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# **The Ecological Meaning of *Roko Molas Poco* Rite of Manggarai-Flores from the Perspective of Martin Buber's Dialogical Philosophy**

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## **Introduction**

The ecological crisis is a very pressing issue in the twenty-first century. It takes various forms, such as climate change, global warming, biodiversity extinction, pollutions (of air, water, and soil), and ecosystem destruction. In Indonesia, 98 percent of the disasters in the last 20 years took the form of hydrometeorological disasters, such as flooding, forest fires, landslides, droughts, and increasingly extreme weather.<sup>2</sup> The disasters result from various human activities that are destructive to nature. Humans frequently engage in illegal hunting, illegal logging, littering, and arbitrary extraction of natural resources, all of which will eventually destroy humans' own lives.

Lurking behind these destructive practices is a conviction that humans are the centre of everything and that nature is created only for humans to meet their needs.<sup>3</sup> This anthropocentric view leads further to treating nature as merely an object upon which to apply science and technology.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank Sefrianus Juhani for having read the earlier version of this article and provided his generous feedback.

<sup>2</sup> Khalisah Khalid, "Darurat Ekologis," *WALHI*, 2021, <https://www.walhi.or.id/darurat-ekologis>.

<sup>3</sup> Feldy Lolangion, Marselino Cristian Runturambi, and Jefry Kawuwung, "Menelaah Antroposentris dalam Menyikapi Krisis Lingkungan dari Perspektif Teologi Penciptaan," *Timoti Tou* 8, no. 1 (2021): 3.

<sup>4</sup> A. Rusdina, "Membumikan Etika Lingkungan bagi Upaya Membudayakan Pengelolaan Lingkungan yang Bertanggung Jawab," *Isteka* 9, no. 2 (2015): 245.

Facing this very situation, it is important to reconsider the way human beings relate to nature. Humans should realise that nature is in fact also an integral part of their life, and that both are inseparable. The universe is but a living space of creatures. St. Francis of Assisi even went further by regarding nature as a sister and a mother who share life and welcome humans with open arms.<sup>5</sup> As a space for living, nature should not be destroyed; it should rather be safeguarded and taken care of. Given the significance of nature for human beings and other inhabitants of the Earth, a proper relation between humans and nature should be a cooperative one, not of a kind between a conqueror and the conquered.

Endeavours to cultivate an awareness of the significance of nature and to promote a harmonious relation with nature can start with paying attention to local ecological wisdoms. This is so as local wisdoms contain values that humans can extract from and use for guiding their lives. One of the local wisdoms that carry an ecological significance is *roko molas poco* in Manggarai, Flores, Indonesia. *Roko molas poco* is a rite that must be performed when the Manggaraians build *mbaru gendang*, their traditional houses (*rumah adat*). The rite is a witness to a harmonious relationship between human beings and nature as fellow creatures. It reflects the philosophy of the Manggaraians about the relationship between humans and nature. The present study aims to investigate this rite by asking the following questions: How is *roko molas poco* performed; and what is its ecological meaning? In asking these very questions, the article sets out to examine the ecological significance of the rite.

An earlier study on the ecological importance of *roko molas poco* comes from Benny Denar, Sefrianus Juhani, and Armada Riyanto in their article titled “Eco-theological Dimension of *Roko Molas Poco* in the Building of the Traditional House of the Manggarai Society of West Flores.” The article attempts to explicate the eco-theological values of *roko molas poco* rite. It shows that the rite reflects a fundamental disposition of the Manggaraians, in that the Manggarai people truly live in harmony with nature.<sup>6</sup>

Similar research comes from Domingus and Pandor. They attempt to examine the ecological and humanist dimensions of the rite vis-à-vis Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’*. Their main finding is that the rite and the encyclical issue the same call for re-ordering the relationship between human beings and nature. Furthermore, they also claim that the rite and the encyclical are highly relevant for the mitigation of the on-going ecological and humanitarian crises.<sup>7</sup>

Another study on *roko molas poco* rite has been conducted by Aventinus Darmawan Hadut, Laurentius Florido Atu, and Antonio Camnahas. The study focuses on the eco-theological meaning of the rite from the point of view of the *Laudato Si’*

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<sup>5</sup> Paus Fransiskus, *Ensiklik Laudato Si’*, trans. Martin Harun (Jakarta: Obor, 2016), 1.

<sup>6</sup> B. Denar, S. Juhani, and A. Riyanto, “Dimensi Ekoteologis Ritual Roko Molas Poco dalam Tradisi Pembuatan Rumah Adat Masyarakat Manggarai – Flores Barat,” *Kontekstualita* 35, no. 01 (2020): 1–24.

<sup>7</sup> H. Domingus and P. Pandor, “Menyibak Dimensi Ekologis dan Dimensi Humanis Upacara Roko Molas Poco dan Ensiklik Laudato Si’ Artikel 89-92,” *Titian: Jurnal Ilmu Humaniora* 6, no. 1 (2022): 1–18.

encyclical, Article 84-88. One important finding of the study is that *roko molas poco* and *Laudato Si'* have the same objective, namely, to inculcate ecological awareness among the people.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike those studies, the present article sets out to examine the ecological meanings of *roko molas poco* from the viewpoint of Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy. Buber put forward two models of fundamental relation among humans, namely, the relationships of *I-Thou* and *I-It*. Of the two models, an ideal one for him is the *I-Thou* relation for its dialogical character. Such a relation is to apply not only to the relation between humans, but also to the relations between human beings and nature as well as between humans and God. We employ this view of Buber as an analytical tool in our search for an ecological meaning of *roko molas poco* rite. In our view, both the rite and Buber's dialogical philosophy share the same value insofar as the relationship between human beings and nature is concerned.

## The Administering Process of *Roko Molas Poco* Rite

*Roko molas poco* is an important part of the rite of building *mbaru gendang*, a traditional house of the Manggaraian society. In Manggaraian language, *roko* means "to take" or "to carry"; *molas* means "beautiful girl"; and *poco* means "mountain" where the forests grow up. *Roko molas poco* refers to the rite of taking or carrying a log from the mountain where the forests grow up. The log symbolizes a beautiful girl or virgin (*molas*).<sup>9</sup> The log, the beautiful girl (*molas poco*), is to be made the main pole (*siri bongkok*) of the *mbaru gendang*. Just as any other type of traditional rite (*ritus adat*), *roko molas poco* consists of several stages, as can be seen in the following.

### Planning Discussion

The first thing to do before embarking on the *roko molas poco* rite is the so-called *lonto léok* (sitting together to discuss). *Lonto léok* is a traditional practice among the Manggaraians that aims at resolving a problem or reaching consensus on the matter under discussion. In the context of *roko molas poco*, *lonto léok* purports to discuss the things that are needed for performing the rite. In this occasion, the elders (*tu'a golo*) of the community in question invite all the chiefs of the respective clans (*tu'a panga*) to talk about the administering of the rite. Once the consensus is already reached, the next step is to distribute different tasks to the whole members of the village community (*kampung*). *Tu'a golo* is to divide the members of the community into two groups,

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<sup>8</sup> Aventinus Darmawan Hadut, Laurentius Florido, and Antonio Camnahas, "Makna Teologi Ekologis dalam Tradisi Roko Molas Poco Ditinjau dari Perspektif Ensiklik Laudato Si' 'Artikel 84-88,'" *Jurnal Agama dan Kebudayaan* 18, no. 1 (2023): 55-71.

<sup>9</sup> The Manggaraian language has several dialects. Most of the words related to the *roko molas poco* rite used in this article are from the dialect of Central Manggarai (the region of Ruteng and around). Only few words, which will be indicated in the text, come from the Kolang dialect of West Manggarai. All the spellings of Manggaraian words and phrases in this article follow Jilis A. J. Verheijen, *Kamus Manggarai I* (Leiden: Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Vollenkunde, 1967).

namely the *roko molas poco* group and the *curu molas poco* one. The former is to be tasked with taking *molas poco* out of a designated forest, whereas the latter with welcoming the *molas poco* to the village.<sup>10</sup>

## Feeding

After reaching a consensus on the execution time and distribution of responsibilities, *roko molas poco* rite is then carried out. The rite comprises several small rituals. The first is the so-called *téing hang* (which literally means “giving food to eat” or “feeding”). It is a ritual to feed the ancestors.<sup>11</sup> Behind this ritual lies a conviction of the Manggaraians that someone still has a life in another world after his or her passing away. For this reason, the Manggaraians have a custom of—and even an obligation to—maintaining the relationship with the deceased members of their families. *Téing hang* is a way to pay respect, to express gratitude, to ask for the ancestors’ blessings, and to maintain a close relationship with the ancestors.<sup>12</sup> This ritual aims to invite the ancestors to take part in *roko molas poco*. The Manggaraians believe that involving the ancestors would make *roko molas poco* go smoothly and succeed.

*Téing hang* is usually performed at night right before the search of *molas poco* in the forests. Materials needed for this ritual is one egg of *ayam kampung* (rooster) serving as *tuak* and a red rooster. Holding these materials for offering, the prayer leader then says the prayer (*tudak*). The following is an example of *tudak* said in *téing hang*:

*Dengé di’a le gemi tana wan béang étan Mori baté jari agu dedek, nggitu kolé sanggéd taung empo ata pa’ang be-lé. Ho’o dé manuk sepang kudut bantang ité. Ai diang ité ga ngo ala haju hiri bongkok molah poso tegi gami walang empo ga porong néka manga watang lamba ronggo do’ong ai kudut manga ngahang hiri bongkok de mbaru gendang. Tegi gami walang ga porong neka manga hela sola, neka manga kendit wa’i, agu sopel lime. Hitu torok agu tilir gami*

(Give ear, o the Owner and Creator of heaven and earth; so do you, o ancestors, living on the other side. This red rooster is for inviting you all. As we will be going to pick up the main log of *molas poco* tomorrow, we now would like to ask for ancestors’ blessings so that no hindrance and problem will come on the way when we pick up the main log for our traditional house.

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<sup>10</sup> Maksimilianus Jemali, Rudolof Ngalu, and Adrianus Jebarus, “Tradisi Roko Molas Poco dalam Hubungannya terhadap Martabat Perempuan Manggarai,” *Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Missio* 09, no. 10 (2017): 88.

<sup>11</sup> Wayan Resmini and Fridolina Saina, “Kebudayaan Masyarakat Manggarai Barat: Tradisi Teing Hang Empo,” *CIVICUS: Pendidikan-Penelitian-Pengabdian Pendidikan Pancasila dan Kewarganegaraan* 9, no. 1 (2021): 33.

<sup>12</sup> Fabianus Selatang, “Membingkai Relasi Orang Hidup dan Mati Melalui Tradisi Lisan Upacara Teing Hang,” *Jurnal Studi Budaya Nusantara* 4, no. 1 (2020): 61.

What we would like to ask now is that the axe will not get dull nor will it injure our legs or hands. These are our very prayers and hopes this time).<sup>13</sup>

### Sharpening Axes and Machetes

Second is the *racang cola dali kopé* ritual. *Racang cola dali kopé* means sharpening axes and machetes. This ritual is performed in the morning right before the people go out to search for *molas poco*. In this ritual, all the devices used for building the customary traditional house (*rumah adat*), represented by an axe and a machete (*dali agu kopé*), are sprinkled with the blood of the sacrificial animal, i.e., the blood of a red rooster (*manuk cepang*). Furthermore, the *racang cola dali kopé* ritual also purports to ask for the ancestors' blessings for a smooth execution of the plan and the safety of the workers in the process of building the traditional house. Besides a red rooster, it is also necessary to provide one egg of non-bred chicken as *tuak*. The presider of the ritual says the following prayer while holding the egg and the red rooster:

*Dengé lité Morin agu ngaran, nggitu kolé sanggéd taung empo ata pa'ang be-lé. Ho'o ami réje ite mori, agu sanggéd meu empo ata pa'ang be-lé. Kudut cama laing ité dali kopé, racang cola te dampu molas poco lé puar. Dasor gélang ita agu tiban. Kudut gélang dadén molas le mai poco. Hitu dé tegi dami...*

(Give ear to us o Lord, the Owner of all things. Give ear to us, o all of you, our ancestors, residing in the other side. We would like to ask you to sharpen the machetes and axes with us so that we could cut the tree, the mountain girl, in the forest. May we could see and receive her soon. May she could be brought to us. This is our very plea...)<sup>14</sup>

### Pre-Cutting and Cutting Ritual

Following the *racang cola dali kopé* is a short ritual before the cutting of the tree in the forest. Arriving in the forest, the workers begin to search for the best tree. The best tree is the one that the ancestors approve. The Manggaraians believe that the ancestors will reveal to them which wood is best for the *siri bongkok* (the main pole of the traditional house) during the search. When the axe can stick deeply into the tree during the cutting, it is a sign that the wood is of good quality and approved by the ancestors. Conversely, if the axe does not stick but rather bounces back, it signals that the wood is not a good one, nor is approved by the ancestors.<sup>15</sup>

After finding the best wood, a short ritual under the tree is performed right before the cutting. The ritual aims to ask the permission from the spirit of the forest (*poco*) for the workers to cut the tree in question. For the Manggaraians, *poco* is a sacred site

<sup>13</sup> An interview with Paulus Janggur, a traditional public figure of the Ker Village of West Manggarai, on April 2025. The prayer is expressed in the Manggaraian language of Kolang dialect.

<sup>14</sup> Denar, Juhan, and Riyanto, "Dimensi Ekoteologis Ritual Roko Molas Poco," 12.

<sup>15</sup> Hadut, Florido, and Camnahas, "Makna Teologi Ekologis dalam Tradisi Roko Molas Poco," 61.

safeguarded by a guardian spirit or inhabitant. The ritual is therefore necessary for preventing the *poco*'s anger. The people believe that the villagers will suffer from calamities resulting from the anger. The calamities could take the form of either zoonotic disease and plant pests.<sup>16</sup> Besides, the ritual is also performed so that the cutting of the tree can go smoothly and safely without wounding other trees and wild animals nearby.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, the items that must be prepared is one egg of an unbred chicken (*ayam kampung*). All the workers gather under the tree which is going to be cut down. Then, while holding the egg, the leader of the group informs the forests of the purpose of their coming, i.e., to cut down one of the trees and make it the *siri bongkok*. Afterwards, the egg is placed next to the tree. The next step is to cut the tree, clean it, turn it into a log, and march with the log to *pa'ang béo* or the gate of the village.<sup>18</sup>

### Serving Betel Nut

The fourth part is the serving of betel nut and the marching. Upon the arrival at the gate of the village, the welcoming group gather and serve the betel nut (*téing cepa*) to the post, which is symbolised as a beautiful girl from the mountain (*molas poco*). The ritual of serving betel nut is meant for expressing the joy the coming of *molas poco* brings to the whole village. A beautiful girl wearing a complete traditional clothing is then asked to take a seat on the log, an act which symbolises the post as *molas poco*. The girl remains seated on the log as the people march towards the village's main courtyard, i.e., the yard of the traditional house (*Natas Mésé*).

### Welcoming Ritual

The ritual that follows *téing cepa* is *renggas*, i.e., the welcoming exclamation. One example of the exclamation is as follows: "*Hu...mai taung ga...u..., mai naka molas poco...ia...kudut jiri siri bongkok...ia!*" (All of us, come, let us welcome the beautiful girl from the mountain! By becoming the main post of your customary house, she becomes the mother of our tribe). As the *molas poco* is being carried, the whole people sing a song titled "*Rewung Kolé Le*" repeatedly along with the sound of gong and drum. *Rewung kolé le* literally means "O clouds, run away, return to the mountain." The full words of the song are "*kolé le...eo...roko molas poco...rewung kolé le...*" (return to the mountain, o clouds, pick up the beautiful girl from the mountain, turn back o clouds...). The song is sung until the *molas poco* arrives in the place wherein the traditional house (*rumah adat*) is to be built up.<sup>19</sup> The song conveys a wish that all the bad things, symbolised as clouds (*rewung*), do not stalk *molas poco*, the virgin of the forest, to the village, but instead returns to its place of origin.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Denar, Juhani, and Riyanto, "Dimensi Ekoteologis Ritual Roko Molas Poco," 13.

<sup>17</sup> Hadut, Florido, and Camnahas, "Makna Teologi Ekologis dalam Tradisi Roko Molas Poco," 61.

<sup>18</sup> Hironimus Apul, "Dimensi Ekologis Ritus Roko Molas Poco di Manggarai," *Thesis* (Institut Filsafat dan Teknologi Kreatif Ledalero, 2020), 33.

<sup>19</sup> Apul, 34.

<sup>20</sup> Denar, Juhani, and Riyanto, "Dimensi Ekoteologis Ritual Roko Molas Poco," 14.

## ***Gerep Ruha* Ritual**

Fifth is the *gerep ruha* ritual. The *gerep ruha* ritual is then performed once the *molás poco* has arrived in the village. The ritual consists of an act of breaking an egg of a non-bred chicken placed on the *molás poco* by stepping on the egg. *Gerep ruha* is, in fact, a ritual in a traditional matrimonial rite of the Manggaraians. In the Manggaraian matrimonial tradition, a bride must perform this ritual when she enters the traditional house of her husband's clan for the first time. This ritual serves as a sign that she has formally become part of her husband's clan since then. The performance of *gerep ruha* in the building process of a *mbaru gendang* (traditional house) signifies the fact that the girl from the mountain (*molás poco*), which is to become the main pole (*siri bongkok*) of the very house, has legitimately been part of the life of the villagers.<sup>21</sup>

## **Staking the Main Pole**

The sixth part is the staking of the main pole (*hése siri bongkok*). After the performing of the *gerep ruha* ritual, all the villagers gather in the place where the *mbaru gendang* is to be built. There are several groups that must witness the staking of the *siri bongkok*, among which are housewives, members of each tribe in the village (*asé ka'é néténg panga*), members of the husband's family (*anak wina*), and all the rest of the villagers, which are often referred to as "the back and front yards" (*pa'ang agu ngaung*).<sup>22</sup>

In the first part of this ritual, the chief elder of the community deliver a welcoming speech to the *molás poco*. Doing this is necessary as the *molás poco* is regarded as a special guest who will become a mother for all the villagers. The material needed for this ritual is a red rooster. While holding the rooster, the chief elder would say a prayer of petition to the Creator and the ancestors, which goes as follows:

*Dengé di'a le gemi tana wan béang étan Mori baté jari agu dedek, nggitu kolé sanggéd taung empo ata pa'ang be-lé. Ai leso ho'o ga gami te gehe ngahang bongkok dé golo, tegi walang le gami ga porong néka gegé eme sai buru mehe, néka wakak eme sai buru warat. Ho'o kéng le gami saun manuk sepang kudut gehe ngahang hiri bongkok dé golo. Hitu tombo agu torok gami. Oné manuk ho'o le gami tombo agu torok.*

(Give heed, o Ruler of all, and so do you, o our ancestors, on the other side of the world. Today we are going to build the main pole of our traditional house. We ask that this pole will not get shaken and fall when the storms strike. We are holding this red rooster as a sign of our request for this main pole to stand firm. That is our request and petition. With this rooster in hand, we say all these prayers).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Denar, Juhani, and Riyanto, 14–15.

<sup>22</sup> Denar, Juhani, and Riyanto, 15.

<sup>23</sup> An interview with Paulus Janggur, a traditional public figure of the Ker Village of West Manggarai, on 24th April 2025. The prayer is expressed in the Manggaraian language of Kolang dialect.

After the prayer of petition has been said, the red rooster is slaughtered. Some of its blood is smeared on the *molas poco* and some other is placed at the spot where the *siri bongkok* is to be staked. Those appointed to build the customary house then can start doing their work. The process of performing *roko molas poco* rite as mentioned above must be done properly. Otherwise, as the people firmly believe, calamities would strike the whole village, taking the form of failed crops and various diseases attacking the villagers and their animals.<sup>24</sup>

*Roko molas poco*, similar to many traditional rituals, has its own values and way of seeing the world that are meaningful to the members of the community it belongs to. It, therefore, does not need an external justification for the validity of its meaning. Nevertheless, reading it through a different cultural lens might be able to broaden understanding and appreciation of its meaning and purpose. It can also increase cultural awareness and even reveal universal themes or human experiences that transcend cultural boundaries. In what follows, we would like to read *roko molas poco* from the lens of Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy. Before embarking, however, a brief account of this philosophy is needed.

### Martin Buber's Dialogical Philosophy in Brief

Mordechai Martin Buber (1878-1965), a Jewish philosopher born in Vienna and raised in Ukraine, is a religious existentialist philosopher known for his dialogical—or inter-subjective—philosophy. Influenced by neo-Kantianism and Hasidism, he authored several philosophical works that mark his legacy in the field, among which are *I and Thou* (1923), *Moses* (1946), *Between Man and Man* (1947), *Eclipse of God* (1952).<sup>25</sup> It is in *I and Thou* that all his thoughts scattered in previous works find their unified and mature expression.<sup>26</sup> Also in *I and Thou* can one find his elaboration of dialogical philosophy, the very message of which stands in stark contrast with the individualistic milieu of his time. The backbones of such philosophy are the following.

In Buber's view, relation is central to human world and extremely important for humans as social beings. Relation is not only the beginning of everything; it makes the whole human world—with “the world” being conceived of as the totality of entities that humans interact with. One can thus say: to exist, for humans, means to exist in a relation. As Buber puts it, “There is no *I* taken in itself, but only the *I* of the primary word *I–Thou* and the *I* of the primary word *I–It*.”<sup>27</sup> Relation involves contact and interaction with other beings, be they humans or non-humans. It can, furthermore, be identified through the words one uses when interacting with something external to oneself.

<sup>24</sup> Apul, “Dimensi Ekologis Ritus Roko Molas Poco di Manggarai,” 36.

<sup>25</sup> Kenneth Seeskin, “Buber, Martin,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 104.

<sup>26</sup> Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber's Life and Work: The Early Years 1878-1923* (Tunbridge Wells: Search Press, 1982), 328.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 2nd ed. (Edinburg: T. & T. Clark, 1937), 16.



Buber distinguishes two fundamental characteristics—and thus types—of human relation with other entities, namely, the *I-It* relation and the *I-Thou* relation.<sup>28</sup> In the *I-It* relation, the subject (I) regards and treats the other party in the relation as merely a thing or an object. This type of relation takes place in the sphere of “experience,” or the realm of activities in which the subject isolate himself or herself from the other party to be able to win over such a party. No meeting or encounter takes place in it. One prominent example of the *I-It* relation is found in the way conventional science is done, in which the party under study is assumed to be a closed compartment that can be manipulated for obtaining the information and knowledge thereof.<sup>29</sup> There is no such thing as self-giving act, intersubjective communication, openness, or sharing in the *I-It* relation. An exercise of domination and control hovers in this monological type of relation. Words typically used to describe such a controlling and objectifying interaction are “experience” and “making use of.”<sup>30</sup> The term “It” in this type of relation signifies any entity that is treated as an object serving the interests of the objectifying subject (the I). As further elaboration below shows, such entity can be nature, a human being, or even God. Thus, the term “It” in Buber’s dialogical philosophy has a connotative meaning rather than a denotative one.

The *I-Thou* relation, on the other hand, is a relation wherein the subject (I) regards and treats the party at the other end of interaction as part of his or her world, as a party to be bound up with.<sup>31</sup> It is a being that the I accepts as it is and allows to enter into his or her world.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the other party is seen as a subject in its/her/his own uniqueness, concreteness, and presentness. The I comes to an awareness of such uniqueness through an open-armed encounter, in which the other party comes to meet the I and the I sees the other party in its whole existence. Unlike the *I-It* relation, the *I-Thou* one is thus reciprocal or mutual, intersubjective, and dialogical in the sense that both parties in the interaction meet each other and affect each other.<sup>33</sup> It is through this interaction between the equals that the “world of relation” is established and “relation”—in the most meaningful sense of the word—comes into existence.

An ideal relation, according to Buber, is an *I-Thou* one as it fosters equality, mutual enrichment, inclusion, respect, and love. He nevertheless acknowledges the unavoidability of the *I-It* relation. This type of relation signifies the importance of things for the sustenance of human life. The dependence of human beings on things for their life makes the *I-It* relation a necessity to some extent. However, dwelling in such an objectifying relation only would make a human being cease to be a human. As Buber remarks, “And in all the seriousness of truth, hear this: without *It* man cannot live. But he who lives with *It* alone is not a man.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 15.

<sup>29</sup> Buber, 18.

<sup>30</sup> Buber, 51.

<sup>31</sup> Buber 51.

<sup>32</sup> Buber, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Buber, 23, 24.

<sup>34</sup> Buber, 52.

There are, Buber goes further, three spheres in which the two types of relation mentioned above could take place. These spheres correspond to the three different kinds of party standing at the other end of interaction. The first is in the domain of humans' life with nature.<sup>35</sup> This relation unfolds below the level of speech, probably because nature cannot speak—at least not the way humans do. Since non-human creatures are unable to speak, they “live and move over against us, but cannot come to us [...]”<sup>36</sup> The responsibility for treating nature as a Thou, therefore, rests a great deal on humans. To make his point, Buber puts forward the case of a tree as an example.<sup>37</sup> One can classify the tree according to species, study its structure, and find the laws that govern its growth. In this case, the tree is treated as an object, i.e., as an It. However, the same person can treat the same tree in its totality or unity as a creature with which he or she is bound up in relation. He or she can do so without having to do away with the specific information about the tree, such as its colour, size, number, species, etc. The person nevertheless must see all those characteristics as qualities indivisibly united with the tree. If the person can do so, the tree can be said to be a Thou to him or her.

The second sphere is that of humans' life with fellow human beings. Here, the relation takes the form of speech. The mutuality is expressed in language and actions between both parties in the relation. For a human being to be a Thou, they, just like nature, should be seen in the context of “relational event,” i.e., in relation with the other and not as a particular entity standing alone. Standing outside a relation, or standing alone, a Thou quickly becomes an It. “The particular *Thou*, after a relational event has run its course, is *bound* to become an *It*. The particular *It*, by entering the relational event, *may* become a *Thou*.”<sup>38</sup> However, a Thou is also at risk of becoming an It if such a Thou, even when standing in a relation, is seen and treated not as a whole being but as “a loose bundle of named qualities” or as an entity to be experienced and described.<sup>39</sup> The latter treatment is addressed to an object.

The third domain wherein the I-Thou and the I-It relations can be found is in humans' life with spiritual beings.<sup>40</sup> The relation with these spiritual beings, says Buber, “does not use speech, yet begets it.”<sup>41</sup> It is, furthermore, “the eternal source of art.”<sup>42</sup> The I cannot perceive this Thou, but he or she nonetheless can feel that he or she is addressed by the Thou. Buber, however, does not explain what he means by “spiritual being(s).” He only refers to it as “a form which desires to be made through him into a work.”<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, neither does he clarify what he means by the “forms.” Friedman, in his elaboration of this passage, takes them to be “not Platonic archetypes but merely the potentialities that arise of man's meeting with the world.”<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless,

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<sup>35</sup> Buber, 18.

<sup>36</sup> Buber, 18.

<sup>37</sup> Buber, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Buber, 50.

<sup>39</sup> Buber, 21, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Buber, 19.

<sup>41</sup> Buber, 19.

<sup>42</sup> Buber, 22.

<sup>43</sup> Buber, 22.

<sup>44</sup> Friedman, *Martin Buber's Life and Work*, 333.

considering the role the form plays for the creation of a work of art in Buber's account, spiritual being is better understood as that which makes it possible for a work of art to arise from a creative I. This being so, a closer synonym of a "spiritual being" would, in our opinion, be a "muse" or inspiration.

The relations with the Thou-s that take place in the three spheres mentioned above, Buber maintains further, all point to and culminate in the eternal Thou. "The extended lines of relations meet in the eternal *Thou* [...]. Every particular *Thou* is a glimpse through to the Eternal *Thou* [...]."<sup>45</sup> The eternal Thou is for him the Thou that by its nature cannot become an It, even though humans are more strongly moved to address their eternal Thou as an It.<sup>46</sup> The I meets the eternal Thou in all his or her relations with nature and fellow human beings. It is nevertheless equally true that the eternal Thou reveals himself to the I through nature and human beings. Buber calls such a relation "*I-eternal Thou* relation." It is a relation in which the I sees everything in God, leaving nothing outside God; it "gathers up and include all others."<sup>47</sup> The I reaches this cosmic range of relation through prayer and sacrifice offered in a deep faith in God.<sup>48</sup>

Institution and feeling play an extremely important role in the three spheres of life as they determine how the I treats the other party in the interaction. However, the kind of institution and feeling Buber has in mind are not the ones that the modern (individualistic) humans hold. Modern institution, in Buber's view, fails to foster a genuine public life of a *true* community. It is so because such institution is too mechanistic, "without soul."<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, the feelings of modern humans are too individualistic and not stable in caring for the others. Both institutions and feelings of modern humans operate based on the logic of separation. The result is that "[n]either of them knows man: institutions know only specimen, feelings only the 'object'; neither knows the person, or mutual life."<sup>50</sup> The kind of institution and feeling that Buber promotes are the ones that can foster the establishment of a true community, i.e., a community in which its member live in mutual relation with one another. For such institution and feeling to come about, Buber states, the people first of all must "tak[e] their stand in living mutual relation with a living Centre."<sup>51</sup> This effective living Centre, which Buber also calls "the central Thou" or simply God, would enable the members of the community to accept and treat one another as a Thou.<sup>52</sup> This claim accentuates his position as a religious existentialist philosopher.

One more thing is worth adding before wrapping up this brief account of Buber's dialogical philosophy. It concerns the shift in the status of the other party in the interaction. Important to note that, for Buber, the two types of relation could arise in all the three spheres. This means that the status of one party in the interaction – be it nature, a

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<sup>45</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 99 (italics original).

<sup>46</sup> Buber, 99.

<sup>47</sup> Buber, 100.

<sup>48</sup> Buber, 108.

<sup>49</sup> Buber, 63.

<sup>50</sup> Buber, 63.

<sup>51</sup> Buber, 65.

<sup>52</sup> Buber, 66.

human being, or God – can change from *Thou* to *It* and vice versa. A further repercussion is that an interaction can change from a dialogical relation to a monological one and vice versa. This all raises a question as to when such change of status would take place and what would make the change to occur. To answer this question, Buber would point three instances. First, the change would occur when the I sees the other party in the interaction as a bundle of qualities, such as colour, size, species, number, gender, speech ability, or goodness.<sup>53</sup> In doing so, the I sees the other partially, in its particularities, not as a whole being. Second, it would also take place when the I treats such a party as something to be experienced and described.<sup>54</sup> Such treatment would make the other party cease to a subject and become an object. Third, the change would commence when the I sees the other party as something of the past as that way of seeing denies the other party their presentness and concreteness. “True beings are lived in the present, the life of objects is in the past.”<sup>55</sup>

### **Reading *Roko Molas Poco* Ritual through the Lens of Buber’s Dialogical Philosophy**

*Roko molas poco* is a traditional ritual whose ecological meanings are still concealed in symbols, be they ritual gestures, materials, or words. It has mostly been studied in isolation from more systematically formulated views of the relation between humans and other entities. If one is to read this ritual from the perspective of Buber’s dialogical philosophy, what would come out from such an undertaking? Upon reflection, several eco-philosophical insights, values, and lessons come to the fore.

#### **Respect for Nature**

Respect for nature might sound strange for those who hold a deep anthropocentric view of the relation between humans and non-human natural entities since they regard such respect as designated only to humans. However, it is not so for those who embrace a more ecocentric view of the relation. For this group, respecting nature is regarded as a necessary thing since nature has some inherent qualities and meaningful contributions to the community that warrant respect. Besides, nature, as already mentioned in the introduction, provides a living space for all. Consequently, destroying nature equals to destroying the life of all living things, including humans themselves. In other words, respecting nature means respecting the lives of other people.

Buber’s view of respect for nature is manifested in his view of the I-Thou relation. It is a relation that takes place between two equal subjects [parties]. In such a relation, “the others” are regarded as a “thou,” rather than as a thing that can be exploited. Viewing others as “You” or Thou means treating them as subjects whose existence one must respect. Here, the attitude of respecting “the others” non-discriminatively is mandatory.

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<sup>53</sup> Buber, 21, 22.

<sup>54</sup> Buber, 23.

<sup>55</sup> Buber, 26

A question nevertheless arises: does the I-Thou relation also apply to nature? In his interpretation of Buber's dialogical philosophy, Maurice S. Friedman argues that the Thou includes not only human beings, but also nature and God.<sup>56</sup> Saying that the Thou also refers to nature indicates that nature must not be viewed and treated as merely an object, but as an entity the existence of which should be respected. Nature should be regarded as a Thou, which should be not treated at will. Its presence should instead be seen as a gift that allows humans to be aware of their uniqueness. Humans are autonomous beings, but they are also limited ones as their life depends significantly on nature. In no way is humans' life separate from "the others," be it fellow humans or nature. Nature should be respected as it is an integral part of human life.

In the *roko molas poco* rite, respect for nature is a very important attitude. The Manggaraians have a unique view of nature. For them, nature is a person that must also be valued and respected. This can be seen in the symbolisation of the main pole (*siri bongkok*) of the traditional house as a beautiful girl (*molas poco*). In a nutshell, the symbolisation begins with a story of a Manggarai girl who lives in the forest. The girl is then proposed by a young man to be his wife. There are, however, several conditions that the man would have to satisfy for the proposal to be accepted. First, the man would have to provide two maids to accompany her in the palace and some more to replace her place in the forest. Second, her pick-up would have to be attended by the whole villagers and she would have to be assigned an honourable place in the family. The man accepts all the conditions, and so the girl is picked up from the forest in a festive ritual. Upon officially being the wife of the man, she is given an honourable place in the main house. The solutions to all the problems in the family rely on her guidance and advice.<sup>57</sup>

The symbolisation of the main pole of the traditional house has still another significant meaning. In the Manggarai cosmology, the Earth is a mother, from who all kinds of creatures, including those inhabiting the forests, originate. So, traditionally, the Manggaraians regards all other creatures as their brother and sisters since all of them were born from the same womb, sustain their very lives from the same source, and are protected by the same Mother Earth.<sup>58</sup>

Also, in the *roko molas poco* rite, the beautiful girl from the mountain (*molas poco*) who will be the main pole (*siri bongkok*) of the traditional house is proposed by the villagers. The marriage proposal means that the girl would be essential part of their tribe. Her welcoming ceremony is to be enacted like that of a bride into the groom's family in the traditional wedding ceremony of the Manggarai people. The *siri bongkok* is to receive the status of *anak rona* by *anak wina* (the groom's family). The reason for the granting of such special status is that she is regarded as *endé agu ema* (mother and father) who begets children for *anak wina* and as *ulu waé* (spring water) that

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<sup>56</sup> Maurice S Friedman, *Martin Buber The Life of Dialogue* (Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press, 1955), 57.

<sup>57</sup> Ahsan Hidayat Setiadi, Nahdatunnisa Nahdatunnisa, and Andi Al-Mustagfir Syah, "“Roko Molas Poco” Tradisi Membangun Suku Manggarai dalam Upaya Pelestarian Artefak Adat,” *ANO: Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat Fakultas Teknik UM Kendari* 1, no. 01 (2022): 19.

<sup>58</sup> We owe Sefrianus Juhani for this remark.

symbolises life.<sup>59</sup> Thus, for the Manggaraian people, *molas poco* symbolises “mother” who brings about life, offspring, and fertility. She is a medium through which *Mori-Keraéng* (God the Most High) grants the blessings generously to the whole village. At this stage, the initial, human-thing relation turns into a new type of relation, namely a mother-child relation. By making *molas poco* an essential part of the village’s clan, all plants in the forest, which is but *molas poco*’s family, is regarded as an integral part of the village as a family and must be respected as *anak rona*.

### Attitude and Act of Loving Nature

Love is the foundation of a dialogic relationship. Without love, respect for “the other” would merely be a hypocritical act. In Buber’s view, love has to do not only with feeling, but also and foremost with care for “the other.” “Love is responsibility of an I for a Thou.”<sup>60</sup> Here, “the other” is regarded as a Thou that must be respected and paid heed to. For him, such an attitude stems from a belief that “the other” is equally God’s creation. As Friedman puts it, all human beings bear the responsibility for taking care of all God’s creation.<sup>61</sup> This responsibility is to apply not only to their fellow human beings, but also to all creation, including nature.

In the *roko molas poco* rite, the Manggaraians do not only respect for nature as a person but also love it. Such a love for nature is manifested in their deep care and responsibility for the safety of other living beings. Right before cutting down a tree for *siri bongkok*, the Manggaraian people would say a prayer (*tudak*) requesting that other plants and animals nearby the tree would not be hit when the tree is cut down. The prayer expresses their awareness and belief that nature, too, has the right to life. The right should not be traded off for the unjustified interests of humans, not to mention their greed. This way of seeing originates in the Manggaraian people’s belief that nature is also the works of *Mori-Keraéng*, God the Most High. This divine shared origin, so they believe, imposes on them a prohibition to use nature irresponsibly.

Besides caring for nature’s safety as expressed in *tudak*, love for nature is also manifested in the act of planting new trees to replace those that have been cut. When going to the forest to search for a *siri bongkok* tree, the people must bring new trees along as a substitute. After asking permission from the ruler of the forest through *tudak*, they must plant the new trees as a replacement for the one they are going to take. This demonstrates a clear sense of ecological responsibility.

Thus, from the perspective of Buber’s dialogical philosophy, such an ecological responsibility is an expression of the love for nature. The obligation to plant new trees comes not only from an awareness of the fact that nature has provided many things for humans, but also from an awareness that nature, too, is the Most High’s creation and deserves respect. Considering such an attitude towards nature, one can convincingly say that the *roko molas poco* rite embodies an I-Thou relation and treats trees as a Thou.

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<sup>59</sup> Hadut, Florido, and Camnahas, “Makna Teologi Ekologis dalam Tradisi Roko Molas Poco Ditinjau dari Perspektif Ensiklik Laudato Si ‘Artikel 84-88,” 66.

<sup>60</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 29.

<sup>61</sup> Friedman, *Martin Buber The Life of Dialogue*, 138.

## Friendship with Nature

Friendship with nature means maintaining a close and harmonious relation with nature. Buber's view of friendship is intimately related to his concept of I-Thou relation. In such a relation, there occurs a meeting between human beings with nature, fellow humans, spiritual beings, and eventually, the Eternal Thou. In the relation with "the other," including that between humans and nature, human beings can meet with the Eternal Thou. However, such an encounter is possible only if humans live with their whole being, in the sense of living with others, not isolating themselves from "the other," and dismantling their desire to dominate "the other."<sup>62</sup>

In the *roko molas poco* rite, the Manggaraians express their friendship with nature. Such a friendship is manifested in the prayers of petition said prior to the main tree being found. The petition contains a request to the inhabitants of the forests for not getting angry nor inflicting calamities on the villagers. The prayer is meant for securing a harmonious relationship with nature. The relationship, so the people believe, also leads them to having a good relationship with *Mori-Keraéng*, God the Creator. For the Manggaraians, nature is the manifestation of *Mori-Keraéng*'s love and acts of granting them life, safety, and blessings. They firmly believe that they are in a harmonious relationship with the Creator when they befriend nature. This worldview echoes Buber's view that humans can experience God in all their network of relation, including the relation with nature. Putting it in a Buberian vocabulary, *roko molas poco*, being a form of friendship between the Manggaraians and nature, is an I-Thou model of relation, which culminates in the relationship with the Eternal Thou.

## Impact on Real Life

The fourth point concerns the impact of the *roko molas poco* rite on the everyday life of the Manggarai people. It is interesting to note that Manggarai, the very region and cultural unit where the *roko molas poco* rite has been practised for a long time, ranks—to our best knowledge—first in Flores Island in terms of the number of ecological destructions exposed to the public. The region, consisting of three regencies, is a site of some eco-social problems. Among those problems are the government-backed destruction of villagers' coffee plantation in Colol in 2004,<sup>63</sup> the privatisation of Pede beach in Labuan Bajo in 2015,<sup>64</sup> and the ongoing waves of protest against geothermal

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<sup>62</sup> Yahya, *Mengenal Martin Buber*, 60.

<sup>63</sup> For a detailed account of this bloody protest, see Eman J. Embu and Robert Mirsell, eds., *Gugat! Darah Petani Kopi Manggarai* (Maumere: Penerbit Ledalero, 2004). See also Yohanes Irfandi Asam, "Menebus Darah Petani Kopi Colol," *Floresa*, March 9, 2016 <https://floresa.co/perspektif/analisis/20646/2016/03/09/menebus-darah-petani-kopi-colol-refleksi-atas-tragedi-rabu-berdarah-10-maret-2004>.

<sup>64</sup> Gersaimos Satria, "Demonstrasi Tolak Privatisasi Pantai Pede, Massa Aksi Pikul Dua Keranda Mayat," *VOX NTT*, March 27, 2017, <https://voxntt.com/2017/03/29/demonstrasi-tolak-privatisasi-pantai-pede-massa-aksi-pikul-dua-keranda-mayat/>; Ari D., "Tolak Privatisasi Pantai Pede, Para Imam dan Mahasiswa Gelar Unjuk Rasa," *Floresa*, December 5, 2015, <https://floresa.co/pilihan-editor/17879/2015/12/05/tolak-privatisasi-pantai-pede-para-imam-dan-mahasiswa-gelar-unjuk-rasa/3>; Hafiz Agassi, "Tolak Privatisasi Pantai Pede, Mahasiswa NTT Demo di

projects in Poco Leok and Wae Sano.<sup>65</sup> Thus, there is a discrepancy between the ecological spirit of *roko molas poco* and the real practices, between the ideal and the empirical of the rite, among its adherents.

What does the reality of such a gap tell us? It is tempting to claim *prima facie* that the *roko molas poco* rite is toothless since it fails to animate its adherents to live out an ecological I-Thou relation it embodies. However, a close look at the grassroots' responses to ecological destructions mentioned above would lead one to a more convincing inference. The protests could not have been enacted had, other things being equal, the people not had respect and love for nature as their *Mori-Keraéng's* creation. Also worthy of notice is the fact that the arguments against the un-ecological policies and practices frequently cite eco-cultural identity the Manggaraian people inherit from their ancestors as the main reason for the rejection. These all speak volumes for the roles *roko molas poco* may have played, surely together with many other factors, in the life of the people. Nonetheless, to know exactly how and to what extent the rite has inspired people in those ecological movements, further research is certainly necessary.

The awareness of the transformative power of the *roko molas poco* rite leads to our fifth and final point, one concerning the conservation of the ecological I-Thou relation envisioned by the rite. Without a serious effort to impart the rite to the young generations of Manggarai, the I-Thou model of relation it embodies will quickly fade away and disappear as globalisation storms Manggarai via tourism. One way to conserve valuable cultural heritage is by teaching it in the local schools as part of what is known in Indonesian educational system as "local (contents of the) curriculum." Along with this effort is to introduce relevant ecology-related sciences into the classrooms. An effective mitigation of the pressing ecological crisis in the long run requires a creative combination of both.

## Conclusion

As one of the local wisdoms of the Manggaraian people, the *roko molas poco* rite has an immense eco-philosophical richness. First, it is a form of veneration of nature. Second, it is a manifestation of love expressed in the form of responsibility toward nature as fellow creatures. Third, it is a form of friendship with nature which, at the same time, brings human beings to an intimate relation with God, the Creator.

The three ecological meanings of *roko molas poco* rite mentioned above have some similarity with Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy. The ideal relation is one of Subject-Subject (I-Thou) rather than subject-object (I-It). In the I-Thou paradigm, relation is dialogical. Such a relation applies not only to the relationship between humans, but also to that between humans and nature.

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Balai Kota," *Times Indonesia*, May 12, 2016, <https://timesindonesia.co.id/peristiwa-dac-rah/125165/tolak-privatisasi-pantai-pede-mahasiswa-ntt-demo-di-balai-kota>.

<sup>65</sup> Epi Wahab, "Demonstrasi Geothermal Poco Leok, Gerbang Kantor Bupati Manggarai Dirusak," *RRI*, March 3, 2025, <https://rri.co.id/ende/daerah/1365128/demonstrasi-geothermal-poco-leok-gerbang-kantor-bupati-manggarai-dirusak>.



Amidst the ecological crisis that strikes hard, *roko molas poco* offers a model for establishing a harmonious relation between humans and nature. It is important to make the values and lessons associated with this rite to be the teaching materials for the young generations in schools. In so doing, the spirit of *roko molas poco* is revitalised and passed on as a cultural heritage to the Manggarai's younger generations. All other factors being equal, a persistent endeavour to cultivate these things at schools would contribute to resolving the ecological crisis in the long run.

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