



Symbolic Meaning in Language in the Pinisi Ship Tradition as a Tourist Attraction

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Abstract

The Pinisi ship is a significant cultural icon in Bulukumba Regency, South Sulawesi, representing the maritime heritage and philosophical worldview of the Bugis-Makassar people. This study examines the symbolic meanings embedded in the Pinisi shipbuilding tradition, focusing on rituals, terminology, and structural elements. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with Panrita Lopi (master shipbuilders), workers, local leaders, and observations of shipbuilding practices. The results reveal that each stage of construction carries symbolic significance: determining auspicious days reflects sacred time and harmony with the universe; annattak (laying the keel) symbolizes a strong life foundation; kalabiseang represents stages of perfection; anyorong lopi (launching the ship) signifies birth and the beginning of a journey; ammosi (sprinkling oil or animal blood) conveys spiritual transition; and the two masts embody balance, duality, and moral values of siri' and pacce. The ship's seven sails denote cosmic perfection and the seven essential human virtues: faith, perseverance, patience, diligence, wisdom, loyalty, and courage. These symbolic meanings demonstrate that Pinisi shipbuilding transcends technical craftsmanship, reflecting local wisdom, spirituality, and social values. Understanding and preserving these symbolic aspects not only enrich cultural heritage but also provide opportunities for culture-based tourism, promoting both educational and economic benefits in the Bulukumba community.

Introduction

According to Ariany et al. (2022), the Pinisi ship is an important icon in Indonesian maritime culture, particularly in South Sulawesi. Bulukumba Regency, located at the southern tip of Sulawesi, has long been known as a center for traditional Pinisi shipbuilding (Paraga, 2020; Tsukiko, 2023; Ali, 2022). Craftsmanship in these ships has been passed down from generation to generation, reflecting the region's rich maritime culture and deep maritime traditions. The Pinisi is not simply a means of sea transportation but also a symbol rich in meaning for the Bulukumba people (Ibrahim et al., 2024; Islami, 2024).

This coastal community encompasses their relationship with the sea, social values, beliefs, and cultural identity (Maulidyna et al., 2021; Wheaton et al., 2021). However, with the advancement of technology, there are concerns that the deep understanding of the Pinisi's symbolic meaning is fading, especially among the younger generation. Each stage of Pinisi shipbuilding involves expressions in the local language that carry profound symbolic meaning.

From the selection of wood and the *annakbang* (wood-cutting) ritual to the launching of the ship, each stage has its own specific terminology that reflects the local way of life. Understanding this symbolic meaning is not only crucial for cultural preservation but also has the potential to become a unique tourist attraction (Perry, 2023; Pai et al., 2026). The development of culture-based tourism in Indonesia has spurred tourist interest in authentic experiences involving direct interaction with local traditions (Trisoko et al., 2024; Iswanto & Irsyad, 2024).

Pinisi ships received UNESCO recognition of the Pinisi shipbuilding technique as an Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2017. This international recognition further emphasizes the importance of preserving and in-depth understanding all aspects of the culture associated with the Pinisi, including its symbolic meaning (Habsary & Sampurno, 2024; Syafruddin et al., 2024; David & Adi, 2025; Rusdi et al., 2025). The development of culture-based tourism in Indonesia has spurred tourist interest in authentic experiences involving direct interaction with local traditions (Herianto & Sanusi, 2024; Sumarmi et al., 2026; Pratama et al., 2025).

Tourists are drawn not only to the physical aspects of the Pinisi ships but also to the philosophical and spiritual values inherent in their construction (Wardhani et al., 2025; Syafruddin et al., 2024; Demmallino et al., 2026). This opens up opportunities for developing educational tourism focused on interpreting the symbolic meanings within the language of the Pinisi shipbuilding tradition. Although the Pinisi boatbuilding tradition has been the subject of research from various perspectives, specific studies on the symbolic meaning of the language used during the construction process are still limited (Belzner et al., 2023; De La Torre-López et al., 2024).

This research is crucial to document and interpret the rich linguistic and philosophical values contained within this tradition, while also developing strategies to integrate them into meaningful cultural tourism experiences in Bulukumba Regency. Traditional Pinisi boatbuilding in Tana Beru, Bulukumba Regency, is a rich Indonesian cultural heritage that has existed for centuries (Ali, 2022; Rahman, 2024). However, the sustainability of this industry faces various challenges and opportunities that require in-depth analysis (Rahmi et al., 2024).

Pinisi boats serve not only as a means of maritime transportation but also as a symbol of the cultural identity of the Bugis-Makassar people. The shipbuilding process involves traditional skills passed down from generation to generation. Therefore, the sustainability of Pinisi boatbuilding is crucial for preserving cultural heritage and creating jobs for the local community (Rahmi et al., 2024; Shamsul Bahri et al., 2024; Nurn et al., 2026; Putra, 2024; Awaluddin et al., 2025).

The Pinisi shipbuilding process involves specific rituals, from selecting the wood and determining an auspicious day to begin construction, to the ceremony of launching the ship into the sea (Golan, 2025; Golan, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). Each stage of construction has profound philosophical and spiritual significance, reflecting the local wisdom of the Bugis-Makassar people in understanding the relationship between humans, nature, and the Creator. For example, when selecting wood, not just any tree can be used wood considered to possess the "spirit" suitable for the ship must be chosen (Yusuf et al., 2023; Zwerger, 2023).

In Tanah Beru and Ara Villages, two major centers of Pinisi shipbuilding in Bulukumba, craftsmen still maintain traditional shipbuilding techniques. They use a nailless "peg" system for joining the wood, a technique that requires high skill and a thorough understanding of the wood's characteristics.

This research is also crucial given the challenges facing the regeneration of Pinisi shipbuilders and the importance of transferring traditional knowledge to the younger generation. In-depth

documentation and analysis of the symbolic and linguistic aspects of traditions will assist in efforts to preserve and develop culture-based tourism that can provide economic benefits to local communities while maintaining the authenticity of the cultural values contained therein.

Methods

Research Design and Setting

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to examine the language, rituals, practices, beliefs, and symbolic values embedded in the Pinisi shipbuilding tradition. Ethnography enables researchers to understand cultural meanings through direct engagement with the daily practices and experiences of a particular cultural group (Hadi, 2021; Mahendra et al., 2024). This approach was considered appropriate because Pinisi shipbuilding involves not only technical craftsmanship but also inherited knowledge, ritual practices, local terminology, and philosophical meanings maintained by the shipbuilding community.

The study was conducted at traditional Pinisi shipbuilding sites in Bulukumba Regency, South Sulawesi, particularly in communities where Pinisi construction remains actively practiced. Fieldwork was undertaken from February to July 2025, including observations of the shipbuilding process and a follow-up interview conducted on July 4, 2025.

Informants and Data Sources

Informants were selected purposively based on their direct knowledge of and involvement in the Pinisi shipbuilding tradition. They included *Panrita Lopi* or master shipbuilders, *sawi* or shipbuilding workers, assistants involved in transferring traditional knowledge, and local traditional figures familiar with the cultural meanings of Pinisi construction. These informant groups were selected because they could provide information regarding the technical processes, traditional terminology, rituals, symbolic meanings, and cultural values associated with the Pinisi ship.

The primary data consisted of interview statements, field observations, field notes, and photographic documentation. Supporting documents and relevant literature were also examined to contextualize the findings concerning symbolic meaning, ritual practices, cultural preservation, and the potential of the Pinisi tradition as a cultural tourism attraction.

Data Collection

Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentation. Participant observation was conducted at the shipbuilding sites to examine the preparation and selection of wood, keel construction, hull assembly, the use of traditional tools, the roles of shipbuilding workers, and ritual activities associated with the construction process. Photographs and field notes were used to document relevant stages, materials, tools, interactions, and cultural practices.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended questions to provide informants with sufficient flexibility to explain their knowledge and experiences. The interviews explored the roles of *Panrita Lopi*, *sawi*, and *palili*; the determination of auspicious days; the processes of *annattak*, *akkalabiseang*, *annyorong lopi*, and *ammosi*; the meanings of traditional expressions; the symbolism of the ship's masts and sails; and the relevance of these cultural meanings to heritage preservation and tourism. Interview responses were recorded in interview notes and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Documentation included photographs of the shipbuilding process, wood selection, hull construction, traditional equipment, and other observable activities. Documentary materials were used to verify and complement information obtained from interviews and observations.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection. The analysis began by organizing field notes, interview transcripts, photographic documentation, and supporting documents. The data were then read repeatedly and coded according to recurring terms, practices, rituals, and symbolic interpretations.

The codes were classified into several principal themes: the roles of individuals in Pinisi construction, the stages and rituals of shipbuilding, traditional tools and materials, symbolic terminology, the meanings of the ship's physical elements, and the relationship between the Pinisi tradition, cultural preservation, and tourism. Particular attention was given to terms such as *Panrita Lopi*, *sawi*, *palili*, *annattak*, *akkalabiseang*, *annyorong lopi*, *ammosi*, *mate' ri dara*, *tallang ri lau*, *nala pammusuk*, and *massale-sale*.

The findings were presented as thematic narrative descriptions supported by interview statements, observational evidence, tables, and photographic documentation. The symbolic meanings were interpreted within the cultural context of the Bugis-Makassar community and connected to broader concepts of ritual, tradition, spirituality, cultural identity, and heritage-based tourism.

Results and Discussion

Based on an interview conducted on July 4, 2025, the construction of the Pinisi ship began with the calculation of auspicious days using auspicious time by Panrita Lopi. Panrita Lopi plays a very important role in the shipbuilding tradition of the Bugis-Makassar community. They are not only technical experts in shipbuilding, but also possess knowledge. The time used is in the Hijri month by looking at the best times with the terms *nataba kangkangi* and *nataba boko*, Panrita Lopi uses time with the term *Nataba Kangkang* which means the best time.



Figure 1. The Beginning of the Construction of the Pinisi Ship, Starting on a Good Day

Source: Research Documentation 2025

Before the Pinisi shipbuilding ritual, Mr. Syarifuddin, as Panrita Lopi, determined auspicious days to begin the *annatarak kalabiseang* process: *Apparammula Araba* (early Wednesday), *Parammula Juma'* (early Friday), and *Cappu' Kammisi'* (last Thursday). These days were chosen in the hope that the Pinisi ship would bring good fortune. The next step was laying the keel, or *kalabiseang*, to prepare the *kalabiseang* wood. The initial step in making a Pinisi involves cutting, measuring, and smoothing the wood to be used for the Pinisi. The types of wood used were *Bitti* and *Besi* wood, with the keel size using measurements previously used by ancestors, as measured by Panrita Lopi. The sequence of determining the size differed according to the inheritance of ancestors, taking into account the characteristics of *masale-masale*, seeking profit or gain, *mate ri dara*, *tallang rilau*, *manggara maling*, and *nala*

pammusuk. However, the hope that became the benchmark for the ship to have good fortune was using the characteristics of masala-sale and seeking profit. The six characteristics that are the provisions of the Pinisi can be interpreted as in the following table:

Table 1. Six Characteristics of the Pinisi

No.	Six Traits
1.	Mate ri dara
2.	Tallang rilau
3.	Mencari Laba
4.	Nala Pammusuk
5.	Ma sale-sale
6.	Manggara maling

Before the annattak begins, the wooden planks must be prepared. The wood commonly used is bitti, teak, or ironwood. These planks are dried for 6-12 months to reduce the moisture content and prevent shrinkage. Each plank is selected based on its grain quality, strength, and position on the ship. The planks for the lower part of the ship (near the keel) must be thicker and stronger than the upper planks. Plank dimensions vary, but generally are: Length: 4-8 meters, Width: 25-40 cm, Thickness: 4-7 cm.

Installation of the Keel Planks (Annattak Kading)

The first stage is installing the planks (annattak kading) on the keel (kading). The first plank installed is called "bende suloara" or "first plank." Installation begins from the center of the ship, symmetrically moving towards the bow and stern. This process requires extreme precision, as the keel plank serves as the foundation for the subsequent planks. The Panrita Lopi uses a traditional tool called a "timba" (wooden bow) to check the curvature of the boards to ensure they conform to the frame shape.

Drilling Nail Holes (Mattekke Bulu)

Before nails are inserted, holes must be drilled to prevent the wood from splitting. Drilling is done with a traditional hand drill called a "paruru." The distance between the nail holes is measured using a "hasta" (hand span), generally around 15-20 cm. The depth of the hole is adjusted to the length of the wooden nail to be used. The hole should not be too large to ensure the nail locks firmly, but not too small to prevent the wood from splitting when hammered.

Installing Wooden Nails (Appaku)

The nails used in traditional annattak are wooden nails called "paku bitti" or "pasak," made from hardwood such as bitti or ironwood. The nails range in length from 15-25 cm to 1-2 cm in diameter. The nails are hammered using a large wooden hammer (palukka) with a measured motion. The blows should be firm but not too hard to prevent the wood from splitting. Each plank is fastened to the frame using 8-12 nails, depending on the length. In modern times, some shipbuilders have begun using iron nails or bolts, but traditional shipbuilders still use wooden nails because they are more flexible and rust-resistant due to their ability to withstand the ship's movements at sea.

Gap Compaction (Makkalusu)

Once all the planks are installed, the small gaps between them must be compacted to make them watertight. This process is called "makkalusu," or caulking. The materials used are: (1) Ship cotton (puru kapuru): Processed cotton or kapok fiber mixed with coconut oil; (2) Tar or damar (sap): The sap of certain trees heated until melted; (3) Coconut fiber: Finely twisted coconut fiber. The makkalusu process involves inserting the caulking material into the gaps

using a special chisel (kalisu) and striking it with a small hammer. The first layer is compacted cotton, followed by hot tar, which hardens and makes the gaps completely watertight.

Installing Subsequent Planks (Annattak Massilolongang)

Once the first plank is completely installed, installation continues with the second, third, and so on, gradually working upwards. Each new row of planks must be installed with attention to: (1) a 2-3 cm alignment with the previous plank; (2) alignment with the shape of the ship's frame; (3) Consistent curvature from bow to stern; (4) Positioning of plank joints that are not vertically aligned for structural strength. This process takes months depending on the size of the vessel. For a 50-meter Pinisi, the annattak process can take 4-6 months with a team of 10-15 workers.

Smoothing and Finishing (Marassa)

After all the planks are installed, the vessel's exterior is smoothed using a planer (randa) and sandpaper. This process makes the vessel's surface even and ready for painting or preservative coating. In the final stage, the vessel is coated with a mixture of oil and tar (called "pammase lopi"), which serves as a wood preservative and protects against seawater, barnacles, and other marine organisms.

Materials and Equipment in Annattak

Wood selection is crucial in the annattak process. Based on interviews with Panrita Lopi, the wood selection criteria include:

Bitti Wood

Most preferred for ship planks. Hard, waterproof, and insect-resistant. Smooth texture and easy to work with. Relatively expensive and increasingly rare.

Teak Wood

A good alternative to bitti. Contains natural oils that are water-resistant. Good structural strength. More readily available than bitti.

Ulin Wood

Very hard and heavy. Very durable (can last 100+ years). Difficult to work with due to its hardness. Very expensive.

Kampili Wood

Used for parts requiring extra strength. Resistant to seawater and marine organisms. Quite difficult to obtain.

Traditional Equipment

The tools used in annattak are largely traditional: (1) Paruru (hand drill): To make nail holes; (2) Palukka (large hammer): To hammer nails and chisel; (3) Timba (arch-shaped planer): To check the curvature of the board; (4) Kalisu (gap chisel): To insert gap-filling material; (5) Randa (planer): To smooth the surface of the board; (6) Ujung (large chisel): To carve and shape the wood; (7) Bagang (wood clamp): To hold the board while it is assembled; (8) Palm fiber rope: To temporarily tie it before the nails are installed. The panrita lopi (shipbuilders) master special techniques passed down orally and through hands-on practice. They possess a keen eye for selecting wood, calculating proportions without technical drawings, and assembling the ship based on intuition and experience that cannot easily be replaced by machines. Traditionally built Pinisi ships have a higher value due to their authenticity, especially for the tourism market.



Figure 2. The Process of Making a Pinisi Ship Hull

Source: Researcher Documentation 2025

From observations and interviews, researchers identified terms that have symbolic meaning in the construction of a Pinisi ship, which are fraught with meaning:

Table 2. Identification of Symbolic Meaning in Pinisi Construction

No.	Symbolic Terms/ Meanings
1.	<i>Panrita Lopi</i>
2.	<i>Sawi</i>
3.	<i>Palili</i>
4.	<i>Annattak</i>
5.	<i>Akkalabiseang</i>
6.	<i>Annyorong Lopi</i>
7.	<i>Ammosi</i>
8.	<i>Mate' ri dara</i>
9.	<i>Tallang ri lau</i>
10.	<i>Nala Pammusuk</i>
11.	<i>Massale-sale</i>
12.	<i>Allong Ampe'ne</i>

Symbolic Meaning in the Pinisi Shipbuilding Process

Panrita Lopi as a Symbol of Wisdom and Spirituality

Panrita Lopi is more than just a craftsman; he is a "symbol reader" who understands that each part of the ship has its own meaning. He combines technical and spiritual aspects, transforming the Pinisi ship into a sacred, soulful work.

Sawi (ship worker)

Symbolizes the values of solidarity and mutual cooperation, where collective work takes precedence over individual interests.

Palili (Panrita Lopi's assistant)

Symbolizes the regeneration of traditional knowledge, connecting past and present knowledge, affirming cultural continuity.

Annattak (determination of auspicious days)

Reflects the harmony between humans and the universe, demonstrating the connection between the material and spiritual worlds.

Akkalabiseang (blessing ceremony)

Seen as a ritual of communication with spiritual powers, it reinforces the belief that every major activity must begin with the prayers and blessings of ancestors.

Annyorong Lopi (ship pushing procession)

Symbolizes the ship's rebirth, its transformation from an inanimate object into a living entity ready to embark on a journey.

Ammosi (sprinkling oil or animal blood on the ship)

Symbolizes the granting of "spirit" and life energy to the ship, symbolizing the spiritual transition from an inanimate object to a living entity (a liminal symbol according to Turner).

Mate' ri Dara (animal sacrifice)

Shows the concept of cosmic balance and sacrifice for the sake of collective safety, the bond between humans, ancestors, and nature.

Tallang ri Lau (voyage to sea)

Symbolizes the courage, steadfastness, and ideals of seafaring communities, the sea as a testing ground and a symbol of freedom.

The symbolic meaning of the ship's physical elements

Two main masts (watang ri olo and watang ri boko)

The shorter foremast symbolizes the material world, the earth, the feminine principle, and the future. The taller foremast symbolizes the spiritual dimension, the sky, the masculine principle, origins, and protection. The mast, the ship's spiritual center, connects the human world, the sky, and the sea. It also serves as a kinetic landmark and symbol of the sailor's spiritual orientation. It represents the values of siri' (self-respect) and pacce (empathy/solidarity), the moral balance of the Bugis-Makassar people. The ritual process of setting up the mast (annoting watang) affirms the ship as a living entity, brought to life through mantras and animal blood. The duality and prohibitions associated with the mast (palili) reinforce the symbol of spiritual protection and social order. Symbolic integration of Islam: the foremast is associated with the words of tawhid (the monotheism), the foremast with the prophetic message, demonstrating the syncretism of tradition and religion.

The ship's seven sails (pitung layara)

Denotative: a technical function as a means of propulsion. Connotative: a symbol of cosmic balance, perfection, and the spiritual journey. It symbolizes the seven strengths that humans must possess: faith, perseverance, patience, hard work, wisdom, loyalty, and courage. It is a symbol of collective identity and cultural pride of the Bulukumba people.

Conclusion

The symbolic meaning in language of the Pinisi ship tradition in Bulukumba Regency encompasses various aspects of the ritual and structure of the ship, which are rich in philosophical and spiritual values of the Bugis people. These symbolic meanings include: determining an auspicious day that reflects the belief in sacred time in starting the shipbuilding activity; annattak (laying the keel) as a symbol of a strong foundation of life; kalabiseang which represents the stages of perfection; two masts that symbolize balance and duality in life; anyorong lopi (ship launching) as a symbol of birth and the beginning of the journey; seven sails that contain the philosophical meaning of the number of perfection in Bugis cosmology; and ammosi (closing ritual) that signifies the perfection of the process and the hope of safety. All of this symbolism shows that the Pinisi ship tradition is not just a boat-building activity,

but a manifestation of the outlook on life, belief system, and local wisdom of the Bulukumba people.

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