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ARTICLE

Sacred Speech, Social Authority, and Coastal Conservation: Manahelo Oral Traditions in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia

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Abstract

Coastal conservation approaches that rely predominantly on formal regulations often overlook the role of oral traditions and customary authority in fostering collective compliance with environmental protection. This study examines how Manahelo poetic speech constructs socio-religious authority and how myths and customary prohibitions (*pamali*) shape collective compliance with community-based coastal conservation practices in Rote Ndao, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative linguistic ethnographic approach, the research was conducted in two coastal customary territories, Dengka and Ba'a, Rote Ndao Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. Data were collected through audiovisual recordings of 6 (six) customary speech performances, in-depth interviews with 12 informants, participant observation, and document analysis. The data were examined using initial coding, axial coding, and ecocritical thematic analysis. The findings reveal that Manahelo oral traditions function as socio-religious institutions that legitimize customary authority, cultivate moral obligations, and regulate ecological behavior. Beliefs in supernatural guardians, particularly Oematan Nitu and Tasi Nitu, reinforce customary prohibitions (*pamali*) and territorial restrictions (*fai punu*) through perceived supernatural sanctions (*mula*). Although collective compliance is continually negotiated in response to everyday economic pressures, Manahelo's sacred authority remains an important source of legitimacy for environmental regulation beyond formal law enforcement mechanisms. The implications of this study extend sociological understandings of religious authority, cultural legitimacy, and social control in environmental governance, while highlighting the importance of recognizing customary institutions in developing inclusive, participatory, and sustainable conservation policies.

Keywords: Oral Tradition; Poetic Parallelism; Religious Authority; Negotiated Compliance

Pendekatan konservasi pesisir yang bertumpu pada regulasi formal sering kali mengabaikan peran tradisi lisan dan otoritas adat dalam membentuk kepatuhan masyarakat terhadap perlindungan lingkungan. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana tuturan puitis Manahelo membangun otoritas sosial-keagamaan serta bagaimana mitos dan larangan adat (pamali) membentuk kepatuhan kolektif dalam praktik konservasi pesisir berbasis masyarakat di Rote Ndao. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan etnografi linguistik di dua wilayah adat pesisir, yaitu Dengka dan Baa, Kabupaten Rote Ndao, Nusa Tenggara Barat, Indonesia. Data dikumpulkan melalui perekaman audiovisual terhadap 6 (enam) pertunjukan tuturan adat, wawancara mendalam dengan 12 informan, observasi partisipatif, dan studi dokumen. Data dianalisis melalui pengodean awal, pengodean aksial, dan analisis tematik ekokritis. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa tradisi lisan Manahelo berfungsi sebagai institusi sosial-keagamaan yang membangun legitimasi otoritas adat, menanamkan kewajiban moral, dan mengatur perilaku ekologis masyarakat. Kepercayaan terhadap entitas penjaga alam, seperti Oematan Nitu dan Tasi Nitu, memperkuat larangan adat (pamali) dan pembatasan wilayah (fai punu) melalui keyakinan terhadap sanksi supernatural (mula). Meskipun kepatuhan masyarakat terus dinegosiasikan dengan kepentingan ekonomi sehari-hari, otoritas sakral Manahelo tetap menjadi sumber legitimasi pengaturan lingkungan di luar mekanisme penegakan hukum formal. Implikasi penelitian ini memperluas pemahaman sosiologis tentang peran otoritas keagamaan, legitimasi budaya, dan pengendalian sosial dalam tata kelola lingkungan, sekaligus menunjukkan pentingnya pengakuan terhadap institusi adat dalam pengembangan kebijakan konservasi yang inklusif, partisipatif, dan berkelanjutan.

A. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary environmental crises have increasingly exposed the limitations of conservation approaches that rely primarily on technical interventions and top-down regulations. Within environmental Anthropology and Sociology, growing attention has therefore been directed towards indigenous knowledge and community-based governance as important dimensions of environmental protection. Local communities have historically embedded systems of ecological knowledge, customary institutions, and collective responsibilities that shape how they understand, access, and protect natural resources. From this perspective, language and oral traditions are not merely instruments of communication or expressions of cultural identity. They can also function as social institutions through which authority is established, moral obligations are communicated, and collective behavior is regulated. Poetic expressions, sacred narratives, and customary prohibitions may consequently provide normative foundations for environmental governance beyond formal state enforcement.

These relationships are particularly relevant to small-island communities, where coastal ecosystems are closely connected to local livelihoods, cultural practices, and customary institutions. In East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, the Rote Ndao community maintains an oral tradition associated with the Manahelo (also known as Maneleo), a customary speaker whose authority extends beyond the recitation of traditional poetry. The Manahelo occupies a respected social and religious position through which ancestral narratives, customary obligations, and moral expectations are communicated to community members. This authority may be significant for understanding how customary rules shape collective compliance in managing coastal areas, protecting marine resources, and maintaining environmentally responsible practices. In this context, the relationship between sacred speech and environmental

conservation raises an important sociological question: how does orally transmitted religious and customary authority influence collective behavior in the absence of continuous formal enforcement?

Existing scholarship on Rote Ndao has examined several dimensions of oral tradition and customary institutions, although these studies have approached the subject from different analytical perspectives. For example, Sine et al. (2025), investigated the communicative competence of the Maneleo in marriage rituals and family relations, highlighting the significance of customary speech in maintaining social relationships. Mboeik et al. (2020) examined linguistic parallelism in traditional oral expressions in Termanu, contributing to an understanding of the aesthetic and structural characteristics of Rote oral traditions. Similarly, Jurdi and Amiruddin (2025) and Willa (2023) discussed oral traditions and artistic practices as expressions of cultural identity. These studies establish the cultural and communicative significance of indigenous speech but offer limited explanations of how its sacred meanings and customary authority may regulate environmental behavior. Beyond linguistic and cultural studies, Oktavia et al. (2018) examined *papadak/hoholok* as a traditional marine resource management system in Rote Ndao, demonstrating the importance of customary institutions, legitimacy, trust, and collective responsibility in local environmental governance. This research provides a particularly relevant foundation for examining the relationship between customary authority and conservation. However, it emphasizes on institutional arrangements rather than the sociological mechanisms through which sacred poetic speech generates compliance.

Broader scholarship on indigenous environmental governance further demonstrates that customary practices operate through complex relationships between cultural authority, social legitimacy, and resource management. Research on customary maritime institutions in Ende,

Indonesia, shows how ancestral narratives, moral beliefs, prohibitions, and customary obligations influence the regulation of coastal resources (2021). Similarly, research on customary institutions in Papua New Guinea demonstrates that their legitimacy in governing access to marine ecosystem services is shaped by social relations and unequal distributions of power (2020). More recently, Trialfhianty et al. (2025) found that customary law can support marine conservation in Indonesia, although its integration with formal regulatory systems remains challenging. Research on indigenous stewardship in marine conservation likewise emphasizes the importance of recognizing indigenous knowledge, responsibilities, and decision-making authority (McLean et al. 2023). Together, these studies indicate that environmental governance cannot be adequately understood through formal institutions alone. Nevertheless, while existing research explains the institutional significance of customary rules and indigenous knowledge, the specific processes through which sacred oral expressions establish authority, communicate environmental prohibitions, and encourage collective compliance require closer sociological examination.

Despite these contributions, the relationship between Manahelo's sacred poetic speech, the construction of customary authority, and collective compliance with environmental prohibitions in Rote Ndao remains insufficiently explained. To address this gap, this study examines how Manahelo's poetic speech constructs social and religious authority and how myths and customary prohibitions (*pamali*) shape collective compliance with community-based coastal conservation practices. This investigation matters because it moves beyond treating oral traditions as cultural performances to examine their role in regulating social behavior and mediating relationships between customary authority, local communities, and coastal ecosystems. The study contributes to broader sociological understandings of religious authority, cultural legitimacy, and social control in environmental governance, while highlighting the

importance of recognizing customary institutions in developing inclusive, participatory, and sustainable conservation policies.

B. METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative linguistic ethnography design to examine the relationship between poetic language, social authority, and ecological practices in the Rote Ndao community. This design enables the study to move beyond the textual structure of Manahelo's poetic speech and investigate how sacred narratives are interpreted, experienced, and enacted in everyday social interactions. Particular attention is given to how these expressions shape collective compliance with customary rules and environmental practices associated with the protection of mangrove forests, coral reefs, and water sources. The fieldwork was conducted in Rote Ndao Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, focusing on two coastal customary areas, Dengka and Baa. These locations were purposively selected because of their active Manahelo institutions and the continued application of customary zoning regulations (*fai punu*) in coastal governance.

Data were collected through audiovisual recordings, semi-structured in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document study. Informants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling based on their involvement in customary institutions and practices, including recognized Manahelo speakers, customary stakeholders, and community members engaged in coastal resource management. of the study included 12 key informants, comprising four Manahelo speakers, four coastal customary elders, two women leaders involved in preserving oral traditions, and two local cultural office officials. Audiovisual recordings documented six Manahelo speech performances during coastal opening and closing rituals (*Halu/Sasi*), capturing verbal expressions, gestures, intonation, and ritual settings. Semi-structured interviews lasting

approximately 60-90 minutes explored the denotative and connotative meanings of customary expressions, the mythical significance of Oematan Nitu/Tasi Nitu, and the reasons underlying compliance with *pamali*. Participatory observation focused on everyday coastal activities, particularly adherence to restricted fishing zones (*fai punu*) and customary prohibitions against mangrove destruction. Documentary analysis complemented these data, while recorded speeches were transcribed orthographically in the Rote language and translated interlinearly into Indonesian, preserving both literal and contextual meanings.

Data were analyzed through three stages of coding and thematic interpretation. First, data condensation and initial coding were conducted to organize speech transcripts into linguistic categories, including poetic parallelism, customary prohibitions (*pamali*), and ecological metaphors. Second, axial coding was used to identify relationships between these linguistic categories and sociological processes, particularly the construction of Manahelo's sacred authority and the spiritual concerns associated with violating customary rules. Third, ecocritical thematic analysis synthesized the coded data into broader themes concerning the ecological functions of customary practices, including marine protection zones and coastal biota restoration. These analytical stages connected linguistic expressions with observed social behavior and environmental governance practices. To strengthen the credibility of the findings, we triangulated sources by comparing speech data from Manahelo speakers in Dengka and Baa. I also conducted member checking by reconfirming the translations and interpretations of customary expressions with the principal Manahelo speakers at the research sites.

Theoretical Framework

To critically examine how the Manahelo oral tradition functions as a storage medium for cognitive memory and an instrument of nature

conservation in Rote Ndao, this research draws on an interdisciplinary synthesis of Ethnolinguistic Theory and the Cultural Ecocriticism Framework. Integrating of these two analytical knives helps avoid the trap of context-dry linguistic analysis or environmental analysis that ignores the aesthetic dimension of linguistic texts.

Fundamentally, the ethnolinguistic framework developed by Alessandro Duranti (1997) and William A. Foley (1997) is the main foothold for dissecting the structure of the Manahelo spoken text. Duranti emphasized that language must be understood as an indexical system and social action, meaning that every lexicon, poetic phrase, and parallelism style uttered by a traditional speaker not only function to convey news (denotative), but points directly to the social reality, hierarchy of values, and cosmology of the community. In Foley's view, Manahelo's oral speech is dissected as a representation of the Rote people's cultural mind. In this context, I use an ethnolinguistic framework to show how specific vocabulary of flora, fauna, ocean currents, and weather patterns is constructed through sacred poetic language, so giving Manahelo speech a customarily binding communicative authority.

However, in order to articulate how the speech structure adapts to and responds to the coastal environmental crisis, this ethnolinguistic analysis is extended using the framework of Ecocriticism (Garrard, 2012; Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996) combined with the concept of Cultural Ecology from Julian Steward (1972). Ecocriticism enables a critical reading of the mythological narratives and environmental metaphors in Manahelo's speech. This choice of theory allows me to trace how myths, such as the existence of supernatural inhabitants in certain coral reef areas or the prohibition against destroying mangrove forests, are not just folkloric fiction but a textualization of local ecological ethics. Meanwhile, the theory of cultural ecology expressed by Steward has helped explain how the linguistic discourse is manifested in the adaptive behavior patterns of the

coastal communities of Rote Ndao to maintain the carrying capacity of their environment from the threat of overexploitation.

Through the integration of these two theoretical frameworks, the analysis of research data is focused on uncovering the dialectic between linguistic form, symbolic meaning, and conservation action (ecological practice). Ethnolinguistic theory is tasked with dissecting how Manahelo's poetic language is constructed, while the ecocriticism and cultural ecology framework is tasked with explaining how the construction of language drives awareness and conservation action. Thus, this theoretical framework not only guides me in categorizing field data, but also becomes an analytical compass to prove that oral literature in the outer island area is a very cutting-edge cultural strategy in maintaining ecosystem sustainability.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

My linguistic ethnographic research in Rote Ndao Regency confirms that the Manahelo oral tradition functions as an ecological conservation institution working systematically through poetic language and the cognitive reconstruction of local communities. Field findings show that the Rote Ndao people do not separate the linguistic realities of cosmology, from coastal nature conservation actions. The structure of poetic speech performed by traditional speakers (Manahelo) carries sacred authority that directly shapes how this small island uses marine and coastal resources on this small island.

1. Linguistic, Parallelism and Cosmological Marking in Manahelo Speech

An in-depth ethnographic observation of oral traditions in Rote Ndao Regency shows that Manahelo speech cannot be understood simply as a ceremonial rhetoric. This speech is a linguistic expression that is arranged in a very systematic manner through the structure of poetic

parallelism. In the context of Rote culture, the form of language used by traditional speakers is at the level of various sacred speeches (ritual speech) which are expressly distinguished from the various languages of daily conversation. Traditional speakers never convey ecological ideas, norms, or mandates as of single, stand-alone clauses at a distance, but always present them in paired verses (dyadic couplets).

Poetic parallelism in Manahelo's speech works through the repetition of syntactic patterns filled with semantically matched pairs of words (couplets), synonymous, antonymic, and complementary. This pattern creates a distinctive rhythm and dimension of speech that not only facilitates collective memory by retaining verbal messages without written text, but also conveys strong spiritual authority. Whenever a Manahelo stands before his community in a traditional ceremonial space, this structure of parallelism automatically conditions the listeners to enter the domain of sacred consciousness.

One of the main ethnographic examples of poetic parallelism appears in recorded speeches from the opening and closing rituals of coastal areas (*Halu/Sasi*) in the Dengka and Baa Customary Territories. When a *Manahelo* informs about the prohibition of destroying water and marine ecosystems, he utters the following fragment of poetic speech:

> "*Lafa tasi te daa nitu, lese oe te daa nitu*". (Don't disturb the sea because there is a spiritual owner, don't damage the water because there are guards).
> "*Ela tasi ana haba, ela oe ana ngga*". (Let the sea recover its breath, let the water calm its turmoil)

Through the ethnolinguistic framework of Alessandro Duranti (1997), the above clause pair shows how language structure acts as an indexical system. The lexicon *tasi* (sea) paired in parallel with *oe* (water/spring), and the verb *lafa* (disturb) juxtaposed with *lese* (destructive), directing the listener's cognition to the reality that aquatic

space is not a separate entity. The repetition of the phrase *te daa nitu* (because there is a spiritual owner) at the end of the second clause gives the indicates that every physical human action toward the sea and water is always in direct contact with a supernatural authority that demands moral accountability.

The poetic words *tasi* and *oe* in the speech also reflect the Rote Ndao people's cognitive perspective on their environment. Seawater and freshwater are understood as an ecological unit that supports each other, where pollution or destruction of one element will damage the balance of the other elements. The pairing of the words *lafa* and *lese* not only prohibits physical destruction, but also prohibits all actions that disturb the ecosystem's spiritual traquillity. Through this parallelism, *Manahelo's* speech succeeded in codifying the basic principles of modern conservation science regarding inter-ecosystem relationships into a poetic-traditional language that is easily understood by local residents.

Furthermore, the second stanza of the speech, namely "*Ela tasi ana haba, ela oe ana ngga*", utilizes a very subtle poetic personification technique. The words *heat* (breath) and *ngga* (turmoil/emotion) which are placed as attributes for the sea and water frame nature as living entities that have physiology and feelings. The sea and springs are not treated as inanimate objects that are free to be exploited for one-sided economic interests, but rather as subjects that need rest to recuperate. This personification directly instills an ethic of ecological empathy in the hearts of the Rote Ndao people from an early age.

Manahelo's authority*is* further strengthened by its association with the cosmology *of Dulu-Muli* (East-West or Hulu-Hilir) the Rote Ndao people's spatial. In this cosmology, the upstream (*muli/oe matan*) is seen as the origin of life and the place of holiness, while the downstream (*past/tasi*) is the receiving space that accommodates all the streams from the upstream. *A Manahelo* consistently inserts the *Dulu-Muli* orientation into

his speeches to remind listeners that destruction upstream, such as felling rees around the springs, will inevitably destroy life downstream and cin oastal areas.

This cosmological cause-and-effect relationship is transmitted not through dry explanations of scientific causality, but through poetic metaphors that are full of symbolic meaning. When *Manahelo* mentions upstream and downstream in a pair of parallel speeches, he is constructing a holistic spatial framework of thought within the cognition of society. The connection between mountains, forests, rivers, and the sea is understood as a single cultural body, where pain in one part is felt by all of the others.

From the perspective of linguistic anthropologist William Foley (1997), *Manahelo*'s ability to articulate this cosmology through poetic speech tangibly reflects communicative competence developed through a long cultural internship. A *Manahelo* imust not only memorize poetic language formulas, but also have a sense of taste to read the social situation and environmental conditions around him. As he orates, he adjusts his articulation, breath pauses, and intonation to create a sacred space that captivates his listener's emotional attention.

The psychological effect of Manahelo's poetic speech has proven very effective in creating social compliance. Language loaded with sacred markings and cosmological metaphors creates a positive sense of fear (*taboo*) among indigenous peoples. This fear stems not from physical sanctions or material fines alone, but from a deep concern about the breakdown in the harmony of the relationship between humans, nature, and ancestors. Thus, *Manahelo*'s poetic language acts as a highly effective instrument of internal social control.

This poetic parallelism also serves as a protective mechanism for the authenticity of the ecological message. Because this speech is composed of pairs of phrases bound by strict rules of symmetry, the

listening community will easily notice if a particular party adds, subtracts, or manipulates verses or customary norms. This poetic rule naturally fences local knowledge from historical distortion and the commodification of values that often threaten oral tradition's survival in the modern era.

Through this orderly cosmological marking, Manahelo's speech succeeded in transforming abstract ecological knowledge into structured real, actionable forms. The concept of nature protection is not taught as a scientific theory separate from everyday life, but rather integrated into local cultural and religious identity. The people of Rote Ndao adhere to the prohibition on exploting of nature because they feel they are fulfilling moral and cultural obligations inherited from their ancestors.

Thus, an ethnolinguistic analysis of this passage proves conclusively that the poetic parallelism in Manahelo's speech is not merely an ornamental language style or an aesthetic artifact of the past. This parallelism is a linguistic technology that is geniusly designed to encode, store, and transmit the ethics of nature conservation from generation to generation. In the beauty of Manahelo's speech, a cosmological blueprint is immortally recorded a that places the natural beauty of Rote Ndao as an absolute condition for the sustainability of their human dignity.

2. Construction of Ecological Myths and Internalization of Customary Prohibitions (Pamali)

The poetic language structure spoken by Manahelo does not stop at aesthetics or sacred discourse alone. The poetic language is transformed into a concrete social institution through the construction of ecological myths and the internalization of customary prohibition norms known locally as *pamali* (or *pemali*). To the Rote Ndao people, myth is not a fictional story (folkloric fiction) that lacks rational meaning, but a textualization of environmental ethics. Myths operate as instruments of social pedagogy that translate complex principles of nature conservation

into cultural languages that are emotionally and spiritually lived by indigenous peoples.

Through Manahelo's poetic speech, myths about supernatural entities that rule nature are continuously constructed and transmitted across generations. Spiritual figures such as Oematan Nitu (Ruler/Guardian of the Springs) and Tasi Nitu (Ruler of the Ocean) are cast as rightful owners of ecologically vulnerable areas. Manahelo consistently frames the coastal realm of Rote Ndao as never lacking spiritual oversight. This narrative forms a worldview (*Weltanschauung*) in which aquatic spaces, coral reefs, and mangrove forests are seen as the private domain of ancestors and supernatural guardians, so that every inch of natural resource utilization is required to obtain ritual permits and adhere to conservation ethics.

In the context of ecocritical analysis (Garrard, 2012) and cultural ecology (Steward 1972), Manahelo's myth-making is a highly intelligent ecological adaptation strategy for people living in small island areas. The Rote Ndao archipelago faces high ecological vulnerability climate change, coastal erosion, and clean water crises. The myth about Oematan Nitu and Tasi Nitu was created to limit the destructive power of human exploitation of these fragile ecosystems. Myths provide a rational moral basis for enacting of local conservation zoning without waiting for regulatory intervention from the central government.

The most important manifestation of this mythical construction is the establishment of sacred zoning or forbidden areas called *fai punu*. Through the traditional oration delivered by *Manahelo*, certain coral reef areas, coastal lagoons, or mangrove forest clusters are designated as *fai punu* areas that no one cultivate or exploit for a set period. The determination *of fai punu* is bound by the prohibition of *pamali* which threatens violators with severe spiritual sanctions, such as mysterious diseases, infertility, or calamities at sea locally referred to as *mula* or *soki*.

Although sanctions may seem mystical at first glance, from a cultural sociology, this threat operates as a highly effective form of internalized social control. Indigenous people feel constantly watched by unseen supernatural forces, so compliance with conservation norms is maintained even though the *fai punu* area. This spiritual fear triggers a collective awareness that reminds people not to violate *pamali*, ultimately creating an independent and efficient community-based environmental security system.

Surprisingly, modern ecological analysis shows that the area Manahelo designates as *fai punu* has always been adjacent to critical ecosystems. For example, the designation of *fai punu* in the coral reef zone, actually forms a local Marine Protected Area (MPA) that functions as a spawning and nursery ground. The closure period through *pamali* provides a biological recovery period for marine life to reproduce optimally without interruption from fishing activities. Systematic mapping of Manahelo's speech categories, linguistic frameworks, ritual performative contexts, and ecological conservation functions in Rote Ndao is comprehensively summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.

Manahelo Speech Forms, Linguistic Categories, and Ecological Functions in Rote Ndao

Forms of Speech / Rote Lexicon	**Category Linguistics & Mitosis**	**Performative Context**	**The Function of Ecological Conservation**
Please, please	Paralelism Poetic (Indeksikal Sakral)	Sea Opening/Closing Ceremony Ritual (*Halu*)	Protection of seawater quality and coastal spring catchment zones
A Piece of Paper / A Piece of Paper	Cosmological Myths (Zona Keramat)	Determination of Coral Reef Area Boundaries	Restriction of fishing zones (marine protected areas based on local wisdom)

Forms of Speech / Rote Lexicon	Category Linguistics & Mitosis	Performative Context	The Function of Ecological Conservation
A Thesis Statement	Taboo Expressions (Direct Social Control)	Daily Customary Instruction on the Coast	Prevention of mangrove logging, coastal erosion, and abrasion
Take a look at Ana	Ecological Metaphor (Personification of Nature)	Seaweed Harvest Prayer Ritual	Providing a biological reproduction phase for marine life

Data source: Analysis Results, 2026

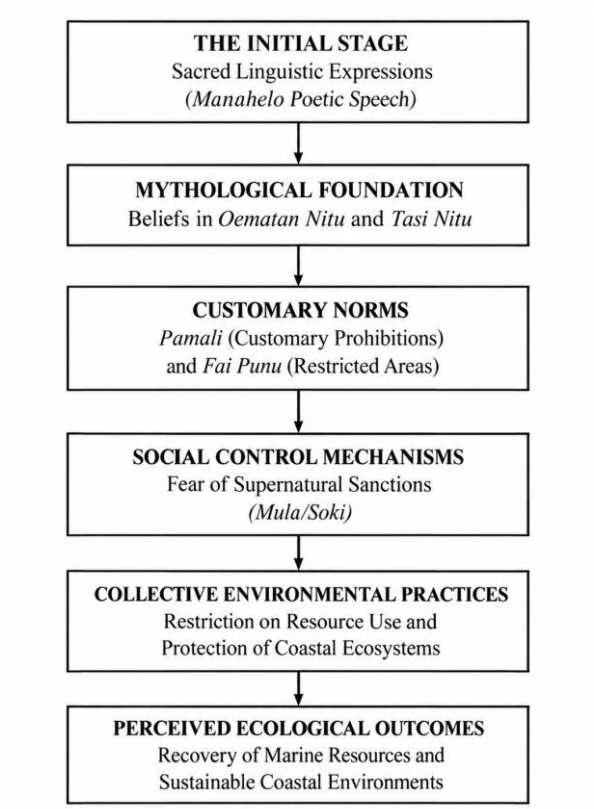
Table 1 shows how cohesive the relationship between linguistic aspects, rituals, and nature protection actions is. For example, Manahelo conveyed the *Pamali lexicon tesi ao* (prohibition of damaging mangroves), not as an optional plea for sustainability, but as a sacred legal commandment. Mangrove logging is believed to damage the "fortress" that protects the land and ito ignite Tasi Nitu's anger. Functionally, this ban has successfully prevented the Rote Ndao mangrove green belt from land conversion and illegal logging, which is vital for containing coastal abrasion rates and extreme wave blows.

The entire chain of socio-ecological causality linking the linguistic structure of Manahelo speech with real conservation actions in the field can be visually understood through the mechanism scheme in Figure 1. As shown in Figure 1, the integration between oral traditions and environmental preservation in Rote Ndao works through a four-stage interlocking groove. The process begins with Manahelo's Spoken Text which relies on the reliability of poetic parallelism and metaphor. This form of language provides a foundation for building Sacred Cosmology which manifests in the myths of Oematan Nitu and Tasi Nitu. This cosmological construction then manifested as social control by determining the status of *fai punu* and the norm of *pamali* prohibition. The

sacred authority of Manahelo's speech provides the binding force of social law without the help of formal law enforcement officials, which in turn gives birth to a real Conservation Practice in the form of the restoration of the marine and coastal ecosystem of Rote Ndao.

Figure 1.

The Mechanism of Transforming Manahelo Oral Speech into Ecological Conservation Practices in Rote Ndao



Data source: Analysis Results, 2026

Internalizing of this *pamali* norm creates a voluntary conservation-based climate. Fishermen and seaweed farmers in Baa and Dengka comply with the sea closure rule not because they fear being caught by Polairud or the marine service, but because they understand the importance of maintaining the harmony of the cosmological order described by Manahelo. This culturally awareness-based compliance is much more

sustainable than instant compliance produced by the threat of state criminal sanctions.

Through a unique combination of ecological myths and the prohibition of *Pamali* customs, the Manahelo oral tradition has shown that the indigenous peoples of the outer islands have a sophisticated local knowledge framework for managing nature. The myth that has modernists have often misinterpreted as a form of cognitivebackwardness, Rote Ndao has actually proven to be a powerful cultural science tool for saving coastal living spaces from ecological destruction.

3. The Academic Debate: Pairing Local Ecology with Technocratic Conservation

These ethnographic findings from Rote Ndao have important theoretical implications for the discourse of environmental science and contemporary ecological anthropology. Over the past few decades, the paradigm of environmental management in coastal areas and small islands in Indonesia has been dominated by a technocratic-positivistic conservation approach. This approach is characterized determining zoning through formal spatial mapping, establishing sectoral laws, the establishment of state conservation institutions, and using criminal law enforcement instruments. However, in practice, *this top-down* conservation model imported from Western scientific ideas is often encounters social conflicts, citizen disobedience, and functional failures. Technocratic policies often treat coastal areas as mere geometric physical spaces and ignore the cultural history and customary rights of the local communities that inhabit them.

This is where the Manahelo oral tradition becomes crucial. This research shows that outer-island communities such as Rote Ndao have long owned and practiced *an* indigenous conservation framework that works far more efficiently. If the technocratic approach relies on

supervising physical facilities and law enforcement officials which require a large allocation of the state budget, Manahelo's oral speech a works instead from the community's cognitive space and collective consciousness. Through poetic parallelism and cosmological metaphors, Manahelo instillsan ethics of environmental protection directly tied to the moral and spiritual identity of indigenous peoples. Public compliance with *pamali* norms stems from internal cultural awareness, not from fear of criminal sanctions or administrative fines from the state.

Modern science often places myths and empirical truths in a position of mutually negating binary opposition. Myths are often judged pejorative as a form of "mystical-primitive beliefs" that are irrational and hinder progress. However, the findings in Rote Ndao openly challenge these Western epistemological biases. In the context of cultural ecology (Steward 1972) and ecocriticism (Garrard 2012), the myth of Oematan Nitu and Tasi Nitu transmitted by *Manahelo* actually operates as a metaphor for cultural science. Myths provide a very rational "sacred wrapping" to maintain ecological order. The determination of the status of *fai punu* (prohibited areas) in certain coral reef zones, for example, has been scientifically proven to function appropriately as a marine protected area. Myths in this case do not intersect negatively with science, but rather act as cutting-edge social technologies that ensure the sustainability of the carrying capacity of the environment on small islands.

The integration of ethnolinguistics and ecocriticism in this study at the same time fills and expands the research *gap* in previous Rote studies. Previous studies, such as those conducted by Sine et al. (2025) on Maneleo traditional communication or Mboeik et al. (2020) on the parallelism of indigenous spoken languages, tend to isolate Rote literature and culture only in the realm of surface art, domestic rites, marriages, or kinship structures. This study dismantles these limitations by proving that the Manahelo oral tradition operates in the ecological political realm of the

outer islands. Poetic language is not just a passive folkloric artifact of the past, but an instrument of environmental governance that is highly adaptive in responding to ecological crises and global climate change.

In the midst of the increasing threat to the sustainability of coastal ecosystems due to global warming and large-scale economic exploitation, juxtaposing the local ecology of Rote Ndao with technocratic conservation science is not a form of naïve cultural romanticism. Rather, it is an epistemological call to reformulate a more inclusive and equitable national conservation strategy. Local governments and environmental policy makers in Rote Ndao Regency are ready to stop neglecting traditional oral institutions. Marine spatial planning policies and the determination of coastal conservation areas will have much stronger resilience if they adopt the poetic narrative of Manahelo and the institution of *fai punu* as part of formal legal regulation. This synergistic integration between modern science and local ecological wisdom is the main key in maintaining the sustainability of coastal

These findings make an important contribution to the sociology of religion and environmental sociology in the outermost archipelago. So far, coastal environmental governance policies by local governments have often used rigid technocratic approaches such as written laws, formal map boundaries, and patrol of the apparatus. This top-down approach often triggers rejection and social conflict because it treats local communities as mere objects of regulation.

Instead, this study proves that Manahelo's oral tradition works through internal authenticity. Belief in Oematan Nitu and Tasi Nitu provides moral legitimacy that the positive laws of the state do not have. Manahelo operates as a religious-social legal governing figure. When he establishes *fai punu*, citizens obey it not out of fear of monetary fines or imprisonment, but out of respect for the harmony of their cosmological order.

Modern conservation science should not dismiss this religious-social structure as a form of "superstition" or "primitive mysticism". The myths and taboos in the Manahelo tradition are social technology that has been proven to be effective in maintaining mechanical solidarity and maintaining the living space of coastal communities on small islands. The local government of Rote Ndao Regency needs to knit synergy between the formal laws of the state and the sacred authority of Manahelo in order to realize inclusive, sustainable, and deeply rooted coastal governance in local religious-cultural values.

D. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Manahelo oral tradition in Rote Ndao functions not merely as an aesthetic expression or ritual performance but as a socio-religious institution that establishes customary authority, fosters collective compliance, and regulates coastal environmental practices. Through poetic parallelism and sacred expressions, Manahelo communicates environmental obligations that become embedded in the community's moral consciousness. Beliefs in supernatural guardians, particularly Oematan Nitu and Tasi Nitu, reinforce customary prohibitions (*pamali*) and restricted areas (*fai punu*) through the perceived consequences of supernatural sanctions (*mula*). These mechanisms contribute to the protection of mangrove forests and coral reef areas, although compliance is continually negotiated in response to everyday economic pressures.

These findings demonstrate how sacred language transforms cultural meanings into social authority and collective environmental responsibility. The legitimacy of Manahelo rests not simply on ritual status but also on the community's recognition of ancestral beliefs, moral obligations, and customary sanctions. This relationship illustrates how religious beliefs and oral traditions operate as informal mechanisms of

social control, allowing communities to regulate environmental behavior without depending entirely on formal state enforcement. At the same time, negotiations between customary obligations and economic interests reveal that collective compliance is socially constructed and continuously renegotiated rather than uniformly imposed.

The implications of this study extend sociological understandings of how religious authority, cultural legitimacy, and social control shape environmental governance, while highlighting the importance of recognizing customary institutions in developing inclusive, participatory, and sustainable conservation policies. The study is limited to qualitative interpretations of customary narratives and environmental perceptions in Dengka and Baa, without quantitative measurements of marine biomass or ecological change. Further research should adopt mixed-methods approaches combining linguistic ethnography with marine biological assessments while examining the intergenerational transmission of Manahelo traditions among younger communities in the digital era.

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