

Animals in Tradition and Culture: An Ethnozoological Study of the Indigenous People of Seram Island

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the relationship between the indigenous people of Seram Island and several species of animals that are utilized for socio-cultural purposes and how the practice of ethnozoology can contribute to sustainable conservation efforts. The research was conducted using an ethnographic approach through in-depth interviews with purposively selected respondents. Qualitative descriptive analysis was conducted systematically based on themes that bind the types of animals studied. The results showed that the practice of ethnozoology includes utilization for ritual purposes related to local community belief values. Some animal species that are utilized for special purposes include Cuscuses (*Phalanger* spp.) and wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) which are useful for traditional ceremonies. The animals are killed and the meat is divided to be eaten during the ceremony. Gosong Bird (*Eulipoa wallacei*) as a Season Marker helps the community in managing agricultural land, marked by the presence or absence of these animals at certain locations. Deer (*Rusa timorensis*) as a Source of Food and Social Status by utilizing its meat. Cassowary (*Casuarius* spp.) as a symbol of strength. Hornbill (*Rhyticeros plicatus*) as a symbol of longevity. These animals are utilized by indigenous people not only for traditional rituals but also for animal protein needs such as cuscuses, Wild Boar and Deer. The needs of the indigenous community for the aforementioned animals have encouraged the community to maintain and preserve them based on their local wisdom such as the application of Sasi.

Keywords: Animals; Ethnozoology; Indigenous peoples; Seram island; Traditions and culture

Introduction

Seram Island, as part of the Maluku Islands, has a high biodiversity wealth and is home to various endemic species (Edward et al., 1993), including Cuscuses (*Phalanger* spp.), wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), scrub fowl (*Eulipoa wallacei*), deer (*Rusa timorensis*), Hornbill (*Rhyticeros plicatus*), and cassowary (*Casuarius* spp.). The existence of these animals not only plays a role in the ecosystem, but also has an important meaning in the social and cultural life of the local indigenous community (Ellen, 2012).

The indigenous people of Seram Island, such as the Alune and Wemale tribes, who are distinguished by their language (Wakano et al., 2023) have a close relationship with nature which is reflected in their ethnozoological practices. Ethnozoology is a branch of science that studies the interaction between humans and animals in a cultural context, including the use, symbolism, and beliefs associated with certain fauna (Berlin, 2019; Pilatus et al., 2017). Ethnozoological studies are essential to understanding how local communities use and conserve their biological resources, which can provide insights into local wisdom-

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based conservation (Jones & Hill, 2021; Mutula et al., 2025).

In everyday life, the indigenous people of Seram Island utilize animals for various purposes, such as consumption, traditional rituals, and spiritual beliefs. Generally, many types of wild animals in the forest are for consumption (Rusmiati et al., 2018). Some animals are considered a symbol of social status or have strong mystical value (Muller & Rahawarin, 2018; Ramadiana et al., 2018; Anugrah et al., 2021; Andriani et al., 2023). This research has novelty because it specifically examines six animal species, namely Cuscuses (*Phalanger* spp.), wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), gosong bird (*Eulipoa wallacei*), deer (*Rusa timorensis*), hornbill (*Rhyticeros plicatus*), and cassowary (*Casuaris* spp.) in the cultural context of the Seram Island indigenous people.

This research is one of the first to examine human-animal relationships within the framework of ethnozoology specifically in the indigenous people of Seram Island, especially the Alune and Wemale tribes, which have unique traditions and local wisdom but lack scientific documentation. This approach has not been widely practiced, especially in uncovering the symbolic, social and ecological meanings of each animal. The gosong bird, for example, is understood as a marker of the planting season (Rahmadi, 2022), the hornbill (*Rhyticeros plicatus*) as a symbol of longevity, while the cassowary is seen as a symbol of strength (Hawkins, 2024). Deer and wild boar are not only used for consumption but also play a role in the social structure of the community, while Cuscuses are linked to spiritual values and customary beliefs (Ellen, 2012).

By highlighting these cultural functions, this research presents an ethnozoological approach that is not only descriptive, but also in-depth and contextual, which is relevant in formulating local culture-based conservation strategies in the Wallacea region (Gomez et al., 2020; Darwis et al., 2024). Therefore, this research aims to examine the relationship between the indigenous people of Seram Island and these animals and how the practice of ethnozoology can contribute to sustainable conservation efforts.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with ethnographic methods. Data were collected through several techniques, namely: In-depth interviews with purposive selection of 25 respondents, namely with individuals or community leaders or traditional leaders who have knowledge about animals and/or who are directly involved in animal management. The respondents selected include traditional leaders,

traditional hunters, and local community members who understand how animals are used in their social and cultural lives. This interview uses a semi-structured guide to explore information about the symbolic meaning of animals, hunting practices, and customary rules governing the use of animals. Data collection was also carried out through a Participatory Observation approach where researchers were directly involved in community activities to observe their interactions with animals, including hunting practices, the use of animals in traditional ceremonies, and patterns of wildlife consumption. In addition, observation was carried out to document the practice of animal use in everyday life and traditional ceremonies.

Data analysis was conducted thematically using a descriptive-qualitative approach to identify key patterns in human-animal relationships (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The thematic analysis stage begins with making transcript notes of the research results, coding and searching for themes by connecting the codes that have been made, then defining and setting themes (Nurhayati et al., 2024). Then describe the themes based on the main themes, such as cultural values, economic utilization, and traditional conservation practices. Documentation analysis was also conducted by reviewing various documents, such as historical records, conservation reports, and previous ethnozoology studies to strengthen the findings of research data in understanding the dynamics of animal utilization by the indigenous people of Seram Island.

Results and Discussion

Cuscuses (Phalanger spp.) in Tradition and Belief

Cuscuses is a nocturnal animal that is often considered a forest guardian by the indigenous people of Seram Island. In some local beliefs, the presence of Cuscuses around settlements is believed to be a good or bad sign depending on the direction of its appearance (Muller & Rahawarin, 2018). In addition, Cuscuses is also consumed as a source of protein, although its population is decreasing due to intensive hunting (Rahmadi, 2022; Tjoa et al., 2022).

Cuscuses hunting by indigenous people in Seram, especially by the Nuaulu Tribe, is aimed at traditional ceremonies which is termed *Pataheri* (Tanamal et al., 2022). The Pataheri cultural ritual that used to be performed by the Nuaulu tribe on Seram Island, Central Maluku, is known as a male maturation ceremony that used to be accompanied by the practice of beheading humans from outside the community as a symbol of courage and strength. A distinctive feature of this tribe is the wearing of red cloth (*Karonunu*) by adult men after undergoing Pataheri, as well as the flattening of teeth in

adult women as part of a maturation ritual called *Pinamou*. Fahham (2016), explained that because it is against state law, the practice of beheading humans has been replaced by the sacrifice of chicken heads in the Pataheri ceremony. However, in later developments, the chicken head was replaced with the head of cuscuses, an endemic wild animal, as a symbol of might. The choice of cuscuses reflects the higher challenge and skill in the hunting process, compared to the chicken. However, on the other hand, they also consume cuscuses, some even hunt it to sell it to get money for family needs. However, the only cuscuses consumed are certain cuscuses that are not used for traditional rituals.

Muslim communities on Seram Island do not consume Cuscuses because according to their beliefs the animal is forbidden to eat, so the Cuscuses population is found more in Muslim-dominated areas. However, sometimes those who are not Muslims are given the opportunity to hunt Cuscuses in Muslim areas. So that efforts to protect Cuscuses are hampered, unlike the Bane tribe in Tobelo, they believe that Cuscuses is the ancestor of their ancestors, so they do not eat Cuscuses even if they meet it, they must avoid it (Kusumaningrum et al., 2018). This shows that traditional social taboos are very useful for conservation practices in the uncontrolled use of certain animal species (Masy'ud et al., 2020).

In connection with the uncontrolled use of Cuscuses, several villages on Seram Island have implemented Cuscuses sasi. Sasi is carried out with the aim of giving the animal the opportunity to breed. Cuscuses sasi is determined by traditional institutions. Usually, sasi activities are carried out in relation to church celebrations, such as the confirmation of sidi. Sasi is carried out from 6 months to 1 year before the event. During that time, no Cuscuses is hunted and this is adhered to because it is beneficial to the community as a whole.

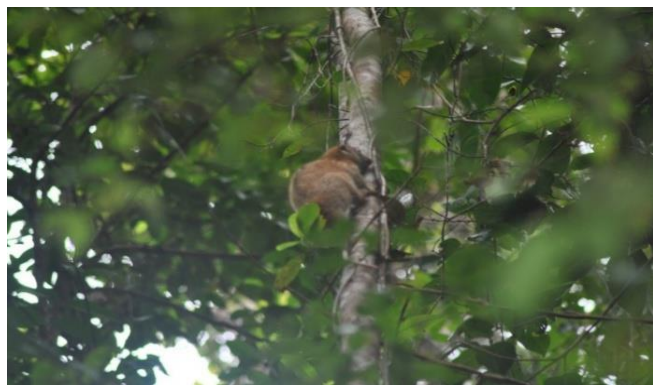


Figure 1. Cuscuses on Seram Island

The Cuscuses plays an important role in the traditions and beliefs of the indigenous people but its existence is threatened by habitat destruction that threatens the continuity of traditional rituals (Pattiselanno, 2005). The Cuscuses is also closely related to the forest, which has deep spiritual meaning for the indigenous people, and sacred locations in the forest are often associated with the presence of the Cuscuses. Seram Island is a habitat for several Cuscuses species, such as *Phalanger orientalis* and *Spilocuscuses maculatus*, which are an important part of the cultural and ecological heritage of the indigenous people. However, logging and poaching activities threaten the Cuscuses. There is even a statement from a Nualu traditional leader on Seram Island stating that: "Before logging, we used to find Cuscuses very easily, now it is difficult. Hunting for two to three days before we can meet,". Furthermore, it is said that sometimes to hunt Cuscuses now one must go far, even into the forest belonging to the neighboring village.

Thus so conservation efforts are needed to maintain the existence of the Cuscuses and the continuity of the traditional traditions associated with it. It is even believed to have health benefits (Mardiastuti et al., 2021). Overall, the Cuscuses is not just an ordinary animal for the indigenous people of Seram Island, but has deep symbolic and spiritual meaning, and its existence is closely related to their cultural identity and traditional traditions.

Wild Boar (Sus scrofa) in Social Roles and Traditional Ceremonies

Wild boars play an important role in traditional rituals, especially in wedding ceremonies and conflict resolution between groups. Wild boar meat is often used as an offering in religious ceremonies and is considered a symbol of wealth and prosperity (Mansyur, 2024). However, increasing hunting and land conversion threaten the sustainability of the wild boar population on Seram Island (Jones & Hill, 2021).

The tradition of wild boar hunting is not just an activity to meet food and medicine needs (Kendie et al., 2018) but also has an important role in strengthening social ties between community members. The Nuaulu tribe on Seram Island has various terms for pig hunting activities, namely "*akaohuso*" and "*kasare*", which is hunting in groups (Marasabessy, 2019). Through this tradition, relationships and solidarity among residents become closer. In fact, the activity of boar hunting is thought to have developed into a traditional tradition involving various activities that are legalized through rituals and customary procedures.



Figure 2. Wild Boar on Seram Island

Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*) plays an important role in the social life and traditional ceremonies of the Seram Island community, Maluku, where they are the main source of protein consumed in various events, both daily and traditional ceremonies, and are a symbol of strength and courage for hunters who successfully catch them, thus increasing their social status; in addition, wild boar hunting is also part of the tradition and survival skills that are passed down from generation to generation. In the context of traditional ceremonies, wild boar is often offered in thanksgiving ceremonies, deaths, and others as a form of respect for ancestors and guardian spirits, and parts of its body, such as tusks or what the Seram Island community calls Naniri, are used as gifts in wedding ceremonies or other customs, symbolizing prosperity and abundance.

Various customary rules regarding wild boar hunting in several locations have been made, including the application of sasi, which aims to protect hunted animals so that they can breed properly, and the application of rules regarding the limitation of hunting pigs to only one animal per hunt. There are also rules about hunting young animals. Hunting animals that takes into account traditional hunting tools and determining specific locations for hunting can maintain the sustainability of these animals (Pattiselanno & Mentansan, 2010).

Gosong or Momoa bird (Eulipoa wallacei) as a Seasonal Marker

The Gosong Bird is known for its habit of laying eggs in the beach sand and using geothermal heat to incubate its eggs. Indigenous people observe the bird's egg-laying patterns to determine the beginning of the planting season, making it part of the traditional ecological knowledge system (Tukuboya et al., 2024). Unfortunately, the exploitation of Gosong Bird eggs for human consumption threatens its sustainability. In addition to eggs, the Seram community also consumes Gosong Bird meat to meet subsistence protein needs, not for trade.



Figure 3. Gosong (*E. wallacei*) Bird on Seram Island

The Gosong Bird (*Eulipoa wallacei*), or Momoa for the Maluku people, plays an important role as a marker of the season, especially the egg season which is closely related to the change of seasons, especially the dry season, where its presence and activity in making nests become a natural marker for the community to start agricultural activities and prepare for the dry season (Tagueha & Liur, 2021).

When birds start building large mounds to incubate their eggs, it signals to local communities that the dry season is approaching (Syafutra et al., 2025). This natural indicator is very important for planning agricultural activities. Usually farmers have already started clearing and preparing their fields to plant crops that thrive in dry conditions or to harvest existing crops before the dry season arrives. It also helps communities manage water resources by understanding the need to conserve water or adjust irrigation strategies (Saiya & Heij, 2017). The sign also helps communities plan cropping cycles by determining the optimal time to plant certain crops that do not require much water or can grow during the dry season.

This knowledge is part of the local wisdom that has been passed down from generation to generation, reflecting the close relationship between indigenous people and nature. The strong conservation tradition shows an understanding of the importance of maintaining the population of this bird, both as a marker of the season and part of the ecosystem, with customary rules that protect the bird and its eggs (Costa, 2019). In addition, the Gosong Bird also plays an important role in the ecosystem through its digging activity which helps aerate the soil, as well as its unique way of incubating eggs by utilizing the heat of the piles of soil and sand. Thus, the Gosong Bird has high cultural and ecological value for the indigenous people of Seram Island (Saiya et al., 2016).

Several locations on Seram Island have implemented sasi to protect bird eggs. Sasi eggs are implemented with the aim of providing an opportunity for the eggs to hatch so that the Gosong Bird population

continues. During the implementation of sasi, the community is prohibited from taking eggs, until the time of opening the sasi. Sasi is implemented according to custom by involving traditional institutions in determining the sasi as well as controlling the implementation of the sasi.

Deer (Rusa timorensis) as a Food Source and Social Status

Deer are often hunted for their meat, which is an important part of indigenous peoples' diet. In addition, deer antlers are used as decoration and as a status symbol in some indigenous groups (Jones & Hill, 2021). The decline in Deer population due to uncontrolled hunting is a serious issue in wildlife conservation on Seram Island (Rahmadi, 2022). Laws for Deer protection have been established but monitoring at the site level is very important because they interact directly with Deer habitat.



Figure 4. Deer (*Rusa timorensis*) on Seram Island

Timor Deer (*Rusa timorensis*) plays an important role in the lives of indigenous people in Seram Island, Maluku, both as the main source of food and a meaningful symbol of social status. As a source of animal protein, venison is a staple obtained through generations of hunting traditions, where all parts of the deer's body are utilized with traditional knowledge (Mesinay et al., 2024). In addition, Deer also has high cultural value and is often associated with traditional rituals and important ceremonies, where success in hunting Deer reflects skill, increases individual social status, and strengthens social structure through meat distribution. However, the Deer population is now threatened by overhunting and habitat destruction, so conservation involving releases by the Maluku BKSDA as well as active community participation based on local wisdom is very important to maintain the sustainability of the population and its cultural-ecological functions (Setyoko et al., 2019; Zulfaeda et al., 2024).

Cassowary (Casuarius spp.) as a Symbol of Strength

Cassowaries have a strong symbolic meaning in the culture of the indigenous people of Seram Island. These large birds are often associated with courage and strength, and some groups even use them in youth initiation rituals (Berlin, 2019). However, habitat loss due to deforestation is a major threat to the survival of this species (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rahawarin et al., 2014).

Cassowaries (*Casuarius* spp.) have deep symbolic meaning for the indigenous people of Seram Island, Maluku, where this bird is seen as a symbol of strength and courage because of its strong and aggressive nature, and is used in traditional ceremonies through feathers and bones as decorations that symbolize strength and protection. In addition, cassowaries also have a close relationship with nature and ancestors, becoming a symbol of respect for nature and having an important spiritual meaning in the beliefs of indigenous people. In traditions and rituals, Cassowary body parts are often used as symbols of strength and social status, and appear in folklore and myths, strengthening its position as an important symbol in indigenous culture. As forest guardians, Cassowaries have an important role in maintaining the balance of the forest ecosystem by helping to spread seeds, symbolizing the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Overall, Cassowaries are not just birds for the indigenous people of Seram Island, but also a symbol of strength, courage, and a spiritual connection with nature and ancestors (Sutarno et al., 2017).

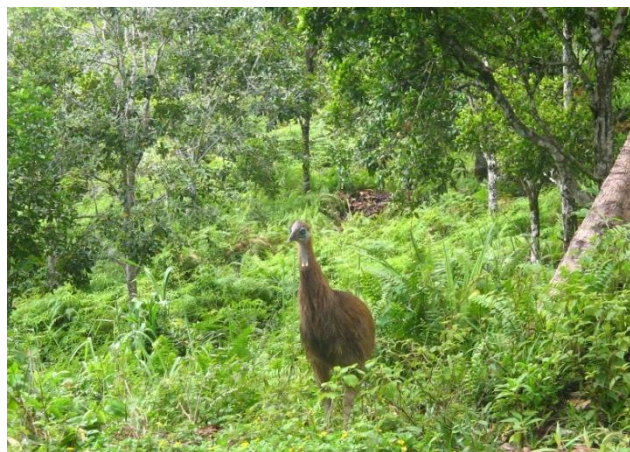


Figure 5. Cassowary on Seram Island

Hornbill (Rhyticeros plicatus) as a Symbol of Longevity

The Hornbill (*Rhyticeros plicatus*) has a deep symbolic meaning for the indigenous people of Seram Island, Maluku. One of the characteristics of the Hornbill is the protrusion above its beak called "balung" or "casque". This Casque has fold lines that increase in

number as the bird gets older. Therefore, the more fold lines on the Casque, the older the bird is. This is then interpreted by the local community as a symbol of longevity. In addition, this bird is closely related to noble culture, often associated with traditional rituals and traditional beliefs. Its existence also indicates the health of the forest ecosystem, so its preservation is the same as preserving the forest which is important for indigenous people. Hornbills, from the Bucerotidae family with 62 species in the world, including those in Maluku, are generally associated with longevity, wisdom, and a strong connection with nature, although their symbolic meaning can vary between indigenous communities.

The indigenous people of Seram Island use the Hornbill feathers as headdresses for traditional figures and hand decorations for Captains or War Commanders. The Hornbill or in the local language is called the Taong-taong bird (Tahun-tahun). The Seram community believes that the Taong-taong bird has a long life span that can reach 60-70 years. Although the Cockatoo has been known to reach more than 70 years. However, as the name suggests, the Taong-taong bird is believed by the Seram community that the use of the Taong-taong bird feather attribute will extend the life of the traditional figures who use it to stay alive and lead for years.



Figure 6. Hornbill on Seram Island

Conclusion

Ethnozoological studies on Seram Island show that the relationship between humans and animals is not only practical, but also full of cultural and spiritual values. Although these animals have an important role in local traditions and beliefs, the conservation challenges faced are increasing due to exploitation and environmental degradation. Therefore, a conservation approach based on local wisdom needs to be developed so that cultural practices and the sustainability of biodiversity can go hand in hand.

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Author Contributions

Conceptualization, M.T., R.M.K., and H.L.; methodology, M.T., R.M.K., and M.M.S.P.; validation, writing-preparation of initial draft, writing-review and editing, visualization, M.T. and R.M.K.; formal analysis, R.M.K. and H.L.; investigation, M.T. and H.L.; resources, R.M.K. and M.M.S.P.; data curation, MT. All authors have read and approved the published version of the manuscript..

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding this article.

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