

Nature and Tradition in An Ecological Reading of *Roko Molas Poco* In Manggarai Culture, East Nusa Tenggara

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Abstract

Environmental degradation reflects an ethical disruption in the relationship between human communities and the ecosystems that sustain them. This study examines the ecological meanings of the *Roko Molas Poco* ritual in Manggarai culture and explains their relationship to the concept of universal brotherhood proposed by William Chang. The study used a qualitative ethnographic design supported by a literature review, participant observation, and in-depth semistructured interviews with seven traditional leaders, ritual practitioners, and cultural elders. Data were analyzed through condensation, thematic coding, hermeneutic interpretation, and triangulation. The findings show that the ritual treats the selected tree as a relational subject rather than a commodity. Its stages regulate communal deliberation, selective resource use, ritual permission, reconciliation, and shared responsibility for the forest. These practices express respect for nonhuman life, limits on exploitation, and moral accountability before God, the community, and nature. The findings also show that *Roko Molas Poco* gives a culturally grounded form to universal brotherhood because humans and other created beings are understood as originating from the same divine source. The ritual therefore provides a local environmental ethic that can strengthen conservation awareness and enrich contemporary discussions of relational and biocultural approaches to environmental protection.

Keywords: *Roko Molas Poco*; Environmental Ethics; Local Wisdom; Manggarai; Universal Brotherhood

Abstrak

Degradasi lingkungan mencerminkan terganggunya relasi etis antara manusia dan ekosistem yang menopang kehidupannya. Penelitian ini mengkaji makna ekologis ritual *Roko Molas Poco* dalam budaya Manggarai serta keterkaitannya dengan konsep persaudaraan universal William Chang melalui pendekatan etnografi kualitatif yang didukung studi pustaka, observasi partisipatif, dan wawancara mendalam dengan tujuh tokoh adat dan pelaku budaya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ritual ini memandang pohon sebagai subjek relasional, bukan sekadar komoditas, serta menegaskan nilai musyawarah, pemanfaatan sumber daya secara bijaksana, penghormatan terhadap kehidupan non-manusia, dan tanggung jawab moral kepada Tuhan, sesama, dan alam. Temuan ini juga menunjukkan bahwa *Roko Molas Poco* merepresentasikan persaudaraan universal yang berakar pada keyakinan bahwa manusia dan seluruh ciptaan berasal dari sumber ilahi yang sama, sehingga ritual tersebut menawarkan etika lingkungan berbasis

kearifan lokal yang relevan untuk memperkuat kesadaran konservasi dan memperkaya diskursus kontemporer tentang perlindungan lingkungan hidup.

Kata Kunci: *Roko Molas Poco; Etika Lingkungan; Kearifan Lokal; Manggarai; Persaudaraan Universal*

Introduction

The contemporary ecological crisis is not only a biophysical or technical problem. It also reflects an ethical rupture in the way humans understand and use nature. Conservation practices become more durable when communities develop knowledge of ecological limits through sustained interaction with their environment. Berkes and Turner Zuhud et al., (2017) show that such knowledge evolves through learning, collective memory, and institutions that guide resource use. This perspective is relevant in Indonesia, where environmental protection must engage cultural practices as well as formal regulation.

Biocultural conservation recognizes that biological diversity and cultural practices are mutually connected. Warung and Diniyanti (2025) argue that effective conservation should acknowledge the links among ecosystems, local knowledge, institutions, and cultural values. Environmental responsibility also depends on relational values that emerge from meaningful relationships among people, places, and other living beings. Chan et al., (2016) explain that these relationships provide reasons to protect nature beyond its economic utility. In Manggarai, East Nusa Tenggara, this relational orientation appears in customary land management and ritual life (Denar et al., 2020).

Research in the Ruteng Mountains demonstrates that Manggarai land-use practices include customary zoning, selective resource use, and community rules that reduce land degradation. Iswandono et al., (2016); Langgor et al., (2026) identify local culture as an important foundation for forest conservation. A subsequent ethnographic study confirms that inherited land-management practices integrate livelihood needs with ecological restraint (Langgor et al., 2026). One ritual that embodies this relationship is *Roko Molas Poco*, the ceremonial retrieval and reception of a selected tree that will become the main pillar, or *siri bongkok*, of a traditional house known as *mbaru gendang*.

Existing scholarship has examined several dimensions of *Roko Molas Poco*. Jemali et al., (2017) focus on the ritual symbolism of women and human dignity. Denar et al., (2020) identify its ecotheological meanings in the construction of the Manggarai traditional house (Ekaputra et al., 2025). Dominggus and Pandor (2022) relate the ritual to ecological and humanistic themes in *Laudato Si'*. Hadut et al., (2023) further explain its contribution to ecological awareness. More recently, Ekaputra et al., (2025) have emphasized its relevance to conservation and environmental education.

These studies establish the ecological importance of the ritual, but they do not fully explain how nature and tradition operate as a unified ethical perspective through the concept of universal brotherhood (Sutam and Jemadi, 2025). The concept of universal brotherhood provides an ethical bridge for this analysis. Chang (1997) grounds human dignity in a moral responsibility that extends beyond individual interests. In his environmental ethics, the same responsibility requires humans to recognize the value of other created beings and to protect the conditions of shared life (Denar et al., 2021).

This position is compatible with the integral ecology, which links care for nature with social and moral responsibility. Arianto et al., (2021) show that the environmental thought of William Chang positions humans as both potential causes of ecological damage and active

agents of ecological restoration (Naingalis et al., 2025). This study therefore addresses two questions. First, how are ecological values expressed through the meanings and stages of *Roko Molas Poco*? second, how do those values correspond to universal brotherhood as a foundation for environmental ethics? by answering these questions, the study seeks to show that Manggarai tradition does not merely preserve a symbolic ceremony. It also organizes a practical moral relationship among humans, the forest, the community, and the divine source of life.

Method

This study used a qualitative ethnographic design to investigate the ecological meanings embedded in Manggarai ritual practice. Library research served as a supporting framework rather than the primary source of evidence (Chan et al., 2016). Primary data were obtained through participant observation and in-depth semistructured interviews. Seven informants were selected purposively: traditional leaders, including *Tu'a Golo* and *Tu'a Teno*, who possess authoritative knowledge of customary rules and land use; ritual practitioners who participate directly in the ceremony; and cultural elders who preserve Manggarai oral history (Iswandono et al., 2016). Secondary sources consisted of the principal writings of William Chang, *Laudato Si'*, and journal literature on *Roko Molas Poco*, local ecological knowledge, and environmental ethics (Arianto et al., 2021). The analysis followed four stages. First, field notes and interview records concerning the selection, cutting, transport, and reception of the tree were condensed into relevant units of meaning. Second, thematic coding organized the data into categories such as personification of nature, communal deliberation, selective extraction, ritual permission, and reconciliation (Iswandono et al., 2015). Third, hermeneutic interpretation brought these empirical themes into dialogue with universal brotherhood. Fourth, conclusions were tested through source and methodological triangulation by comparing observations, informant explanations, and scholarly literature. This process maintained the grounding of the interpretation in field evidence while allowing a philosophical analysis of the relationship between humans and nature (Hadut et al., 2023).

Results and Discussion

1. The Ecological Dimension Of *Roko Molas Poco*

a. The cultural meaning Of *Roko Molas Poco*

The expression *Roko Molas Poco* consists of three Manggarai words. *Roko* refers to bringing or taking something in a ceremonial procession, *molas* refers to a beautiful young woman, and *poco* refers to a mountain or forested highland. The expression therefore depicts the selected tree as a mountain maiden who is welcomed into the village. The tree is prepared as *siri bongkok*, the central pillar of *mbaru gendang*. This symbolism prevents the tree from being reduced to anonymous timber. The ritual assigns it a social identity and places its use within a network of obligations.

The association between the tree and womanhood also communicates fertility, continuity, care, and the sustaining role of nature. Letsoin et al., (2024) similarly find that the feminine symbolism of the ritual connects humans with nature, other people, and the Supreme Being (Iswandono et al., 2016). The relational meaning of the ritual is consistent with the Manggarai expression *gendang one, lingko peang*. The house and the fields are spatially distinct but form one system of life. The traditional house organizes community identity, while fields, forests, and water sources sustain material existence. Nature and settlement are therefore not opposing domains (Jemali et al., 2017). They are interdependent

parts of a cultural landscape. The ritual makes this interdependence visible by moving the selected tree from the forest to the village through a regulated communal process. It transforms extraction into a moral event that requires deliberation, restraint, permission, and reception.

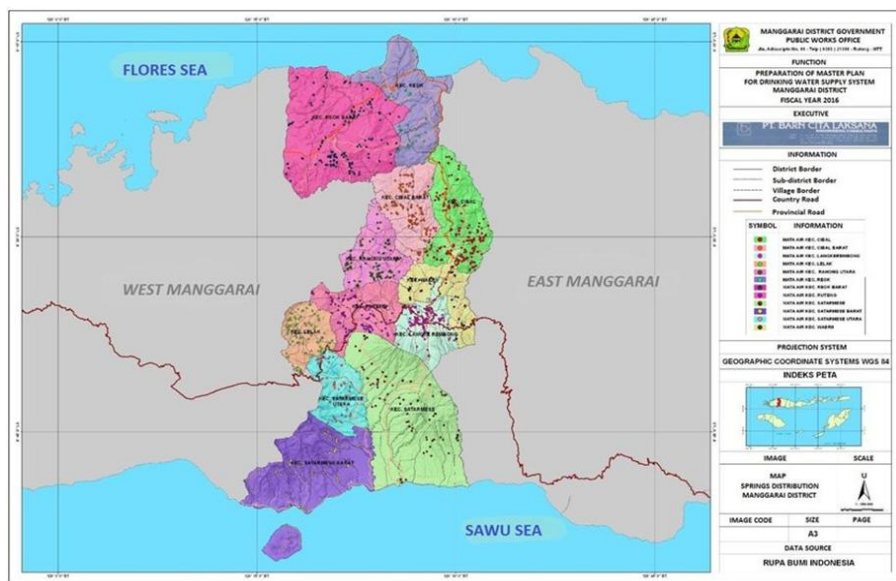


Figure 1. Spring Distribution Map In Manggarai Regency
(Source: Public Works Ministry, 2016)

b. Customary Knowledge and Ecological Restraint

Manggarai ecological knowledge is transmitted through customary leadership, oral teaching, agricultural practice, and ritual performance. *Tu'a Golo* and *Tu'a Teno* help regulate community relations with settlement space, customary land, and cultivated areas. Ritual communication also reinforces collective memory and social cohesion. Ngare (2014) shows that Manggarai ceremonies function as media for transmitting religious, social, and cultural meanings. In *Roko Molas Poco*, such communication teaches that forest resources may be used only for a legitimate communal purpose and through an agreed procedure (Keraf, 2010).

Participant observation and interviews identified three forms of ecological restraint. First, the community selects a tree according to the structural needs of the traditional house rather than cutting trees indiscriminately (Niman, 2022). Second, the decision is collective, so individual economic interest does not determine the extraction. Third, the stages of permission and reconciliation acknowledge that taking a tree creates a moral debt. These practices are consistent with the broader role of local wisdom in environmental preservation. Niman Letsoin et al., (2024) argues that the internalization of local ecological values can build attitudes that support sustained environmental care.

The ritual provides such internalization through repeated symbols and communal actions rather than through abstract instruction alone (Ngare, 2014). This finding also supports the idea that conservation knowledge develops through practice and institutional memory. Customary rules become effective because they are connected to authority, belief, and participation (Widyawati et al., 2022). They do not simply prohibit forest use; they define when, why, and how use becomes morally acceptable. The ecological contribution of *Roko Molas Poco* therefore lies in its ability to establish limits. The community may take a tree, but the act must remain selective, purposeful, accountable, and open to collective evaluation (Jem, Simpen, Satyawati and Pastika, 2024).

2. Universal Brotherhood in *Roko Molas Poco*

a. Universal Brotherhood as Environmental Ethics

Universal brotherhood begins with the recognition that humans do not create the conditions of life independently. Human dignity is inseparable from responsibility toward the community and the world that supports it. Chang Niman (2019) explains dignity as an ethical reality that must be realized in relationships, not merely claimed as an individual status. Applied ecologically, this view challenges human superiority when it becomes a justification for unlimited exploitation. Humans possess moral agency, but that agency creates obligations toward other beings and future generations.

Chang (2015) extends moral responsibility to the human relationship with the environment. Nature has value that cannot be exhausted by market price or immediate utility. Keraf (2010) similarly argues that environmental ethics demands responsibility, respect, care, and restraint in the treatment of the natural world. Within Christian ecological thought, Chang (2015) describes creation as an interconnected common home. Universal brotherhood in this study therefore refers to an ethical fraternity among created beings that share a divine origin, while recognizing the distinctive responsibility of humans to protect the integrity of creation (Derakhshan and Shakki, 2021). The field evidence shows that *Roko Molas Poco* embodies this fraternity in concrete practices. The community does not approach the tree as an equal human person, but it refuses to treat the tree as a morally empty object. The tree is addressed, selected, requested, reconciled, accompanied, and welcomed. These actions form a ritual language of respect (Dominggus and Pandor, 2022). They also show that universal brotherhood is not limited to sentiment. It guides decisions about resource use and assigns accountability to the people who benefit from the tree (Sitoto et al., 2022).

b. Ritual Stages and Their Ecological Meanings

1) Communal Deliberation Through *Nempung*

The process begins with *nempung*, a communal gathering in which leaders and community members discuss the construction of *mbaru gendang* and the need for *siri bongkok*. This stage locates the decision within the community rather than in individual preference (Seeliger and Repp, 2023). Deliberation determines the purpose, distributes responsibilities, and establishes moral consent (Düzgün and Yeşildal, 2023). Ecologically, *nempung* limits extraction because the tree can be taken only for an agreed communal need. Ethically, it reflects universal brotherhood by requiring participants to consider the well-being of the community and the consequences of their action before entering the forest (Sunarti, 2023).

2) Invocation And Preparation Through *Manuk Baro*

After agreement is reached, the community performs *manuk baro* as an invocation of divine and ancestral guidance. The ritual locates human action under a moral authority greater than the people who will use the wood. Participants ask for protection and for the process to proceed without harm. The stage also reinforces the idea that a legitimate communal purpose does not eliminate responsibility. The act of taking from nature still requires humility and accountability. Denar et al., (2020) interpret this ritual structure as an ecotheological message that connects the construction of the traditional house with responsibility for creation (Ferretti, 2023).

3) Preparing Tools Through *Racang Kope Agu Raca Cola*

The next stage involves *racang kope agu raca cola*, the preparation and sharpening of machetes and axes before departure. The tools are not prepared solely for efficiency. Their ritual preparation asks that the work be completed safely and that avoidable damage not

occur. This stage may include an animal offering known as *manuk lalong bakok racang kope* (García, 2020). The combination of technical preparation and ritual accountability is ecologically important. It frames skill, safety, and restraint as parts of the same moral action. A sharp tool allows a controlled cut, while the ritual reminds participants that technical ability does not grant unlimited authority over the forest (Peneva, 2023).

4) Tree Selection And Permission Through *Kawe Haju* And *Weang Wejang*

The search for the selected tree, or *kawe haju*, requires knowledge of species, strength, density, maturity, and suitability for the central pillar. Once a suitable tree is identified, *weang wejang* is performed to request permission and to address the spiritual guardian associated with the tree. The belief in a guardian discourages careless cutting because the tree exists within a spiritual and ecological community. Hadut et al., (2023); Gu and Wang (2021) interpret this relational awareness as a basis for reviving ecological responsibility (Pan, 2025). In ethical terms, the stage recognizes a boundary: human need may justify use, but use must not erase respect for the life and relationships affected by extraction (Haddad, 2022).

5) Reconciliation And Reception Through *Hambor Haju*

After felling, the selected tree is carried toward the village and received through *hambor haju*. At the boundary between the forest and the settlement, a welcoming group offers *cepa* and performs reconciliation. The tree is then accompanied by singing, gongs, and drums (Huan et al., 2024). At the village, elders offer *tuak kapu*, and a girl in traditional clothing may sit on the tree as the embodied symbol of *molas poco*. The procession ends at the village altar, or *compang*, before the tree becomes *siri bongkok*. Dominggus and Pandor (2022); Hopkinson (2021) explain that these practices express both ecological and humanistic relationships. The reception completes the moral transition from forest being to communal pillar and publicly acknowledges the responsibility created by its use (Ogiermann and Bella, 2021).

3. *Roko Molas Poco* as A Contemporary Environmental Ethic

a. From Commodity to Relationship

The principal ethical contribution of *Roko Molas Poco* is its transformation of a potentially extractive act into a regulated relationship. Modern resource exploitation commonly separates materials from their ecological and social histories. The ritual reverses that separation. It identifies the origin of the tree, limits the reason for taking it, involves the community, and requires symbolic restitution. This orientation corresponds to relational values, which emphasize appropriate relationships and responsibilities rather than isolated preferences. West et al., (2018) show that stewardship and care are sustained when people understand themselves as participants in relationships with places and ecosystems (Ibrahim et al., 2025).

The ritual also supports a biocultural approach to conservation. Its ecological effect cannot be separated from language, kinship, ritual authority, spirituality, and the architecture of *mbaru gendang*. The same practice protects cultural continuity and communicates limits on forest use (Nagy, 2022). This does not mean that every customary practice automatically produces conservation (Kharitonov et al., 2023). It means that conservation policy can become more socially meaningful when it recognizes practices that already organize responsibility and restraint. Ekaputra et al., (2025) likewise conclude that the ecological values of *Roko Molas Poco* are relevant to environmental education and community-based conservation.

b. Theoretical Contribution and Research Distinction

The findings extend previous interpretations in three ways. First, the study treats nature and tradition as one ethical field rather than as separate themes. The forest is understood through ritual, and the ritual gains meaning through the material dependence of the community on the forest (Mohammed, 2021). Second, it shows that universal brotherhood is operationalized through decisions, roles, permissions, limits, and public accountability. Third, it places Manggarai ecological practice in dialogue with broader environmental philosophy without reducing local knowledge to an illustration of Western theory (Kholid et al., 2024).

The ritual has affinities with deep ecology because it rejects the assumption that only humans possess value. Gudynas (2017) explains that biocentric ethics recognize intrinsic value in the nonhuman world and challenge anthropocentric domination. Nevertheless, *Roko Molas Poco* is not merely a local version of deep ecology (Kiklewicz, 2023). Its ethical force emerges from Manggarai language, customary authority, communal architecture, ancestral memory, and belief in divine creation. Universal brotherhood clarifies this distinctive relational structure: humans remain responsible moral agents, while other beings are treated as members of a shared created order rather than as disposable objects (Kravchenko et al., 2022). The practical implication is that conservation in Manggarai should engage customary institutions and ritual knowledge alongside scientific and legal approaches. The ritual cannot substitute for forest monitoring, ecological assessment, or enforceable regulation (Marchal, 2023). It can, however, strengthen the moral motivation that makes rules meaningful in everyday life (Lou, 2021). By teaching selective use, collective deliberation, gratitude, and reconciliation, *Roko Molas Poco* offers a culturally grounded resource for resisting indiscriminate logging and for cultivating responsibility toward the forest (Kutlu et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Roko Molas Poco represents a Manggarai environmental ethic in which nature and tradition form an integrated moral relationship. The ritual stages transform the use of a forest tree into a communal process of deliberation, selective extraction, permission, reconciliation, and responsibility. The selected tree is not treated as an anonymous commodity but as *molas poco*, a relational being that is respectfully brought into the village and established as *siri bongkok* in *mbaru gendang*. This process gives practical form to universal brotherhood because humans and other created beings are understood within a shared divine order. The concept does not erase differences between humans and nature; instead, it emphasizes the distinctive human obligation to restrain exploitation and protect the integrity of creation. The study therefore contributes a culturally grounded interpretation of environmental ethics and shows how Manggarai ritual knowledge can support conservation awareness. Its practical use should complement, rather than replace, ecological science, forest governance, and legal protection.

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