

“Twin Brothers”: Claim-Making Strategies by the Ata Modo in the Tourism Development Project of Komodo National Park, West Manggarai

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Abstract

The Komodo monitor lizard is an endangered species found only on the Indonesian islands of Komodo, Rinca, Flores and Gili Motang. To protect them, a national park was established in the 1980s. In 2019, the Indonesian government designated Komodo National Park as a super-premium tourist destination, sparking controversy over its impact on the indigenous Ata Modo people. This article examines the claim-making process of the Ata Modo community, supported by local NGOs. Claim-making – the assertion of rights over land and resources – plays a crucial role in tourism projects, often leading to uneven development that threatens community livelihoods, indigenous wildlife and the environment as a whole. The 2021 super-premium tourism development in West Manggarai involving Komodo National Park is used as a case study to explore how people secure their rights to land and animals. The Ata Modo’s claim-making has helped them to maintain their livelihoods despite ongoing political contestation. The article aims to elucidate the political processes of appropriation, access and contestation in claims to land, animals and the environment, providing insights into the interplay between society, local knowledge of human–non-human relationships and political dynamics.

Keywords: Indonesia, West Manggarai, Komodo National Park, Ata Modo, tourism development, claim-making

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Komodo National Park (KNP) comprises volcanic islands inhabited by approximately 5,700 giant lizards known as “Komodo dragons” (UNESCO 2024). The Komodo dragon was first introduced to the world in 1910 by J.K.H. Steyn van Hensbroek, which led to a rapid demand for the exploitation of Komodo dragons by sending them to the United States and Europe for research (KNP 2024). To prevent further exploitation, the colonial government and local authorities in the Bima Kingdom took steps to protect Komodo National Park. In the independent era, KNP was declared one of Indonesia’s first national parks by ministerial decree in March 1980, covering an area of 72,000 ha (ibid.). This area was expanded to 219,322 ha in 1984 to include an expanded marine area and the mainland section of Flores (UNESCO 2024). In 2013, KNP was declared one of the “New 7 Wonders (Nature)” by the New 7 Wonders Foundation (KNP 2024). The unique plants and terrain found here are of great interest to evolutionary scientists. The rugged hillsides are covered in dry savannah and patches of thorny green vegetation, which contrast with the beautiful white sandy beaches and blue waters rippling over the coral.

In 2019, the Indonesian central government designated Komodo National Park (KNP) to be a “super-premium” tourist destination. KNP comprises three major islands: Rinca, Komodo, Padar and dozens of medium-small islands. This new policy regulates the park and the surrounding area as a “National Strategic Territory” (*Kawasan Strategis Nasional*) to be developed as a “world-class ecotourism destination” (Ministry of Environment and Forestry 2016). In order to enhance the infrastructure, the government granted concessions to a number of private companies and state enterprises that cover an area of up to 447.17 hectares inside the park under the so-called “nature-tourism business permit” (*Izin Perusahaan Usaha Pariwisata Alam*). Furthermore, the designation as a super-premium tourist destination has led to the allocation of substantial resources and energy facilities in West Manggarai to the advancement of investment-based tourism development, including within KNP. For example, since 2014, the government has granted privatisation permits to PT Komodo Wildlife Ecotourism (PT KWE) for 151.94 hectares, constituting 0.5 per cent of Komodo island’s total area of approximately 32,169.2 hectares. In the KNP area,¹ specifically on Padar Island, PT KWE has been granted management rights over 274.13 hectares, equivalent to about 19.6 per cent of Padar Island’s total area. Additionally, the Ministry of Environment and Forestry has issued a privatisation permit for 22.1 hectares on Rinca Island to PT Segara Komodo Lestari. Plans are underway to privatise two other islands, Muang and Bero Island, located within the KNP core and jungle zones (WALHI 2021).

The Ata Modo people are the indigenous people of the Komodo National Park area. The total population of KNP is 4,995 people, while the population

1 For a map of Komodo National Park, see for example <https://www.komodo.indonesia-tourism.com/map.php> or <https://balistariland.com/komodo-national-park-map/> (accessed 20 June 2024).

of Komodo Island itself is 1,845 inhabitants (BPS 2020). Their language is called Wana Modo, a distinct language group with some similarities to the languages of nearby islands (Verheijen 1987). Kinship among the Ata Modo people is based on blood and identity, which is determined by practices and social relations on the island, where different clans live peacefully among one another (Afioma 2024). In the past, before the creation of the park in 1980, the Ata Modo subsisted on hunting, gathering, seasonal agriculture and fishing. Since 1980, the Ata Modo have shifted their livelihoods towards conservation and ecotourism projects (*ibid*).

The development of a super-premium tourism destination in the Komodo area has led to a contestation discourse between the government and the local community. The central government's policy tends to favour business interests, which has the effect of creating unequal development. In response, the Ata Modo local community, with the assistance of local civil society alliances in the city of Labuan Bajo, a town on the western tip of Flores island, has taken the initiative to defend their space of life. Tourism development projects frequently involve complex negotiations concerning access to and control over natural resources, including conservation areas (Dahlberg 2005, Almeida et al. 2017). Consequently, the development process can have a significant impact on local communities' livelihoods and environmental conservation efforts (Kent 2003). Furthermore, the perspectives of diverse stakeholders on spatial planning and tourism development can also lead to conflicts (Almeida et al. 2017).

However, the community's response to tourism development remains a subject of ongoing study. Existing literature primarily focuses on community participation in decision-making processes (*cf.* Muganda et al. 2017, Setokoe et al. 2019). Further detailed examination is needed in order to explore how local communities contest and negotiate government policies using their local knowledge. Building on this notion, this article aims to research the methods people employ to secure rights to natural resources, encompassing land and wildlife, focusing specifically on the case study of Komodo National Park and the Ata Modo community. It seeks to emphasise the intertwined dynamics of appropriation, access and contestation, and their impact on community livelihoods and environmental conservation efforts.

Claim-making

To deepen our understanding of the phenomenon, this study employs claim-making and indigenous territory approaches. García Kronenburg and Dirk van Dijk describe claim-making as involving “actors (individuals, groups, institutions, companies, and state), and the processes of appropriation, accessing and

contesting” (Kronenburg / van Dijk 2020: 167). Moreover, the act of claiming rights to a certain territory is inextricably linked to an understanding of the territory itself. The territory is understood not merely as a political reality; rather, it is also understood as a relationship between space and time, which includes the relationship between humans and non-humans.² In other words, the territory is a space of life as well as a relationship between human and non-human systems (Escobar 2006, Descola 2005). Hence, territories represent claims based on this relation of space-time. As in other human-related phenomena, claim-making is about the struggle for power and economic resources. Therefore, using this theoretical framework, we investigate how tourism policy in Indonesia, specifically on the Flores islands in West Manggarai, shapes the indigenous population’s interpretation of the cosmos (the universe), reflecting the concern towards material issues. Moreover, this approach captures the dynamic interactions taking place in the policy-making process and at the ground level.

Claim-making – the process by which people assert rights to land and other natural resources (Kronenburg / van Dijk 2020: 167) – has been central in current debates on tourism development policy. Given Indonesia’s archipelagic geography and diverse cultures, discourses on nature and tourism have emerged as crucial elements supporting the government’s broader economic development agenda. Within Komodo National Park (KNP), claim-making underscores the intricate relationships between humans and non-humans, particularly the ancient animals such as the Komodo dragons, which are perceived as adding value and exotic appeal for both the government and (international) tourists.

Although claim-making has been widely studied, the dominant perspectives often focus on socio-spatial aspects (Kruks-Wisner 2013, Smith 1993), women’s movements (Peattie / Rein 1983) or institutional arrangements (Lepofsky / Fraser 2003), thereby placing less emphasis on intersocietal dynamics between humans and non-humans, as well as political dynamics. The institutional perspective views claim-making primarily as an institutional arrangement originating from disputes between two different actors (Barnard 2005). A study by Michael Saward (2006) expands the concept of claim-making by arguing that it occurs through political representation grounded in culture, the importance of performance and non-electoral issues. Therefore, mere representation of claims is insufficient, as claims are products of socio-spatial exposure across divisions (Kruks-Wisner 2013). However, this perspective has limitations in understanding the numerous challenges involved in resource management within touristic destinations that are rich in local folklore and in intricate relationships between humans and non-humans.

2 See Bryan 2012, Gudynas 2009, Radcliffe 2011, Walsh 2010.

This article adds to the existing body of literature on the subject of claim-making by demonstrating that the phenomenon is the result of a complex process of appropriation, access and contestation. This process involves contesting various forms of discourse, political economy interests and power relations. The case of KNP as a “super-premium” tourist destination in West Manggarai will be used as a point of reference to illustrate the claim-making process in a sector that is highly regulated and centralistic, yet operates within a culturally strong societal context.

The research for this study was conducted in October 2021, using a case study method and qualitative research approach. A variety of sources were used to collect data, including document and media studies, face-to-face and telephone interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and observations. Media studies were carried out beforehand to gain a better understanding of the current situation and to identify potential key actors to interview. This study was part of the National Research Priorities Programme funded by the Indonesian Endowment Funds for Education (LPDP) and the National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) in 2020–2021. Entitled “Between Custom and Ballot Box: Examining the Opportunities and Challenges of ‘Asymmetric’ Democracy at the Local Level in Indonesia”, the study was led by Associate Professor Abdul Gaffar Karim from Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia. The East Nusa Tenggara team consisted of researchers from Universitas Gadjah Mada (Mahesti Hasanah and Longgina Novadona Bayo), Nusa Cendana University (Yonathan Yon Lopo, Kupang) and Widya Mandira Catholic University (Dididmus Dedhi Dosa Kupang). The fieldwork lasted two weeks and included four FGDs and 33 interviews. As we were working with local university researchers, we did not use translators. The team interviewed community leaders, villagers who run tourism businesses, village officials, local activists, local journalists, academics and government officials. Telephone interviews were conducted after the fieldwork to triangulate data with local partners and activists in Komodo National Park. FGDs were conducted with ordinary villagers and local activists at their base camp in KNP. Secondary data was collected from policy documents, statistics and village records.

Following the claim-making approach outlined by Kronenburg and van Dijk, this study delineates three stages in the discourse on political claim-making. First, the term “talking claims” refers to “when speech is used strategically to make, justify, and contest property and access claims” (Kronenburg / van Dijk 2020: 173). Second, “grounding claims” involve “the practice of inscribing or altering the landscape (or seascape, cityscape, etc.)” (*ibid.*). And lastly, “representing claims” occur “when claims are represented on material objects detached from the landscape or resource, unlike grounded claims which find meaning in their surroundings” (*ibid.*: 174). These three typologies are essential to an understanding of how people on the ground utilise claims as a strategy to preserve

their space of life, which is strongly related to the sustainability of the environment. After an introductory overview of the competing political strategies for the development of the islands of the KNP, we will examine these three categories in greater detail in our case study.

Tourism development in the KNP islands

In 2023, a total of 300,488 tourists visited KNP, as reported by the Chairman of KNP on 13 January 2024 (Taris / Prasetya 2024). The majority of the tourists, 184,096 people, came from abroad, while the number of domestic tourists was 116,392. This figure was twice as high as expected and exceeded the previous year's total of 144,724 tourists in 2022. The peak months for tourist visits were August (48,850 people), September (31,333 people) and October (23,888 people) (ibid.). Indonesian President Jokowi has actively promoted various national and international events held in the town of Labuan Bajo, the regional capital of KNP, which have resulted in increased tourist arrivals. These events included the G-20 Side Event, the 42nd ASEAN Summit and the 17th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC) (Liputan6 2024).

There are two policy strategies for development on Komodo and the surrounding islands, demonstrating two different power relations with different resources. These reflect the tension between the investment-based tourism development represented by the government in Jakarta and the community-based tourism development articulated by local NGOs and the Ata Modo community, each policy narrative representing the interests of particular actors.

The first narrative is based on market interests, positioning the corporate sector as the prominent actor in tourism development. The tourism development project in KNP serves as a shortcut for economic development, altering its primary purpose. KNP is part of one of ten National Tourism Strategic Areas (NTSA), designed and promoted by the Jokowi government since 2017 (KPPIP 2022). Moreover, tourism development in the town of Labuan Bajo has been facilitated by such events as the G-20 Summit in 2022 and the ASEAN Summit in 2023 in Golo Mori, a village near Labuan Bajo (Fadila 2020). In 2020 the government invested a considerable quantity of resources in this tourism project of nearly 70 billion IDR or around 4.3 million USD, which had an impact on the local communities (Permatasari et al. 2020). The Ministry of Public Works and Housing, through its Regional Infrastructure Development Agency (*Badan Pengembangan Infrastruktur Wilayah*), is developing an Integrated Tourism Master Plan (*Rencana Induk Pariwisata Terpadu*). The government also provides concessions to private corporations to participate in the process of developing premium tourist destination areas. Within the KNP

area two types of nature tourism business permits are in operation: Business Permits for Providers of Nature Tourism Services (*Ijin Usaha Penyedia Jasa Wisata Alam*) and Business Permits for Providers of Nature Tourism Facilities (*Izin Usaha Penyedia Sarana Wisata Alam*).³ These two types of business licences are the basis for the operation of many corporations in the KNP area and its surroundings. Both permits provide an opportunity for private corporations to operate in the Komodo National Park area, including the islands Loh Liang (Komodo Island) and Loh Buaya (Rinca Island). This type of development can be perceived as a way of laying claim to the local community's living space. As access to land becomes increasingly restricted, the Ata Modo face growing difficulties in farming and in managing their lives.

I still find that most of the vegetables for consumers here come from other regions. For instance, the suppliers of fruits come primarily from areas such as Bajawa, Bima and Makassar. This may be because local people lack the capacity to compete as chefs in hotels or because local Manggarai foods are not included in the super-premium tourism food circle. (interview with one of the tour operators in Labuan Bajo, 13 October 2021)

In addition to establishing comprehensive regulations, the central government has established a special agency to implement them. Based on Presidential Decree No. 32 of 2018 on the “Labuan Bajo Flores Tourism Area Management Authority”, the government established the Implementing Agency of the Labuan Bajo Flores Authority in 2018 in West Manggarai Regency. This agency is tasked with implementing the development of the Labuan Bajo port and the tourism sub-sectors, including the development of tourist areas and the promotion and marketing of tourism products within the East Nusa Tenggara district. It coordinates with local stakeholders, including 11 local government agencies from Flores to the Bima region, to execute the development strategy in the Labuan Bajo area. In further detail, the plan is to establish an integrated tourism area encompassing islands between Komodo, Rinca, Sumbawa and Flores, specifically around Labuan Bajo.

In contrast to the investment-based tourism development promoted by the government in Jakarta, the second policy narrative places the interests of the local community in the Komodo area at the forefront. This approach is based on political economy considerations. In this approach, it is the local population that is responsible for the maintenance and sustenance of the wider ecosystem. This is in contrast to the super-premium tourism programme in KNP, which is characterised by limited access and a lack of transparency in the decision-making

3 The Business Permit for Providers of Nature Tourism Services is a business permit granted for the provision of nature tourism services as part of nature tourism activities (cf. Article 4.1.a/b). These services include: tourism information service businesses, tour guide service businesses, transportation service businesses, tourist travel service businesses, souvenir service businesses and food and beverage service businesses (cf. Article 4.2). The Business Permit for Providers of Nature Tourism Facilities covers water tourism, accommodation, transportation and adventure tourism (see Article 6.1). According to the provisions of this regulation, all these businesses can only be carried out in business areas in the utilisation zones or blocks of National Parks, Grand Forest Parks and Nature Tourism Parks (cf. Article 4.3).

process – and which does not involve the local population in decision-making, despite its having inhabited the region for centuries.

Komodo National Park is one of the most crucial conservation forests, for both Indonesia and the world as a whole. It has been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2004 and is home to a number of very rare animals, such as the Komodo monitor lizard and the endangered humpback dolphin (Walpole / Goodwin 2001). As it is a conservation forest, visitors are required to obtain a permit and adhere to specific rules and regulations in order to gain access to the island. These regulations are primarily designed to safeguard the integrity of the ecosystem, and visitors are expected to comply with them in order to protect the national park and its surrounding environment. For instance, visitors are prohibited from feeding the animals in the park or touching them without a permit, and they are obliged to keep to the schedule set out by the park rangers (Komodo National Park 2022). Nevertheless, the government has invested in developing the area by constructing new facilities to attract tourists willing to pay a high price to experience the natural environment in the park. The government had planned to increase entry ticket prices from IDR 150,000 to IDR 3.5 million by 1 August 2022, but in the end it only increased them to IDR 200,000 or IDR 250,000 or IDR 300,000 depending on the trek distance on 1 March 2024 (Lumbanrau 2022, Haryanto 2020). This policy has prompted protests from various sectors, particularly local tourism actors who have been operating for years and have been focused on conservation activities.⁴

President Jokowi only visited Rinca Island for 5 minutes and then said that the KNP will be developed like Jurassic Park so tourists cannot have direct interaction with Komodo, consequently the tourist operators must adjust their website description and their nature business which offers direct and daily experiences with the community. (interview with a SunSpirit activist, 12 October 2021)

The conservation activities in KNP have created a strong connection between the local people and the Komodo animals, thus helping to protect the park and preserve its biodiversity. The park also plays an essential role in enhancing the quality of life of the local population, who rely on tourism as a source of income. However, some have posited that the advent of super-premium tourism in the KNP has adverse consequences for the park and its local community.⁵ “Infrastructure is provided only for the super-premium, which is consequently unattainable for small local players, who will be eliminated and replaced by people with big capital,” said one of the tourism operators in the town of Labuan Bajo (13 October 2021). In particular, the additional income earned by the super-premium tourists is said to have come at the expense of the residents, who have lost out on business opportunities as a result of the influx of visitors into the

4 Interview with tourist operator, 13 October 2021; interview with SunSpirit activist, 12 October 2021.

5 Interview with SunSpirit activist, 12 October 2021.

park. “Usually, middle to lower class tourists buy souvenirs. Wealthy cruise passengers rarely purchase souvenirs,” explains one of the souvenir sellers (in the Multatuli and Floresa project, 14 November 2022).

This implies that the increase in the number of super-premium tourists does not equate to an increase in the wealth of the community, as the tourists have their own standards and preferences. The introduction of the super-premium tour programme has been criticised for having a negative impact on the local community in several ways. KNP is managed under a zoning system based on Decree No. 65 of 2001 by the Directorate General of Natural Resources and Ecosystem Conservation, which stated that Padar Island only had a core zone and a wilderness zone. However, following the issuance of Decree No. SK.21/IV-SET/2012 by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry in 2012, 303.9 hectares of the wilderness zone on Padar Island were converted into use zones.

Since 2014, the government has been issuing permits to tourism companies under the premium tourism programme, which has changed the zoning system based on the 2012 decree (Walhi 2021). The zoning system converts wilderness zones into use zones, including tourist areas. For example, Padar Island used to have core and wilderness zones, but the wilderness zones have been converted to use zones. The changes in zoning have had two effects. Firstly, this has resulted in reduced access to the island for the local people who depend on it for their livelihood, leading to a significant loss of employment opportunities for local people. The indigenous people are heavily dependent on marine resources for their livelihood but are now restricted to accessing only two sea zones: the Traditional Nautical Use Zone of 17,308 hectares (now part of the renamed Local Community Traditional Zone from 2020) and the Pelagic Use/Traditional Pelagic Zone of 59,601 hectares. In addition, fishers will have to share these zones with tourist activities (WALHI 2021).

Secondly, it has led to the depletion of the natural resources of the island. To implement the premium tourism concept, the government plans to alter the zoning conservation status of Muang island and Bero/Rohtang island. These two islets are situated between Rinca and Flores islands. They fall within the core and wilderness zones and are home to the Komodo dragon and Yellow-Crested Cockatoo, respectively. Under the new plan, the government intends to incorporate these islets into the Tana Mori Special Economic Zone, covering an area of 560 hectares for management purposes (WALHI 2021).

Finally, the increase in tourism permits has led to an increase in the level of environmental pollution on the island.⁶ “We used to have a lot of coconuts there, but they were cut down by the KNP,” explains one of the villagers who used to live in Loh Liang (in the Multatuli and Floresa project, 14 November

6 Interview with tourist operator, 13 October 2021; interview with SunSpirit activist, 12 October 2021; interview with local activist and Komodo Island resident, 16 October 2021.

2022). Deforestation is one of the effects of the zoning system, a national government issue.

Still, the label “super-premium tourist destination” has emerged as a new image for the Komodo islands, with the Komodo monitor put in the spotlight while the local Ata Modo community is regarded as a challenge to discipline. This has resulted in unequal development for the economy, society and culture in Komodo island communities. The need to integrate the local identity into the tourism development narrative has prompted the community and local NGOs to secure and reclaim their rights to nature, including land and access to the forest.

Claim-making strategies in the KNP tourism development project

As the interviews and focus group discussions have shown clearly, the stated development of the “Komodo Super-Premium Tourism Programme” feels threatening to the livelihood of the Ata Modo people, who have lived on the islands for centuries (Verheijen 1985). The Joko Widodo government promotes infrastructure development through the Ministry of Public Works and Housing. The total area of KNP is 181,700 hectares, comprising both terrestrial and marine zones. The areas have been subdivided into nine zones, with the smallest zones comprising 298 hectares of residential land. In order to protect the super-premium zone, the government has imposed a limit of 500 residents’ households and 1,818 individuals within the zone, considering them a potential threat to the conservation and sustainability of the Komodo dragon. Through the Komodo National Park Institution (KNPI), the government has devised a plan to restrict the access of the local communities to the forest.⁷ “We also want no humans to live on Komodo Island. We will move those who live there now to Rinca Island or Padar Island,” said the governor of East Nusa Tenggara province in a press conference on 21 May 2019 (Bere / Ika 2019). This plan was met with massive protests from the community and some environmental NGOs. On 15 August 2019, the Ata Modo people staged a protest against the government’s plan to relocate and develop the area as an exclusive destination (Afioma 2024). An ad hoc team of officials from various ministries, local governments, NGOs and private companies visited Komodo Village to discuss the government’s plan and the community’s aspirations and demands (Dale / Afioma 2020: 11, Afioma 2024).

The visit to Komodo village was in response to another demonstration that took place in the town of Laboan Bajo and a dialogue in Jakarta in August

⁷ Interview with the Head of KNPI, 15 October 2021.

2019 (Afioma 2024). In 2019, President Jokowi’s administration planned to issue a Presidential Decree to include KNP and its surrounding area in the National Strategic Tourism Areas (KSPN). Although the decree has not yet been issued, privatisation is ongoing based on the Ministry of Environment and Forestry Regulation No. 8 of 2019 on “Natural Tourism Enterprises in Wildlife Reserves, National Parks, Grand Forest Parks, and Natural Tourism Parks”. The privatisation began after coordination between the governor and the national government, represented by the Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs, the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, and the Ministry of Tourism, in December 2019 in Jakarta (Bere / Ika 2019), with the result that the government decided that the Loh Liang region, encompassing the forest area within KNP, would become the exclusive super-premium zone where tourists are required to pay 1,000 USD for entry. Consequently, only privileged tourists can access the Loh Liang area, while the local community cannot enter the zone as freely as before.

This exclusionary policy has prompted some NGOs, both local and national, to initiate reclaiming actions. This arises from the perception that the Ata Modo community and the Komodo monitor’s habitat constitute a single ecosystem, where the presence of each is essential to the other. Both the local environmental NGO SunSpirit for Justice and Peace (also known as SunSpirit), based in Labuan Bajo, and WALHI, a leading Indonesian environmental NGO, have engaged in advocacy through formal and informal channels, employing three key strategies for reclaiming.

Talking claims

Firstly, the community has engaged in *talking claims* by circulating local folklore, which says that the local community and the komodo monitor are twin brothers.⁸ At the stage of talking claims, a narrative is being built with the help of NGOs. Floresa.co, Mongabay.com and WALHI.or.id are the main media outlets that have been actively publishing on these issues since 2014. They also make collaborative publications, for example by Floresa.co and Project Multatuli, one of the largest media-based research publishers in Jakarta, in November 2022. In the local language Wana Modo, the Ata Modo are referred to as the *komodo* people. The term consists of two words, *ko* (belong to) and *Modo* (the Modo people). Therefore the name *komodo* can be interpreted as “belonging to the Modo people”.⁹ A SunSpirit activist explains that there are two ways of disseminating the folklore:

8 Statement from indigenous leader, 5 August 2022, in WALHI NTT (5 August 2022). See also Elegi Orang Komodo, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEqIaBXRIuk> (accessed 20 June 2024).

9 Interview with conservation activist, 17 October 2021.

First, organising the work through visits by our team and bringing new knowledge through videos and other visual products. Secondly, publications through the media platforms [...] then there is the documentary analysis of Flores through the work media. (interview with SunSpirit activist, 12 October 2021)

According to legend, a Komodo princess, gave birth to twin sons, one of whom resembled a Komodo monitor (Dale / Afioma 2020). The twins were named Gerong (the boy) and Sebae (“the other half”). To avoid public humiliation, Sebae was banished to the forest. Years later, Gerong develops into a good man with excellent hunting skills. He goes to the forest with the intention of hunting deer, but instead encounters a Komodo monitor. Gerong proceeds to hunt the animal, but fortunately, the Komodo princess intervenes and prevents Gerong from killing it. She explains that Gerong must not kill the Komodo monitor as it is his twin brother. Since then, the community on Komodo Island has treated the animal as a member of their family.

The community reinterprets the local folklore as testament to the fact that they are entitled to the Komodo territory. According to the legend that has been passed down through generations, the folklore holds that the bond between the local community and the Komodo monitor is inseparable and woven into the fabric of their shared history.

The act of talking claims here takes up the direct connection between the local community and the Komodo monitor. The government plans to relocate the local Ata Modo communities because it sees them as “squatters” or “wild settlers”, but for the Ata Modo, the relocation threatens their space of life (Dale / Afioma 2020: 1). Moreover, for them these plans constitute an attempt to erase their history and civilisation, even though “[they] have been living together with [the] Komodo for hundreds of years”.¹⁰ Besides threatening the agrarian rights of the Ata Modo, the new super-premium eco-tourism also undermines the relationship between the Ata Modo community and the Komodo monitor. The folklore surrounding the assertion that the Komodo dragon is a relative of the Ata Modo or Komodo people forms the foundation for their claim that they are inherently linked to the Komodo monitor and cannot be separated under any circumstances. The Ata Modo have coexisted with the Komodo monitor in what anthropologists refer to as an “interspecies companionship” (Tsing 2012, Haraway 2003).

“Interspecies companionship” refers to the bond between different species, emphasising the mutual benefits and emotional connections that result from close interactions. This concept is borrowed from Donna Haraway (2003, 2008), who explores how humans interact with the animals closest to us and what this relationship means. She notes that they are “constitutively companion species. We make each other up, in the flesh. Significantly other to each other in specific

¹⁰ Statement from Head of Hamlet One in KNP, 5 August 2022 in WALHI NTT (5 August 2022). See Elegi Orang Komodo, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEqIaBXRiuk> (accessed 20 June 2024).

difference” (Haraway 2003: 2–3). For Haraway, humans become human not through opposition to animals (liberal humanism), but through contact with them (McLaughlin 2015: 20). This close companionship translates into contemporary conservation actions, whereby individuals are even willing to risk their own safety to combat forest fires in the mountains to save their four-legged “twin brothers”.¹¹ In the local vernacular, the Komodo monitor is called *sebae* (other half) – referring to the twin Komodo brothers described in the folktale above and symbolising the coexistence and interdependence of the Ata Modo people and the Komodo dragon in everyday life up to the present day (Dale / Afoma 2020: 3).

The folklore of the “twin brothers” shows how the indigenous community relates to the territory as part of their oral traditions and history passed down from generation to generation over the centuries (Jackson / Nexon 1999). Moreover, oral literature is intertwined with particular rituals that directly reference specific environmental features, as well as the flora and fauna around the island (*ibid.*). To underline their claims, the Ata Modo base their claims on the concept of a deep relationship between humans and the non-human Komodo monitor, which is seen as a symbolic object of the community. This symbol helps the community to build an identity of who they are, how they relate to each other and to leverage their (fragile) position vis-à-vis the government or other (powerful) actors.

Grounding claims

Prior to the super-premium tourism programme, the local Ata Modo community had a land use permit that allowed them to develop and register their tourism-related activities in the area. Apart from legal recognition, their tourism-related activities were based on traditional ownership rights. However, the government-led tourism development project only sells and represents the premium facilities, including modern boats. A boat plays a crucial role in tourism in the Komodo islands because the Komodo monitor only lives on a few of the 147 islands surrounding Komodo National Park.¹² The community has therefore started to invest in and exhibit their traditional and minimalist boats in the tourist area of Labuan Bajo.¹³ Their aim is to attract the attention of tourists who are likely to use their service instead of the modern boats. The service price of the traditional boat is much lower than the modern one (140 USD vs 1100 USD).¹⁴ However, new investors are increasing pressure on this strategy by offering more modern facilities under the super premium policy.

11 Statement from a villager, 5 August 2022 in in WALHI NTT (5 August 2022). See Elegi Orang Komodo, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEqIaBXRiuk> (accessed 20 June 2024).

12 Interview with Regional Secretary, 14 October 2021.

13 Interview with tourist operator, 13 October 2021.

14 Interview with tourist operator, 13 October 2021.

Grounding claims means placing a visible mark on a particular territory so that it can be easily identified (Kronenburg / van Dijk 2020). The mark needs to be a combination of on-site work and activities to claim the resources. Cutting branches and putting them on the ground or starting community activities on the ground are some examples of grounding claims (Kronenburg / van Dijk 2020). The new policy on the super-premium tourism programme has challenged the traditional mark, so the advanced grounding of claims is needed both locally and outside the area. Being aware of their fragile position, the Ata Modo community and SunSpirit activists recognise the need for continuously grounding claims alongside other strategies.

We counter the national government's narrative in the KNP by producing public education media [...] and networking by connecting with JATAM, Floresa.co and AMAN [Indigenous People's Alliance of the Archipelago], then doing work like advocacy, community development and regular meetings. (interview with SunSpirit activist, 12 October 2021)

Owning tourism infrastructure is one aspect; effectively utilising traditional knowledge in these claims is another critical factor.

The Ata Modo community and SunSpirit activists have conducted demonstrations with the objective of attracting the attention of the National House of Representatives. On 12 February 2020, "People of Conservation and Tourism"¹⁵ held a demonstration in the KNP, in front of the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) and the Regent's Office of Manggarai Barat (Un Taolin 2020). The protesters gave speeches and had audiences with the local government, during which they made ten demands, one of which was to reconsider the super-premium projects, as they would harm their businesses and the environment (Un Taolin 2022). They hoped to achieve a high level of participation to demonstrate the strength of their claims to a wider audience. Their intention was to gain support for their claims regarding the territory and to utilise it as a means of enhancing their opportunities and gaining greater attention at the national level in the discourse on Community-based Tourism Development. The concept of Community-based Tourism Development was envisioned by the local community with the aspiration that tourism development would be informed by their indigenous knowledge, involve their people and utilise their infrastructure in the super-premium tourism programme.¹⁶ "In demonstrations and speeches on the streets, we don't just talk about conservation in the KNP, there have to be three things: conservation, livelihoods and a community-based tourism economy," said one of the villagers (interview on 12 October 2021). Thus, they have invested in the formation of alliances and the pursuit of cooperative endeavours:

15 "People of Conservation and Tourism" consists of Asita, Askawi, Formap, P3KOM, Dock, Gahawisri, Ganda Pemuda Komodo and SunSpirit for Justice and Peace.

16 Interview with villager from Komodo village, 12 October 2021.

I'm involved in the Tourism Awareness Group [*Kelompok Sadar Wisata*, Pokdarwis] and play a role in developing the village as a tourist destination. I'm aware of the potential of our village. So, we deliberately created thematic tourism packages. We invite tourists to experience what it's like to be one of the Komodo people, and we also plan to launch a five-day tourism package in Komodo Village, learning the Komodo language and basic techniques for handling Komodo. Essentially, our tourism introduces visitors to the local lifestyle. We're the only one of our kind in the world. (Head of Tourism Awareness Group, Pokdarwis, 16 October 2021)

As explained in the previous paragraph, a multi-level alliance has been developed, starting from local, regional and national levels. At the local level there is cooperation with Pokdarwis and "People of Conservation and Tourism". There is also WALHI, which has regional and national branches. As mentioned by the SunSpirit activist before, they also cooperate with JATAM and AMAN to echo their struggle. The form of this multiple collaboration is in media publications, research and advocacy.

The designation of Komodo as a "super-premium" tourist destination has significant political implications, as the national government in Jakarta holds sway over its planning and execution. Conversely, the local government and the Regional House of Representatives of West Manggarai (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah*) have made minimal contributions, particularly concerning tax and levy matters thus far. In order to address these concerns, the National House of Representatives has convened discussions with the local community and SunSpirit activists. Additionally, the activists have pledged to engage in negotiations with the President to ensure greater community involvement in the tourism development project.¹⁷ The ongoing negotiations provide an illustrative example of how asserting claims through the National House of Representatives can challenge the national discourse. Currently, the local community is leveraging traditional knowledge to convey information to external stakeholders and utilising existing channels to garner broader attention. The community's efforts to ground claims are not limited to challenging premium tourism projects. They are also combining their existing access to resources and networks with investment activities to expand their claims.

Representing claims

Representing claims means to focus on making claims visible, typically characterised by their material dimension. As Kronenburg and van Dijk (2020: 174) argue, "representing claims is when claims are represented on material objects that are detached from the landscape or resource, unlike grounded claims which find meaning in their surroundings". The material dimension of these signs is significant as it represents "the rearrangement of things on the ground" (Blomley 2007: 4). Examples of representing claims include map-making, surveys, boundary

¹⁷ Interview with SunSpirit, 17 October 2021.

lines and the collection of GPS points. These signs serve as a means of communicating property claims (Kronenburg / van Dijk 2020: 174).

In the KNP the representation of the claims has been achieved through the establishment of a cultural centre and an alternative tourism route. The tourism project initiated by the government focuses on premium facilities that are typically owned by Jakarta-based oligarchs and investors. In response, the local community and SunSpirit activists have launched alternative tourism initiatives that are rooted in local knowledge and cultural representations.¹⁸ They established the Komodo's Community Centre (KCC-Rumah Pengetahuan Ata Modo) at Komodo Village in 2021, a cultural hub showcasing local artefacts and the historical bond between the Ata Modo community and the Komodo monitor (Hastutik 2021). The Ata Modo, with the help of local NGOs, organised a festival called "Festival Ata Modo" on 5 and 6 November 2021.

The event featured three main activities: the inauguration of the KCC, a boat festival and local food exhibition, and art performances by local Ata Modo people (Hastutik 2021). The KCC is expected to be a hub of knowledge and a centre for research on the relationship between a Komodo dragon and Ata Modo. It also serves as a study centre for the younger generation (Hastutik 2021). A visit to the centre is included in the alternative tourism package provided by the local community and the Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis). This offers insights into how to speak the local language and engage in respectful interaction with Komodo monitors like the local people.¹⁹ "We know the potential of this village, so we have created themed tour packages. We educate our guests on how to experience life as a Komodo resident. This involves living in a Komodo village, learning the Komodo language and acquiring basic techniques for interacting with Komodo dragons," explains a Pokdarwi member (interview 16 October 2021). Regrettably, the cultural centre has reportedly fallen into neglect due to insufficient funding and support during the last years. Consequently, tourists tend to visit Loh Liang and Komodo National Park, instead of visiting the community residents.²⁰

Representing claims in this KNP case demonstrates the vital nexus of claim and property, involves capturing both historical and contemporary processes, necessitating the inclusion of boundaries, mapping and visual elements to effectively depict these processes (Cotula 2011, Kronenburg / van Dijk 2020). In the beginning, the local community possessed a territory on the island on which they had been able to live for centuries. Then the Jokowi government divided the KNP in 2020 into nine zones through Decree of the Directorate General of Natural Resources and Ecosystem Conservation. The 2020 Decree was issued to adjust the zoning process of the KNP because it was found that several zones

18 Interview with SunSpirit, 12 October 2021.

19 Interview with member of Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis), 16 October 2021.

20 Interview with member of Tourism Awareness Group (Pokdarwis), 16 October 2021.

established in 2012 were no longer suitable for the needs and internal and external dynamics of KNP management (WALHI 2021). Although the total area of the zoning remains the same, there have been changes in the wilderness zone. In 2012, the wilderness zone covered 66,921 hectares, while in the 2020 Decree, it covers only 22,192 hectares. As these numbers reveal, the super-premium tourism policy in the Flores Islands and KNP areas underscores the disparity in territorial definitions between the central government and the local community, leading to contested power dynamics. While the community perceives the KNP territory as intrinsically tied to local culture and place, emphasising it as a space of residence and cultural connection, the government sees it primarily as a managed service area (Prebensen et al. 2018). This governmental perspective neglects the community's understanding of the territory as a vital habitat where social relationships are formed through interactions between human and non-human elements (Surrals / Hierro 2005, Surrals 2017).

One of the areas in the territory is a traditional settlement that has been designated for the indigenous community, which is administered by the head of the KNP. According to the Regulation of the Minister of Environment and Forestry of the Republic of Indonesia No. P.7 of 2016 on the Organisation and Working Procedure of the Technical Implementation Unit of the National Park, the head of the KNP is a structural official of echelon IIIb from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, who is appointed, not elected. This head and their staff are responsible for inventorying potential areas, area planning, management, protection, security, forest fire control, ecological restoration, closure of areas, non-commercial use of plants and animals, development of environmental services, counselling, promotion of the love of nature (*bina cinta alam*) and empowerment of surrounding communities (as per Article 28).

However, in the super-premium policy, the government has asserted that the local community is occupying the land illegally and must be relocated from the islands. The community has claimed the land as their property, despite the absence of a certificate that would enable them to reclaim their position. Since the Ata Modo community's claim is for their rights over their territory, the representation of claims is done through advocacy, by forming the KCC as a tangible representation of Ata Modo's claim. Through the KCC, the Ata Modo community seeks to reclaim the resources that belong to them. The resources here are their culture and knowledge as Ata Modo who know and live together with the Komodo dragon. Furthermore, the KCC wouldn't be effective without talking and grounding claims. This is why the KCC is integrated with the alternative tourism packages offered by the community. Finally, the three claim strategies (talking, grounding and representing claims) show that a combination of access to resources and cultural legitimacy can help them secure their position as caretakers of the Komodo territory. This representation of claims in multiple ways demonstrates how the local community's claims require various

resources, such as access and prior legitimation to articulate the continuity of historical and contemporary processes.

The three strategies outlined above represent the West Manggarai people's efforts to challenge the government's dominance in the development of tourism in the KNP, while simultaneously seeking to safeguard their rights as citizens. The talking and grounding of claims serve to underscore the indigenous connection to and knowledge of the territory as a counter-hegemonic force, particularly rooted in the twin brother legend. These approaches are insufficient without the third strategy, representing the claims. Although both the talking and grounding claims strategies are evidently based on the assertion of land and forest claims, the representing claims serve to reinforce their position. This multifaceted strategy reflects the collective endeavour of the Ata Modo people to gain recognition and empowerment, and underscores the necessity of incorporating indigenous knowledge as a legitimation force to assert authority over the territory (see also Jennings 2017).

This struggle for territorial authority is further complicated by the super-premium tourism policy in the Flores Islands and Komodo National Park (KNP) areas, which highlights the disparity in territorial definitions between the central government in Jakarta and the Ata Modo local community, leading to contested power dynamics. While the community perceives the KNP as intrinsically tied to local culture and place-relatedness, emphasising it as a space of residence and cultural connection, the government views it primarily as a managed service area (Prebensen et al. 2018). This governmental perspective neglects the community's understanding of the territory as a space of life, where social relationships form through everyday interactions between humans and non-humans (Surrals / Hierro 2005, Surralles 2017).

The tourism expansion of the KNP in West Manggarai demonstrates the vital interest of local communities in the development and equitable benefit sharing of tourism on their territories. The Ata Modo community, who have lived there for centuries, define Komodo as their territory and home (Walpole / Goodwin 2001). Moreover, they possess a unique understanding of how to live, communicate and approach the Komodo dragon, fostering a form of interspecies companionship (Haraway 2003, Tsing 2012, Dale / Afioma 2020). Their existence is intricately tied to the biodiversity of the islands, an aspect that the government ignores in its decision-making. Consequently, the government's tourism policy threatens indigenous people's relationships with their environment, paying insufficient attention to socio-spatial indignity (Garcia 2020, Radcliffe 2017).

The three strategies outlined above demonstrate that local communities have the power to influence and define their territory and welfare through political agency. The strategy of claim-making serves as both a legitimising force and a political countermeasure against governance agendas that marginalise commu-

nity knowledge in decision-making processes. By politicising their local folklore, the Ata Modo aim to access and assert their territorial claims in Komodo National Park, challenging the Jakarta government's policy. The KNP case thus reveals the resistance of local culture to the central government's encroachment, which seeks to discard traditional ways of life for the benefit of the tourism industry.

Conclusion

Using the claim-making concept to bridge access and property theory and indigenous territory frameworks, we view claim-making as the product of multiple appropriations, accessing and contesting. This process involves contesting discourse, political economy interests and power relations. The Ata Modo community is reclaiming its land and livelihood in and around the Komodo National Park through the following four instruments: networking with local and national NGOs, engaging in media discourses, direct negotiation with local representatives and infrastructure development. Practically, they implement these strategies in three ways – acknowledging their connection as the twin brother of the Komodo monitor, investing in tourist infrastructure, and constructing a cultural centre and alternative tourism routes. This process emphasises the importance of cultural heritage and non-human entities in reclaiming the Ata Modo community's legitimacy. Furthermore, it understands claim-making as an evolving definition that will continuously be redefined and reproduced along with the relationship between the community and the environment.

Throughout the history of the development of the Komodo National Park, the process of claim-making has strongly influenced the process of socio-political development in the local community. The super-premium tourism policy has created tensions between the government and the local community. The central government in Jakarta facilitates the private sector by granting concessions and permits for the use, management and development of tourism projects. It has also divided the KNP into several zones, allowing the private sector to expand its tourism project and accumulate capital. The local community, in contrast, is to be relocated, as they are considered to be illegal residents in the absence of land ownership certificates.

This article has described how the local Ata Modo community is engaged in the process of defending and actively reclaiming its legitimation over the territory. With the support of local and national NGOs, the community has established a policy of claim-making in three areas. Firstly, they claim their relationship with the Komodo monitor by talking and echoing their identity as its twin brother (talking claim). Based on the logic of interspecies companion-

ship, the Ata Modo community has asserted that it cannot be separated from the Komodo monitor. Secondly, the local community has grounded its claims through investment in tourist infrastructure and an audience with the National House of Representatives (grounding claim). Finally, they have solidified their bond with the Komodo monitor by establishing a cultural centre and an alternative tourism route (representing claim). The process of claim-making within the context of the KNP demonstrates that cultural heritage and historical beliefs transcend mere tourist commodity. Moreover, the recognition of knowledge exchange between humans and non-humans signifies a movement to reclaim the legitimacy of the local community, which has been overlooked by the state and the private sector in super-premium tourism endeavours.

By utilising the apparatus of the politico-legal system, indigenous communities in Indonesia can establish and reclaim their rightful ownership of property. The KNP case study illustrates how the Ata Modo can leverage their cultural heritage to reinforce their bond with the environment and underscore their essential role in spearheading, developing and overseeing eco-tourism and conservation initiatives. Furthermore, the claim-making process within the KNP context highlights the pivotal role of folklore in advocating for community rights and grassroots movements against detrimental development across Indonesia. This case also emphasises the importance of employing multiple strategies to cultivate networks, garner support and reinforce movements simultaneously.

In July 2024, the national government, through the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, announced its plan to temporarily close the Komodo National Park in mid-2025. This plan aims to restore and preserve the Komodo dragon's ecosystem, which is in need of protection. The government's plan has been strongly criticised by the Ata Modo people. They argue that it will not benefit the recovery of the ecosystem in Komodo National Park because the government has not revoked the licenses of several companies with concessions of hundreds of hectares on various islands, which pose a threat to conservation itself (Susabun 2024).

In the theoretical realm, this study shows that claim-making through the lens of human–non-human relationships contributes to the post-human approach that challenges human–animal dualism. Within this framework, post-human discourse advocates for the inclusion of non-humans in rights assertions. The indigenous people's approach to claim-making provides inspiration for the development of alternative methods of framing and asserting rights. These methods emphasise the active involvement of non-human entities, rather than disempowering them to mere expressions of cultural belief. In conclusion, this research contributes to the anthropological discourse addressing the emerging role of non-human agents in political discourse, particularly concerning indigenous rights (Scheer 2021: 490). Ultimately, claim-making is part of the process of appropriation, access and contestation in claims to land, the living and their environment.

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