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NEGOTIATING MORALITY IN CLIENTELISTIC DEMOCRACIES: SOCIAL EXCHANGE AND POLITICAL DILEMMAS IN AN ARCHIPELAGIC SOCIETY OF EASTERN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how morality is negotiated within clientelistic democratic practices in an archipelagic society of Eastern Indonesia. Moving beyond dominant political economy approaches that reduce clientelism to rational-instrumental exchange, the study analyzes the social embeddedness of political exchange, identifies the moral dilemmas experienced by political actors and citizens, and explains how local values interact with formal democratic norms to produce hybrid political practices. It also develops an analytical framework positioning morality as a mediating variable between rational action and social structure. Adopting a qualitative intrinsic case study in Namlea, Buru Regency, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The analysis follows an interactive model of data reduction, display, and iterative conclusion drawing, enabling an in-depth interpretation of moral negotiations in everyday political life. The findings reveal that social exchange is shaped not only by instrumental rationality but also by value-oriented, affective, and traditional rationalities. Political actors face dilemmas between adhering to democratic ideals and fulfilling socially embedded obligations, while communities exhibit moral ambivalence toward practices often labeled as violations. These dynamics produce a hybrid democratic order grounded in local moral economies. This study contributes by conceptualizing "negotiated morality," integrating multiple theoretical perspectives, and foregrounding underrepresented island contexts in global sociology.

Keywords: *Archipelagic Society, Clientelism, Hybrid Democracy, Moral Economy, Negotiated Morality*

INTRODUCTION

Debates on democracy in the Global South have long been marked by a persistent tension between formal institutional ideals and the lived realities of political practice. Nowhere is this more evident than in the prevalence of clientelism and patronage, which continue to shape electoral dynamics, governance processes, and citizen–state relations across diverse contexts. In much of the dominant literature, these practices are frequently framed as pathological deviations from democratic norms, manifestations of weak institutions, underdevelopment, or incomplete modernization (Sambodo et al., 2023; Wardhani et al., 2022; Wardiyanto et al., 2025). Such interpretations often rest on a narrow conception of rationality, assuming that political actors

and voters engage in clientelistic exchanges primarily for short-term material gain. However, mounting empirical evidence suggests that this framing is insufficient to capture the complexity of political life in many societies, particularly in archipelagic and culturally embedded contexts such as Eastern Indonesia. In places like Namlea in Buru Regency, political exchanges are not merely transactional; they are deeply intertwined with social obligations, kinship ties, and moral expectations that have historically structured community life.

The persistence of these practices is not incidental. Studies on Indonesian local politics, especially following decentralization reforms, have demonstrated the entrenchment of patron–client networks as adaptive responses to shifting institutional landscapes (Sudarmanto et al., 2023; Vujić et al., 2025; Yuliantri & Suwignyo, 2024). Rather than disappearing with democratization, clientelism has evolved, becoming more diffuse and relational in nature. Survey-based evidence and ethnographic accounts reveal that vote buying, gift-giving, and resource distribution are often perceived not as corrupt acts but as legitimate forms of social reciprocity (Faxon et al., 2022; Kristiyanto et al., 2023; Saud et al., 2025). In Eastern Indonesian societies, characterized by strong communal ties and maritime spatial configurations, these practices are further embedded within local moral economies that emphasize mutual aid, obligation, and collective survival (Apriliyanti et al., 2026; Jurriëns, 2023). This creates a paradoxical situation in which practices condemned at the level of formal democratic discourse are simultaneously upheld as socially appropriate and morally justified within local contexts.

The importance of addressing this paradox lies in its implications for both theory and practice. From a theoretical standpoint, the reduction of clientelism to instrumental rationality obscures the role of values, emotions, and cultural norms in shaping political behavior. This not only limits explanatory power but also risks reproducing epistemic biases that privilege Western-centric models of democracy (Basedau, 2026; Mantilidewi et al., 2026; Schmid, 2025). From a practical perspective, policy interventions aimed at curbing clientelism often fail because they do not engage with the underlying social logics that sustain these practices. Anti-corruption campaigns, electoral regulations, and governance reforms tend to focus on formal compliance, neglecting the relational and moral dimensions that influence how actors interpret and enact political participation. As a result, there remains a disconnect between institutional design and social reality, one that continues to undermine efforts to strengthen democratic accountability in many parts of the Global South.

Existing scholarship has made significant strides in unpacking the mechanisms and variations of clientelism. Early works in political economy conceptualized clientelism as a contingent exchange of goods and services for political support, emphasizing monitoring and enforcement mechanisms (Osterberg-Kaufmann, 2026; Petlach & Říčanová, 2025). Subsequent studies have expanded this framework by examining the role of brokers, networks, and informal institutions in mediating these exchanges (Dahlberg & Mörkenstam, 2024; Fuchs, 2026; Nkansah & Bartha, 2023). In the Indonesian context, scholars have documented how local elites mobilize resources and social ties to secure electoral advantage, often operating through complex

patronage networks that blur the boundaries between state and society (Hariyono & Leksana, 2025; Marzuki & Ali, 2023). These contributions have been instrumental in highlighting the adaptability and resilience of clientelistic systems in democratic settings.

More recent approaches have begun to shift the analytical lens from transactional models to relational perspectives. Rather than viewing clientelism solely as vote buying, these studies emphasize the importance of long-term relationships, trust, and social embeddedness (Fong, 2022; Sukardi et al., 2025; Vetrita et al., 2025). Ethnographic research has shown that political exchanges are often embedded in everyday interactions, where material benefits are intertwined with symbolic gestures of recognition and belonging. In this view, clientelism is less about discrete transactions and more about sustaining social ties that carry both political and moral significance. This relational turn has opened up new avenues for understanding the persistence of clientelism, particularly in contexts where formal institutions are weak or unevenly enforced.

Parallel to this development, sociological perspectives on morality have provided valuable insights into how norms and values shape economic and political behavior. The concept of moral economy, for instance, highlights how communities evaluate actions based on shared notions of fairness, obligation, and justice (Kholili et al., 2024; Manitra et al., 2026; Rahmawati & Rukmana, 2025). Similarly, Weberian approaches to social action emphasize the multiplicity of rationalities, instrumental, value-oriented, affective, and traditional, that guide human behavior (Luhtakallio et al., 2022; Maharani & Matthews, 2023). These frameworks challenge the assumption that actors are purely self-interested, instead pointing to the ways in which moral considerations and social expectations inform decision-making processes. However, despite their relevance, these perspectives have rarely been systematically integrated into the study of clientelism, particularly in empirical analyses of local political dynamics.

In the context of island and archipelagic societies, the interplay between social structure and political practice acquires additional layers of complexity. Geographic fragmentation, limited state presence, and strong kinship networks often produce forms of governance that rely heavily on informal institutions and personal relationships (Abidin et al., 2025; Juned & Sutiono, 2024; Soemartono et al., 2026). In Eastern Indonesia, these characteristics are further shaped by historical patterns of migration, trade, and cultural exchange, resulting in highly plural and adaptive social systems. Political practices in such settings cannot be fully understood without considering how spatial, cultural, and relational factors intersect to produce distinctive modes of engagement with democratic processes.

Yet, even as these diverse strands of literature have enriched our understanding, there remains an underexplored dimension concerning how morality itself is constituted, negotiated, and contested within clientelistic democracies. Much of the existing work treats morality as either an external normative benchmark against which practices are judged, or as a background cultural factor that passively influences behavior. What is less examined is how actors actively negotiate moral meanings in situ, navigating tensions between competing value systems and structural constraints. It is precisely within these everyday negotiations that the contours of

democratic practice are shaped, revealing a more nuanced and dynamic interplay between agency and structure.

Building on this insight, the present study advances an approach that foregrounds morality not as a fixed standard, but as an emergent and relational process embedded within social exchange. By situating the analysis in the lived experiences of political actors and citizens in Namlea, this research captures how moral dilemmas are articulated, justified, and resolved in concrete situations. In doing so, it brings into focus a dimension of political life that is often overlooked, yet central to understanding the persistence and transformation of clientelistic practices. This orientation allows for a more context-sensitive interpretation of democracy, one that acknowledges the coexistence of multiple rationalities and normative orders.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze how social exchange is manifested in local political practices, to identify the forms of moral dilemmas experienced by actors, and to explain how the interaction between local values and formal democratic principles gives rise to hybrid political configurations. By integrating insights from social action theory, social exchange theory, and moral sociology, the research seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive and reflexive understanding of democracy in the Global South. In doing so, it not only addresses a critical gap in the literature but also offers a framework for rethinking the relationship between morality, rationality, and political practice in contexts marked by deep social embeddedness.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an intrinsic case study approach to capture the complexity of moral negotiations within clientelistic democratic practices. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate because the research seeks to understand meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences rather than to measure variables or test causal relationships in a positivistic sense. The central concern of this study lies in how actors interpret, justify, and negotiate moral boundaries in everyday political exchanges, processes that are deeply embedded in social context and cannot be reduced to quantifiable indicators. As argued by Wijaya & Jones (2025), qualitative inquiry enables the exploration of social phenomena in their natural settings, allowing researchers to interpret meanings that people bring to them. This interpretive orientation is further strengthened by the use of an intrinsic case study, which focuses on understanding a specific case for its own sake, rather than for generalization (Foa & Mounk, 2021; Nuraniyah & Solahudin, 2024; Yaqin et al., 2025).

The research was conducted in Namlea, the administrative center of Buru Regency in Eastern Indonesia. This location was selected purposively due to its socio-political characteristics as an archipelagic society where kinship networks, communal ties, and informal institutions remain highly influential in structuring political behavior. In such contexts, clientelistic practices are not merely instrumental strategies but are intertwined with moral obligations and social expectations. Namlea represents a critical site where formal democratic institutions intersect

with longstanding cultural norms, making it particularly suitable for examining how moral dilemmas emerge and are negotiated in practice. The choice of this site is therefore not incidental, but analytically driven, as it offers a rich empirical setting to explore the interplay between democracy, morality, and social exchange.

The informants in this study were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure the inclusion of actors directly involved in or affected by local political processes. A total of 27 informants participated in this research, consisting of local political candidates, members of campaign teams, community leaders, and ordinary voters. These groups were chosen because they occupy different yet interconnected positions within the clientelistic network. Political candidates and campaign teams provide insights into strategic considerations and moral justifications from the supply side of political exchange, while community leaders and voters offer perspectives on how such practices are received, interpreted, and legitimized within society. The use of snowball sampling allowed the researcher to access individuals who are often difficult to reach due to the informal and sensitive nature of political transactions (Hartoto, 2025; Ho, 2023; Pahrun Wadipalapa, 2023).

Data collection was carried out through in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were employed to elicit detailed narratives and personal reflections on political practices and moral reasoning. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility for informants to express their views while ensuring that key themes relevant to the research objectives were consistently explored (Bekti et al., 2026; Samsul Hady et al., 2025; Sihombing, 2026). Participant observation was conducted to capture everyday interactions and practices that may not be fully articulated in interviews, particularly those related to informal exchanges and social rituals. This method enabled the researcher to observe how moral norms are enacted in situ, providing a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Athique et al., 2026; Floranti et al., 2023; Ruijgrok et al., 2026). Document analysis, including local electoral materials, policy documents, and media reports, was used to contextualize the findings and to trace the formal discourse surrounding democratic practices.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, this study employed triangulation across methods, sources, and perspectives. Methodological triangulation was achieved by combining interviews, observations, and document analysis, allowing for cross-validation of findings. Source triangulation involved comparing information obtained from different categories of informants to identify convergences and divergences in perspectives. In addition, interpretive triangulation was conducted through iterative data analysis, where emerging themes were continuously refined and validated against the data corpus (Dewi, 2021; Natter, 2024; Puspaningtyas et al., 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social Exchange Beyond Instrumental Rationality: Embeddedness in Local Moral Worlds

The empirical findings from Namlea reveal that social exchange in local political life cannot be adequately understood through a narrow lens of instrumental rationality. Rather than functioning as isolated transactions driven solely by short-term electoral gain, these exchanges are deeply embedded in a dense web of social relations, moral expectations, and historically constituted obligations. What appears, from a formal institutional perspective, as vote buying or patronage often carries a different meaning within the lived social world of the community. Material distribution, whether in the form of money, goods, or assistance, is frequently interpreted as an extension of relational continuity, not as a discrete political bargain. This interpretive shift becomes particularly visible when examining how actors themselves narrate their actions.

Several informants emphasized that providing resources during electoral periods is not simply a strategic act, but a socially expected practice grounded in norms of reciprocity. One local candidate (initials A.R.) explained that refusing to assist community members, especially those with whom one shares kinship or long-standing social ties, would be perceived as a moral failure rather than political neutrality. In his words, “people do not see it as buying support; they see whether you remember them, whether you care.” This sentiment was echoed by a community leader (initials H.L.), who noted that political generosity is often evaluated through the lens of social memory, how actors have maintained relationships over time, not only during elections. Such accounts indicate that social exchange is embedded within what can be described as a moral economy, where actions are assessed according to shared norms of obligation and fairness rather than abstract legal standards (Quintero González, 2025; Sa’di, 2025; Trzciński, 2022).

This embeddedness is further reinforced by the structure of kinship and communal life in an archipelagic setting such as Namlea. Social proximity, shaped by shared lineage, locality, and everyday interaction, creates a context in which political behavior is inseparable from broader social roles. Individuals do not enter the political arena as detached, self-interested actors; they carry with them identities as relatives, neighbors, and community members. Consequently, the distribution of resources becomes a way of reaffirming these identities and sustaining relational ties. A campaign team member (initials M.S.) described how campaign strategies often rely on pre-existing networks of trust, where assistance is framed not as persuasion but as maintaining social bonds. This aligns with the argument that clientelistic practices are sustained not only by material incentives but also by relational commitments that extend beyond electoral cycles (Cheng & Lee, 2023; Herdiansah, 2026).

From this perspective, the notion of rationality itself requires reconsideration. The findings suggest that political action in this context is shaped by a plurality of rationalities, including instrumental, value-oriented, affective, and traditional dimensions, as conceptualized in Weberian sociology. Actors do calculate potential benefits and costs, but such calculations are inseparable from moral considerations and emotional attachments. For instance, a voter (initials

S.T.) admitted accepting assistance from multiple candidates, yet justified this behavior not as opportunistic, but as a way of maintaining balanced social relations and avoiding offense. This reflects a form of practical reasoning that prioritizes social harmony over strict adherence to formal democratic norms.

The concept of relational politics offers a useful lens to interpret these dynamics. Fünfgeld (2026) argues that clientelism should not be reduced to episodic vote buying, but understood as an ongoing process of relationship-building in which material exchanges are embedded within broader social interactions. The findings from Namlea strongly support this view, showing that political exchanges are rarely one-off events; they are part of longer trajectories of engagement that involve mutual recognition and obligation. At the same time, the idea of embedded agency helps explain how actors navigate these relational structures. As Hartini et al. (2023) suggest, individuals act within socially structured environments, yet they also actively reproduce and reinterpret the norms that govern these environments. In Namlea, political actors are not merely constrained by expectations of reciprocity; they also strategically engage with these expectations, balancing moral obligations with electoral considerations.

Importantly, this does not imply that material interests are absent. Rather, materiality and morality are intertwined in ways that resist simple categorization. Assistance given during elections may indeed influence voter behavior, but its effectiveness depends on how it resonates with existing social ties and moral expectations. A purely transactional approach, devoid of relational grounding, is often perceived as inauthentic and may even backfire. This suggests that the success of political exchange is contingent not only on what is given, but on how and within what relational context it is given.

Moral Dilemmas in Practice: Between Democratic Integrity and Social Obligation

The findings from this study illuminate the complex moral terrain navigated by political actors and citizens in Namlea, where democratic participation is shaped by the coexistence of formal institutional norms and deeply rooted social obligations. Rather than encountering morality as a fixed or singular standard, actors experience it as a field of tension in which competing expectations must be continuously negotiated. For political candidates and their campaign teams, this tension often manifests as a dilemma between adhering to principles associated with democratic integrity, such as transparency, fairness, and programmatic campaigning, and responding to socially embedded expectations of reciprocity and care. These are not abstract or hypothetical tensions; they are lived, immediate, and consequential in everyday political practice.

Several candidates interviewed in this study articulated a clear awareness of formal electoral regulations and the normative discourse surrounding “clean” politics. One candidate (initials R.K.) reflected that while he understood the importance of avoiding practices categorized as vote buying, he also felt that disengaging from community expectations would undermine his legitimacy as a social actor. In his account, refusing to provide assistance when approached by

relatives or neighbors would not be interpreted as ethical restraint, but as indifference or even arrogance. A campaign team member (initials D.L.) similarly described the discomfort of operating within what he termed a "double expectation," where success required both compliance with formal rules and responsiveness to informal social norms. This duality places actors in a position where any decision carries moral implications, making it difficult to draw clear boundaries between right and wrong.

What emerges from these accounts is not a simple contradiction, but a layered moral logic in which different normative orders coexist. Formal democratic principles derive their authority from legal frameworks and national discourse, while local expectations are grounded in shared histories, kinship ties, and everyday practices of mutual support. The dilemma arises not because one set of norms is inherently stronger than the other, but because both are perceived as legitimate within their respective domains. As a result, political actors are compelled to engage in a form of situational reasoning, weighing the consequences of their actions not only in terms of electoral outcomes but also in relation to their standing within the community.

This dynamic is equally evident among voters, who are often portrayed in the literature as passive recipients of clientelistic inducements. The findings challenge this assumption by showing that voters actively interpret and evaluate political exchanges through a moral lens. Accepting assistance from candidates is not necessarily seen as opportunistic behavior, but as part of maintaining social relationships and honoring norms of reciprocity. A voter (initials N.T.) explained that declining such assistance could be perceived as rejecting a relationship, which might have broader social repercussions beyond the electoral moment. At the same time, informants expressed awareness that these practices are often criticized in public discourse, creating a sense of ambivalence about their own actions. This ambivalence reflects an internal negotiation between different moral frameworks rather than a lack of ethical awareness.

The concept of moral economy provides a useful framework for understanding these dynamics. As Rasmitadila et al. (2023) argues, economic and political practices are always embedded within moral evaluations that reflect shared understandings of what is just, appropriate, and necessary. In Namlea, the moral economy is shaped by expectations of solidarity and mutual obligation, which influence how political exchanges are interpreted and justified. Assistance given by candidates is not assessed solely in terms of its legality, but also in terms of its alignment with these broader moral expectations. From this perspective, what might be categorized externally as clientelism can be locally understood as fulfilling a moral duty.

Importantly, these dilemmas do not paralyze actors; rather, they create a space for ongoing negotiation. Political actors develop strategies to navigate these tensions, such as framing assistance in culturally resonant ways or selectively engaging in practices that balance competing demands. Similarly, voters exercise agency in deciding how to respond to offers of support, often seeking to maintain a sense of moral coherence across different contexts. This suggests that moral dilemmas function less as points of breakdown and more as sites of active meaning-making, where individuals reconcile multiple obligations in ways that are contextually

appropriate.

Moral Ambivalence and the Social Legitimacy of Clientelistic Practices

The empirical material from Namlea points to a pervasive condition of moral ambivalence that shapes how clientelistic practices are understood, justified, and enacted in everyday political life. Practices that are formally categorized as violations of democratic norms, most notably the distribution of money or goods during electoral periods, are not uniformly perceived as problematic within the community. Instead, they are often interpreted as ordinary, even expected, forms of engagement between candidates and citizens. This does not suggest an absence of moral judgment; rather, it reflects the coexistence of multiple evaluative frameworks through which political actions are assessed. Within this layered moral landscape, actors do not simply accept or reject clientelistic practices; they interpret them through situational reasoning grounded in both formal and informal normative orders.

Interviews with voters reveal how this ambivalence is articulated in practice. A respondent (initials Y.M.) acknowledged that accepting assistance from candidates could be seen as "not ideal" when viewed through the lens of official electoral rules, yet emphasized that in everyday life such exchanges are inseparable from broader expectations of social reciprocity. Another informant (initials F.R.) explained that candidates who fail to provide any form of tangible support are often perceived as lacking commitment to the community, regardless of the quality of their political programs. In this sense, material exchange becomes a visible marker of relational investment, signaling recognition and respect. What might be labeled externally as vote buying is thus reinterpreted locally as a socially meaningful gesture, embedded within a moral economy that prioritizes mutual care and obligation.

This dual interpretation highlights the presence of normative pluralism, where different systems of norms coexist and interact within the same social space. As Lewis & Dong (2025) argue, political behavior in many contexts cannot be understood through a single normative framework, as actors draw upon multiple, sometimes competing, standards of evaluation. In Namlea, formal democratic norms, such as fairness, equality, and the prohibition of vote buying, coexist with locally grounded norms that emphasize reciprocity, solidarity, and relational accountability. These normative systems are not entirely separate; they intersect and are continuously negotiated in practice. Actors are aware of both, but their actions are shaped by how they prioritize and reconcile these norms in specific situations.

Importantly, this ambivalence should not be mistaken for inconsistency or moral confusion. Rather, it reflects a form of moral flexibility that allows individuals to navigate complex social environments. A community leader (initials B.H.) described how people "understand the rules, but also understand life," suggesting that adherence to formal norms must be balanced with the realities of social relationships. This balancing act is not arbitrary; it is guided by shared understandings of what constitutes appropriate behavior within the community. In many cases, maintaining social harmony and fulfilling relational obligations are seen as more immediately

consequential than complying with abstract institutional standards. As a result, legitimacy is often conferred not through formal legality alone, but through alignment with locally recognized moral expectations.

This perspective also sheds light on why externally driven efforts to eliminate clientelistic practices often encounter resistance or limited effectiveness. Policies that focus exclusively on enforcement and deterrence tend to overlook the social meanings attached to these practices. From the standpoint of local actors, such interventions may appear disconnected from lived realities, failing to acknowledge the moral logic that underpins everyday interactions. The findings suggest that without engaging with this moral dimension, attempts to reform political behavior risk being perceived as imposing external standards that do not resonate with local values.

At the same time, moral ambivalence creates space for critique and reflection within the community. Informants did not uniformly endorse clientelistic practices; many expressed discomfort with their implications, particularly in relation to long-term governance outcomes. A voter (initials S.L.) noted that while accepting assistance is common, it can also lead to disappointment when elected officials prioritize personal networks over public interests. This indicates that ambivalence includes an awareness of potential contradictions and unintended consequences. Rather than resolving these tensions, individuals often live with them, adjusting their expectations and actions accordingly.

In this sense, the legitimacy of clientelistic practices is neither fixed nor unconditional. It is continuously negotiated through everyday interactions, shaped by shifting interpretations of what is considered fair, necessary, or appropriate. The coexistence of formal and informal norms does not produce a stable equilibrium, but an ongoing process of adjustment in which actors reinterpret their positions in relation to changing circumstances. This reinforces the idea that political legitimacy is contextually constructed, emerging from the interplay of multiple normative orders rather than being derived from a single authoritative source.

Negotiated Morality: Bridging Rational Action and Social Structure

At the core of the findings presented in this study lies a more nuanced understanding of morality as something that is not fixed, external, or universally given, but rather continuously produced through interaction, interpretation, and situational judgment. The empirical evidence from Namlea suggests that morality operates as a negotiated process, what may be termed “negotiated morality”, in which actors actively interpret what constitutes appropriate or legitimate behavior within the overlapping demands of democratic norms and social expectations. Rather than simply complying with pre-existing rules, individuals engage in ongoing moral work, calibrating their actions in relation to context, relationships, and anticipated consequences. This perspective shifts the analytical focus from morality as a normative benchmark to morality as a lived and relational practice.

Political actors, in particular, demonstrate a high degree of reflexivity in navigating this terrain. A candidate (initials J.P.) described how decisions about whether and how to distribute resources were rarely straightforward, but involved careful consideration of timing, audience, and intention. He noted that providing assistance could be framed either as a campaign strategy or as a continuation of longstanding social responsibility, depending on how it was communicated and received. This indicates that actors are not merely constrained by moral norms; they actively interpret and rearticulate them in ways that allow for both social legitimacy and political viability. Similarly, a campaign team member (initials E.K.) explained that certain practices are deliberately "softened" through culturally resonant language, emphasizing care and solidarity rather than transactional exchange. Such practices illustrate how moral meanings are not fixed but are strategically and socially constructed in interaction.

This process is equally evident among voters, who do not passively absorb political messages but interpret them through their own moral frameworks. A voter (initials L.W.) recounted how accepting assistance from a candidate was accompanied by an internal evaluation of the candidate's character and intentions. The decision was not based solely on material benefit, but on whether the gesture aligned with broader expectations of sincerity and relational commitment. In this sense, moral judgment is not external to political action; it is embedded within it, shaping how actions are perceived and responded to. These findings resonate with the argument that morality is inherently intersubjective, emerging through social interaction rather than existing as an abstract standard (Roh et al., 2025; Vivoda et al., 2026; Wicaksono et al., 2026).

Integrating this empirical insight with theoretical perspectives allows for a more comprehensive understanding of political behavior. From a Weberian standpoint, social action is guided by multiple forms of rationality, instrumental, value-oriented, affective, and traditional, which often coexist and interact within the same decision-making process (Nana Djomo et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2025). The notion of negotiated morality provides a bridge between these forms of rationality and the structural conditions in which they are enacted. It highlights how actors do not simply choose between competing rationalities, but actively reconcile them through moral interpretation. For instance, what may appear as an instrumental act of resource distribution can simultaneously be justified as fulfilling a moral obligation rooted in kinship or community norms. This dual orientation underscores the inadequacy of approaches that privilege a single dimension of rationality in explaining political behaviour (Fiarni et al., 2024; Pentz et al., 2025).

Social exchange theory further complements this perspective by emphasizing that exchanges are not purely economic transactions, but are embedded in social relationships that carry expectations of reciprocity and trust. However, the findings suggest that these expectations are not mechanically followed; they are interpreted and negotiated in context. Actors assess not only what is given and received, but also how these exchanges align with shared moral understandings. In this way, morality functions as a mediating variable that shapes the meaning and legitimacy of exchange. It is through this mediation that social structure, comprising norms,

relationships, and institutional arrangements, becomes meaningful and actionable for individuals.

The concept of negotiated morality thus allows us to reconceptualize the relationship between agency and structure. Rather than viewing actors as either determined by structure or fully autonomous, it becomes possible to see them as engaged in a continuous process of interpretation and adjustment. Structure provides the conditions and constraints within which action takes place, but it does not dictate outcomes. Instead, actors draw upon available norms and values, selectively emphasizing or reinterpreting them in response to specific situations. This dynamic is particularly visible in contexts like Namlea, where formal democratic institutions coexist with strong informal social structures. The interaction between these layers does not produce a stable synthesis, but an ongoing negotiation in which moral meanings are constantly redefined.

Importantly, this negotiated character of morality also explains the variability and fluidity of political practices across contexts and over time. What is considered acceptable in one situation may be contested in another, depending on how actors frame and interpret their actions. A community elder (initials P.H.) reflected that practices once taken for granted are increasingly subject to scrutiny, especially as public discourse around democracy evolves. Yet, rather than leading to a wholesale rejection of established norms, this scrutiny often results in subtle adjustments and reinterpretations. This suggests that moral change occurs not through abrupt shifts, but through gradual processes of negotiation embedded in everyday life.

Hybrid Democratic Practices: Reconfiguring Formal Institutions through Local Norms

The empirical findings from Namlea point toward a form of democratic practice that cannot be adequately captured through institutional indicators alone. While formal procedures such as elections, voter registration, and campaign regulations are firmly in place and widely recognized, their enactment is deeply shaped by locally embedded norms, relational expectations, and moral economies. What emerges is not a breakdown of democracy, but a reconfiguration, one in which formal institutional frameworks are interwoven with informal social logics. This hybridization reflects how democracy is not simply implemented from above, but is continuously interpreted and reshaped through everyday practices (Brandtjen, 2026; Dudayev et al., 2023; Radtke & Renn, 2024).

At the procedural level, elections in Namlea largely follow the formal rules established by the state. Informants across different groups demonstrated familiarity with electoral timelines, voting mechanisms, and the legal boundaries governing campaign conduct. However, as the fieldwork reveals, the meaning of participation extends far beyond these formal parameters. A local election organizer (initials T.S.) noted that while compliance with regulations is necessary, it is not sufficient to secure legitimacy in the eyes of the community. Legitimacy, in practice, is co-produced through visible engagement with social networks, responsiveness to communal needs, and adherence to locally valued norms of reciprocity. This suggests that formal institutions

provide a framework, but their effectiveness depends on how they are embedded within social life.

The hybrid character of democracy becomes particularly visible in campaign practices. Candidates do not rely solely on programmatic appeals or policy platforms; instead, they engage in forms of interaction that resonate with local expectations of relationality. A candidate (initials M.R.) described how campaign activities often take the form of visiting households, participating in community gatherings, and providing assistance in moments of need. These actions are not perceived as peripheral to politics, but as central to demonstrating one's suitability as a leader. From an external perspective, such practices may blur the line between legitimate engagement and clientelism. Yet within the local context, they are understood as integral to the moral fabric of leadership, where authority is grounded in the capacity to maintain and nurture social ties.

This blending of formal and informal elements does not occur without tension. Actors are often aware that certain practices may be viewed critically in broader democratic discourse, particularly those associated with material exchange. However, rather than abandoning these practices, they adapt them in ways that align with both regulatory expectations and social norms. A campaign team member (initials R.L.) explained that assistance is increasingly framed in terms of community development or mutual support, rather than direct electoral inducement. This reframing illustrates how actors actively negotiate the boundaries of acceptable behavior, seeking to reconcile institutional constraints with relational obligations. In this sense, hybridization is not a passive condition, but an active process of adjustment and reinterpretation.

From the perspective of voters, democracy is similarly experienced as a combination of formal rights and relational engagement. Voting is recognized as an individual civic duty, yet it is also embedded within a network of social considerations. A voter (initials D.P.) reflected that electoral choices are influenced not only by policy preferences, but also by the perceived character and relational history of candidates. This does not imply that voters disregard democratic principles; rather, they integrate these principles with locally meaningful criteria for evaluation. The result is a form of participation that is both institutionally structured and socially situated.

The concept of everyday democracy offers a useful lens for interpreting these dynamics. Kątek et al. (2025) argue that democracy should be understood not only through its formal institutions, but through the ways it is practiced, negotiated, and experienced in daily life. In Namlea, democracy is enacted through a series of interactions that extend beyond the ballot box, encompassing acts of giving, receiving, recognizing, and reciprocating. These practices may not always align neatly with institutional ideals, but they are central to how democracy is made meaningful for those who participate in it. By focusing on these everyday dimensions, it becomes possible to see hybrid democratic practices not as anomalies, but as contextually grounded expressions of political life (Ngabiyanto & Atmojo, 2026; Pekandi et al., 2025; Wardani et al., 2025).

Importantly, this hybridization challenges the tendency to evaluate democracy through a singular, universal standard. It suggests that democratic practice is inherently adaptive, shaped by the interplay between institutional design and social context. In archipelagic societies such as Namlea, where geographic dispersion and strong communal ties shape patterns of interaction, such adaptation is not only inevitable but necessary. Formal institutions alone cannot sustain democratic engagement; they must be complemented by practices that resonate with local moral frameworks.

At the same time, recognizing hybridity does not mean romanticizing all local practices. Informants themselves expressed concerns about the potential consequences of certain forms of exchange, particularly when they lead to unequal access to resources or reinforce existing hierarchies. A community leader (initials S.H.) noted that while relational engagement is important, it can also create expectations that are difficult to sustain and may divert attention from broader public interests. These reflections indicate that hybrid democratic practices are not static or unproblematic; they are subject to ongoing critique and renegotiation.

Toward a Context-Sensitive Framework: Rethinking Clientelism in the Global South

Bringing the empirical threads together, this study suggests that prevailing approaches to clientelism in the Global South require a substantive rethinking, one that moves beyond a narrow fixation on material exchange and instrumental rationality toward a more context-sensitive framework attentive to moral, relational, and cultural dimensions. The evidence from Namlea demonstrates that clientelistic practices are not merely strategic transactions aimed at securing electoral support, but are embedded within a broader social fabric where meanings of obligation, reciprocity, and legitimacy are continuously negotiated. As such, understanding political behavior in this context demands an analytical shift from what actors do to how they interpret what they do, and why those interpretations matter.

Across the interviews and observations conducted, it became clear that both political actors and citizens situate their actions within overlapping moral frameworks. A candidate (initials A.S.) reflected that decisions made during campaigns are rarely guided by a single logic; rather, they involve balancing expectations from party structures, legal frameworks, and community relationships. Similarly, a voter (initials R.T.) explained that choices at the ballot box are influenced not only by campaign promises but also by past interactions and perceived moral character. These accounts reinforce the idea that political action is embedded in relational contexts where meaning is co-produced, not imposed. In this sense, clientelism cannot be adequately understood without recognizing the active role of moral reasoning in shaping both action and interpretation.

This perspective aligns with recent calls in the literature to move toward more relational and contextually grounded analyses of political practices. Rather than treating clientelism as a uniform phenomenon with universal characteristics, scholars increasingly emphasize its variability across social settings and its dependence on local norms and institutions (Mtoi et al.,

2026; Supriyadi & Makatita, 2025). However, what the present study adds is a more explicit articulation of morality as a mediating element in this process. Moral considerations do not simply accompany political exchange; they actively structure how such exchanges are perceived, justified, and legitimized. In doing so, they bridge the gap between individual rationality and broader social structures, offering a more integrated account of political behavior.

The implications of this are both theoretical and epistemological. Theoretically, it calls into question reductionist models that privilege economic incentives while sidelining the normative and affective dimensions of action. By demonstrating that rationality itself is plural and context-dependent, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of agency, one that recognizes actors as capable of navigating multiple, sometimes conflicting, logics. This resonates with broader developments in social theory that seek to integrate insights from moral sociology, relational sociology, and practice theory (Costa et al., 2024; Islam et al., 2025). Within this integrated perspective, morality is not an external standard against which behavior is judged, but an internal and dynamic component of social life.

At an epistemological level, the findings speak to the ongoing effort to decenter dominant frameworks in the social sciences and to foreground perspectives emerging from the Global South. Too often, practices observed in non-Western contexts are evaluated against normative models derived from different historical and cultural trajectories, leading to interpretations that emphasize deficiency or deviation. By contrast, this study approaches local practices as sources of insight rather than anomalies, treating the lived experiences of actors as analytically generative. The concept of negotiated morality, as developed through the empirical analysis, exemplifies this orientation by grounding theoretical innovation in context-specific realities.

Importantly, adopting a context-sensitive framework does not imply abandoning critical evaluation. Informants themselves articulated concerns about the long-term implications of certain practices, particularly in relation to governance quality and distributive fairness. A community leader (initials M.H.) noted that while relational engagement strengthens social cohesion, it can also create expectations that are difficult to sustain within formal institutional constraints. This highlights the need for analytical approaches that can hold together both recognition and critique, acknowledging the legitimacy of local practices while remaining attentive to their potential consequences.

The framework advanced in this study also opens up new avenues for comparative research. If morality is indeed negotiated in context-specific ways, then similar processes may be observable in other settings across the Global South, albeit with different configurations of norms and structures. Future research could explore how negotiated morality operates in urban environments, in regions with different colonial legacies, or within transnational political networks. Such inquiries would not only deepen empirical understanding but also contribute to the development of more inclusive and globally representative sociological theories.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that clientelistic practices in an archipelagic society such as Namlea cannot be adequately understood through a purely instrumental lens, as social exchange in local politics is deeply embedded within relational ties, moral expectations, and historically rooted obligations. The analysis shows that political actors and citizens do not simply act based on material calculations, but continuously navigate competing normative frameworks, where formal democratic principles intersect with locally grounded values of reciprocity, solidarity, and social responsibility. In this process, moral dilemmas emerge not as deviations, but as inherent features of political life, reflecting the coexistence of equally legitimate moral orders. Consequently, the interaction between these value systems produces a form of hybrid democracy in which institutional procedures are maintained, yet substantively reshaped by local moral economies and relational practices. By situating morality as an active and mediating element between rational action and social structure, this study advances an alternative analytical perspective that conceptualizes morality as something negotiated in practice rather than imposed as a fixed standard. This perspective not only provides a more context-sensitive understanding of clientelism, but also underscores the importance of recognizing local rationalities as constitutive of democratic processes, thereby contributing to a more grounded and reflexive approach to the study of democracy in the Global South.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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