ETHOS, LOGOS, AND PATHOS IN SARAWAK AND SABAH POLITICAL DISCOURSE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ABANG JOHARI OPENG AND HAJIJI NOOR

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ABSTRACT

In East Malaysia, festive speeches serve as important platforms for political communication. This study examined the rhetorical appeals and thematic content in festive speeches delivered by Abang Johari Openg, Premier of Sarawak, and Hajiji Noor, Chief Minister of Sabah. Employing a qualitative research design, the study analysed twelve festive speeches delivered between 2024 and 2025 using Aristotle's framework of ethos, pathos, and logos, combined with Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. The findings revealed a clear divergence in rhetorical strategies. Abang Johari Openg's speeches were dominated by ethos (38.6%) and logos (36.8%), while Hajiji Noor's speeches relied mainly on pathos (55.3%). Development, economy, and transformation was the leading theme for Abang Johari Openg (41.4%), whereas social cohesion and unity was the leading theme for Hajiji Noor (42.1%). Abang Johari Openg prioritised logos and ethos, which supported his dominant theme of development, economy, and transformation. He relied on factual evidence, strategic planning, and constitutional authority to project competence and visionary leadership. In contrast, Hajiji Noor predominantly employed pathos to reinforce his central theme of social cohesion and unity by using emotional language to build communal solidarity and trust. The findings indicate that Abang Johari Openg adopts the persona of a visionary architect, while Hajiji Noor functions as a unifying guardian, with both adapting their communication styles to the specific political and cultural contexts of Sarawak and Sabah. These contrasting personas show that persuasion in festive speeches is shaped by local context, and this insight may help political communicators and language educators understand how leaders tailor their messages to multicultural audiences.

Keywords: Political Discourse, Rhetorical Appeals, Ethos Pathos Logos, Festive Speeches, East Malaysia, Sarawak, Sabah.

INTRODUCTION

Political speeches play an important role in shaping public opinion, strengthening leadership credibility, and promoting national unity. In Malaysia's multicultural society, festive speeches delivered during celebrations such as Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Chinese New Year, Gawai Dayak, Christmas, and Kaamatan serve not

only ceremonial purposes but also function as platforms for political communication. These speeches allow leaders to connect cultural values with political messaging while addressing diverse audiences (Săftoiu, 2010) noted that festive speeches are typically delivered during culturally significant occasions and are often used by leaders to strengthen relationships with the public. Similarly, (Boginskaya, 2023) highlighted that political leaders strategically use public speeches during important events to engage audiences and reinforce political narratives. The persuasive nature of political speeches can be understood through Aristotle's rhetorical framework, which consists of ethos, pathos, and logos. Ethos refers to the credibility and trustworthiness of the speaker, pathos involves emotional appeal, and logos focuses on logic and evidence-based reasoning. According (Lutzke & Henggeler, 2009), effective persuasion depends on the balanced use of these three rhetorical appeals. In political discourse, leaders use ethos to establish authority and competence, pathos to create emotional connection with audiences, and logos to justify policies through facts and reasoning (Abdul Malik et al. (2023). Analysing these appeals in East Malaysian festive speeches may reveal how leaders combine persuasion with cultural celebration when addressing plural audiences. Such an analysis could also extend the use of the Aristotelian framework beyond campaign and parliamentary speeches to ceremonial political discourse in a less studied region. Despite the significance of festive political speeches, this area remains underexplored. Existing research has largely focused on political leaders from Peninsular Malaysia or broader campaign speeches rather than festive addresses in East Malaysia. Studies by Ting et al. (2022), (Rahman et al., 2017) and Manan and Shukri (2023) mainly examined rhetorical strategies used by leaders in West Malaysia. Consequently, there is limited understanding of how political leaders in Sarawak and Sabah employ rhetorical appeals within their distinct sociocultural contexts. Sarawak and Sabah joined the federation under the Malaysia Agreement 1963 and retain certain autonomous powers, and both states have large Indigenous and non-Muslim communities, such as the Dayak in Sarawak and the Kadazandusun in Sabah. These conditions suggest that East Malaysian leaders may need to appeal to regional identity, interethnic harmony, and state rights in ways that differ from political communication in Peninsular Malaysia. This study focuses on two prominent East Malaysian leaders: Abang Johari Openg, Premier of Sarawak, known for his policy-driven leadership focusing on economic development, digital transformation, and state autonomy; and Hajiji Noor, Chief Minister of Sabah, recognised for emphasising social cohesion, unity, and political stability within Sabah's diverse society. By comparing these two leaders, this study aims to examine how rhetorical appeals and thematic content are employed differently in festive speeches to reflect political priorities and leadership styles. The objectives of this study are: (1) to analyse the rhetorical appeals used in festive speeches by Abang Johari Openg and Hajiji Noor, and (2) to compare the key thematic content in their festive speeches. The two objectives are related, as the themes identified in Objective 2 are examined alongside the rhetorical appeals through which they are conveyed. In this way, the study considers both how the leaders persuade and what they choose to emphasise.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative design using rhetorical analysis to examine rhetorical appeals and thematic content in festive speeches by Abang Johari Openg and Hajiji Noor. Rhetorical analysis was considered more suitable than a low-inference descriptive approach because the study applied Aristotle's

framework to interpret how persuasion is constructed in naturally occurring political discourse. This theory-driven approach allowed the analysis to move beyond surface description towards explaining how each leader used ethos, pathos, and logos to achieve persuasive goals. The dataset consisted of twelve official festive speeches delivered between 2024 and 2025, with six speeches by each leader. The speeches were selected through purposive sampling based on four criteria, namely that each speech was delivered by the leader personally, was linked to a major festive occasion, was released through an official channel, and was available in full between 2024 and 2025. Although the occasions were matched where possible (Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Christmas, and Chinese New Year for both leaders, with Gawai Dayak and Kaamatan treated as equivalent Indigenous harvest festivals), the sets were not fully identical, which is acknowledged as a limitation. Speeches included major celebrations such as Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Chinese New Year, Christmas, Gawai Dayak, Kaamatan, and Hari Raya Aidiladha. All speeches were obtained from official YouTube channels (TV Sarawak, Hajiji Noor's official channel, TV Sabah) and manually transcribed verbatim. Their speeches are as follows:

1. Perutusan Hari Raya Aidilfitri oleh Premier Sarawak 2024 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iADPTYtpRAI
2. Perutusan Hari Krismas oleh Premier Sarawak 2024 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rsFnf3N_OVw
3. Perutusan Tahun Baru Cina oleh Premier Sarawak 2024 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnKmW9n7DJo
4. Perutusan Hari Gawai Dayak oleh Premier Sarawak 2024 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3IjSRgXYSA
5. Perutusan Hari Raya Aild-ilfitri oleh Premier Sarawak, Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri Abang Johari Tun Openg https://youtu.be/W1v4JAiFk1o?si=EZPSqTd2r-m5-bp2
6. Perutusan Hari Gawai Dayak 2025 oleh Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri Abang Johari Tun Openg - https://youtu.be/u0E0Z8MSOzc?si=UAdklzms8mSF2se9
7. Perutusan YAB Ketua Menteri Sabah sempena Hari Raya Aidilfitri 2024 https://youtu.be/9mD9eOsCBaM?si=Pgt1fLAmIdGZ5x8i
8. Perutusan Ketua Menteri Sabah Sempena Sambu-tan Hari Krismas 2024 https://youtu.be/1Z8z7afngKk?si=Hro6wvMU6WP_EczS
9. Perutusan Tahun Baru Cina 2024 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6mTJlbUzv4
10. Majlis Penutupan Sambutan Pesta Kaamatan Peringkat Negeri Sabah 2024 https://www.youtube.com/live/ybVPCg4mUFc?si=oybZawwTJBrHReSJ
11. Perutusan YAB Ketua Menteri Sempena Tahun Baharu Cina 2025 https://youtu.be/zlftq1ze6bY?si=hClAsrPc4wmNMxOL
12. Perutusan Hari Raya Ai-diladha 1446H YAB Ketua Menteri Sabah https://youtu.be/J1gOlBdm9VI?si=ezA1gllJWZXzA5jf

Two analytical instruments were used. The first instrument was a rhetorical appeal coding scheme listing the operational descriptors for ethos, pathos, and logos, and the second was a thematic coding table used to record and organise the themes identified in each speech. The rhetorical appeal framework was adapted from Aristotle's model of ethos, pathos, and logos, with operational descriptors synthesised from previous studies (Al-Momani, 2014; Gagich et al., n.d.; Higgins & Walker, 2012; Mshvenieradze, 2013; Ting, 2018; Ting et al., 2022). Logos was identified through statistics, policy explanations, and logical reasoning; pathos through emotional appeals involving unity, gratitude, or solidarity; and ethos through references to credibility, leadership experience, and public trust. A thematic coding table was developed to identify recurring themes

across speeches, including social cohesion, governance, development, and cultural harmony. The thematic analysis followed the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which are familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Data analysis involved manual coding of speech segments according to rhetorical appeals and thematic categories, followed by frequency calculation and comparative analysis between the two leaders. Coding was carried out independently by two coders, and disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Several limitations were identified. The analysis focused only on twelve festive speeches within a limited timeframe (2024-2025), so findings may not represent broader rhetorical styles across different political contexts. Additionally, translation from Malay to English may have affected certain cultural meanings and emotional nuances.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Rhetorical Appeals Used in Festive Speeches

The analysis identified 94 coded rhetorical segments across twelve festive speeches: 57 in Abang Johari Openg's speeches and 38 in Hajiji Noor's speeches. The distribution of rhetorical appeals for each leader is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1/ Distribution of rhetorical appeals by leader

Appeal	Abang Johari Openg	Hajiji Noor	Total
Ethos	22 (38.60%)	11 (28.95%)	33 (34.74%)
Logos	21 (36.84%)	6 (15.79%)	27 (28.42%)
Pathos	14 (24.56%)	21 (55.26%)	35 (36.84%)
Total	57 (100%)	38 (100%)	95 (100%)

The two leaders differed most clearly in how they built ethos. Abang Johari Openg grounded his credibility in institutional and constitutional authority by drawing on his governance record and his role as a cultural custodian. He reinforced this with external validation by citing recognition from the World Bank and alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. This approach positioned him as a leader whose authority rests on formal achievement and international benchmarking. Hajiji Noor took a different route. He built a more relational form of ethos. Rather than leaning on institutional markers, he presented himself through personal sincerity, moral responsibility, and religious grounding, while framing cultural inclusiveness as central to his leadership identity. This suggests he sought legitimacy through closeness to the people rather than through formal validation.

This same contrast appeared in their use of logos. Abang Johari Openg relied heavily on statistics, development targets, and structured policy frameworks, most notably the Post COVID-19 Development Strategy 2030. His argumentation followed a technocratic style. He relied on measurable planning to project competence and demonstrate long term vision. By anchoring his claims in targets and timelines rather than broad promises, he presented governance as a matter of calculated execution. This style positioned him as a leader who manages the state through structured planning rather than one who leads through appeal or persuasion alone. It also implied that progress could be tracked and verified rather than simply promised, giving his rhetoric a sense of accountability grounded in evidence. Hajiji Noor used logical appeals more selectively. He focused mainly on economic performance indicators and the Sabah Maju Jaya Roadmap. He used

these references to support his governance credibility rather than to construct an extended policy narrative. Unlike a technocratic approach built on detailed frameworks and projections he treated data as a point of reference rather than the central basis of his argument. This indicates that logos served a supporting function in his rhetoric. It reinforced his credibility at key moments but remained secondary to more emotionally driven appeals which carried the greater persuasive weight in his overall message.

Pathos revealed the clearest divergence between the two leaders. Abang Johari Openg embedded emotional appeal within his broader development narrative rather than allowing it to stand on its own. He used pathos to reinforce collective ambition and shared progress. This aspect gives his technocratic vision a human dimension without letting emotion drive the argument. In this sense, pathos functioned as a supporting layer that made his development agenda feel inclusive rather than purely administrative. Hajiji Noor, on the other hand, took a different approach by treating pathos as his primary rhetorical strategy rather than a secondary reinforcement. He consistently invoked resilience gratitude togetherness and unity making emotional connection the foundation of his political appeal rather than an accompaniment to policy discussion. By drawing on the multicultural composition of Sabah society, he positioned unity itself as both the message and the persuasive method. This reliance on shared identity and communal sentiment allowed him to build rapport with a diverse audience in a way that technical argumentation alone could not achieve.

The Key Thematic Content in Festive Speeches

Thematic analysis revealed a clear divergence in priorities between the two leaders. For Abang Johari Openg the dominant theme was Development, Economy, and Transformation at 41.4 percent (n=24). This was followed by Cultural and Religious Affirmation at 22.4 percent (n=13) and Social Cohesion and Unity at 19.0 percent (n=11). The prominence of development related themes reinforces the technocratic identity established through his ethos and logos and suggests that economic progress formed the core of his rhetorical agenda. This pattern suggests that Abang Johari constructs his political credibility primarily through what could be termed a discourse of competence, where legitimacy is claimed through demonstrated capacity to deliver material progress rather than through appeals to shared belonging. The terms discourse of competence and discourse of belonging are proposed in this study as interpretive categories and are not drawn from an existing framework. In this sense, economic transformation functions not only as policy content but as a rhetorical resource, one that positions the speaker as a rational and forward-looking leader whose authority rests on measurable outcomes.

For Hajiji Noor the pattern was reversed. Social Cohesion and Unity emerged as the dominant theme at 42.1 percent (n=16), followed closely by Cultural and Religious Affirmation at 39.5 percent (n=15). Development Economy and Transformation appeared only 18.4 percent of the time (n=7) making it the least emphasised theme in his speeches. This distribution supports the earlier finding that his rhetoric relied primarily on pathos, with unity and shared identity functioning as both message and persuasive strategy rather than economic progress. Here legitimacy is constructed differently. Rather than appealing to competence, Hajiji Noor draws on a discourse of belonging, where political authority is affirmed through emotional identification with the audience and through the symbolic reinforcement of collective identity. The near equal weighting of unity and cultural affirmation themes suggests these two categories work together as a single persuasive strategy, with cultural and religious references serving to anchor and authenticate claims of unity within a locally

recognisable frame of reference.

These results demonstrate a thematic inversion between the two leaders. Abang Johari Openg prioritised development while treating unity as a secondary concern, whereas Hajiji Noor prioritised unity while treating development as a secondary concern. This inversion may reflect not simply stylistic preference but distinct governance priorities shaped by each state's sociopolitical context. It also illustrates a broader principle in political discourse analysis, namely that rhetorical choices are context dependent rather than universal. The same communicative event, a festive speech, can be shaped into markedly different persuasive structures depending on the political and cultural conditions under which it is delivered.

These patterns carry implications that extend beyond the two leaders studied here. This study contributes to rhetorical and political communication research in two ways. First, it demonstrates that festive speeches are not merely ceremonial but function as strategic instruments of persuasion that deliberately shaped to reinforce political identity. Even within a genre governed by convention and expected goodwill, speakers retain considerable latitude to embed distinct ideological and political messaging. Second, it shows that ethos, logos, and pathos do not operate in isolation but interact in ways shaped by the distinct sociocultural contexts of Sarawak and Sabah. The dominance of logos and ethos in Abang Johari's speeches and the dominance of pathos in Hajiji Noor's speeches should not be read as evidence that one leader uses rhetorical appeals more skillfully than the other. Rather, both patterns represent context sensitive rhetorical choices, each calibrated to the specific political and cultural landscape in which it operates. This interconnection suggests that rhetorical strategy in political speech cannot be fully understood without accounting for the specific cultural and governance environment in which it is produced. It further suggests that comparative studies of political discourse should treat context not as background information but as a constitutive element shaping which rhetorical appeals become available and effective to a given speaker in a given setting.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how two Bornean state leaders, Abang Johari Openg of Sarawak and Hajiji Noor of Sabah, used festive speeches as a platform for political rhetoric. By analysing the distribution of ethos, logos, and pathos alongside the thematic content of twelve speeches, the study found that each leader adopted a distinct and internally consistent rhetorical identity. Abang Johari Openg built his political voice around institutional credibility and structured planning, using development as both message and proof of competence. Hajiji Noor built his around emotional closeness and collective identity, using unity as both message and method of persuasion. Rather than treating these as isolated stylistic differences, the study shows that they form two coherent and opposing rhetorical systems, each shaped by the particular political and cultural conditions of the state in which it was produced. The significance of this finding extends well beyond describing two speaking styles. It challenges the assumption that festive speeches are largely ceremonial and rhetorically thin. The findings show instead that even a highly conventionalised genre, bound by expectations of goodwill and celebration, can carry substantial ideological weight and serve as a vehicle for reinforcing political legitimacy. This matters because it suggests that public rhetoric in Malaysian state politics, and potentially in similar multicultural federated contexts elsewhere, cannot be understood through a single universal model of persuasion. What counts as convincing leadership rhetoric is not fixed. It is negotiated locally, shaped by the specific social composition, political history, and governance expectations of the audience being addressed. Having

read this study, readers can no longer view Aristotelian appeals as fixed categories that leaders deploy in similar proportions regardless of context. Instead, ethos, logos, and pathos should be understood as resources that are selectively activated depending on what a given political environment recognises as legitimate authority. This reframing opens several avenues for further inquiry. Future research could examine whether these rhetorical patterns hold across a wider range of speech genres beyond festive occasions, such as budget speeches or crisis addresses, where the pressure to demonstrate competence or unity may shift. It could also examine whether audience reception aligns with speaker intention, since this study analysed rhetorical construction rather than public interpretation. In this way, the study offers not only a finding about two leaders, but a framework for asking new questions about how political legitimacy is rhetorically constructed in culturally plural societies.

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