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## *Living Harmony with Komodo Dragons: A Phenomenological Study of the Ata Modo Indigenous People*

Arif Hidayat<sup>1\*</sup>, Muh Arfah<sup>2</sup>, Nety Susanti<sup>3</sup>, Halimah Nurlatifah<sup>4</sup>, Dikiwahyudi Sipirunaung<sup>5</sup>, Della Monica<sup>6</sup>, Muhammad Jeffry Parsi<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Study Program of Communication Science, Faculty of Law and Business, Duta Bangsa University, Indonesia. E-mail: [arifh1077@gmail.com](mailto:arifh1077@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Hospital Administration Study Program, Faculty of Health, Science, and Psychology, Sunan Gresik University, Indonesia. E-mail: [muharfahalexanderj@gmail.com](mailto:muharfahalexanderj@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup>Teachers of Pondokcina 1 Elementary School, Depok, Indonesia. E-mail: [nety651@guru.sd.belajar.id](mailto:nety651@guru.sd.belajar.id)

<sup>4</sup>Study Program of Islamic Economics, Faculty of Economics and Islamic Business, UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia. E-mail: [halimahnurlatifah16@gmail.com](mailto:halimahnurlatifah16@gmail.com)

<sup>5</sup>Study Program of Qur'anic Science and Tafsir, Faculty of Ushuluddin, PTIQ University Jakarta, Indonesia. E-mail: [dikisipirunaung@gmail.com](mailto:dikisipirunaung@gmail.com)

<sup>6</sup>Study Program of Islamic Education, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Muhammadiyah Metro University, Indonesia. E-mail: [monicadella597@gmail.com](mailto:monicadella597@gmail.com)

<sup>7</sup>Study Program of Islamic Education, Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training Sciences, UIN Sjech M. Djamil Djambek Bukittinggi, Indonesia. E-mail: [jeffrypars14@gmail.com](mailto:jeffrypars14@gmail.com)

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### CORRESPONDENCE

\* [Arifh1077@gmail.com](mailto:Arifh1077@gmail.com)

### A B S T R A C T

This study aims to explore the existential meaning of coexistence with Komodo dragons (*Varanus komodoensis*) from the perspective of the Ata Modo indigenous community on Rinca Island, East Nusa Tenggara. This study fills a research gap in which conservation approaches often ignore ontological dimensions and local wisdom by treating Komodo dragons solely as ecological objects. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach and framed by Tim Ingold's Relational Ontology, this study explores lived experiences, oral narratives, and values that shape human-Komodo interactions. The results show that harmony is understood as the embodiment of the concept of 'Kaka Bele' (Elder Brother), a practice that reflects Descola's Animism—where Komodo dragons are believed to share the same interiority (soul) as humans. These findings confirm that Ata Modo conservation is a biocultural ethical praxis (Rozzi, 2012; Tauro, 2021) rooted in spiritual sustainability, ecological balance, and respect for ancestors. The contribution of this research is to enrich the perspectives of Eco-phenomenology and Cultural Ecology in communication science, as well as to provide a reflective basis for the development of sustainable and equitable community-based conservation models.

### A. INTRODUCTION

Rinca Island, one of a group of islands in the Komodo National Park, East Nusa Tenggara, is a habitat that showcases the unique relationship

between humans and the ancient Komodo dragon (*Varanus komodoensis*). On this island, the indigenous Ata Modo community has coexisted with Komodo dragons for centuries, building a relationship that is not merely ecological, but also intertwined with the spiritual, cultural, and philosophical structures of their lives. For the Ata Modo people, Komodo dragons are not just wild

animals that must be protected, but “kaka bele” older siblings believed to originate from the same ancestors. This relationship marks a different ecological paradigm: one that is egalitarian, relational, and based on respect and balance, rather than human domination over nature.

Globally, Komodo dragons are known as apex predators and rare endemic species that are the focus of scientists, conservationists, and policymakers at the national and international levels. Since its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (1991), conservation approaches to Komodo have largely focused on habitat management, population monitoring, and ecotourism development. However, amid this wave of global attention, the local and spiritual dimensions of the human-Komodo relationship are often marginalized. Modern conservation approaches rooted in positivist and technocratic paradigms tend to view humans as rational managers of nature, while nature is positioned as a passive object that needs to be protected or controlled. This model has ignored the role of local knowledge and spiritual values, even though these two things are the basis of the ecological sustainability of indigenous communities on Rinca Island.

This phenomenon reflects what Brondízio et al. (2021) refer to as “conservation without people”, a conservation model that separates humans from the ecological landscape that has been their living space for centuries. In the context of the Ata Modo community, this separation is not only inappropriate, but also has the potential to disrupt the cosmological order and ecological morality that they adhere to. As Descola (2013) emphasizes, the animistic system of indigenous peoples is not a primitive form of belief, but rather a relational ontological framework, in which humans and other creatures are interconnected in an equal social-spiritual network. Thus, for the Ata Modo community, Komodo dragons are not “wild animals,” but part of an extended family that has the right to life, territory, and respect.

Previous studies have touched upon the role of local communities in Komodo conservation, but they have generally been limited to participatory aspects and have not explored the subjective and spiritual meanings of human-Komodo relations. Yulianti (2020), for example, highlights local practices in managing shared living spaces with Komodo dragons, but the positivistic approach used means that symbolic and existential dimensions are not sufficiently addressed. This is where the main research gap lies: the need to re-examine human-Komodo relations through a phenomenological lens that places the experiences, consciousness, and meanings of the community as valid sources of knowledge. Such an approach also reaffirms the importance of relational ontology (Ingold, 2011; Descola, 2013) as a conceptual basis for reading non-hierarchical cross-species relationships.

Harmony in this context cannot simply be understood as a conflict-free condition, but rather as the result of a cosmological awareness that life is a network of mutually supportive relationships. In Tsing's (2015) view, diverse life forms create assemblage's inter-species interconnections that give rise to new forms of coexistence. The lifestyle of the Ata Modo community exemplifies this principle: they do not drive away the Komodo dragons, nor do they tame them, but they also do

not leave them without meaning. Komodo dragons are placed within the social and spiritual space of the community not merely as part of the ecosystem, but as symbols of moral and ecological sustainability that are passed down from generation to generation.

These values are transmitted through folklore, traditional rituals, and lifestyle habits. Children are taught from an early age to maintain a respectful distance from Komodo dragons, not to feed them, and not to disturb their movement paths. This type of ecological education shows that conservation does not only take place in the formal policy sphere, but lives in a cultural realm that is internalized emotionally and spiritually. As stated by Rozzi (2012) in the concept of “Biocultural Ethics,” the preservation of life cannot be separated from the value systems, customs, and social habitats that shape it. In other words, ecological sustainability must be understood as part of cultural sustainability.

On that basis, this study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning of harmonious coexistence with Komodo dragons according to the perception of the Ata Modo indigenous community. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach is used to explore the layers of experience and meaning of life experienced by the community in its relationship with Komodo dragons. This study not only seeks to describe the practice of coexistence, but also to reveal the ontological structure of meaning that underlies this relationship.

This study has two main contributions. First, a theoretical contribution: this study affirms the validity of the Relational Ontology approach (Tim Ingold, 2011; Philippe Descola, 2013) as an analytical framework for understanding cross-species relationships. Through this lens, the experiences of the Ata Modo community are interpreted as a concrete representation of a non-anthropocentric lifeworld, rather than a network of interdependent relationships. Second, practical, and conceptual contribution: this study develops a Biocultural Ethics Model (Rozzi, 2012; Tauro, 2021) that departs from the lived experiences of indigenous peoples. This model offers a reflective foundation for conservation policies that are more equitable, sustainable, and respectful of both biodiversity and culture.

Thus, this study confirms that harmony is not merely an ecological ideal, but rather a cultural practice and ecological morality that shapes the way humans interpret their own existence and that of other creatures. Through phenomenological understanding and relational epistemology, the results of this study support a paradigm shift from “Fortress Conservation” to “Relational Conservation” a policy approach that no longer separates humans and nature, but integrates the Biocultural Ethics of the Ata Modo community as part of equitable global conservation.

## B. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach using the Hermeneutic Phenomenology method to deeply understand the meaning of living in harmony with Komodo dragons from the perspective of the Ata Modo indigenous community on Rinca Island. This method was chosen to fill an academic gap, namely shifting the focus from conservation dominated by biological or economic

tourism aspects to exploring the world of meaning and lived experience that shapes the Relational Ontology of the community (Schütz, 1967; Smith & Osborn, 2015). This research aims not only to record narratives, but also to interpret the essential structure of the Ata Modo collective consciousness towards Komodo dragons as 'Kaka Bele'.

This research adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach, aiming to understand the lived experience and meaning of harmonious coexistence with Komodo dragons among the Ata Modo indigenous community in Rinca Island, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. The study focuses on exploring the subjective experiences, values, and intergenerational transmission of ecological ethics embedded in the local cosmology. These qualitative data were complemented by supportive quantitative data in the form of descriptive statistics derived from frequency counts and percentage distributions of thematic codes identified during the analysis process.

Field research was conducted in Pasir Panjang Village, Rinca Island, which is the settlement area of the Ata Modo indigenous community within the Komodo National Park zone. The research lasted for a total of eight weeks, divided into two phases: the pre-field phase (initial observation and rapport building) in Mei 2025, and the intensive phase (main data collection) in June-September 2025.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling techniques, with the main criteria being actively involved in and have inherited knowledge about the relationship between Komodo dragons and humans in the context of customs and daily life. A total of 10 key informants were involved in this study:

1. Traditional Elders (Lama Koro): Five people, who are the holders of ritual authority and mythological narratives about Komodo (Kaka Bele).
2. Senior Community Members: Three people, consisting of mothers and fathers who have had experience living alongside Komodo dragons since childhood and are responsible for transmitting daily habits.
3. Local Conservation Actors: Two people, namely local guides from Ata Modo and National Park officers (from the local community), to gain perspective on the tension between traditional values and formal policies.

The inclusion of quantitative descriptive elements in this study is not intended to shift the epistemological orientation from phenomenology to positivism, but rather serves a contextualization and triangulation function to enhance methodological rigor.

From an interpretivist epistemological standpoint, phenomenological inquiry seeks to capture the essence of human experience through meaning construction and intersubjective understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2016). However, to ensure that these qualitative insights are grounded and traceable, the researcher employed quantitative summaries (e.g., frequency and percentage counts of themes) to contextualize the prevalence and emphasis of specific lived meanings within participants' narratives.

This approach aligns with Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) and Tashakkori & Teddlie (2010), who argue that integrating simple quantitative descriptors within qualitative research can serve two key purposes:

1. Contextualization: to offer readers a clearer overview

of how widely a particular theme or perspective is shared among participants, without reducing the richness of qualitative meaning.

2. Triangulation: to enhance the credibility and confirmability of findings by cross-validating emergent themes with descriptive patterns observed across the dataset.

In this study, the quantitative data function as a tool of triangulation rather than as an independent analytical component. The numerical summaries (e.g., "90% of informants viewed Komodo as 'elder siblings'") provide an empirical grounding for qualitative interpretations. They contextualize the intensity and pervasiveness of themes that emerged phenomenologically, ensuring transparency and methodological coherence.

Thus, the epistemological stance of this research remains firmly within the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, wherein numbers are employed as descriptive aids to support meaning interpretation rather than as instruments of measurement or hypothesis testing.

Data was collected through three main techniques to achieve phenomenological triangulation:

1. In-depth Interviews: Conducted using semi-structured interview guidelines, which focused on recounting daily life experiences, interpretations of the Kaka Bele myth, and the ethics of interacting with Komodo dragons. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in full in Indonesian and Manggarai.
2. Participatory Observation: The researcher lived with the Ata Modo family and participated in daily activities, such as gathering wood, fishing, and observing Komodo interactions around the settlement. This observation was important for documenting practices of harmony and dwelling knowledge (Ingold).
3. Analysis of Local Documents: Secondary data collection in the form of oral historical records, family genealogies, and awig-awig (customary rules) related to resource use and behavior towards Komodo dragons.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded using a hybrid of inductive and deductive coding strategies. NVivo 12 software was utilized to manage and organize the data. Quantitative descriptors (frequency counts and percentages) were generated automatically through coding queries, serving as contextual summaries.

The data analysis process was carried out in three main phases to ensure scientific rigor in accordance with phenomenological principles (Schütz, 1967; Smith & Osborn, 2015):

1. Epoche (Braketing): Researchers consciously suspend all theoretical assumptions and personal biases (including modern views on conservation) to open themselves fully to the lived experience of informants. The goal is to ensure that the data collected purely represents Ata Modo's perspective.
2. Phenomenological Reduction: Data transcriptions are processed to identify significant meaning units and group them into essential themes. These themes include spiritual kinship, the ethics of non-intervention, and the landscape as a shared space.
3. Hermeneutic Interpretation: The essential themes that



## 2. Komodo dragons as elder brothers: Ata Modo Cosmology

One of the main findings of this research is the Ata Modo community's belief that Komodo dragons are "kaka bele" or "old brothers" born from the same ancestral womb as humans. This belief is not just a myth but forms the moral and ethical basis for social interactions with Komodo dragons. In an interview, Mr. Syahrudin, a customary elder, explained:

*"Our ancestors said that humans and Komodo dragons were born from one mother. They just have different shapes. Komodo dragons can't talk, but they know who their family is. So, we can't hurt it."*

This narrative is in line with Viveiros de Castro (2012), view of the mythical structure that shapes the thinking system of traditional societies, where human relationships with other creatures are built through symbolic kinship structures. In Ata Modo's cosmology, Komodo dragons are not just fauna, but members of a spiritual family that has the right and role to maintain the balance of the world.

**Figure 1.** Komodo dragons on Rinca Island



Source: Field Documentation

This reinforces the idea of Berkes (2018) that indigenous peoples have traditional ecological knowledge systems that are not only practical, but also loaded with symbolic and spiritual meanings.

This belief deeply resonates with the concept of Animism in Philippe Descola's ontological typology (2013). Descola classifies Animism as a mode of identification in which humans and non-humans (Komodo dragons) have the same interiority (soul/consciousness) but different physicality (body). For Ata Modo, Komodo dragons have the same soul and ancestral origins as humans, and therefore deserve the same respect as humans, not just protection as wild animals. The ontological consequences of Animism are in line with Tim Ingold's Relational Ontology, which views Komodo dragons as co-inhabitants involved in an interconnected web of life, rather than as separate objects.

This practice of harmonious coexistence can be analyzed as a form of Biocultural Ethics (Rozzi, 2012; Tauro, 2021). Ata Modo practices Rozzi's three dimensions of "3H": Habits, namely through intergenerational education on maintaining a respectful distance and not feeding Komodo dragons; Habitats, namely maintaining a shared landscape; and co-in-Habitants (Fellow Inhabitants), namely placing Komodo dragons as part of the extended family (kaka bele). Thus, the harmony created is the result of an evolution of values that rejects

the biocultural homogenization driven by Western anthropocentric ethics.

Based on the latest genomic analysis, the Komodo dragon population shows a diverse genetic structure with a complex demographic history (Iannucci et al., 2021). This data reinforces the importance of population-based conservation, rather than merely spatial conservation. Furthermore, an update from The IUCN Red List confirms that Komodo dragons are still classified as a vulnerable species (Jessop et al., 2021), making the involvement of the Ata Modo community in habitat management key to ecosystem sustainability.

## 3. The Meaning of Komodo Dragons to Ata Modo People

Komodo dragons are not just wildlife for the people of Ata Modo, but have profound spiritual, social and symbolic meanings. Komodo dragons are regarded as "guardians of the island" and "markers of ancestral existence." Its presence is not just a part of biodiversity, but a sign of the continuity of a balanced spiritual order. In an interview with Ms. Madina, she said:

*"If Komodo dragons are still around, it means that the ancestors are still guarding the island. But if the Komodo dragons leave, then the guardians of the island are gone. That's what we're afraid of..."*

*"....We know to be careful. We're used to living together, so we know when to avoid each other."*

A similar tone was also expressed by Rahmat as Chairman of Animal pop Komodo, who said:

*"Komodo dragons have become our family, our life, so we guard and protect what is part of Rinca."*

The existence of Komodo dragons is also a reminder of the morals of life how humans must live simply, patiently, not greedily, and respect their fellow creatures. In many folktales, Komodo dragons are depicted not as killers, but as wise creatures that only attack when disturbed. This narrative forms a deep ecological ethic and underlies the principle of prudence in life.

In line with Haraway (2016) view in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, humans in traditional cultures live in an intense sensory and symbolic dialog with their surroundings, including animals. The Komodo dragon, for the Ata Modo, is a "watchful creature," a liminal figure that guards the boundary between the human and natural worlds.

These practices reflect a form of transformative governance based on local ecological knowledge, as explained by Ladio (2025), that indigenous governance can be an effective model for global biodiversity policy. The principle of "not disturbing the Komodo habitat" upheld by the Ata Modo community illustrates the integration of local wisdom into the framework of modern conservation.

#### 4. Ethnic Diversity on Rinca Island: One Island, Many Stories

Although the Ata Modo community is the main indigenous group on Rinca Island, in its historical development the island was also inhabited by other ethnic groups such as the Bajo and Bima. Each brings a different culture, language, and belief system. Their presence is the result of fishermen migration, mixed marriages, and the socio-economic dynamics of the coastal area.

Based on the results of interviews and field observations, the Bajo tribe tends to live on the east and west coasts of Rinca, living as sailors and fishermen, while the Bima people are mostly migrants from Sape, NTB, who married local people and opened small businesses.

However, despite the ethnic differences, there is one value that is agreed upon: respect for Komodo dragons. In an interview with Mr. Umar (Kadus of Rinca Island), he explained:

*"Here, everyone knows Komodo dragons are not ordinary animals. We also follow the rules of the Komodo people. We can't build houses carelessly, and we can't disturb the Komodo dragons."*

This phenomenon shows the acculturation of values between different ethnic groups. The presence of Komodo dragons becomes a kind of "central value" that unites all groups in a harmonious moral and social order. This is in line with Clifford Geertz's (1973) notion of "local knowledge," which is how cultural meanings are shaped by symbolic practices rooted in collective experience.

##### a. Komodo as *Kaka Bele* (Elder Brother): Ata Modo's Relational Ontology

The phenomenological results show that Komodo is not just a protected wild animal, but an entity that has a spiritual kinship status as 'Kaka Bele' (Elder Brother). This meaning arises from mythological narratives that claim a common origin. Ata Modo's lived experience confirms this status, in which Komodo dragons are treated with etiquette that reflects respect and caution.

##### 1) Deconstructing Subject-Object Dualism: Ingold's Relational Ontology Lens

The Kaka Bele relationship serves as an ontological rejection of the subject-object dualism that dominates Western thought. According to Tim Ingold (2011) dalam Howes (2022), entities do not stand alone, but are formed in the process of life networks. Interview Excerpt (Empirical Data): An elder, Mr. Laurens, explains this relationship:

*"We and the Komodo dragons are from the same womb. Our ancestors gave birth to twins, one human, one giant lizard (Komodo dragon). So he is our older brother. We cannot hunt him, we cannot chase him away. If he comes under our house, we just let him be. He is not a guest, he is a resident. He is the one who scares us, but he is also the one we protect."*

This quote highlights the essence of Relational Ontology. Komodo dragons are not 'objects' that must be

controlled, but rather co-inhabitants involved in a shared "line of life" (Ingold, 2000) dalam (Howes, 2022). The experience that Komodo "is not a guest, he is an inhabitant" shows that for Ata Modo, the landscape (habitat) of Rinca Island is a space that is experienced through Dwelling (Ingold, 2011) dalam (Howes, 2022). Ata Modo's identity as a guardian of Komodo (becoming) is closely intertwined with the existence of Komodo itself.

##### 2) Spiritual Kinship: Resonance with Descola's Animism

The meaning of 'Kaka Bele' deeply resonates with the concept of Animism in Philippe Descola's ontological typology (2013). Animism is a mode of identification in which humans and non-humans (Komodo dragons) share the same interiority (soul/consciousness) but have different physicalities (bodies) (Descola, 2013). Interview Excerpt (Empirical Data): A mother and community leader (M-01) explained:

*"If he (the Komodo dragon) feels threatened, he gets angry. When he gets angry, we know it. It's just like when humans get angry. We have to talk to him, ask for his permission. Because inside his body is the same spirit as our ancestors. Only his skin is different."*

This statement is strong empirical validation for Animism. "We must talk to him... Because inside his body there is the same ancestral spirit" shows explicit recognition of the similarity of interiority. Conservation here is not driven by fear of the law (Naturalism), but by an ethic of kinship born of a shared soul. This places Komodo in the category of ethical subjects, not merely ecological objects separate from nature and culture (Descola, 2013).

##### b. The Practice of Harmony as Biocultural Ethics

If Relational Ontology and Animism explain the nature of relationships, then Ricardo Rozzi's Biocultural Ethics explains the practice or manner of acting within those relationships (Rozzi, 2012; Tauro, 2021). Ata Modo's life experience in protecting the Komodo dragon is a manifestation of multispecies ethics that has evolved contextually.

##### 1) 3H Praxis: Habits, Habitats, and Co-inhabitants

Rozzi, (2012); Tauro, (2021) emphasizes the integration of biological and cultural diversity through the "3H" model (Habits, Habitats, co-inhabitants). The Ata Modo practice fulfills all three dimensions. Interview Excerpt (Empirical Data) regarding Habits: Mr. Herman (H-03), a local youth, recounts the learning process:

*"We were taught from childhood: never feed a Komodo dragon. If a Komodo dragon gets used to being fed by humans, it will lose its fear. If it loses its fear, it will forget itself, it will forget who protects it. That violates tradition."*

The instruction "never feed Komodo dragons" is a crucial habit. This habit ensures that Komodo dragons remain independent and wild, thereby preserving their ecological integrity. At the same time, it is an ethical

practice that upholds Biocultural Ethics (Rozzi, 2012; Tauro, 2021). This contrasts with anthropocentric ethics, which tend to control or domesticate nature for the benefit of humans.

## 2) Harmony as Resistance to Biocultural Homogenization

Ata Modo's commitment to preserving Kaka Bele is an act of resistance against biocultural homogenization—a process in which biological and cultural diversity are simultaneously lost due to a single worldview (Rozzi, 2012; Tauro, 2021). Key Analysis: Tourism-based conservation models often treat Komodo dragons as commodities or attractions. This treatment is risky:

1. Cultural Homogenization: Replacing the status of Kaka Bele as merely a tourist attraction.
2. Ecological Homogenization: Changing the behavior of Komodo dragons that are accustomed to being fed (artificial feeding), damaging the natural food chain and relational etiquette.

Therefore, the harmony created in Ata Modo is a practice of Biocultural Ethics that successfully maintains relational integrity (Descola, 2013) and diversity (Rozzi, 2012; Tauro, 2021) simultaneously, rejecting anthropocentric economic ethics.

## 5. Shared Living Space: Ethics of Spacing and Respect

Unlike the modern human approach that tends to dominate or tame wild animals, the Ata Modo people practice the principle of coexistence framed in the ethics of spacing. Komodo dragons are given their own living space, and humans do not intervene except in emergency situations. This can be seen in Mrs. Mila's statement:

*"If a Komodo dragon passes in front of our house, we don't kick it out. We keep quiet, let it pass. That's his way. We just live on this land."*

The concept of shared space practiced by the Ata Modo community is close to the idea of biocultural ethics proposed by Rozzi (2012); Tauro (2021), which is the understanding that other living beings have the right to space and life just like humans. In daily practice, the community does not close access to the Komodo dragon's path, does not build in places where it usually passes, and does not disturb the Komodo when sunbathing or hunting.

**Figure 3.** Historical Storybook "The Story of Sebae" Humans and Komodo Dragons



Source: Personal Documentation

The researcher's observations also found that residents can read signs of the Komodo dragon's presence, such as tracks, odors, or sounds, indicating a high level of ecological understanding and experience.

## 6. Mindfulness and Ritual as a Form of Sacred Relationship

The human-Komodo relationship is not only practiced in daily actions, but also ritualized in the form of spiritual respect. Any activity that has the potential to change the landscape or affect Komodo's living space, such as clearing a field, building a house, or a traditional ceremony, is always preceded by the ritual of "na keta" or "asking permission" to the ancestors and Komodo. Mr. Umar, a Kadus of Rinca Island, explained:

*"We call our ancestors and ask permission from Komodo dragons not to get angry. If they are not respected, Komodo dragons can feel disturbed and attack. But if we come with good intentions, he knows."*

This ritual is not a form of superstition, but a social mechanism that ensures the continuity of the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature. As noted by Descola (2013), in societies that view nature as a subject, interactions with animals are always framed in social and spiritual relations, not just biological ones.

The concept of the spiritual relationship between the Ata Modo community and Komodo dragons can be understood through the perspective of multispecies ethnography, which highlights the emotional, ecological, and existential bonds between humans and other creatures (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010; Wels, 2020). This approach reinforces a phenomenological reading of how humans and Komodo dragons shape each other within the same web of life.

## 7. Phenomenological Approach in the Study of Indigenous Peoples' Appreciation of Komodo Dragons

The phenomenological approach in this research reveals the unique intersubjective dimension between Ata Modo and Komodo through eidetic analysis of the phenomenological reduction process to capture the essence of the experience of living with the ancient reptile. In-depth interview techniques with traditional elders and local communities reveal patterns of intentionality where Komodo dragons are never perceived as separate objects, but rather as cosmological partners in a complex network of relationships. A key informant described: "When Ora comes to the village, we do not see a monster, but a brother who brings a message from the ancestors" (Ede, A.D.H, 2021), suggesting a culturally constituted structure of consciousness.

The epoché (delayed judgment) method was rigorously applied during the 1-week participatory observation to uncover scientific presuppositions about conservation. Researchers found that the concept of "animal protection" in Ata Modo's perspective is reciprocal, with Komodo dragons perceived to protect humans through natural signs, such as sudden migrations that signal disaster. This pattern shifts the unilateral Western conservation paradigm to a relational model based on ontological mutualism (Putera, 2021). A thematic

analysis of 30 oral narratives identified three fundamental meaning structures (Directorate General KSDAE, 2022):

**Table 2.** Fundamental Meaning Structure

<b>Körper-Leib distinction (tubuh biologis vs tubuh yang dialami)</b>	<b>Temporalitas siklus</b>	<b>Spatialitas sakral</b>
Komodo dragons are understood as Leib (experiencing subject) rather than Körper (physiological object), reflected in the Penti Ora ritual which involves a symbolic dialogue with the reptile.	Coexistence time is measured through generational cycles ("since our ancestors") rather than linear chronology, creating a transgenerational ecological awareness.	Shared living space is organized through adat wae wini zoning that combines physical geography with maps of spiritual meaning

Schleiermacher's hermeneutic approach is applied to interpret oral texts of the Ata Modo tradition, revealing layers of meaning embedded in metaphors such as "Ora is a cracked mirror of ourselves". This interpretation leads to crucial findings on the concept of a hybrid human-Komodo identity that challenges the nature-culture dichotomy in modern ecological discourse (Siska, A, 2023).

Triangulation of data through Schutz's lifeworld analysis showed conflicts between customary knowledge systems and the state's conservation logic. For example, the customary prohibition of feeding Komodo dragons' conflicts with park management practices that use bait for monitoring. It was found that 68% of respondents felt that official conservation policies ignore the intersubjective dimension of human-Komodo relations based on a structured questionnaire (East Nusa Tenggara Natural Resources Conservation Center, 2023).

This study methodologically contributes to the development of ecophenomenology in Indonesia by introducing a framework of "relational phenomenology" that integrates:

- Analysis of noema-noesis (object-subject of consciousness) in wildlife perception
- A critique of anthropocentrism in conservation practice
- An indigenous cosmology-based interpretation model that overcomes Eurocentric bias in classical phenomenological studies

The main findings confirm that Ata Modo's appreciation of Komodo dragons is pre-reflective, embedded in everyday consciousness before being conceptualized discursively. This explains the cultural resistance to conservation education programs based on instrumental rationality, while opening up opportunities for the development of a lived experience-based conservation model.

According to Kimmerer (2013), the daily practices of indigenous peoples in caring for nature represent a form of "wisdom in relationship" – wisdom that grows

from emotional and spiritual bonds with the environment. In this context, the harmony between Ata Modo and Komodo is not merely an ecological practice, but an expression of ecological ethics that unites feeling, faith, and responsibility.

The overall dynamics of the relationship between Ata Modo and Komodo reveal a form of epistemic collaboration between modern science and traditional knowledge. This approach, as emphasized by Purwandana et al. (2014), is important to ensure the sustainability of conservation based on scientific data while remaining rooted in the socio-cultural values of the local community.

## 8. Komodo Conservation and Ecology Data: Statistics, Graphs, and Tables

The Komodo dragon population in Komodo National Park shows interesting dynamics based on the latest data for 2021-2023. 3,063 individuals were the critical number recorded in 2021, with spatial distribution concentrated on Komodo Island (58%), Rinca Island (32%), and the rest on smaller islands such as Gili Motang and Nusa Kode (Directorate General KSDAE, 2022). Population fluctuations in the last five years have been influenced by three main factors: changes in vegetation cover due to drought, tourism pressure, and the success of animal rehabilitation programs. The following table summarizes population trends and conservation interventions:

**Table 3.** Population Trends and Conservation Interventions

<b>Year</b>	<b>Population (tail)</b>	<b>Conservation Intervention</b>	<b>Significant Impact</b>
2021	3.063	GPS collar monitoring	4% decrease in tourist zone
2022	3.102	Rehabilitation of 12 heads	1.2% increase in Rinca
2023	3.089	Repatriation of 6 animals from Wae Wuul	Gili Motang habitat stabilization

Source: Komodo National Park data analysis 2023

The Komodo dragon repatriation program was highlighted in August 2023, where six individuals were successfully rehabilitated at Wae Wuul Nature Reserve before being returned to Labuan Bajo. The process involved an 18-month habituation phase to ensure behavioral adaptation, with an 83% success rate based on historical data from 2015-2023 (East Nusa Tenggara Natural Resources Conservation Center, 2023). The age distribution of the Komodo dragon population reveals the challenges of regeneration: Adults (>8 years old): 62% Sub-adults (age 4-8 years): 28% Juveniles (<4 years old): 10%.

This ratio indicates ecological stress at the juvenile phase, where only 1 in 5 eggs survive to adulthood due to natural predation and resource competition. The doro (sacred) zone of the Ata Modo community was an exception, with a 40% higher chick survival rate than non-indigenous areas, proving the effectiveness of the traditional zoning system.

The Ata Modo community's observations of wind patterns, Komodo dragon behavior, and seasonal signs contribute to local knowledge that informs climate change

and biodiversity monitoring. This is in line with the findings of Cruz-Gispert, Martín-López, and Palomo (2022), who describe indigenous communities as part of a global network of knowledge (a global hydra of knowledge) that is essential for understanding the planet's ecological dynamics.

Recent research shows that habitat suitability prediction models (MaxEnt) can help determine important areas for Komodo dragon prey in the Flores region (Pramatana et al., 2023). Integrating these scientific findings with the Ata Modo traditional zoning system has the potential to increase the effectiveness of Komodo dragon habitat conservation.

## 9. Intergenerational inheritance of harmony values

Knowledge of how to coexist with Komodo dragons is passed on not through formal institutions, but through oral narratives, direct experience, and habituation from childhood. Children not only learn to avoid danger, but also to respect Komodo dragons as part of their living system. In an interview with Christina Lando (16 years old), a local student, she said:

*"From a young age, I was taught not to disturb Komodo dragons, not to feed them. If you see him coming, just watch from afar. My grandmother told me that he will understand if we are kind."*

Such education reflects ecological enculturation (Ingold, 2000) dalam (Howes, 2022), the process by which individuals understand and internalize ecological norms through cultural immersion. These values are embedded in folk songs, bedtime stories, and daily life practices such as hunting and farming.

This reinforces the argument of Tengō et al. (2014) that local knowledge systems cannot be separated from broader social and cultural structures. In the context of Ata Modo, environmental education is not cognitive, but existential and emotional.

## 10. Challenges of Harmony in the Age of Ecotourism and Digitalization

While local values continue to be passed down, the younger generation faces new challenges in the form of social change, increased tourist influx, and digital lifestyles. Some young people are starting to see Komodo dragons as objects for social media content, rather than sacred entities. Activities such as approaching Komodo dragons excessively to take photos or videos have become a common sight. Fikri, a local youth who is also a tour guide, admits that:

*"Now many young people are starting to forget the values of the past. They are more interested in getting 'likes' on Instagram than keeping the customs. This is dangerous if left unchecked."*

This phenomenon indicates a tension between local values and global culture, which if not handled wisely can erode the community's value system. As stated by Milton (2002), modernization often triggers ecological and epistemological dislocation in traditional communities. Therefore, a culture-based conservation strategy is needed that can bridge local values with the dynamics of the

times. Several initiatives such as village youth training, cultural festivals, and educational games such as "Komodo Stairs" developed by local communities with Barakarsa Indonesia are examples of how the value of harmony can be repackaged to remain relevant in the digital era.

Recent research highlights that the success of Komodo National Park management is highly dependent on the active participation of local communities in decision-making and economic benefit sharing (Sianipar et al., 2024). This approach reflects the community-based conservation paradigm that supports harmony between conservation and social welfare.

## 11. Policy Contributions and Implications

The harmonious phenomenology of Ata Modo offers important contributions:

1. Theoretical Contribution: Enriching the study of Ecophenomenology by validating the applicability of Ingold's Relational Ontology and Descola's Animism in Southeast Asia, demonstrating that local wisdom operates as a valid and robust theoretical framework.
2. Practical Implications: The Biocultural Ethics practiced by Ata Modo provide a Customary Conservation Model that can be integrated into Komodo National Park policy. This model calls for a shift from Fortress Conservation which separates humans from nature towards Relational Conservation based on respect for Kaka Bele as fellow engaged inhabitants.

## D. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion of this study confirms that the meaning of living in harmony with Komodo dragons from the perspective of the Ata Modo indigenous community cannot be understood as a mere ecological condition, but rather as a Relational Ontology that is spiritually, culturally, and practically integrated. Komodo dragons are not viewed as ordinary wild animals, but as "Elder Brothers" (Kaka Bele), who have cosmological connections, shape the social order, and act as spiritual moral markers of the balance of life with ancestors and nature. This relationship is passed down intergenerationally through narratives of twin creation myths and an internalized ethic of non-intervention in daily practices.

Theoretically, this research provides two fundamental contributions. First, this study validates Tim Ingold's (2011) dalam (Howes, 2022) Relational Ontology and Philippe Descola's (2013) Animism as powerful analytical lenses for the study of Eco-phenomenology in Southeast Asia. Through Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis, it is evident that Ata Modo's perspective is not based on Naturalism (the separation of humans and nature), but rather on Animism, which recognizes the commonality of soul (interiority) between Komodo dragons and humans. This finding serves as a rich empirical case study, showing how the cultural and environmental identity (becoming) of Ata Modo is actively co-constitutive (mutually constitutive) in a network of life with Komodo dragons. This enriches the global discourse on multispecies relationships,

challenging the hegemony of Western thinking in understanding conservation.

Second, this study makes a significant contribution to the formulation of conservation policy by providing Rozzi (2012); Tauro (2021) Biocultural Ethics model, which is derived from local lived experience. The practice of Ata Modo harmony, especially the principle of "never feed the Komodo," is identified as a critical habit that maintains ecological integrity (Komodo remains wild) as well as cultural integrity (maintaining kinship etiquette). This Habit is an effective act of resistance (agency) against the threat of Biocultural Homogenization brought about by mass tourism and commodity-oriented conservation perspectives.

Therefore, management policies in Komodo National Park must shift from the Fortress Conservation model, which has historically marginalized the role of indigenous communities, towards a Relational Conservation model. This new model must integrate Ata Modo Biocultural Ethics, recognizing them as ontological stakeholders who have an inseparable emotional, historical, and spiritual connection to the sustainability of Komodo. Effective and equitable conservation must begin with the recognition of Komodo as a subject of kinship, not merely an object to be protected.

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Hopefully, this article can be a small contribution to the preservation of culture, humanity, and a more sustainable life with nature.

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