spaces. Furthermore, through *siri*, *pesse*, *sipakatau*, and *sipakalebbi*, the practice of culturally-based democracy in Bugis society is found, which is often seen in interactions on the verandas of Bugis houses (*lego-lego*).

Lego-lego: the concept of sitting together and democratic space

There are three terminologies in the Bugis tradition that describe sit-together forums closely related to democratic practices, all of which historically took place on the verandas (*lego-lego*) of Bugis-community homes. The first terminology is *tudang sipulung*. The term is widely used in communities in the southern part of South Sulawesi province. *Tudang Sipulung* is usually held at the turn of the season or the beginning of the year. The activity is a sitting together to discuss things that must be done by the government (*pamarenta*) and also various community interests. The life experiences of the Bugis community over the past year and the year ahead become the main theme in *tudang sipulung*. Urgent matters such as the anticipation of long droughts and crop failures, as well as kampung security, are themes that are usually discussed. Thus, through *tudang sipulung*, various policies concerning the lives of Bugis people are decided. Decisions that have been made in *tudang sipulung* can be used by the community to sue the government, if in the future things that have been agreed upon are not realised (Hakim, 2020). *Tudang sipulung* is present to bridge the various interests of the community before the government in addressing the problems of everyday life (Kurniawan, 2012).

Furthermore, in the Bugis tradition, there is the concept of *tudang sipulung* as a political space to discuss matters of common life. Although in the modern era, the concept of *tudang sipulung* is often used by the government, in practice, it still seems formal and bureaucratic. In contrast, the practice of *tudang sipulung* in the Bugis tradition is conducted informally, unlike official forums such as programme socialisation. Historically, *tudang sipulung* was born as a discussion between community leaders and the general public in

lego-lego. Like *tudang sipulung* is conducted to discuss matters of common life. *Tudang sipulung* is often referred to as *tudang wanua* (sitting together in a village). Conceptually, *tudang sipulung* is closely related to the practice of democracy, especially discursive democracy initiated by Habermas, both of which simultaneously carry the concept of community life that is free to express its opinions in public. In addition, various decisions concerning the public interest must be discursively tested in public spaces. A space that contains simple interactions between people that do not place subjects in an equal position (Habermas, 2008). Bugis society also recognises the concept of *tudang sipulung* as the practice of democracy in Bugis life, characterised by public participation. Through this forum, community members can contest and participate both individually and collectively, as social groups, community forums, and inter-group networks, thus encouraging participation and influencing the decision-making process.

The practice of *lego-lego* reflects how everyday deliberation is deeply rooted in Bugis social life, where people gather on the veranda not merely to converse but to collectively reaffirm ethical values such as *siri*, *pesse*, *sipakatau*, and *sipakalebbi*. These encounters function as an informal arena of decision-making that embodies reciprocity, moral responsibility, and the search for communal balance. Rather than serving only as a cultural ritual, *lego-lego* operates as an indigenous mechanism of governance that regulates social relations through dialogue and mutual recognition. This finding demonstrates that political deliberation in Bugis communities arises organically from shared moral obligations and kin-based solidarity, thereby transforming ethical norms into the foundation for resolving disagreements and building collective understanding.

From a theoretical standpoint, this empirical reality substantiates the concept of “everyday democracy”, where legitimacy and rationality are embedded in ordinary interactions rather than formal institutional settings. The veranda, as a physical and symbolic space, mirrors Habermas’s notion of communicative action and Touraine’s idea of subjectivation by turning ethical dialogue into democratic practice. Through *lego-lego*, the community enacts a form of cultural democracy in which moral discourse becomes the medium of participation and consensus-building. In this sense, the Bugis experience does not merely exemplify democracy; it expands its theoretical boundaries by demonstrating that indigenous ethics can function as both the normative and procedural core of deliberation. The integration of empirical observation and conceptual reflection thus reinforces the argument that democracy, in the Bugis context, is not only institutional but also relational, affective, and continuously performed in everyday life.

The politics of the veranda (*lego-lego*) as an articulation of cultural democracy in Bugis society

Veranda politics is a term introduced by Emmanuel Terray in his article ‘*Le climatiseur et la veranda*’ in his 1986 study to describe the political practices of the post-World War. The term veranda politics refers to an informal political space, which distinguishes it from political practices that are considered bureaucratic, or in Terray’s term, ‘air-conditioned politics’ (Kelsall, 2002). *Airconditioned politics* is characterised as the face of modern politics dominated by state power and bureaucracy (Berman, 1998). In contrast, veranda politics is characterised as the practice of politics that takes place outside the

halls of government (Harrison, 2008). These informal political spaces become arenas where political ideas are developed and political decisions are taken without strict attachment to formal government structures. This creates a space for political interaction that is more flexible and often more directly engages the public. Irrespective of formal structures, veranda politics provides opportunities for individuals and groups to participate in the political process in ways that do not always conform to official procedures.

Historically, Bugis political practice in *lego-lego* proves that there is a model of policy formulation and organisation of communal life that takes place outside formal forums. *Lego-lego* is an informal political practice that has become an integral part of Bugis life in South Sulawesi. This practice shows that the process of formulating policies and organising collective life can be done outside formal forums. *Lego-*, in this context, refers to political meetings and discussions that take place outside formal forums, often in the form of social gatherings or rituals that bring together community members. In Bugis society, *lego-lego* has become an important part of political and social life. Through these gatherings, communities can discuss, negotiate, and make decisions on a range of issues without being bound by formal procedures that are often perceived as rigid and inflexible. *Lego-lego* create space for active community participation in decision-making, making the political process more inclusive and responsive to community needs and aspirations.

Lego-lego as an informal political practice, has similarities with the concept of veranda politics. Both simultaneously carry the theme of expanding political spaces. Political activities are not limited to official state institutions, and political decisions are not always produced in representative buildings. The presence of *lego-lego*, along with the concept of veranda politics, has transformed a new style in solving the problems of social life. Both can enter into modern political reality and reduce mainstream political methods. Furthermore, both Bugis *lego-lego* politics and Terray’s veranda politics have become new preferences for democratic practices in the modern era. These two concepts, both veranda politics and *lego-lego*, have undergone transformation and penetration into modern political reality. In the context of modern democracy, we can see that informal political practices are increasingly carried out by political parties and community groups (Prianto et al., 2022). Political parties, for example, often conduct informal meetings, group discussions, and social events to communicate with voters and shape public opinion outside official forums. This shows how informal political spaces can influence and shape political decisions taken within formal structures.

In an increasingly complex and dynamic world, it is important to recognise and understand the role of informal politics in democratic processes. These informal political spaces not only provide opportunities for people to participate more actively in the political process but also contribute to the development of more inclusive and responsive democratic practices. With veranda politics and *lego-lego* practices, we can see how modern democracy is evolving to become more complex and diverse. Both concepts emphasise the importance of expanding political spaces and people’s involvement in decision-making processes. Porch politics and *lego-lego* are clear examples of how informal political spaces can serve as additions and complements to formal political practices. They demonstrate that political processes need not be confined to formal state institutions and that political decisions can be made in ways that more directly involve communities. By understanding and recognising the role of informal

politics in democracy, we can create a political system that is more inclusive, responsive, and effective in facing the challenges and changes of the modern era.

The findings of this study indicate that *lego-lego* functions as more than a domestic architectural feature; it is a living arena of informal democracy within Bugis society. On this veranda, neighbours, elders, and women gather to converse, listen, and reach decisions collectively. Through practices such as *tudang sipulung*, these gatherings turn moral values into social action. Participants deliberate with a deep sense of *siri* (dignity), *pesse* (empathy), *sipakatau* (humanise), and *sipakalebbi* (respect), transforming abstract ideas of equality and accountability into the tangible ethics of everyday life. This informal system of decision-making produces a moral cohesion that strengthens community trust, often bridging gaps left by formal institutions.

The influence of these informal practices becomes visible when community agreements reached at the *lego-lego* are later brought into village meetings, conflict mediation, or development planning sessions. Local leaders frequently draw on the outcomes of these conversations as a moral compass for governance decisions. This interplay between informal interaction and formal administration suggests that *lego-lego* operates as a mediating layer between citizens and the state, a site where democratic values are rehearsed and legitimised before they enter official channels. Rather than opposing formal democracy, it complements it by supplying the relational and ethical capital that formal structures often lack.

When situated within Indonesia's wider democratic context, these findings underscore how Bugis informal deliberation enriches the country's democratic life. Whereas the post-Reformasi framework primarily highlights elections, representation, and procedural transparency, the *lego-lego* illustrates how deliberation can also thrive through cultural intimacy and moral reciprocity. The Bugis case, therefore, contributes to a more grounded understanding of Indonesian democracy, one that acknowledges participation not merely as institutional compliance but as a moral and spatial practice

embedded in everyday life. This interpretation resonates with Antlöv (2003) and Bebbington et al. (2006) analyses of local participation as a source of accountability, yet it extends their arguments by revealing how democratic conversation in Bugis society is inseparable from indigenous ethics and cosmological space. It also enriches Chatterjee's (2004) idea of 'political society', demonstrating that collective negotiation and recognition can occur in communal settings that blend domestic familiarity with public reasoning.

The veranda, as a social and architectural space, embodies the Bugis philosophy of openness and reciprocity that frames interpersonal and communal relationships. Conversations held on the veranda, ranging from informal exchanges to dispute resolutions, illustrate how moral obligations and collective reasoning are enacted in public life. Through these encounters, individuals learn to balance self-expression with respect for others, aligning personal interests with the values of *siri*, *pesse*, *sipakatau*, and *sipakalebbi*. This practice cultivates a habit of listening and empathic engagement that transforms private dialogue into shared deliberation. Thus, the veranda is not only a physical meeting place but also a moral institution that sustains social cohesion and nurtures civic reasoning within everyday settings. The empirical observation of these interactions shows that 'veranda politics' is a living manifestation of indigenous governance, where ethical reflection and consensus emerge organically through repeated social encounters.

Table 2 illustrates the range of issues commonly discussed during informal gatherings in *lego-lego*, highlighting how deliberation is embedded in the rhythms of daily life. The topics discussed, ranging from family affairs, agriculture, social engagement, to cultural ceremonies, demonstrate that *lego-lego* serves as a flexible and participatory forum that accommodates both domestic and communal concerns. In the context of "family democracy," for instance, discussions revolve around determining planting seasons, organising family events, or planning children's education. These interactions reveal how decision-making within Bugis families is deeply intertwined with ethical considerations of reciprocity, responsibility, and shared welfare.

TABLE 2 On the agenda at the informal gathering in *lego-lego*.

Issues	Discussion agenda	Meeting participants	Decision/resolution
'Family democracy'	Discussing the planting season for family farming land, planning family events or traditional ceremonies (such as weddings) after the farm harvest, or discussing educational opportunities for the family's children.	Family members and close families	Determining planting time, deciding on the time of customary ceremonies (such as weddings) after the harvest, or making decisions about children's education.
Agriculture	• Based on traditional weather forecasts regarding water conditions and the best planting times	Traditional authorities, landowners, and farm workers	Determining the timing for rice planting
	• Traditional irrigation water distribution	Community leaders, landowners, farm workers, and agricultural extension workers	Determination of rice field irrigation distribution models, as well as monitoring and enforcing sanctions for violators
	• Agricultural pest control strategies	Community leaders, landowners, agricultural extension workers, tenant farmers, and local government officials	Decision on a collective pest control model
Social engagement	Disputes over inherited land	Traditional leaders, disputing actors	Traditional dispute resolution
Social culture	Traditional ceremonies	Indigenous leaders, intellectuals, cultural figures, and community leaders	Determining the feast and traditional event schedules

Agricultural discussions further emphasize the collective dimension of *lego-lego* as a mechanism for participatory governance. Deliberations on weather forecasts, irrigation schedules, and pest control strategies involve various actors, traditional leaders, landowners, farmers, and even local government officials, showing the layered social structure that underpins rural decision-making. Here, *lego-lego* functions not merely as a cultural gathering but as an informal institution that ensures coordination, fairness, and mutual accountability in managing shared resources. Similarly, issues of social engagement, such as land disputes, and matters of social culture, such as traditional ceremonies, are resolved through dialogue guided by moral and customary norms. These discussions affirm the function of *lego-lego* as a moral and deliberative space where local wisdom mediates conflict, strengthens communal ties, and sustains democratic ethics in everyday governance.

Viewed through the lens of deliberative and cultural democracy, veranda politics offers an alternative paradigm of political participation grounded in ethical communication rather than procedural rationality. The veranda acts as a vernacular public sphere that bridges informal and formal domains of governance by translating local ethics into participatory norms. This dynamic illustrates that Bugis communities engage in what Habermas terms communicative rationality, yet they do so through the moral idioms of empathy, shame, and respect. In this sense, veranda politics expands the theoretical discourse of democracy by revealing that deliberation does not require bureaucratic mediation but can flourish through cultural intimacy and relational trust. The integration of these empirical findings with democratic theory demonstrates that the veranda is a site where political subjectivity is continuously produced, where people learn to negotiate, empathise, and decide together, reaffirming democracy as a lived ethical practice rather than merely an institutional arrangement.

The relevance of *veranda politics* extends beyond the realm of cultural practice and remains closely connected to Indonesia's evolving democratic landscape. The values embodied in veranda-based deliberation, *siri* (dignity), *pesse* (empathy), *sipakatau* (humanise), and *sipakalebbi* (respect), mirror the ethical foundations of participatory governance promoted in post-reformasi Indonesia. Similar to the principles guiding *musyawarah desa* and community consultation forums, veranda deliberation provides a relational model of decision-making grounded in trust and reciprocity rather than procedural formality. This correspondence illustrates that indigenous practices such as *lego-lego* and *veranda politics* are not remnants of a premodern past but active moral infrastructures that continue to shape how communities negotiate consensus, inclusion, and responsibility. By recognising these cultural forms as integral to Indonesia's democratic life, *veranda politics* contributes to a more plural and grounded understanding of deliberative democracy, one that acknowledges ethics and social relationships as the very conditions of democratic participation.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the Bugis concept of *lego-lego*, the open veranda of a traditional stilt house, serves as an indigenous public sphere that sustains informal democratic life. Through informal practices such as *tudang sipulung*, the Bugis community deliberates, reaches consensus, and reinforces mutual respect based on the ethical

principles of *siri*, *pesse*, *sipakatau*, and *sipakalebbi*. These findings confirm that democracy in Bugis society is not merely institutional but also cultural, enacted through spatial traditions and moral interaction. The *lego-lego* therefore embodies a form of cultural democracy that complements Indonesia's formal democratic framework by rooting participation in informal interaction. This research is limited to a few communities in South Sulawesi and does not capture variations across other regions or ethnic groups. Future studies could compare similar vernacular democratic spaces in Indonesia to reveal how cultural ethics shape participation. Policymakers are encouraged to integrate such local participatory practices into village governance and community planning, recognising that Indonesia's democratic strength lies not only in elections, but also in the informal ethics of listening, dialogue, and collective decision-making.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Ethics Committee of Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar, Indonesia. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

AP: Writing – original draft, Validation, Resources, Methodology, Supervision, Conceptualization, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing. NS: Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Project administration, Validation, Methodology, Supervision. DW: Software, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Methodology. AA: Visualization, Investigation, Software, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Generative AI statement

The authors declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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