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MARGINALIZATION OF THE ATA MODO TRIBE THROUGH THE CONSERVATION DISCOURSE OF KOMODO ISLAND

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Abstract

The following research discusses marginalization of the Ata Modo tribe through the conservation discourse of Komodo Island. The study analyze the reasons, forms, and impacts of the Ata Modo tribe marginalization through conservation implemented by state policies that strengthen conservation based tourism industry. While intended to protect biodiversity, these conservation practices have restricted the Ata Modo's access to their ancestral living spaces, natural resources, and recognition of their traditional knowledge. Theoretical frame of critical ethnography and the using theory of power relations by Michel Foucault, political ecology, and Gayatry Chakravorty Spivak' study of subaltern applied to interpret how structural power mechanism works to silence local perspective and legitimizes obedience to authorities. The result of study indicates that Ata Modo tribe has been marginalized by hegemonic discourse of conservation that reproduces unequal power relationship between state and Ata Modo Tribe. Conservation discourse operates as a form of social exclusion and territorial dominance rather than environmental action. Ata Modo tribe was excluded spatially, economically, culturally, and politically. These forms of marginalization create social inequality, economic susceptibility and loss of identity crisis as indigenous people of Ata Modo Tribe. This research conclude that conservation discourse creates social injustice among indigenous people by justifying their exclusionary practices. Therefore government should implement participatory and inclusive conservation that formally acknowledge their indigenous knowledge and rights.

Keywords: Marginalization, Ata Modo Tribe, Discourse, Conservation, Komodo Island.

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Introduction

Various issues and cases surrounding the marginalization of local and indigenous communities have proliferated significantly, becoming a focal point in both public discourse and scholarly debate. Entire groups of citizens have been displaced from their ancestral lands to satisfy a libido for power, which is often normalized through the rhetoric of development. One concrete case is the marginalization of the Ata Modo tribe on Komodo Island. Under the guise of environmental protection, conservation discourse have effectively sidelined this indigenous community.

The roots of the Ata Modo tribe's marginalization can be traced back to 1926, when the Sultanate of Bima, under instructions from the Dutch colonial government, issued a decree to protect the Komodo dragon (Saripa, 2022:3663). This process intensified significantly after the Indonesian government formally designated Komodo Island as a conservation area via Ministry of Forestry and Plantations Decree No. 145/Kpts-II/1980 and the Minister of Agriculture's 1980 announcement (Pratama et al., 2024:8). Since that pivotal moment, Komodo Island has been managed primarily as a zone focused on the protection of Komodo dragons and the surrounding biosphere, often at the expense of its long-standing human inhabitants (Mongi et al., 2024:17).

However, conservation policies are considered to lack substantive involvement of the Ata Modo tribe, resulting in their social and cultural marginalization (Kusumo, 2021). Policies of the Dutch colonial government, on the other hand, were aimed at commodifying the Komodo dragon for the sake of Western scientific research. The Indonesian government, too, through zoning policies and tourism activities implemented without the participation of the Ata Modo people, has contributed to their marginalization and coercive transformation. The conservation discourse legally and formally produced by the state has gradually shifted the Ata Modo people's position from being ecological subjects living in harmony with nature to a marginalized group alienated on their own ancestral lands.

The urgency of this research lies in the pressing need to critically uncover how the conservation discourse surrounding Komodo Island, which is normatively oriented toward nature preservation, in practice operates as an instrument of power that produces the marginalization of the Ata Modo tribe. Over the past few decades, public narratives and discourse regarding Komodo National Park have been dominated by the technocratic ecological interests of the state, premium tourism investors, and the global market. Conversely, the voices, customary rights, and local wisdom of the indigenous communities are rarely accommodated in policy formulation or inclusive public discourse. The

environmental spatial planning patterns implemented are suspected of tending to disregard the basic rights of local communities, ranging from restrictions on access to the area, the denial of the legality of customary rights, to the emergence of threats of forced relocation that undermine their social cohesion.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the theoretical discourse in the fields of cultural studies and political ecology by exposing how scientific knowledge is used to discipline the living spaces of marginalized groups. This issue is not merely a technical environmental problem, but a tangible form of epistemic and spatial injustice. Given this context of inequality, the research questions in this study focus on three fundamental inquiries: Why does the marginalization of the Ata Modo tribe occur in the conservation discourse of Komodo Island, what are the forms of marginalization experienced by the Ata Modo tribe, and what are the implications of the marginalization of the Ata Modo tribe within the conservation discourse of Komodo Island? Through these questions, this study seeks to offer social critique in order to promote conservation management policies that are more just and humane.

Literature Review

Existing research on Komodo Island predominantly emphasizes conservation, tourism development, and environmental sustainability. Studies by Norchamahdi and Zuhra (2023), Syahadat and Putra (2021), and Permatasari et al. (2020) highlight the dual goals of biodiversity protection and economic growth, while also documenting the environmental degradation caused by tourism infrastructure. Furthermore, while scholars like Komar et al. (2024) and Kusumo (2021) acknowledge the Ata Modo tribe's deep cultural connection to the Komodo dragon and their valuable local ecological knowledge, these works largely overlook the critical socio-political implications of conservation discourse on the tribe's autonomy.

Current academic discourse is evolving to challenge these narratives. Angelica (2024) and Tati et al. (2021) argue that conservation discourse is frequently employed to legitimize territorial control, noting that indigenous participation in governance remains largely symbolic and dominated by state and corporate interests. Additionally, research by Pratama et al. (2024) and Mongi et al. (2024) addresses the lack of legal recognition for the Ata Modo tribe and the rise of "green grabbing," where land is seized for the commodification of nature under the guise of environmental protection.

Despite these contributions, significant research gaps persist. Previous literature has often treated ecological, legal, and tourism aspects in isolation, failing to deeply investigate the systemic marginalization of the Ata Modo tribe.

Furthermore, the use of conservation discourse as an instrument for political-economic manipulation remains under-explored, and there is a notable scarcity of community-based research capturing the direct, lived experiences of the indigenous population. Consequently, this study seeks to bridge these gaps by critically analyzing Komodo Island's conservation narrative as a mechanism of exclusion, while advocating for the rights of the Ata Modo tribe and the formal recognition of their status as an indigenous community within the governance of their ancestral home.

This study analyzes the marginalization of the Ata Modo tribe on Komodo Island through four conceptual lenses. First, marginalization is defined as the systematic sidelining of minority groups (Wahyudi 2023:3-5), the loss of the Ata Modo's access to ancestral land and natural resource management to serve state and dominant interests. Second, the Ata Modo are recognized as the indigenous community who have inhabited the island for 2,000 years, now facing intense pressure from conservation and tourism (Angelica, 2024: 27). Third, utilizing Foucault's framework, discourse is viewed as a social practice and an instrument of power that constructs knowledge and social reality through institutional and professional rules (Kumbara, 2025). Finally, conservation is examined as an arena where environmental protection efforts intersect with competing political, economic, and social interests. Together, these concepts provide a framework to understand how conservation discourse effectively dispossesses the Ata Modo of their rights and agency.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study consists of three main pillars. The first is Michel Foucault's theory of power relations, which is used to identify how power operates and spreads through zoning policies, laws, and surveillance by national park authorities, which in turn enforce structural compliance among indigenous communities. Second is the political ecology framework, which examines how global and national political-economic interests influence the distribution and control of natural resources. Political ecology theory helps reveal inequalities when communities' living spaces are restricted, while, on the other hand, large-scale tourism concessions for market actors are granted legal permission. Third is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of the subaltern, which is used to position the Ata Modo tribe as an oppressed group whose rights and voices are ignored within the hegemonic power structure, leaving them with insufficient space to articulate their agency within the state's official policy discourse.

Research Methods

This study utilizes a critical ethnography approach to move beyond mere cultural description, aiming instead to uncover the hidden power dynamics, oppressive structures, and hegemonic discourses that impact the Ata Modo tribe. By applying this method, the research exposes how conservation discourse functions as an instrument of social control over natural resources on Komodo Island (Foucault, 1977:131-133).

The research is strategically situated in Kampung Komodo, West Manggarai, East Nusa Tenggara, the historical settlement of the Ata Modo which sits directly under the regulatory authority of the Komodo National Park. This location provides essential empirical insights into the ongoing tensions between state-led conservation mandates and the survival realities of indigenous residents. Data was gathered through intensive field research conducted from November 2025 to February 2026.

Qualitative data was derived from two main sources. Primary data was collected via non-participant observation and in-depth interviews with diverse stakeholders, including Ata Modo traditional leaders, government officials, activists, academics, and representatives from the Balai Taman Nasional Komodo (BTNK) (Komodo National Park Office). Complementing this, secondary data was obtained through an analysis of colonial archives, park zoning policies, conservation laws, and demographic reports. All information was critically analyzed using frameworks of power relations, political ecology, and subaltern studies to ensure robust and valid conclusions.

Results and Discussion

Causes and Processes of the Marginalization of the Ata Modo Tribe

The research findings indicate that the marginalization of the Ata Modo tribe has a long history linked to the production of top-down and hegemonic conservation discourse from the colonial period through the postcolonial era. This conservation discourse was initially shaped by the Dutch East Indies government in the early 20th century through the Kingdom of Bima, which established scientific protection regulations (Gustaman, 2020:7-10). However, Barnard's (2009) findings explain that later, the Dutch government, seeking to commodify the Komodo dragon, sidelined local authorities. Colonial logic deemed local communities incompetent to manage their natural environment and necessitated their replacement by a Western knowledge regime. Consequently, in 1939, Komodo Island was designated as a wildlife reserve directly managed by the Dutch colonial government.

This pattern was continued by the modern Indonesian government, which adopted the "fortress conservation" paradigm through the implementation of regulations such as Law No. 5 of 1990, later revised into Law No. 32 of 2024 on the Conservation of Biological Resources and Their Ecosystems (Undang-Undang Konservasi Sumber Daya Alam Hayati dan Ekosistemnya [UU KSDAHE]). Through this legal instrument, the state claims full control over customary territories without involving a substantive Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) mechanism for the indigenous people (Kusumo, 2021).

> "*Loh Liang* used to be a garden and a temporary dwelling for our grandparents. They were forcibly relocated, but now that area has actually been handed over to a company for tourism," (Interview with a community leader from Komodo Village, 5/12/2025).

The Ata Modo tribe's historical narrative reveals a systematic, forced eviction from their ancestral lands under the guise of conservation. While authorities justified this displacement as essential for protecting the Komodo dragon, the resulting transformation of the area into a capital-intensive tourism hub exposes a deeper, more problematic reality. This process illustrates what Peluso (1993:199) defines as "coercive conservation," where state legitimacy is weaponized to exert control over space through human displacement. This spatial clearance is operationalized through a "regime of truth," wherein a hegemonic scientific discourse constructs the Ata Modo as an ecological threat, thereby providing moral and legal legitimacy for their removal (Foucault, 1980:131).

However, the purported ecological rationale is invalidated by the subsequent transfer of land management to private entities. Instead of maintaining a pristine nature reserve, the territory has been repurposed for exclusive, profit-driven tourism. This transition highlights a clear shift from genuine conservation to "green grabbing," where environmental policy serves as a mechanism for capital accumulation (Fairhead et al., 2012:238).

When examining the legal basis for the state's exploitation of Komodo Island, the marginalization has been carried out in a systematic and structured manner. In 1965, Komodo Island was designated as a *Suaka Margasatwa* (Wildlife Reserve) under Forestry Decree No. SK.66/Dep.Keh/1965. Subsequently, in 1980, it was officially declared *Taman Nasional Komodo* (Komodo National Park) through an announcement issued by the Ministry of Agriculture and later formalized by the Ministry of Forestry. In 2006, regulations on the zoning of conservation areas began to emerge through Ministry of Forestry Regulation No. P.56/Menhut-II/2006. A major change to the Komodo Island area occurred in 2012 through the Decision of the Director General of Forest Protection and Nature

Conservation No. SK.21/IV-SET/2012 regarding the Zoning of Komodo National Park. The legal status of the area was developed bureaucratically through a formal and technical zoning system. This genealogy demonstrates that conservation shifted from traditional symbolic protection to a state-produced administrative legal regime. In Foucault's (1980) terminology, this constitutes an exercise of power through the discipline of knowledge. Conservation became a domain of state interests and modern science that subordinated local knowledge.

The production of power and corporatism subsequently emerged through the granting of the *Izin Usaha Penyedia Jasa Wisata Alam (IUPJWA) (Nature Tourism Service Business License) to private companies* (2012–2015). The issuance of IUPJWA permits to PT KWE and PT SKL reflects the normalization of conservation area corporatization. Zoning policies reinforce power imbalances by separating human settlements from Komodo habitats, ignoring indigenous practices. This model erases historical claims, redefining ancestral fishing and living areas as "tourism assets." Despite being labeled "public," these policies facilitate the privatization of conservation zones through corporate concessions, effectively excluding local communities while granting capital-backed actors exclusive rights to the land. Marginalization in this context operates through state legalization that transforms the relationship between humans and nature into a market relationship.

> "We're not even allowed to build a house, but companies can get permits to operate businesses inside the national park," (Interview with the chairman of the Komodo Youth Association, 30/11/2025).

This quote reveals the paradox of conservation policy, strict restrictions on indigenous communities coexist with significant relaxations for corporations. A number of companies hold IUPJWA permits, which legally allow business activities within conservation areas. Normatively, the IUPJWA scheme is touted as a form of sustainable ecotourism. However, field findings show that these permits actually serve as instruments for the legalization of the commercialization of conservation areas.

Marginalization is exacerbated by environmental governance that prioritizes Western science and bureaucratic knowledge systems, leading to the neglect of indigenous ecological practices that have evolved over generations. The Ata Modo people possess long-standing environmental knowledge regarding biodiversity conservation, marine ecosystems, and coexistence with the Komodo dragon. However, this knowledge has not received adequate institutional recognition because scientific conservation narratives are considered more authoritative. A traditional leader of the Ata Modo tribe expressed his deep frustration:

> "Back then, no one ever came to ask whose island this was. Suddenly, it was declared a protected area. Yet we've been living here long before the national park existed... The ones talking about Komodo's and protection are outsiders, researchers and the government. We were never asked for our opinion, as if we didn't exist," (Interview with a traditional leader of the Ata Modo tribe, 11/29/2025).

The quote above reveals a clear epistemic injustice. Foucault (1980:131) argues that power is not centralized and does not rely solely on physical force. In the concept of power relations, power instead subtly infiltrates life through institutional structures, legal systems, and the production of discourse that evolves. The state prioritizes Western scientific knowledge, specifically the conservation discourse, over the Ata Modo tribe's indigenous knowledge system, which has actually been tested over hundreds of years of living in harmony with the Komodo dragons. As a result of this technocratic knowledge's dominance, the community's customary rights have been unilaterally delegitimized by the national park authorities.



Figure 1: Barrier constructed by BTNK around Komodo Village
(Source: Author's documentation, 2025)

Indigenous communities are increasingly losing control over their ancestral territories as environmental regulations and zoning systems replace customary governance. On Komodo Island, this shift is accelerated by the expansion of premium tourism and global branding, where nature is transformed into a commodified asset integrated into the international market (Mongi et al., 2024:15). Applying a Foucauldian framework, conservation functions as a disciplinary mechanism used to legitimize territorial control and institutional power (Foucault, 1977:135-141). Consequently, conservation on Komodo is less

an ecological project than a political-economic process that prioritizes state and corporate interests over indigenous rights.

Marginalization is further reinforced by the lack of legal recognition of the Ata Modo tribe as a customary law community (Wahyudi, 2023:3-5). Without adequate legal recognition, indigenous communities have weaker bargaining power when facing institutional policies regarding land use, environmental restrictions, and natural resource management. As a result, customary rights are often subordinated to state administrative regulations and conservation frameworks.

> "We were invited to the meeting, but the plans had already been finalized. We were only asked to listen," (Interview with a member of the Ata Modo tribe, 12/13/2025).

Although indigenous communities are directly affected by conservation regulations, participation mechanisms are often symbolic rather than substantive. Institutional decision-making remains largely concentrated within government agencies, conservation authorities, and tourism stakeholders who possess greater political influence and economic capital. The voices of indigenous communities regarding traditional-based environmental management often receive limited institutional recognition.

Forms of Marginalization Experienced by the Ata Modo Tribe

The marginalization experienced by the Ata Modo indigenous community manifests in several interrelated dimensions of daily life. First is spatial marginalization. Through strict zoning policies established by BTNK, the indigenous community's sphere of activity has been forcibly restricted to core zones and zones where human activities are prohibited. Communal areas that once served social, economic, and spiritual functions, such as Loh Liang for farming and Gunung Ara as a site for traditional rituals are now completely off-limits to local residents (Angelica, 2024:21). Field interviews reveal that many Ata Modo fishermen experience fear and uncertainty when accessing marine areas historically used as a livelihood source due to increasingly strict conservation regulations.

> "We are people of the sea, but now even going to the sea has become something to fear. If we cross the zoning boundaries even slightly, we can be arrested," (Interview with an Ata Modo tribal member, 12/7/2025).

Institutionally established conservation boundaries have significantly altered the freedom of movement for indigenous communities, placing traditional territorial systems under formal governance structures (Kumbara, 2025:159). This territorial control is further reinforced by the expansion of

tourism, as the construction of ports, tourism infrastructure, and commercial facilities increasingly encroaches upon spaces that previously served as communal and traditional territories (Mongi et al., 2024:17). Informants also expressed feelings of insecurity regarding land ownership and relocation plans perceived as threatening the survival of indigenous communities, cultural continuity, and ancestral ties to their territories.

From a political ecology perspective, these findings indicate that conservation governance cannot be separated from struggles over authority, control of land, and political-economic interests that shape territorial management (Peluso, 1993:199). Discussions regarding relocation further intensify indigenous communities' sense of insecurity. Although relocation is officially framed as a strategy to support conservation and tourism management, many community members perceive it as a threat to the very existence of indigenous communities. For the Ata Modo people, territory is not merely a living space, but an ancestral legacy, a historical identity, and the foundation of cultural continuity. Therefore, territorial displacement threatens not only their economic sustainability but also their collective memory and social identity.

Second is economic marginalization. As a result of restrictions on customary lands, communities' access to their traditional livelihoods such as hunting, gathering forest products, and farming has been drastically reduced or even completely prohibited. This forces communities to turn to the tourism sector, which is unpredictable and heavily dependent on external markets. This study further reveals that tourism-based conservation significantly contributes to economic marginalization and structural inequality. Conservation discourse often promotes tourism as a sustainable development strategy expected to improve community well-being and create local economic opportunities. However, field findings indicate unequal economic relationships among indigenous communities, the tourism industry, investors, and institutional actors.

> "Our land is used for tourism, but outsiders are the ones getting rich while we only get the leftovers. When tourism declines, we struggle to survive because access to agricultural land and marine resources is increasingly restricted," (Interview with a member of the Ata Modo tribe, 12/6/2025).

Before tourism expansion, the Ata Modo tribe primarily relied on fishing, the use of marine resources, and subsistence livelihoods closely tied to traditional ecological knowledge. However, conservation regulations have increasingly restricted access to traditional living spaces, thereby weakening the economic autonomy of indigenous communities. At the same time, tourism development has introduced a market-oriented economic system largely dominated by

external investors and tourism businesses, while indigenous communities' participation remains concentrated in low-income sectors, such as informal labor, souvenir sales, and temporary tourism services.

This unequal economic structure creates dependency while simultaneously reinforcing the vulnerability of indigenous communities, as economic benefits are concentrated more among investors and institutional actors than among local communities. Tourism-based conservation reproduces the process of capitalist accumulation. The nature and culture of indigenous communities are commodified within the global tourism market, while indigenous communities remain in a subordinate economic position (Mongi et al., 2024:15-17). This situation reflects the paradox of the sustainable tourism discourse. Officially, tourism is promoted as a means of community empowerment and local development; in practice, economic power remains concentrated among investors, institutions, and commercial actors.

Third is the marginalization of culture and knowledge. The traditional practices and ancestral myths of the Ata Modo tribe, which regard the Komodo dragon as their twin (sebae), are dismissed as unscientific superstition by the state conservation regime. When communities are cut off from their natural interaction with these animals, local ecological knowledge is also threatened with extinction. Institutional environmental management prioritizes scientific conservation narratives, while local ecological perspectives receive only limited recognition in official conservation policies.

> In the past, before going out to sea, we would always offer a ritual offering to the sea first. That was a form of respect, so that the sea would also protect us. Now, the sea feels like it no longer belongs to us. Everything is already regulated. We even feel afraid to perform rituals, (Interview with a member of the Ata Modo tribe, 12/07/2025).

From this statement, it is evident that the traditional knowledge system which historically governed the community's interaction with the environment faces pressure from institutional governance and market-oriented tourism structures. Indigenous culture is integrated into tourism branding and commercial representations. Tourism promotions often highlight the uniqueness of indigenous traditions, local myths, cultural symbols, and traditional lifestyles to enhance tourism appeal. From a Cultural Studies perspective, cultural marginalization occurs not only through direct exclusion but also through symbolic representation and reconstruction (Barker, 2004:110). The identity of indigenous communities is then controlled through tourism and conservation narratives largely shaped by institutional and commercial interests.

The Ata Modo tribe actually possesses extensive ecological knowledge regarding environmental cycles, marine ecosystems, wildlife behavior, and traditional-based environmental management. This ecological knowledge has developed through long-term interaction with local ecosystems and is passed down across generations through traditional customs. However, conservation management relies more heavily on scientific environmental discourse, institutional expertise, and bureaucratic administrative systems. Conservation policies are generally formulated based on scientific research and institutional regulations with limited consideration of indigenous communities' ecological perspectives.

> "We are the komodo dragons' kin. In the sebae story, it is clearly stated that we protect one another. We never harm our sebae. This is not merely a folk tale, but our guiding principle. However, our story is merely used as tourist entertainment and has never been considered in conservation governance," (Interview with Ata Modo, a traditional elder, 11/29/2025).

This explanation by the traditional elder indicates that the exclusion of indigenous knowledge undermines the potential for collaborative environmental governance. Conservation policies implemented without integrating local ecological perspectives have the potential to generate social tension, mistrust, and conflict between institutions and indigenous communities. The findings of this study indicate that conservation governance is not merely a territorial process but also an epistemological struggle over whose knowledge is deemed legitimate in environmental management.

From Foucault's perspective (1977:195), knowledge cannot be separated from power because institutions determine which forms of knowledge are legitimized and normalized within the governance system. Conservation discourse functions not only as an effort to protect the environment but also as an epistemological regime that prioritizes scientific authority over indigenous communities' understanding of nature. Spivak (1988:280-283) further explains that marginalized groups often face silencing because dominant institutions monopolize political and epistemological legitimacy. In the case of the Ata Modo tribe, the voices of indigenous communities regarding traditional-based environmental governance are frequently overshadowed by state institutions, tourism narratives, and global conservation discourse.

Fourth is political marginalization. Indigenous communities' involvement in environmental management is regulated in a purely formal and symbolic manner. Village governments are not granted substantial authority in determining zoning policies for their territories. This asymmetrical top-down

relationship relegates residents to the role of mere spectators or passive recipients of the impacts of regulations crafted at the seat of power.

> "We lack a strong legal foundation. When they want to relocate us, the only thing we can do is resist physically, shout, protest, and wear shrouds as a symbol that we are ready to die for our ancestral lands," (Interview with a member of the Komodo Youth Community, 12/3/2025).

Political marginalization of the Ata Modo tribe is primarily driven by the absence of robust legal recognition as an Indigenous Customary Community, rendering their territorial claims vulnerable to state intervention and tourism development. Conservation policies frequently prioritize bureaucratic authority over customary rights, relegating local participation to a superficial administrative requirement rather than genuine democratic engagement. As noted by Angelica (2024:38), indigenous aspirations regarding land and resource access are rarely integrated into substantive policy, fostering deep-seated distrust toward conservation institutions.

Applying Foucault's (1977:195) framework, this governance functions as a mechanism of disciplinary power, where the state asserts control through institutional surveillance and the discursive legitimation of "expert" knowledge. By defining which environmental practices are legitimate, the state systematically subordinates indigenous voices. Consequently, the Ata Modo are reduced to objects of governance rather than empowered political actors. This power asymmetry is further manifested in the tourism industry, which exploits indigenous identity for branding romanticizing local traditions and spiritual connections to the Komodo dragon to market an exotic destination. Such representations serve to commodify the tribe's culture while simultaneously obscuring the underlying structural realities of their territorial displacement, economic vulnerability, and systemic political exclusion.

Implications Social, Economic, Political, Cultural, Psychosocial, and Ecological

The multidimensional and structured marginalization perpetuated through conservation discourse has profoundly destructive social implications for the daily lives of the Ata Modo people. One of the primary implications relates to the erosion of indigenous communities' territorial sovereignty due to restrictions on access to customary lands and natural resources. The most tangible manifestation of these social implications is the extreme population density in the Kampung Komodo settlement area.

> "Our settlement area is now only about five hectares. We are not truly free on our own land. We are merely permitted to live here. We do not possess land ownership

> certificates. Therefore, we could be relocated at any time," (Interview with a Komodo Village official, 30/11/2025).

The area of residential land allocated by BTNK for local residents is limited and has never been expanded in proportion to the demographic growth rate of the indigenous population. As a result, residents' homes are forced to be built right up against one another with no space in between, creating an extremely dense settlement layout and degrading daily quality of life, sanitation, and environmental health. Their living space, which once stretched across the entire island, is now forced to shrink into mere "settlement pockets" isolated amidst the encroachment of state regulations.

This spatial tension fuels acute structural conflict between the village government and national park authorities. The village government's efforts to build essential public infrastructure to fulfill residents' basic rights often face legal deadlocks. Village officials and residents who take the initiative to carry out physical development on their own ancestral lands are repeatedly faced with the threat of criminalization by law enforcement officers from the BTNK, accused of violating the legal boundaries of state conservation areas.

> I was once a suspect for building a school and a health center. Yet that was for the residents. But they said it was within a conservation area, (Interview with the Village Head of Komodo, 30/11/2025).

This statement illustrates that conservation is not a neutral endeavor but a repressive political-ideological instrument. Through Komodo National Park's zoning, the state utilizes Foucault's "spatial technologies" to discipline and restrict human movement (Foucault, 1980:68). By criminalizing essential needs like education and healthcare under the guise of environmental law, technocratic authorities establish a "regime of truth" that prioritizes Western biological frameworks over human existence (Foucault, 1980:131). Territory is no longer recognized for its social, cultural, or spiritual significance; instead, it is reduced to an object of state regulation and a tourism commodity, effectively stripping the indigenous community of their agency and connection to their heritage.

Economically, conservation-based tourism on Komodo Island contributes to growing inequality between indigenous communities and external actors who benefit from the tourism industry. This ecological paradox reveals a double standard of power. Subsistence activities and the fulfillment of local residents' public rights are curtailed through the threat of criminal prosecution, while large-scale private corporations are granted IUPJWA permits that legalize the construction of luxury resorts in tourism utilization zones.

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Figure 2: A woman from the Ata Modo tribe is making a Komodo dragon sculpture (Source: Author's documentation, 2025)

Although tourism has brought economic growth and international recognition to Komodo Island, many members of the Ata Modo community remain in unstable, low-income sectors, such as informal workers, souvenir vendors, and temporary tourism service providers. Furthermore, the reduction in territorial autonomy directly impacts traditional livelihood systems, particularly fishing practices and customary resource management that have historically sustained the social and economic lives of indigenous communities (Putra et al., 2021:309).

Inequalities in access to tourism benefits, institutional authority, and economic opportunities reinforce indigenous communities' dependence on external tourism markets while increasing their economic vulnerability. The Ata Modo people are ultimately forced to become spectators on their own land, trapped in what Spivak calls the "circle of global subordination". Local subjects are exploited as cheap tourism labor to serve the comfort of foreign tourists and the capital accumulation of concession holders (Spivak, 1988:294).

Culturally and in terms of local knowledge, tourism development that transforms traditions, symbols, and cultural practices into tourist attractions strips the Ata Modo tribe's cultural activities of their spiritual and communal significance. Younger generations have also become a group highly vulnerable to the ongoing, prolonged cultural transformation. Traditional identity, ecological traditions, and intergenerational knowledge transmission are growing weaker due to increasing exposure to modernization and conservation-based tourism.

> "If there's an illness, it's a sign of imbalance. We used to drive away sickness together to cleanse the village, but the main ritual site is now within the national park. We can't just go in there, so the ritual has faded away on its own," (Interview with a traditional leader of the Ata Modo tribe, 29/11/2026).

Interview data with elders indicate that conservation policies have severed the connection between cultural practices, living spaces, and the ecological knowledge systems that have shaped the Ata Modo tribe's way of life for centuries. Traditional rituals that once served as collective mechanisms to maintain balance between humans, nature, and the Komodo dragon are gradually being abandoned, not merely due to changing times, but because of the loss of access to the sacred and ecological spaces that are the primary prerequisites for performing these rituals.

This situation underscores the Ata Modo tribe's position as a subaltern group whose voice is silenced by hegemonic power structures. Borrowing Spivak's thesis on the silencing of the subaltern, the phrase "so the ritual just disappeared on its own" indicates the absence of institutional channels for indigenous communities to defend their cultural rights (Spivak, 1988:271). The extinction of the traditional ritual to drive away illness occurred not because the community voluntarily abandoned its culture, but because their cultural agency was usurped by the state's repressive spatial planning laws. Indigenous communities lack the political leverage to challenge this spatial division, so their voices and customary rights vanish amidst the grand narrative of global environmental conservation.

> "When we hunt deer, the komodo dragons must also get their share. That is the teaching of our ancestors, to maintain balance in life. Now we're accused of causing damage when we're near the komodo dragons, even though that used to be our way of protecting them," (Interview with a member of the Ata Modo tribe, 15/12/2025).

This narrative statement clearly reflects a sharp epistemic clash between local truth and state-sanctioned scientific truth (Foucault, 1980:131). Discourse establishes boundaries regarding what may be said, thought, and considered "legitimate truth". Meanwhile, traditional knowledge places humans and komodo dragons within an ecological-spiritual relationship that mutually sustains one another. However, modern governmental logic categorizes this myth- and custom-based knowledge as a form of ignorance lacking scientific validity (Foucault, 1980:82).

A shift in power occurs when the state imposes a Western conservation knowledge regime through "fortress conservation" policies. The consequence is evident in the second sentence, "Now we're called destroyers just for being near

the komodo". At this point, state power works to redefine the identity of the Ata Modo tribe. A tribe that for centuries acted as guardians of the natural environment is now unilaterally labeled as environmental criminals, destroyers, or poachers through the formal legal mechanisms of the state (Law No. 32 of 2024 on Conservation). Their subsistence activities are now regulated, monitored in a panoptic manner by BTNK forest police checkpoints, and disciplined to keep them away from the komodo's habitat.

Politically, limited institutional recognition and weak participation of indigenous communities contribute to the continued exclusion in conservation governance (Pratama et al., 2024:8-9). Decision-making authority regarding territory and environmental management remains largely centralized within state institutions and conservation agencies, while indigenous communities often experience only symbolic, rather than substantive, participation. Without stronger legal legitimacy and meaningful inclusion mechanisms, the Ata Modo people remain vulnerable to unequal policies and external interventions.

We are not yet free. Even the permission to live on our own land is being restricted every year. There is no land left to build houses, even though this is our village, (Interview with a community leader from Komodo Village, 12/5/2025).

The statement above reveals the deep anguish of an indigenous community experiencing structural violence both spatially and politically. Without stronger legal legitimacy and meaningful inclusion mechanisms, the Ata Modo tribe remains in a vulnerable position regarding unequal policies and external interventions. This political powerlessness leads the analysis to the concept of the subaltern group, as proposed by Gayatri Spivak. Within the current environmental governance structure, the Ata Modo tribe occupies the position of a subaltern, a social group whose position is severely marginalized and whose voice is systematically silenced by the hegemony of power (Spivak, 1988:283).

When the state and international conservation agencies hold public consultation forums, the participation granted to indigenous communities is merely a procedural formality or political window-dressing to fulfill administrative obligations in order to secure global legitimacy. As Spivak (1988:294) emphasizes, subaltern groups do indeed speak, yet their voices are never truly heard because they do not fit into the linguistic and legal frameworks of the ruling power. The Ata Modo tribe continues to voice their customary rights, but these voices are lost amid the dominance of technocratic language, certification, and the state's positive law.

Psychosocially, the demarcation of customary territories and persistent relocation threats have inflicted severe psychosocial distress on the Ata Modo

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tribe, undermining their emotional well-being and sense of security. Following Robbins's (2020:89) political ecology, strict human-nature separation policies create spatial fears that stifle the community's adaptive capacity. For the Ata Modo, their ancestral land is not merely physical territory. It is the vital center of historical memory, emotional attachment, and social identity. Threatening this space through exclusionary conservation regulations triggers profound existential alienation. By forcibly uprooting the tribe from their ecological environment, these policies shatter their collective consciousness, leaving the community in a state of constant anxiety and displacement as their foundational connection to their heritage and sense of belonging is systematically eroded.



Figure 3: Location of the BTNK Guard Post in the center of Komodo Village (under renovation) (Source: Author's Documentation, 2025)

This alienation manifests through strict spatial discipline, with the national park authorities maintaining a central village guard post. Applying Foucault's (1980:112) power-knowledge framework, this surveillance functions at the micro-level, transforming the Ata Modo from autonomous historical subjects into domesticated objects of state control. The constant presence of patrols instills a psychological sense of being perpetually monitored.

This vulnerable psychosocial condition is further exploited by the unstable nature of premium tourism. Economic monoculture policies that sever agrarian-maritime customary ties force the Ata Modo people to rely entirely on the tourism service industry. When the flow of global tourists experiences a sharp decline, residents' income sources immediately grind to a halt, directly leading to a surge in daily psychological anxiety. This asymmetrical economic dependence reinforces Spivak's (1988) analysis of the position of subaltern

groups. They lack independent economic agency, and their voices are silenced by the logic of the international tourism market.

Ecologically, the marginalization of indigenous communities threatens the very sustainability of conservation. The Ata Modo tribe has historically served as vital ecological guardians, utilizing traditional ethics and local knowledge to coexist with the Komodo dragon and preserve biodiversity. However, contemporary conservation discourse increasingly prioritizes scientific and bureaucratic authorities, effectively delegitimizing the Ata Modo's role as historical environmental stewards and severing management from essential local ecological experiences (Angelica, 2024:38).

This disconnection forces the Ata Modo into a state of radical alienation, relegating them to a subaltern position. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988:281) observes, subalternity is defined by the inability of marginalized groups to articulate their agency within dominant discursive structures. Because the top-down formulation of national park policies denies the Ata Modo a platform to express their perspectives, they are systematically silenced, ultimately undermining both their cultural identity and the long-term ecological resilience of the region they have protected for generations.

> "We once went to Loh Liang and staked out the land there as a sign that we exist and that it is our land; we even went to Jakarta for a formal review of Law No. 32 of 2024 to include provisions for indigenous communities, but we failed. But we keep trying, especially now that there's social media," (Interview with a member of the Komodo Youth Association, December 4, 2025).

Nevertheless, power relations are never monolithic. As Foucault (1980:142) asserts, "where there is power, there is resistance". The psychological trauma, existential anxiety, and social wounds accumulated over decades are gradually transforming into a catalyst for the emergence of a new critical consciousness. This phenomenon of cultural and political resistance is driven by a circle of young people from the Ata Modo tribe who refuse to remain in a passive, subaltern position. Indigenous youth have begun organizing themselves into collective movements, building strategic alliances with civil society organizations, and utilizing digital platforms, even sending representatives to Jakarta to meet with government ministries, despite being turned away, to voice their grievances regarding spatial governance injustices and demand the restoration of their customary rights. This marks a shift from physical resistance to symbolic and discursive resistance.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the discourse on the conservation of Komodo Island does not operate in a scientifically neutral manner, but rather functions as an instrument of power that systematically marginalizes the Ata Modo tribe as the indigenous inhabitants. This marginalization is driven by the dominance of the state's epistemic authority, which implements a top-down "fortress conservation" paradigm without incorporating substantive Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) mechanisms. On the ground, this marginalization manifests in multiple dimensions, including spatial aspects such as the curtailment of territorial autonomy through a strict zoning system; economic aspects such as the prohibition of traditional livelihoods, which forces residents to become low-wage informal tourism workers; cultural aspects through the delegitimization of the ancestral myth of the sebae; and political aspects involving the silencing of community voices, whose involvement is merely symbolic in policy formulation. This structured process carries destructive implications, including an identity crisis, extreme population concentration in Komodo Village due to restrictions on residential land, and social trauma resulting from the threat of criminalization and the threat of relocation from Komodo Island.

This critical ethnographic study uncovers a glaring paradox within the political ecology of Komodo Island. While state conservation policies strictly restrict and criminalize the Ata Modo tribe's subsistence activities and access to basic resources, the same territory is simultaneously opened to large-scale private corporations for luxury resort development through legalized permits. Furthermore, the study highlights a profound epistemic injustice, as state-imposed legal frameworks, Law No. 32 of 2024 and specific zoning policies systematically redefine the Ata Modo from traditional environmental guardians into perceived threats. Ironically, local knowledge systems and traditional rituals that have been tested over centuries to maintain harmony with the Komodo dragons have been excluded from official policy frameworks and then exploitatively reduced to mere entertainment commodities or commercial branding to serve the global tourism industry.

As a follow-up to the research findings, there are several practical recommendations for relevant stakeholders. For the Government: It is vital to provide formal legal recognition of the Ata Modo as a customary law community to secure their land rights, cultural practices, and access to legal remedies. For Conservation Authorities: The Ata Modo must be treated as primary stakeholders and equal partners. Integrating traditional ecological knowledge and restoring access to ancestral living spaces are essential prerequisites for

achieving sustainability that aligns with social justice. For Tourism Developers: Development must prioritize social and ecological equity. Crucially, their culture must be respected as a living identity and ethical system, rather than a mere commercial commodity. For the Ata Modo tribe: The community must strengthen internal solidarity and organizational capacity. Systematic documentation of their history, customary territories, and ecological traditions is essential to securing formal recognition and building resilience against external pressures.

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