

The Guardians of Nunusaku: An Eco-Theological Study of the Manusa Cosmology



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ABSTRACT

This research aims to examine the cosmological idea of the Manusa community as “guardians of Nunusaku” in relation to ecological and theological perspectives in responding to global warming. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study examines the understanding and practices of the Manusa community that emphasizes the spiritual relationship between humans, nature, and God. The concept of *mara'a nunue ai welu* reflects the ancestral responsibility to preserve the ecosystem through traditional practices rich in spiritual and ecological values. The findings of the study indicate that the behavioral patterns of the Manusa community contribute to maintaining ecological balance through respect for nature and wise management of resources. This perspective is in line with organic theology and the concept of *Imago Dei*, where humans are divinely mandated to treat, not exploit, nature. Thus, an ecological understanding of humans can enrich ecological theology in fostering ethical awareness for environmental sustainability.

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Introduction

Today, the world is facing global ecological problems that are concerning and require urgent attention. This is caused by global warming, which causes climate change triggered by greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, and air and water pollution (Singgih, 2021). Global warming has an impact on extreme climate change, food crisis (Jokowi, 2024), and threats to health and the economy (Putri, 2021). The real impact of global warming, which causes climate change is the clean water crisis, the threat of sinking islands with an altitude of 2-3 meters above sea level, the extinction of various animal and plant species (Erari, 2017). Developing countries and low-income populations will experience a significant impact, leading to increased social and political pressure (Pope Francis, 2015). Although the planet faces an escalating ecological crisis, natural resource exploitation persists under the justification of economic growth and national profit, often with little regard for the long-term environmental consequences or global responsibility.

Overcoming this problem is challenging because it is rooted in human behavior. Therefore, this study raises the cosmology of the indigenous people of Manusa village who interpret their existence as the guardians of Nunusaku, or in the local language called *mara'a nuunee welu*. Bakker explains cosmology as human understanding of the world, where humans and the world

have a reflective relationship (Bakker, cited in Apituley, 2021). This is in line with Yusak Tridarmanto's formulation of cosmology as knowledge about the origin, structure and purpose of the universe, every entity including humans contributes to it (Hukubun, 2023). Watloly explains that the Maluku community understands nature in three elements, namely, macrocosm (universe), microcosm (humans and their communities), and cosmogony (Watloly, 2013). For example, the Alune and Wemale tribes on Seram Island consider Nunusaku as a sacred place, the center of creation and civilization (Tiwery, 2015; Bartels, 2017). Therefore, for the people of Seram Island, nature is considered a sacred entity that has personal substance and metaphysical properties (Watloly, 2013).

However, even though nature is considered sacred and has relationships and dependencies, economic and development demands can trigger humans to damage nature (Borong, 2019). This attitude of dominating nature is accused by Lynn White of being based on an anthropocentric understanding of Christian theology, thus ignoring the sacred dimension of nature as a whole (Singgih, 2021). Lyn White thesis has caused many reactions from several theologians. Macquarie, one of the theologians, rejected the traditional hierarchical idea of understanding God, humans and nature. Macquarie proposed an organic view that posits God, humans, and nature as a unified interrelated whole. God is not only transcendent but also immanent in humans and nature. This understanding is done to answer the ecological crisis (Macquarie, cited in Singgih, 2020). Macquarie's view can also be emphasized by Barr's interpretation of the text of Genesis 1:26-28. The image of God shows the relationship between God and humans, not just giving a mandate to control. The words *rada* (rule) and *kabash* (conquer) in the context of Genesis are often too harsh and exploitative, so that both words should be interpreted as sheltering or protecting rather than controlling or conquering.

The massive exploitation carried out by humans against nature occurs in the context of liberal humanism, which views nature as no longer under the protection of the Creator. The view of liberal humanism influences the interpretation of Genesis 1:26-28 and the Old Testament's perspective on nature (Bar, cited in Singgih, 2020). This article aims to highlight the worldview and practices of the Manusa people in caring for nature as a form of participation in addressing the climate crisis, including their complementary approach to sacred (sacred) and everyday-use (profane) forests. Furthermore, the article presents the Manusa people's perspective on *Nunusaku* explicitly. This study presents a new perspective, diverging from previous research by Dieter Bartels, which did not specifically emphasize the local perspective of the Manusa people.

Research Method

The problems that will be studied in this article are: First, how do humans understand and experience the cosmology of the "Guardians of Nunusaku"? Second, how to develop ecological theology based on human cosmology in responding to the current global climate change? The purpose of this study is to explore Human understanding and practice related to the cosmology of the Guardians of Nunusaku, with the aim of gaining insight into how they experience this cosmology in everyday life. And, to develop Eco-theology based on Human cosmology in responding to the current global climate change. Research methods used. This study employs a descriptive approach and qualitative research methods. This approach and method were chosen by the author with the aim of obtaining in-depth data based on the results of interviews with informants (Creswell, 2010). The data obtained are explained in accordance with the statements of the informants, and then analyzed scientifically based on information that describes the background of the informant's behavior, including how they think, feel, and act (Usman, 2018).

Results and Discussion

Overview of Manusa Village

Manusa Village is located in West Seram Regency, Inamosol District. It is a mountainous village with an altitude of 1,900 meters above sea level (BPS Kabupaten Seram Bagian Barat, 2021). The road conditions are still dirt and some gravel. This makes it difficult for people to carry out activities, especially to the sub-district center, hospital, and economic center (market, bank, etc.). The four-wheeled vehicles used are 4x4 wd or four-wheel drive (*double garden*). Difficult terrain results in increased transportation costs and long travel times, especially during the rainy season.



Figure 1. Map of West Seram Regency and Inamosol District

The Manusa people hold their ancestral traditions tightly, and kinship relations are a vital element in their lives. Originating from the Alune tribe, which adheres to a patrilineal lineage system. Like indigenous people in general, they still respect the culture that regulates the life cycle; birth, marriage, and death (Bartels, 2017). In tradition, customary marriage is called *tala hau*, in which natural symbols are used throughout various ritual practices. The concept of bridewealth appears to have been modified in line with modern life – for instance, using ceramic plates, glassware, cloth, and cash.

Nunusaku in the Perspective of Manusa People

Understanding Nunusaku cannot be separated from the origins of the Manusa village and their cosmology. Cosmology is a way of thinking in culture, including human existence and the world that is connected to the surrounding nature (Matakena, 2023). According to the informant interviewed, the Manusa people believe that their settlement or village area is part of Nunusaku (Neyte, 2024, pers. comm., 9 November). This is implied by the first name of the Manusa village, namely *Samanuey*, which means a place of division. According to the informant (Souhaly, personal communication, May 16, 2024), the story recounts the beginning of the Alifuru people's departure from Nunusaku towards the east. On the way, they arrived at a place called *Saibatale*, where they planned to live. Then one of them was appointed as a leader. At one time, there was chaos and a dispute that ended in a fight. Differences in understanding and language exacerbated this condition. Because it could not be resolved, the community was divided into two tribal groups, *Alune* and *Wemale*. The place where the division took place is called *Samanuey*, serving as a reminder that it was at that site that the people were separated before dispersing to inhabit different areas across Seram Island. This was confirmed through

interviews with Andy Souhaly and Johanis Neyte (Personal communication, May 16, 2024). In his previous research, Yance Rumahuru also identifies Nunusaku as the origin of the *Alune* and *Wemale* people on Seram Island (Rumahuru, 2017). The name *Samanuey*, later in the Dutch era, was changed to *Manusa*.



Figure 2. "The Green" of Manusa Village from Google Maps

People call Nunusaku in the Alune language "nunue," which means "banyan tree." However, etymologically the word Nunusaku comes from the word *nunu* or *nunue*, which means *waringin* (banyan tree), and the word *saku*, which means shelter. Nunusaku is regarded as sacred because, according to the oral tradition of the Manusa people, it is believed to be the place where *Upu Lanite* or God created the world. Therefore, it is seen as a refuge of the ancestors and the center from which whole people dispersed to inhabit various regions of Seram Island and even the entire world. Based on this belief, the term *Alifuru* is used to refer to the first people of Seram as the first humans in the world. This understanding was conveyed through interviews with Johanis Neyte, Semi Maslebu, and Bob Ruspanah, indigenous people of Nunusaku (Personal Communication, November 6, 2024). They explained the meaning of the term *nunue* as referring to Nunusaku and described the Manusa perspective on it as the site of creation by *Upu Lanite*. This aligns with Bartels' research (Bartels, 2017).

For the Manusa people, Nunusaku is considered a sacred narrative that is not readily disclosed to outsiders, unless there is a strong and valid reason. Even within the community, such stories are not shared with children who are deemed too young. This perspective was gathered through separate interviews with Roni Kapitan and Markus Neyte (November 8, 2024); Johanis Neyte, Semi Maslebu, and Bob Ruspanah (November 6, 2024); and Agus Kapitan (October 30, 2024). Interestingly, Hanock Ruspanah firmly stated that Nunusaku is merely a myth and never truly existed, thus should not be questioned. One of the sub-elements of cosmology is cosmogony, a sacred story that explains the origins and influential figures of the past (Watloly, 2013).

According to several informants, Nunusaku is described as a large banyan tree that differs from ordinary banyan trees. It is said to have three roots, three main trunks growing upward, and each branch splits into three. The leaves are light green, making them distinct from the surrounding foliage. The trunk of the Nunusaku tree is clean, free from climbing plants, parasites or other vegetation. Interestingly, the leaves of the Nunusaku tree do not fall beneath it — the area under the tree remains clean and free from fallen leaves (Neyte, 2024; Kapitan, 2024; Suzanah Ruspanah, 2024; Maslebu, 2024). According to Bartels (2017), the depiction of Nunusaku is a tree that emits three large springs in West Seram, namely Tala, Eti, and Sapalewa, through each of its roots. This differs from the Manusa people's perspective on Nunusaku. Based on the results of interviews with several indigenous people (IN, 2024, personal communication,

April 24, 2024) it was revealed that the Manusa people said that under Nunusaku there was a spring that gushed out, the spring was not directly under Nunusaku, it was pretty far away, but it was believed to come out from within Nunusaku. The spring was believed to have supernatural powers, so it was sometimes taken as a protector for some people.

The different depictions of Nunusaku between Bartels and the Manusa people can be interpreted based on their perspectives and interests. Bartels describes Nunusaku in the political interests of uniting the Maluku people. The aim is to serve as a unifying symbol for the Dutch of Maluku descent and promote post-conflict peace among the Muslim-Christian community in Maluku (Bartels, 2017). The Manusa people's view of Nunusaku water holds a symbolic meaning: water, as a source of life, is not only found in the Nunusaku location. However, it has spread to various locations on Seram Island.

Nunusaku and its surrounding area are believed to be the dwelling place of the spirits of the dead. It is said that all who die will eventually return to Nunusaku. The spirits of the ancestors are thought to reside there, making it a sacred place for the community. Additionally, not far from Nunusaku, there is a large stone resembling the shape of a boat (SR, pers. comm., 2024). In their cosmology, the Seram people view the world as comprising two realms: the upper world and the lower world. The upper world, or the sky, is inhabited by the gods. In contrast, the lower world refers to the earth, which is inhabited by humans – including the spirits of deceased ancestors – who, though invisible, are believed to coexist alongside the living (Rumahuru, 2017).

Guardian Nunusaku or Mara'a Nunue ai Welu as Eco-Spiritual.

The people of Manusa believe they have been entrusted with the responsibility of guarding Nunusaku based on their understanding of cosmology. According to traditional elders (Berkolius & Eli, interview, February 22, 2024), the guardianship of Nunusaku is an ancestral inheritance, passed down through generations, recognized and trusted within the community. The legitimacy of Nunusaku's guardians is reflected in the *kapata* – ritual oral traditions – recited during customary ceremonies, which declare: “*hlamate ena upu samae, upu osia lumamatai'tu, batu Lehane, mara'a nunue ai welu, lolane ai webute*”.

Based on the *kapata* (a traditional oral narrative), the term Guardians of Nunusaku is etymologically derived from the phrase *mara'a nunue ai welu*. The *kapata* mentions the name *Samae* as a revered ancestor of the Manusa people. It also refers to the ancestors of the seven clans (*upu osia, batu Lehane*), who established the village of Manusa with the purpose of becoming guardians of Nunusaku and its surrounding territory. The phrase *lolane ai webute* serves as a symbolic reminder that these seven ancestors gathered around three stone hearths—shaped like traditional cooking stoves—where they agreed to found the village of Samanuey (Manusa). The site of *lolane ai webute* is known by the Manusa people as *nuruitu*, meaning “the seven clans.”

Mara'a nunue ai welu is defined as a community entrusted with the responsibility to protect, preserve, and safeguard the Nunusaku area, including the forest and its entire ecosystem. This responsibility extends beyond ecological concerns and encompasses cultural values with spiritual dimensions. Nunusaku is regarded as a symbol of ancestral heritage (*tete nene moyang*), which must be protected to ensure the sustainability of future generations. The role of the Guardians of Nunusaku is to act as protectors who maintain a harmonious relationship between God (*Upu Tuni or Upu Lanite*), humanity, nature, and customary values, which together form an interconnected system of cultural belief and practice. Maintaining the terminology of the Manusa community not only shows care but also conveys the connotation of protecting and concealing the existence of the Nunusaku location from outsiders. This is a closed and static way of thinking of the interior community. They combine magical elements based on relationships with nature and ancestral traditions that are passed down from generation to generation, so they view outside influences as a threat (Watloly, 2013).

However, when it becomes absolutely necessary to enter the Nunusaku area, a customary ritual is performed, involving prayers recited in the Alune language. This ritual includes the use of *siri-pinang* (betel leaves and areca nut), which are placed in a traditional container (*tampa siri*), along with *sopi* or *sageru* (local alcoholic beverages), and *tabaku* (tobacco). After the prayer is spoken, the *siri* and *pinang* are consumed, the *tabaku* is lit and placed on the ground, and the *sopi* or *sageru* is poured onto the soil before being consumed by the participants. This practice is not merely ceremonial; it is a symbolic expression of reverence toward the Divine, the ancestors, and nature within a spiritual context. Various taboos must be observed within the sacred forest area: cutting trees is prohibited, hunting animals is forbidden, waste disposal is not permitted, polluting the river is strictly prohibited, and harvesting aquatic life is strictly prohibited. If animals are encountered along the path, travelers must wait until they have passed before continuing their journey.

From these taboos enforced in the Nunusaku forest, several ecological values can be inferred. First, nature is understood as a shared living space with fellow creations—humans, animals, plants, and other organisms. Second, the Manusa people are taught to respect nature, not merely as an object or resource to be exploited, but as an integral part of life to be honored and appreciated. Third, they are instructed to refrain from violence against other creatures. The prohibition on extracting resources from the sacred forest reflects a commitment to non-destructive and non-harmful behavior toward living beings. Fourth, the Manusa are taught to adapt themselves to nature—specifically, to the Nunusaku forest—rather than forcing nature to conform to human will. These sacred forest practices also shape their treatment of the profane forest, or areas outside Nunusaku, which may be utilized and managed more freely.

Local communities understand nature as having a personal substance that has metaphysical properties. Nature is not only seen as a physical object but also has a whole personal space, soul, feeling, and activity in everyday life. Nature is understood and experienced as a personal entity with identity (Watloly, 2013). The actions of humans in the sacred forest, with its various taboos, are explained by Monike Hukubun as a cosmic relationship that exists between humans, nature, and ancestral spirits, hierarchically. This relationship allows the physical elements of nature to be not only passive and inert, but also natural bodies that seem to possess souls, life, and existence (Hukubun, 2023). When the forest of Nunusaku—understood as the body of nature—is damaged, it threatens the human soul, which is intimately connected to it. Conversely, nature is believed to possess an awareness of human presence and can assess human actions, determining whether one is worthy of accessing its resources. Much like a guardian that grants entry only to the respectful, nature in this worldview responds to the moral conduct of humanity (Neyte, interview, 30 October 2024).

Based on the explanations and analytical findings, it can be concluded that *mara'a nunue ai welu* represents the ecological spirituality of the Manusa people. For them, spirituality is not merely an abstract concept but a lived and embodied experience, deeply rooted in specific space, time, and place. This spiritual awareness encourages the Manusa to transcend the self holistically—not only in their relationship with *Upu Lanite* (the Divine), but also through a harmonious engagement with the environment, grounded in the values they uphold (Stevanus, 2022).

Mara'a Nunue ai Welu in the Lived Practices of the Manusa People

Based on the results of observations and interviews, there appears to be a cosmology that serves as the guardian of Nunusaku, influencing their life practices. This behavior can be attributed to the role of indigenous peoples in maintaining the sustainability of the natural ecosystem, as well as their contribution to preventing the expansion of global warming. Suppose modern society aims to mitigate the effects of global warming by pursuing renewable energy sources to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, as outlined in the decisions of the Rio de Janeiro

Summit, the Paris Agreement, and the outcomes of the G20 Meeting. In that case, local people can do so by caring for and respecting the sacredness of nature.

Several behavioral patterns can be developed as forms of participation by the Manusa people in responding to global warming. First, the prohibition of polluting rivers and the air within sacred forests and other sites is considered *pamali* (taboo). Second, the management of nature with a concern for the sustainability of both human life and the broader ecosystem. This is demonstrated through the restrained use of Nunusaku water, which is believed to possess supernatural power. Third, the recognition of nature as a fellow creation. The Manusa people possess a deep awareness that nature is part of God's creation that must be protected and preserved. Humans and nature are interconnected; thus, environmental destruction is seen as a threat to human life and potentially as a form of divine punishment. Fourth, the protection of ecosystems is maintained through strict prohibitions within sacred forests, ensuring their ecological integrity. Fifth, nature is managed wisely, with natural resources used solely to meet basic needs on a relatively small scale. For instance, timber is harvested for household purposes without large-scale exploitation.

However, there are also unconscious behaviors that may contribute to greenhouse gas emissions as a result of the separation between sacred and profane forest spaces. This is illustrated, first, by deforestation carried out to meet economic and developmental demands. Although occurring on a small scale, logging activities can nonetheless trigger climate change. The Manusa people, both individually and collectively, utilize natural resources for purposes beyond ritual use (*kabong*), such as expanding residential areas, collecting firewood, and acquiring building materials for the construction of private homes as well as public facilities (schools, health clinics, teachers' housing, churches, pastorates, village offices, and community halls). Second, forest burning for agricultural purposes. The Manusa people practice a form of shifting cultivation that involves clearing land, burning vegetation, and subsequent planting. Deforestation and forest burning generate carbon emissions that contribute to the greenhouse effect (Herpita Wahyuni & Suranto, 2021), which in turn exacerbates global warming (Singgih, 2021). Forests play a crucial role in maintaining ecosystems and act as natural converters, neutralizing CO₂ gas to produce O₂, which is essential for living things, as well as balancing the atmosphere's composition (Noor, 2010).

Nevertheless, there exists an awareness of the reciprocal relationship between nature and human beings. This is evident, for instance, in their utilization of natural resources while engaging in reforestation efforts, such as replanting trees that have been cut down. One resident, for example, has planted approximately 100 tree seedlings. Several community members utilize domesticated animals (such as dogs) for hunting and guarding their gardens, utilize water streams for aquaculture, and designate forest areas as grazing land for their livestock. The Manusa people recognize that their livelihood is dependent on nature, thus fostering the development of an ecological community.

Nunusaku and Guardian Nunusaku as Creation and Imago Dei

The first part of this theological reflection aims to explain Nunusaku and the Guardian of Nunusaku as part of God's creation, which is considered good in Christian theology. Nunusaku is a representation of nature, while the Guardian of Nunusaku represents humans. The Creation Story is considered not a historical record but a confession of faith (Drummond, 2006). However, at least the story of Creation based on Christian faith can provide meaning if humans and nature are part of God's creation, so that there is no dominance of one over the other, because both are dependent.

Genesis 1 and 2 show that God created the universe. In Genesis 1, the word "*bara*" is the verb "*qal*" indicating the idea of absolute creation. The verb form *qal* is in the first-person plural, which means it is typically used in the Bible to represent the work of God. God is described as

the Creator who created all things out of nothing (Ririn, 2022). However, in the Bible (Genesis 1) it is clearly stated that God's act of creation was good in its essence, as reiterated seven times (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), and ultimately declared very good (Genesis 1:31). There is no trace of residual evil in creation. Genesis 1 does not embrace a dualistic view that separates spiritual good from physical evil. Everything that God created is considered good (Paul Evans, 2012). Thus, it can be understood that the universe is a sacred creation that must be respected and cared for as part of human responsibility to God, the creator.

Humans and nature are part of creation; nature is not formed naturally, but is an integral part of God's creation. Humans and nature are equal as a result of creation. If we look more closely, the Bible presents a picture in which humans are viewed as managers of nature, a result of God's creation. Thus, humans are not owners who are free to exploit, let alone carry out destructive actions against nature, which results in a threat to the survival of every entity in the natural community (Earth). The Bible explains that creation is a world that God loves (John 13:16), and in the Christian eschatological view, it shows that there is hope for the restoration of nature (Rev. 21) (Borong, 2019). This fosters an understanding of equality between humans and nature as fellow creations, without the assumption that humans are more dominant than other creations.

The organic pattern is a concept where the positions of God, humans, and nature are part of a unity that is interrelated. The traditional hierarchical model places God above, humans in the middle, and nature below, which will have an impact on the placement of humans as rulers. This understanding has an impact on excessive exploitation, so it does not answer the ecological crisis. On the contrary, the organic pattern sees God as both transcendent and immanent. God is not only outside but also present in humans and nature. The large-scale exploitation of nature is not based on Christian theology, but on the influence of liberal humanism on the interpretation of the Bible (Macquarie, Bar, 2021, cited in Singgih, 2021).

Based on the conducted research, it was found that the Manusa people demonstrate a profound attitude of reverence and appreciation for nature, rooted in their theological understanding of Nunusaku as the first land created — regarded as the center of early civilization on Seram Island (a microcosm) as well as a representation of the world (a macrocosm). The Manusa people's reverence for Nunusaku is manifested through customary rituals. The ritual performed before entering the Nunusaku area involves the invocation of Lanite ai tapele (God and the ancestors), reflecting an attitude of veneration toward God the Creator and the ancestors who entrusted nature to be safeguarded by future generations. Respect for Nunusaku is also expressed through ecological behavior, particularly through strict prohibitions against environmental degradation within the sacred forest area. These include bans on tree felling, hunting, and polluting river streams. Such behavior reflects an organic relational pattern as proposed by John Macquarrie, in which the Manusa people perceive God (*Upu Lanite*) not only as transcendent but also immanent. They regard nature as a co-equal creation, interrelated and interdependent, and thus hold a moral responsibility to respect and maintain balance with all other forms of life.

Human beings, as *Imago Dei* (image of God), are called to reflect God through the incarnate Christ by acting in ways that do not destroy nature. According to Jürgen Moltmann (Moltmann, 1997), in his interpretation of Genesis 1:26–27, God created humanity “in His image” to reflect both the honor and intimacy shared with the Creator. The concept of human beings as the image of God emphasizes the relational aspect between humanity and God rather than any physical characteristics. As bearers of God's image, humans fulfill three primary functions: to govern other creatures as God's representatives, to be partners in dialogue with God, and to embody the manifestation of God's glory on earth. The entire human existence—both individually and communally, and in relation to nature—serves to reflect the glory of God. What about the command to subdue and have dominion in Gen. 1:28, because these two words are often used

to exploit nature on a large scale, which destroys nature and its ecosystem. The verb to have dominion (*radah* – רדה) in the Bible, including in Genesis 1, refers to authority that is exercised humanely and responsibly, not with violence or brutality. This can be seen, for example, in Leviticus 25:43, where God commands authority not to be exercised harshly towards others. It can also be found in Ezekiel 34:4, where leaders are warned not to rule with cruelty. This can show that humans are mandated by God to rule with love and respect for creation, in accordance with God's just and merciful character.

The verb to subdue (*kabash* - כבש) in the Old Testament refers to the act of one person dominating another. It is often done in a harsh or coercive manner and is not to the advantage of the one being subdued. However, it is essential to note that in Genesis 1:28, the word "to subdue" (*kabash* - כבש) is used by the author in the context of no enemies or the negative influence of sin (Paul Evans, 2012). The word conquer (*kabash* - כבש) should be understood as the human duty to manage and care for the world created by God, not as a legitimacy for humans to carry out destructive actions. It seems that we can consider the use of the words to rule (*radah* – רדה) and to conquer (*kabash* – כבש) in the context of the harsh nature of Palestine; erratic rain, drought, and storms at sea (Drumond, 2006). In that frame of mind, the words to rule (*radah* – רדה) and to conquer (*kabash* – כבש) reflect the farmer's response to harsh natural conditions and limited resources. The Israelites in the past were mostly farmers, growing wheat and barley for their daily needs, but had to deal with low yields (Coote, 2019).

Junus Inabuy's view can clarify this understanding. It is explained that it is challenging to avoid the notion of "humans in power" over nature in the context of industrial society, which leads to the large-scale exploitation of nature for the sake of controlling resources and driving economic growth. However, the understanding of humans in power over nature must be read in the context of a subsistence pre-industrial society. Humans at that time had to struggle to survive in a challenging natural environment, with limited natural resources and unpredictable climate and weather cycles (Inabuy, 2024). This prompted the Israelites to exert their power and conquer the harsh conditions of the land and nature in order to fight for their lives. Because, if we look closely in the Bible, before the words power (*radah* - רדה) and conquer (*kabash* - כבש), God also gave the command to be fruitful and fill the earth. This command has a *dimension* of sustainable life, where the management of nature also pays attention to the next generation or the sustainability of human life.

In theological view, humans and nature are good creations of God, where humans as the image of God have the responsibility to care for and preserve nature. Human behavior towards nature should reflect the love and goodness of God as shown by Jesus Christ, so that ecological balance can be maintained for the sustainability of all creatures. The practice of conquering and controlling nature carried out by humans must always be accounted for to the Creator (Inabuy, 2024). However, we must realize that the understanding of humans as the image of God (*Image of God*) is not limited to humans alone. If this concept is understood exclusively, then there is a risk that humans will feel superior. Ultimately, it fosters an attitude of exploiting nature on a large scale. I agree with Gerith Singgih's view that the biblical tradition not only emphasizes the presence of God in human history, but also in nature. The Old Testament tradition inherited in Christianity, the God of Israel is the God of history and nature. God can reveal himself in humans and nature (Singgih, 2021).

The attitude of rejecting the ecological movement that seeks the religious dimension of God's presence through nature as His creation, is a fear of being trapped in pantheism, naturalism and paganism. In the early era of the Christian tradition there were two sources of revelation, the first source was the manifestation of nature, and the second was the manifestation of God through the scriptures. However, in the 16th century when the printing press was invented, more attention was paid to the texts of the scriptures. This resulted in the doctrine of the two books, the book of nature and the scriptures fading, leaving the doctrine in

the scriptures. As a result, humans rarely appreciate the reality of nature. Christians are reluctant to enter the inner reality of the created world and express themselves affectively, the voice of nature is not heard (Barry, 2013).

In the Bible, there is a tendency for humans to view nature as a reflection of God's presence as creator (Psalm 19:2). Nature is described as a means to see the glory of God and the knowledge of God, and shows that God is present and communicates through His creation (Psalm 19:1-4). God is also involved in regulating the universe, including natural phenomena (Amos 4:13; Jeremiah 10:12-13). Thus, a sense of respect for nature arises as a manifestation of God's presence, which can help avoid a destructive attitude towards nature, because destroying nature is equivalent to destroying the existence and manifestation of God. If the world gives a good idea as the glory of God, then a broken world will also give us a broken idea of God (Barry, 2013). This does not mean worshiping nature as God, but from the regularity of the ecosystem and the laws of nature, it can provide meaning about the existence of God as the creator.

Respect for humans and nature as a form of God's presence (*Imago Dei*) is explicitly depicted in the cosmology of the Manusa people as the guardians of Nunusaku. The guardians represent humans who are given the mandate to maintain and guard. Nunusaku is a representation of nature as a reflection (manifestation) of God's presence. The behavior of the Manusa people who guard Nunusaku from various potentially destructive actions is a form of respect and an act of protecting nature as known in Christian theology. Through traditional rituals before entering the sacred forest, the Manusa people also show awareness of the harmonious relationship between humans, nature and God. Traditional rituals can be interpreted as a reminder that God is present in all of His creations, and in respecting nature, humanity participates in maintaining creation.

Moltmann criticized the theological perspective that distinguishes between God and nature. According to Moltmann, this perspective must be reevaluated in light of the historical conditions of the Old Testament, which prevented God from being influenced by pantheistic, matriarchal, and animist religions. This gave rise to the understanding that God is transcendent (outside and above the world), while on the other hand, the world of His creation is something immanent (connected to God in worldly reality). This world does not possess a divine nature; political reality and human history are devoid of divine power, rendering the world a passive entity. In its development according to Moltmann, this view was used by modern theological apologetics to adjust the teachings of the Bible to the process of secularization that occurred in Europe, causing the conquest and exploitation of nature by humans to gain religious legitimacy based on the distinction between the world of God and the world that is more material (Moltmann, 1997).

In Colossians 1:15 Christ represents the image of the invisible God. As the visible image of God, Christ reveals His existence, will, love, and works. Christ opens access for all cosmic realities, including humans and the earth, to relate to God. In that relationship, all cosmic realities participate in realizing God's love, justice, and will. God's relationship through Christ with humans and nature, which is very immanent, does not obscure God's identity as creator. God is still honored as creator, while humans and nature are God's limited creations (Hukubun, 2023). However, in Christ as a representation of God's will, it does not only apply in Nunusaku as a sacred forest but also for forests that can be managed (profane). Thus, the welfare efforts made by humans from nature are based on love, justice, and preservation as a form of respect for fellow connected creations. The relationship in this understanding is seen in conservation actions by replanting trees that have been cut down for agricultural land clearing, the construction of various infrastructures, and the prohibition of polluting rivers with garbage. These actions reflect great respect for nature as God's creation and a form of active participation by humans in the work of Christ, which brings salvation for the restoration and renewal of creation. Nature is part of the creation that has been reconciled by Christ. Therefore, the various prohibitions in the sacred forest that are practiced for the profane forest by humans are not only

interpreted ecologically but also theologically. The relationship between humans and Nunusaku and the surrounding forests must be interpreted in a relationship based on love and gratitude to God (Hukubun, 2023).

However, it is acknowledged that economic pressures can lead to changes in community behavior. Currently, the Manusa people still strongly uphold their local wisdom as the Guardians of Nunusaku, who respect and honor nature. Yet, the question remains whether this cosmology can be maintained amid the demands and difficulties of economic welfare. Leonardo Boff explains that the meaning of economics today has undergone a paradigm shift. Economics, in essence, is the just and simple management of life's needs to ensure the well-being of all. In many developing countries (poor countries), this economic principle is still practiced. However, modern society pursues economics with an emphasis on unlimited growth and profit. This model leads people to believe that we have two unlimited resources: natural resources and future technological progress. In reality, natural resources are limited and non-renewable, while technological advancements cannot be evenly applied across all social groups. This economic model benefits only a small elite, while disadvantaging the working class and the poor (Boff, 1995).

Leonardo Boff's perspective should be understood within the context of the community's struggle to achieve well-being amid economic pressures, while simultaneously maintaining environmental sustainability. In this regard, the natural resource management practiced by the Manusa people reflects a concrete effort to preserve and improve their quality of life. Based on research findings, tree-cutting activities—whether for development needs or economic advancement—form part of a resource utilization strategy oriented toward present and future welfare. However, these actions are not exploitative, as they are balanced by forest regeneration practices embodying the spirituality of *mara'a nunue ai welu* (the guardians of Nunusaku). Despite economic hardship, the Manusa people demonstrate ecological awareness by managing natural resources prudently, considering the sustainability of the ecosystem. This concept is part of the Sustainable Development Goals framework, initiated by the United Nations (UN). Sustainable economy refers to development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It creates opportunities for everyone to live a decent life by ensuring environmental protection, social justice, and economic efficiency (Secretary-General, World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, cited in Kristian, 2024).

Conclusion

The guardians of Nunusaku is an analytical reflection of the ecological-theology perspective that does not only focus on humans (anthropocentric) or nature (ecocentric), but is centered on God (theocentric). This awareness was born from the local tradition of the Manusa people, who understand that protecting nature is a mandate from the Divine (*Upu Lanite* or God), as in Christian theology. An eco-theological perspective on the guardians of Nunusaku emphasizes the fundamental principle that humans and nature must be united in harmony, with God at the center of life. The principles that transform the idea of being church not only include human beings as the body of Christ, but also all natural existences are the body of Christ. It means that the church should be open to developing theology rooted in local culture and real action to care for nature (earth) as part of the integrity of creation. This inclusive attitude allows the church to fight for ecological justice as part of its service mission. The district and village governments need to consider the local wisdom of indigenous peoples in development, especially those containing elements of ecological justice. Cooperation between the church, government, and society can ensure that nature remains sustainable, humans can live in harmony with nature, and at the same time, participate in preventing the spread of global warming.

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