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THE CONSTRUCTION OF "*MBARU GENDANG*" IN FLORES, INDONESIA: RELIGION AND LOCAL WISDOM

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Abstract

Traditional houses embody the wealth and cultural heritage of a community, reflecting its worldview, philosophical orientation, and societal values. These structures also illustrate intimate family relationships and serve as central spaces for both social and spiritual life within the community. However, in the wake of globalization, many customary houses are no longer built or are merely preserved as tourist attractions, often stripped of their deeper meanings. This phenomenon contributes to the erosion of cultural values and the loss of distinctive artistic heritage. This study explores the stages involved in constructing of "mbaru gendang" as a traditional house in Eastern Flores, Indonesia. Employing ethnographic methods, it reveals a lengthy and intricate process characterized by the active participation of various parties, both the living and the deceased. The construction process includes stages of communal discourse, collective planning, ritual reporting to ancestors, preparation of tools, timber cutting, ceremonial transportation of wood, installation of the main pillar, inhabitation of the house, and thanksgiving celebrations. These stages reflect the sacredness, communal ethos, and ecological wisdom that define local cultural practices. The study concludes that the cultural heritage embedded in traditional house-building is deeply intertwined with the community's belief in its own existence, its relationship with the divine, and its connection to the natural environment.

Keywords: *Traditional House, Religiosity, Local Wisdom, Mbaru Gendang*

INTRODUCTION

Numerous indigenous communities across the globe maintain communal dwellings that reflect their traditional architectural heritage. For traditional communities, the customary communal house is not merely a physical building but a symbol saturated with philosophical and kinship values [1]. Every human-made object serves particular functions in social life, and these functions evolve in line with societal demands and developments. The ensemble of an object's functions forms a system consisting of the cultural system of ideas, the social system, and material culture, through which the meanings embedded in objects become legitimate [2]. Singer [3] emphasizes that humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings those things hold for them, meanings that arise from social interaction and are refined in the course of that interaction.

The customary house symbolizes the cultural identity of a particular tribe or ethnic group, which is visible in its architectural form, ornamentation, and the materials used in its construction [4]. Its architecture reflects the norms, behaviours, and value systems of collective life. Vernacular or traditional forms are cultural artifacts born of the images, expressions, and foundational knowledge of the local community. What matters most in vernacular architecture is not only interior or formal aspects but the values, images, and inner spirit of it embodies [5]. In practice, such traditional architectural orders are inseparable from the religious context that underlies beliefs and from the environmental or ecological setting in which communities live, often correlating with megalithic traditions; traditional ornamentation and painting are not merely aesthetic, but convey spiritual, social, and cosmological meanings, manifesting value systems, cosmological beliefs, and collective identity [6].

Customary houses also express a community's wealth and traditions, communicate prevailing ways of thinking, and reveal their understandings of the world and human life. They serve as venues for cultural activities such as customary ceremonies, communal meetings, and ritual performances. They also reflect nuclear family relationships and function as centres of social and spiritual life. As symbols, they embody the continuity of a people and its ideas and beliefs. Building orientation is typically north-south and is regarded as sacred within local cosmology; east-west orientations are adopted only under compelling circumstances, as the east (sunrise) is held to be the abode of the deities and the west (sunset) the abode of the ancestors [7].

In Indonesia, the existence of customary houses has been preserved to the present, despite significant changes in patterns of everyday life. Their persistence is especially strong in local villages, where conditions are generally relatively good and the houses remain inhabited. Each region exhibits distinctive features in its customary houses, and such distinctiveness reflects the character of the communities that built and sustain them. Communities seek customary houses that protect, and provide safety and comfort for, the continuity of their existence. The construction of such houses is inseparable from the norms governing social life.

As forms of material culture that vary across the archipelago, customary houses carry important meanings for a nation's history, heritage, and development. They are built not only with functional and practical considerations, but also as syntheses of the multiple dimensions of human life. These dimensions include the social, cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic, which are integrated with both physical and non-physical functions into an impressive art of building. In this sense, the customary house is a total work that articulates human values through structure, space, and use [8].

Amid modern technological development, customary houses continue to be maintained as valuable cultural heritage, symbolizing a group's cultural identity and embodying historical and architectural value. They possess high cultural significance and merit continued preservation. Their connectedness to nature, often built from natural, locally appropriate materials, facilitates integration with the surrounding environment and supports environmental friendliness. However, as times change, some traditional houses in Indonesia are no longer used as dwellings and are repurposed for other functions.

The aspiration to retain cultural heritage frequently collides with the pragmatic demands of contemporary life, producing a dialectical tension between tradition and modernity [9]. Changes in traditional houses and settlements are driven by multiple factors, including rising human needs, advancing technologies, shifts in knowledge, changes in ideology, and cultural acculturation. These changes encompass transformations in spatial layouts, forms, and building materials that reflect communities' adaptations to increasingly complex life demands [10]. According to Irianto [9], the commodification of heritage creates an ambivalence between preserving authentic values and pragmatically adapting to economic pressures.

Nabilunnuha and Novianto [11] document significant changes in the functions and meanings of the Tongkonan as a consequence of progressive social, economic, and cultural transformations. This shift introduces complexity into efforts to understand the continuity of traditional values amid inevitable modernization. The Tongkonan, once a centre of customary governance, a site of ritual, and a symbol of social cohesion, is undergoing a redefinition that repositions its role within the social structure of North Toraja society. As a stilted house, the Tongkonan protects inhabitants from wildlife and ground moisture while expressing adaptation to its environment.

Another customary house carefully maintained by its community is the *Mbaru Gendang* in Manggarai, Flores, Eastern Indonesia. Its construction patterns and stages reflect the community's relationship with nature, social order, environmental conditions, cultivation systems, and local cosmology. The spatial concepts embodied in the customary house are integral to local tradition. Within its architecture reside symbols of sociocultural life that are rich in meaning, reflecting how leaders and community members live their daily lives in accord with the social order attached to each. Belief systems shape settlement layouts, house architecture, and social order, and are enforced through various ritual ceremonies; the making and erection of these buildings are always bound to hopes and petitions addressed to the Creator and to the ancestors for peace, safety, and well-being [12]. This article describes the process and stages of constructing the traditional house of the Manggarai people, known as *mbaru gendang*. It will then analyse its meaning and significance for contemporary society.

The primary objective of this research is to describe and systematically document the local wisdom of a community that continues to preserve its ancestral customs, focusing in particular on the construction sequence of the *mbaru gendang*, the traditional Manggarai house. Through detailed ethnographic observation and participatory documentation, this study aims not only to record architectural and ritual practices but also to illuminate the underpinning social values and knowledge systems that sustain them.

By doing so, the research contributes to the expanding corpus of global indigenous knowledge, offering a rich case study that international scholars and practitioners can draw upon. Local cultural policies and customary frameworks embodied in the mbaru gendang's construction provide transferable insights into community resilience, collective decision-making, and sustainable resource management. These insights can inform contemporary debates on cultural preservation, participatory governance, and heritage-driven development.

Engaging with the positive values inherent in long-standing traditions is increasingly vital for fostering harmonious societies that honor cultural diversity, environmental stewardship, and social cohesion. Integrating ancestral epistemologies into modern policy-making and community development initiatives can bridge past and future, guiding the creation of inclusive, resilient, and culturally responsive communities worldwide.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using ethnographic methods. The researcher immersed herself in the culture and social life of the Manggarai community in Flores to collect comprehensive information on

everyday life, routines, and practices, particularly those related to the construction of the customary house. Data were gathered through several techniques as follows. 1) Direct observation conducted by the researcher. Because she lived and worked within the community, the timing and scope of observations could be arranged flexibly; 2) In-depth, focused interviews with numerous key informants who were well acquainted with Manggarai culture and involved in activities related to the Mbaru Gendang. Interviews were conducted with customer leaders (*tu'a-tua golo/beo, tua teno,* and *tu'a panga*), community leaders, other elders, and members of the wider community; 3) In several cases, data collection was supported by the assistance of additional interviewers and observers; 4) Use of diverse documents, photographs, notes, and a review of the literature to complement and enrich the ethnographic data and analysis.

The data were analysed and interpreted qualitatively. The procedure involves the following steps: 1) Organizing the data into subthemes consistent with the study's aims; 2) Selecting relevant data and eliminating non-relevant material; 3) Interpreting the data and assembling the findings into a descriptive narrative. The findings are presented as a descriptive narrative.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The construction of customary houses in Manggarai, Flores, Eastern Indonesia unfolds through an extended process involving multiple parties, both the living and the deceased. The stages are as follows.

First, idea and need to build a custom house. The construction of a *gendang*/customary house typically begins with informal discourse about the need to build a new *Mbaru Gendang*. Such discussions arise in everyday conversations, for example during meals, in the fields, in front-yard chats, or in impromptu gatherings. The reasons for building a new customary house vary (Lon and Widyawati, 2020; Widyawati, 2021). For instance, when the existing Mbaru Gendang has been burned down or is severely damaged and thus no longer fit for purpose, people would have idea to have a new one.

In addition, the old *Mbaru Gendang* is deemed insufficient or no longer capable of bringing prosperity to its residents (*toé dia naga béo*). When residents frequently fall ill and the village experiences misfortune or disasters, people begin to ask informally about the causes. The issue becomes more serious when a shaman discerns that illness, death, and disaster stem from an inadequate or improperly built *Mbaru Gendang*. In such cases, a new *Mbaru Gendang* is seen as the solution to the community's problems.

Another reason is the establishment of a new hamlet (village expansion). As the population grows, residents can no longer live in a single settlement and will expand the village and build a new settlement. To establish a new locus of authority, the idea of building a new *Mbaru Gendang* gains strength, especially among those with political interests. The parent village may grant authority to build a *Mbaru Gendang* in the new village as gift (*widang*). In some cases, a new village and new drum are created due to internal conflicts. If reconciliation fails, a breakaway group may establish a new village and gendang without the blessing of the parent village.

Second, Initiating the planning process at the community level. The *Mbaru Gendang* is the common property of all villagers. Its construction therefore begins with a collective consensus reached in *lonto léok*. It is a circular model of meeting of the village. The head of the village will invite people and they will sit in circular shapes. All villagers gather together (*nempung weki*), sit in a circle (*lonto léok*), engage in shared deliberation (*bantang cama*), and conduct a formal discussion (*réjé lélé*) to decide how the *Mbaru Gendang* will be built collectively.

In the *lonto léok*, everyone stands on equal footing and has the same right to speak about the construction of the *Mbaru Gendang*. During these deliberations, each person is given the same time and opportunity to express opinions and ideas. At the initial meeting, the village leaders, the *tu'a golo* and/or the *tu'a gendang* typically emphasize the importance of shared commitment, responsibility, and the participation of all members of the gendang. Everyone is obliged to participate through attendance, contribution of thought, and willingness to accept the meeting's agreed outcomes [12].

After consensus and a shared commitment are reached, follow-up meetings are held to discuss preparations for rituals, financial and material needs, the required committees, and the schedule for construction. In the past, work organization and committee structures were very simple, based on the number of pangas in the village. Typically, the *tu'a panga* was entrusted with coordinating all members of his panga.

Third, a ceremonial act of declaring intentions to ancestral and spiritual entities. After agreement among the living to build a new *Mbaru Gendang*, the community holds the *manuk baro, manuk tesi* ceremony. The terms literally mean "chicken of notification" or "chicken of permission." The purpose is to report the living community's decision to the ancestral spirits and to ask for their blessing and permission. On this occasion, it is conveyed to the deceased that the plan is not intended to disparage their past achievements or oppose their will. The new construction arises solely because the existing house is damaged and unusable.

This petition is also a request for blessings so that construction proceeds smoothly to completion. Manggarai people believe that human endeavours have no meaning without the grace and blessing of spirits, ancestors, and the Supreme Being. This further clarifies that the *Mbaru Gendang* is not merely a dwelling for the living but also a house of the ancestors and spirits, as discussed earlier.

The *manuk baro, manuk tesi* ceremony is held in the gendang house with all residents present. During the ritual, villagers sit in a circle in the gendang house according to their positions in the village, generally facing

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the ritual leaders. The leaders sit facing the front door and are not permitted to look elsewhere while delivering the customer prayer. The ceremony takes place at night because it is believed that the ancestors awaken and work at night and sleep during the day.

Offerings include a predominantly red chicken with some black and white (*manuk cepang*), symbolizing courage. They also offer betel nut (cepa), local alcohol (*tuak, sopi*), cigarettes (*rongko*), and chewing tobacco (*mbako cécu*). Since the 1960s, factory-made cigarettes and sometimes beer have been used as substitutes for local beverages.

Fourth, ritual of sharpening machetes and axes. At this stage, villagers conduct a ritual to sharpen axes and other tools that will be used for cutting down timber in the forest and for work at the construction site. In essence, the community entrusts the entire building plan to the Ruler of Heaven and Earth, to the spirits who govern the forest, land, and village, and to their ancestors. Concretely, the ritual is intended to ensure that axes, machetes, and other sharp implements function properly, cut effectively, and do not endanger their users. With divine protection and ancestral blessing, it is hoped that carpenters and villagers who venture into the forest to obtain beams and boards for the *Mbaru Gendang* will be saved from harm.

The ceremony is held at night, before the community goes to the forest to cut timber. It is conducted in the (old) *Mbaru Gendang*. If it has collapsed or no longer exists, it may be held in the house of the elder (*tu'a*), regarded as a communal house. All villagers attend to present a sacrificial animal, either a pig or a white rooster (*ela* or *manuk lalong bakok racang cola/kopé*). The species and size depend on communal agreement and capacity; if resources permit, a pig, costlier than a chicken, may be provided. The animal must be male; pigs should be black-haired, while roosters must be white. All are symbolizing the pure heart of those offering sacrifice to the Almighty, the spirits, and the ancestors. Practical considerations also apply: a larger animal is preferred when many participants will share the meal.

During the ceremony, the leader, the *tu'a golo* or *tu'a gendang* assigns responsibilities to individuals and groups. Tasks are typically divided among three groups: the gong-and-drum ensemble, dominated by women, who play in the house to be renovated; the woodcutters, dominated by adult men; and the reception team, made up mostly of youth, who fetch and transport timber from the forest (Lon and Widyawati, 2020). Gong-and-drum rhythms include *concong* (accompanying the *saé* and *raga* dances), *kedéndit* (a faster tempo), *taki tu, redep* (a softer tempo), and *ndundu-ndaké* (accompanying the *ndundu-ndaké dance*).

Fifth, cutting down the tree. Upon arriving in the forest, the woodcutters perform the *wéang wejang* ritual (cleansing the resting place). They offer a chicken or chicken egg to petition for safety while working and to announce their purpose and presence to the forest's inhabitants, so that nearby beings, including trees, are not started or angry. Before cutting, they recite prayers; after praying, an egg is placed at the base of the tree (*cakat ruha*), and felling then proceeds.

Sixth, propose to the forest girl and transporting the timber. In Manggarai cosmology, timber is metaphorically personified as a maiden belonging to the forest community, which serves as the bride-giver (*anak rona*). Before a felled tree may be transported to the village for use as the principal pillar of the *mbaru gendang* (traditional Manggarai house), villagers must undertake a formal courtship of this "maiden" so that the timber can lawfully pass into the care of the receiving community, known as *anak wina*.

This courtship unfolds in the roko molas poco ceremony, literally "proposing to the forest maiden", which legitimates the tree's transfer from forest domain to village stewardship. Only once the ritual proposal has been made does the timber embark on a celebratory procession to the village, accompanied by dance, song, and festivity. During this jubilant escort, a young girl, symbolizing the bride, sits astride the carried log, embodying the union between community and forest embodied in the construction of the *mbaru gendang*.

The transport of timber (*élong haju*) to the village is framed as "courting and parading the forest maiden." A reception team from the village—comprising men and several women—meets the woodcutters at the forest boundary. Their task is to "propose to" the molas poco (mountain maiden), namely the timber for the main pillar (*siri bongkok*). At the boundary (*wejang asi*), a woman presents betel nut folded three times, symbolizing the unity of God, humanity, and nature. This is followed by the *pa'u tuak curu* and *roko molas poco* (betrothal to the forest maiden) rituals. The *siri bongkok* is then shouldered in procession with communal singing, accompanied by gong and drum, in the *ronda style* (a distinguished parade with song and percussion). They sing *rewung kolé lé*, imploring the subtle spirits (present as mist) accompanying the *siri bongkok* to return to the forest and permit the wood to be carried to the village. This reflects the Manggarai understanding that every tree, river, and mountain has an owner; thus, any act of taking requires a ritual to avert misfortune.

At the village gate, the *siri bongkok* is welcomed by all residents with gong and drum. The *tu'a beo* (village head) and *tu'a panga* (sub-clan heads) gather to greet the arrival of the molas poco, offering betel and *tuak kapu* (reception palm wine). The timber is then paraded into the village, with a young girl in traditional dress wearing a headdress (*bali-bélo*) sitting atop the log. She symbolizes the forest maiden chosen to become the main pillar of the *Mbaru Gendang*.

Upon reaching the village centre, in front of the gendang house near the *compang* (ritual stone altar), the *kapu molas poco* (reception of the forest maiden) is performed. Women beat the gongs and drums in festive rhythms, and some dance. The girl born with the molas poco is then lifted down and led into the *Mbaru Gendang* with the dance troupe that accompanied the woodcutters. Inside the *Mbaru Gendang*, the group performs the *renggas*

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and proceeds with the kapu molas poco, marked by the offering of a reddish-white pig (*torok ela raé*) [13] [14] [15] [16].

Seventh, installation of the main pillar and construction of the customary house. This phase begins with the *sungké ritual,* a symbolic act to ward off harm, during which a woman briefly carries the main pillar (*siri bongkok*). This act highlights the symbolic dimension of the pillar, likened to a maiden who embodies gentleness, serenity, and maternal protection. She is expected to remain within the house, nurturing all who live within. Following this, the pillar is borne by men and erected into a prepared hole in the ground, accompanied by a traditional prayer and the offering of a pig.

Construction proceeds under the guidance of skilled craftsmen. While building the roof, they sing ritual songs such as *wéké léok* and *saru lambo*, which carry themes of communal cooperation and express hope that the house will be strong, distinguished, and noble. As the roof nears completion, the *raum bubung* (ridgepole ceremony) is held at *lémpa raé*. The *tu'a golo* presents a white rooster and offers prayers to God and the ancestors. The ceremony concludes with the symbolic act of hanging the rooster's wings and binding the final roof timbers with *ijuk* rope (*wolét wasé wunut*). Afterwards, the workers descend from the roof's exterior—following the ritual directive, *néka langgar wancang, néka larong ri'i*, which prohibits crossing the sacred threshold.

Eight, inhabiting the house (*wéé mbaru*). Once the roof is complete, the house is ritually entered through the *wéé mbaru* ceremony, signifying its occupation. This ceremony takes place during a full moon and involves offering a pig known as *kina wé'é*. According to local tradition, the house is inhabited by representatives of each clan within the village. For example, if there are four clans, four families will reside there. Each family occupies one bedroom, while the remaining spaces—such as the living room, kitchen, and so forth—are shared. Although these families dwell in the house, it is not privately owned by them but held as communal property.

Ninth, thanksgiving celebration (*Congko Lokap*). As an expression of gratitude and the official conclusion of the house's construction, the *congko lokap* ceremony is held. Literally meaning "to carry away strips of bark," *congko lokap* symbolizes a ritual purification of the house, making it a safe and sacred dwelling. This thanksgiving celebration, often called *ramé congko lokap*, is typically enlivened by the caci whip dance, a festive closure marking the house's formal inhabitation (Janggur, 2010b: 34).

The ceremony consists of several sub-rituals: *reké kaba congko lokap, panték kaba, barong,* and *pa'u kaba*. In *reké kaba congko lokap*, villagers pledge to offer a buffalo as sacrifice. This pledge is made only after full consensus and the blessing of the *anak rona ulu/pokok*, regarded as the source of grace for the house. During *panték kaba*, the buffalo for sacrifice is formally announced. The event, attended by all members of the house community, begins with the offering of a pig, followed by dialogue and communal singing (sanda). Before dawn, a special sanda is performed and leads into *toto loké* (exhibition of the hide) or *saé kaba* (buffalo dance), where dancers and musicians encircle the buffalo in celebration. The dancers, representing each panga (sub-clan) and often dressed in elaborate ceremonial attire, may also include performers from *neighboring* villages. From this moment, the buffalo is tied in place and cannot be moved until the sacrifice takes place on the third day.

The climax of *congko lokap* is the b*arong* and *pa'u kaba* (sacrificial offering). During barong, elders present offerings at ancestral graves (*wanta oné boa*), water sources (*barong waé*), and garden plots (*barong lodok*). These acts symbolically invite ancestral spirits, water protectors, and agricultural guardians to participate in the thanksgiving celebration at the house. Additionally, an offering of a chicken is made at the *compang* (village altar) for the guardian spirit of the settlement [17].

The core and peak of *congko lokap is pa'un/roba(n) kaba*, initiated by *wa'u wa tana*, in which representatives from each panga—dressed in ceremonial clothing—sing and dance from the gendang house to the village courtyard, surrounding the buffalo to be sacrificed. The ritual continues with kari, a formal invocation to spirits and humans, seeking their blessings and support. A final prayer is then recited before the buffalo is slaughtered.

During the sacrifice, villagers closely observe the direction in which the buffalo falls. If its head faces south, toward God (*pa'u ngger lé ulun*)—this is interpreted positively, indicating divine acceptance. Conversely, if the head points north (*ngger lau*), it is seen as a sign of impending misfortune. In some communities, the head must face the ragged to affirm the sacrifice's worthiness; failure to do so may be interpreted as divine displeasure, inviting calamity.

The state of the buffalo's heart is also interpreted: a clean, sharply rounded heart without wounds, blood spots, or vein markings signals acceptance; a heart with injuries (ngeténg), blotches, or tangled veins is considered as a negative omen.

DISCUSSION

The Australian Heritage Commission [18] underscores the importance of understanding heritage values in any conservation process: "...a key principle in heritage conservation is the need to understand the heritage importance or significance of a place before making a decision about how to manage it." In the context of constructing customary houses in Manggarai, Flores, Eastern Indonesia, three core values emerge. First, the stages of construction prominently express the community's religiosity and spiritual dimension. Second, they

embody a communal ethos that prioritizes the collective over the individual. Third, they reflect the community's ecological intelligence and ethical engagement with the natural world.

Religiosity and the Spiritual Dimension

The sacred dimension is manifest in the series of rituals that accompany the building process. All rituals are performed in faith in God's presence in creation, in a world that is the mother of life, and they reveal a deep attachment to the divine. These rites signify reverence for the environment and for God who dwells within it, and they foreground the practice of *tesi* (seeking permission) before making use of other creatures. Before felling trees, for instance, special words are spoken to request leave from the spirit that protects the tree, and eggs are offered during the cutting of timber for the central pillar.

In his encyclical Laudato si', Pope Francis [19] affirms universal communion as an expression of the divine. Every creature has intrinsic value and bears the imprint of God, and thus must be regarded as a subject rather than an object. When human beings see God, other persons, and other creatures as subjects, universal kinship and fraternity become possible. Even where relations are structured as a "food chain," they communicate sacredness and self-giving rather than domination. Through self-giving, humans cultivate harmonious relationships with the environment, learning to love and care for our common home as God's gift.

Communalism

The construction stages also reflect a communal value orientation. Communalism is a familial ethos that binds and impels individuals to prioritize the community over self-interest. Anthropologically, it concerns group identity and its features, showing that humans form associations to achieve common goals for survival and flourishing, with systems of division of labour, cooperation, and communication distinguishing them from instinct-driven animal groupings. Cooperation, interdependence, and communication are defining traits; yet communalism may also involve the privileging of one's own group and discrimination against others [20].

In Indonesia, communalism upholds the integrity and supremacy of collective identities, religious and ethnic alike, and exhibits four prominent characteristics [21] [22]. Strong interconnection among spheres of life and between individuals and the group. The human person is understood simultaneously as economic, social, and theological, finding meaning only in and through the community.

The palpable presence and influence of the supernatural. God not only creates but manifests presence in human life and in every corner of the physical, bodily, and social realms; authority is seen as a divine trust, and religious leaders function institutionally as God's representatives. Clear sensitivity to territorial and identity boundaries. Each ethnic, religious, and belief community forms a cohesive whole with distinctive convictions and well-defined territory. Cultural markers clarify territoriality and identity, recognizable in language use and distinctive customary practices of particular ethnic groups.

Ecological intelligence

The Manggarai conceive their environment as a medium of divine presence, naming *God Mori Kraéng, par'n awo kolep'n salé* (the sun that rises in the east and sets in the west), *awang'n éta tana'n wa* (the sky above and the earth below), *ulun lé wa'in lau* (from headwaters to estuary). Creation is received sacramentally, manifesting signs of God's holiness; spirits are acknowledged as guardians of particular creatures, and thus reality bears a measure of sacredness [23]. Ancestor spirits, for example, are believed to guard springs so that water continues to flow, with guardian spirits dwelling in and around the spring in stones, wood, fish, and eels.

Accordingly, the spirits that protect springs must be honoured and invited to hear communal petitions during *tudak penti* (harvest thanksgiving) and *congko lokap* (ritual purification of the customary house and village). Here, ecological quality is closely tied to ecological intelligence and spirituality. Ecological intelligence equips persons to deliberate on actions with regard to ecological preservation, applying knowledge of human impacts on ecosystems to reduce environmental damage. As creatures of God, humans are called to cultivate a spiritual sensitivity that fosters morally ordered relationships with other humans and with nature. The spiritual dimension guides attitudes and actions in human–nature relations toward ethical responsibility [24].

CONCLUSION

For the Manggarai people, building a communal traditional house is far more than a routine or technical activity. It is an expression of cultural identity and spiritual conviction. Every stage of the construction process is intricately woven into the broader fabric of belief systems and customary practices. Even the construction of an ordinary dwelling requires specific rituals and procedures; all the more so, a sacred and communal house like the *Mbaru Gendang*, which embodies profound spiritual and social significance.

The extended and elaborate construction process reveals a worldview in which ancestors, living and deceased, actively participate. Thus, the act of building is infused with three interrelated dimensions: spiritual (religiosity), social (communalism), and ecological intelligence. Nature, in Manggarai cosmology, is not merely a source of economic utility but a sacred and cultural reality, rich with theological meaning. The quality of ecological engagement is inseparable from the local belief system and spiritual practices.

In the face of ecological degradation, these findings point to the urgent need for revitalizing ecological intelligence and spirituality among local communities. Education and empowerment initiatives must nurture this integrated consciousness. A spiritually and ecologically intelligent person approaches the world not as a collection of exploitable resources, but as a sacred community of interrelated beings, embracing a spirit of unity (*oneness*) with all creation. Ultimately, the customary house is not only a dwelling, it is a living testimony to the Manggarai people's harmonious relationship with the divine, with one another, and with the earth.

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