

Mythology as a Catalyst for Creative Economy and Environmental Conservation: A Critical Comparison of the Manguni and Bali Starling Narratives

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Abstract: This study is motivated by the importance of revitalizing local values through the construction of myths that can bridge spirituality, education, and the creative economy within the context of conservation and sustainable tourism. The research focuses on how the myths of the Manguni bird and the Bali Starling are constructed and transformed as media for education, conservation, and the creative economy, including challenges encountered. Critical discourse analysis, social construction and eco-biology theory are employed to interpret these phenomena. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and document analysis. The findings reveal that bird mythology in Bali and Minahasa communities both is constructed within local narratives and transformed into a medium for ecological ethics education, creative innovation, and ecotourism development. These findings emphasize the importance of policies that integrate such strategies into the management of ecotourism, and encourage the adoption of a development paradigm rooted in cultural authenticity.

Keywords: Bali starling; conservation; creative economy; manguni bird; myth

1. Introduction

Indonesia is a megadiverse country rich in flora, fauna, and cultural variety. Amid threats such as climate change, deforestation, urbanization, and local wisdom serves as a crucial asset for supporting environmental conservation and

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socio-cultural sustainability (Victoria, et al., 2025; Aldyan, et al., 2024). Folklore and myths rooted in a harmonious relationship between humans and nature play a key role in transmitting ecological values and cultural identity across generations (Maffi & Woodley, 2010). In this context, birds as symbols of nature and culture hold significant importance. Many indigenous communities across the archipelago regard certain birds as signifier beings and spiritual mediators. One potential asset in Indonesia that is considered to play a positive role in this context is the myth of the Manguni bird in North Sulawesi and the Bali Starling or *Jalak Bali* (*Leucopsar rothschildi*) in Bali, thus this issue is considered necessary to examine from a multiple perspective, as it holds both theoretical and practical significance.

Within the oral tradition of the Minahasa people in North Sulawesi, the Manguni bird, a species of owl (*Otus Manadensis*), holds a special status. For the Minahasa, the Manguni represents a hierophanic reality that conveys divine messages into a socially and symbolically constructed world (Mamoto, 2007). The Manguni is viewed as a messenger of ancestors as well as a guardian of natural balance (Liando, 2021). Its call is believed to carry supernatural meaning, signaling danger, ancestral blessings, or marking important decisions. However, lately, the influences of modernization and globalization marked by economic growth and the expansion of global culture, this myth has undergone continuous processes of de-mythologization and re-mythologization in various sociocultural practices and its spiritual function, the Manguni myth also serves as an informal educational medium through folktales, customary rituals, and artistic symbols. Ecological values, such as prohibitions against forest destruction and respect for nocturnal wildlife are conveyed through Manguni stories. Empirically, over the past two decades, the Manguni image has also been developed in wooden handicrafts, *batik* motifs, group identity emblems, and cultural festivals, creating opportunities for a conservation-based creative economy (Wenas, 2021).

On the other hand, the *Jalak Bali* (*Leucopsar rothschildi*) is an endemic bird of Bali Island with both ecological and spiritual significance. In Balinese mythology, the Bali Starling stands as a cultural icon and a symbol of ecological conservation. With its brilliant white plumage and striking blue eyes, it is often regarded as a representation of purity and cosmic balance in Balinese Hindu tradition (Sukmawan & Febriani, 2023). However, over the past three decades, this species has been listed as Critically Endangered by the IUCN, with its population continuing to decline due to hunting and habitat degradation (Birdlife International, 2023). van Balen et al. (2009) reported from field notes that: from ~300–400 individuals (1976/77) to 125–180 (1984), 13–14 (1990), recovered to 45 (1993), then dropped again to around 15 individuals in 2000. In

response to the alarming decline of the Bali Starling, the government through the Rare Animal Conservation Center has collaborated with local communities and international organizations since the 1980s to implement conservation programs involving captive breeding and reintroduction (Jepson, 2016; Jepson and Ladle, 2005). These efforts have focused on two key habitats: Ped Village Nusa Penida Island in Klungkung Regency and Bali Barat National Park (BBNP) in Jembrana Regency and Sumber Klampok Village in Buleleng Regency.

Alongside these conservation measures, the government is working with a Pentahelix network. The pentahelix concept is a collaborative development model that involves five key stakeholders working together in an integrated and synergistic manner such as: NGO's, communities, academic, and mass media has promoted the Bali Starling as an ecotourism attraction that combines environmental education, traditional rituals (such as the animal-related ritual *Tumpek Kandang* and the forest-protection ritual *Wana Kertih*), and the development of creative products from fine art to tourism merchandise. Today, the Bali Starling stands as both a symbol of Bali's tourism promotion and a driver of a creative economy rooted in wildlife conservation (Wenas, 2007).

Integrating fauna-related myths into formal and nonformal education has been proven to enhance ecological awareness. Storytelling grounded in local culture strengthens the teaching of science and environmental ethics (Banks, 2017; Ortega et al., 2023; Rawanda et al., 2020). In Minahasa, the story of the Manguni is incorporated into elementary school local content curricula and church activities to instill conservation values. In Bali, educational programs in Bali Barat National Park (BBNP) use the sacred narrative of the Bali Starling to foster pride and environmental concern among younger generations (Sukmawan & Febriani, 2023). While simultaneously inspiring the development of creative arts and the creative economy perspective, both myths hold significant potential. The global market for nature- and culture-based tourism is growing at a rate of 5–7% per year (UNESCO, 2021). Handicrafts, fashion, and festivals featuring Manguni and Bali Starling symbols can provide local communities with sources of income while expanding the impact of conservation through market mechanisms (Howkins, 2020). However, the risk of excessive commodification may shift their spiritual meaning into mere commercial products, underscoring the need for balanced governance.

This study focuses on how the myths of the Manguni Bird and the Bali Starling are constructed and transformed into mediums for education, conservation, and the creative economy, including the challenges encountered in these processes. By moving beyond descriptive ethnography toward a critical and integrative approach, this study repositions bird mythology as a transformative socio-cultural resource bridging ecological ethics, creative

economy development, and culturally grounded sustainable tourism. In doing so, it offers a new conceptual contribution that situates myth not as a static narrative, but as an active mechanism in contemporary sustainability discourse and policy praxis.

2. Literature Review

Studies on myth in traditional Indonesian societies generally position myth as an integral part of belief systems and cultural identity (Geertz, 1973; Eliade, 1959). In the context of biodiversity and local wisdom, several scholars argue that mythological narratives perform ecological functions by operating as mechanisms of social regulation against environmental exploitation (Maffi, 2010; Berkes, 2012). However, most of these studies remain largely descriptive and ethnographic in nature and have not systematically analyzed the dynamics of myth transformation within the contexts of modernity and the creative economy.

Research on the Manguni bird in Minahasa, for example, as discussed by Mamoto (2007) and Liando (2021), primarily focuses on its cosmological symbolism and spiritual meaning within local belief systems. Manguni is portrayed as a hierophanic symbol and a spiritual mediator within Minahasan cosmology. Its call and flight direction are interpreted as ancestral messages guiding collective decision-making (Liando, 2021). These studies successfully explain Manguni's position as a mediator between the ancestral realm and the human world, yet they pay limited attention to how this meaning is negotiated within the contexts of globalization and shifting social structures. In other words, the transformational and reconstructive dimensions of the Manguni myth have not been thoroughly examined. Consequently, without an analysis of such transformations, studies on Manguni risk falling into cultural romanticism and failing to capture contemporary social dynamics. From a social constructionist perspective, the process of demythologization resulting from modern rationalization does not necessarily erase the meaning of the Manguni myth; rather, it triggers a process of remythologization through cultural festivals and ethnic identity symbols, in which Manguni shifts from a cosmological symbol to a cultural-political emblem.

Previous literature consistently describes Manguni as a hierophanic symbol and spiritual mediator within Minahasan cosmology (Mamoto, 2007). Its call and flight direction are interpreted as ancestral signs guiding communal decisions (Liando, 2021). Beyond its spiritual function, the Manguni myth also serves as an informal educational medium transmitted through folktales, customary rituals, and artistic symbols (Marbun, 2025; Gosal et al., 2024). Ecological values—such as prohibitions against forest destruction and

respect for nocturnal wildlife—are conveyed through Manguni narratives. Over the past two decades, the image of Manguni has also been developed in wooden handicrafts, *batik* motifs, organizational emblems, and cultural festivals, generating opportunities for a conservation-based creative economy (Wenas, 2021). Nevertheless, these studies have not sufficiently examined how younger generations in Minahasa reinterpret this symbol within the contexts of urbanization and modern formal education. This article therefore emphasizes that without analyzing processes of construction and transformation, studies of Manguni remain limited to descriptive accounts and fail to address contemporary social reconfigurations.

Similarly, studies on the Bali Starling predominantly emphasize biological conservation, population dynamics, and species protection policies (Jepson & Ladle, 2005). More recently, the Bali Starling has been framed both as a symbol of Bali's tourism promotion and as a driver of a wildlife-based creative economy (Jepson, 2016). While these contributions are important, such approaches tend to separate ecological dimensions from symbolic and cultural ones. The Bali Starling is frequently treated as a technocratic conservation object rather than as a symbol continuously constructed and reproduced within social and economic relations. As a result, the interconnections among myth, cultural identity, and the creative economy have not been fully integrated within a comprehensive analytical framework.

The literature on the Bali Starling further indicates that the theory of the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) has rarely been applied, despite its relevance for understanding myth not as a static entity but as a historical product continuously reproduced through social interaction. Through this theoretical lens, discourses surrounding Manguni and the Bali Starling can be examined as socially constructed and transformed within educational, conservation, and creative economic contexts, integrating symbolic, political, and economic analyses. Likewise, cultural ecology theory (Berkes, 2012), which highlights the role of local knowledge in conservation, has been widely employed. However, this perspective often idealizes indigenous communities as inherent guardians of nature without sufficiently connecting conservation practices to processes of symbolic commodification and global economic penetration. Therefore, in the context of Manguni and the Bali Starling, it is crucial to consider how these symbols function as forms of cultural capital that can be converted into economic value (Bourdieu, 1986). Within this framework of cultural capital, the Bali Starling can be understood as simultaneously embodying symbolic, conservation, and economic value. The internalization and institutionalization of this symbol through government policies demonstrate the interrelationship among conservation, regional identity, and tourism branding strategies.

Accordingly, this study adopts a distinct analytical position. It does not merely describe the symbolic meanings of Manguni and the Bali Starling but critically examines how these myths are constructed, negotiated, and transformed across three interconnected domains: education, conservation, and the creative economy. By doing so, the research seeks to bridge the fragmentation of previous studies and to offer a comparative and interdisciplinary approach. A critical review of earlier scholarship reveals a strong tendency toward descriptive analysis and single-perspective frameworks that have not adequately captured the dynamic processes of social reality construction and symbolic transformation. This gap therefore confirms the originality and scholarly contribution of the present study, as it holds the potential to generate new insights—whether by enriching, extending, or clarifying existing research findings.

3. Methods and Theory

3.1 Methodological Approach

This study employs a multi-method design, specifically qualitative methods (Geertz, 1973; Madison, 2005; Thompson, 2015), combined with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) Fairclough (1995), and comparative case analysis techniques (Yin, 2018). This method focuses on uncovering the symbolic meanings embedded in social actions, and to identify similarities and differences in how the Manguni and Bali Starling myths function within education, cultural–environmental preservation, and creative economic development.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analysis of socio-religious documents. Several informants related to the topic interviewed include: traditional leaders, religious figures, conservation managers, teachers, community members, and creative-economy practitioners in both Minahasa and Bali. Field studies were conducted to capture how the species is represented in rituals, conservation practices, and tourism narratives within local communities, providing insight into the living expression of myth in daily interactions. Meanwhile, document analysis involved examining traditional manuscripts, government conservation reports, and academic literature to trace how the myth evolved from a sacred symbol of purity and prosperity into a marker of identity and environmental ethics. By integrating these perspectives, the study seeks a holistic understanding of how the Manguni and Bali Starling myths are constructed and practiced as media for education, cultural and environmental conservation, and the creative economy, as well as the challenges that arise in utilizing these myths as instruments for sustainable development.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an eclectic theoretical foundation, drawing on social construction of reality (Berger & Luckman, 1966) and the cultural ecology framework emphasizes the reciprocal interactions between humans, culture, and the environment (Berkes, 2012). This theory explains how animal myths function as adaptive mechanisms that guide conservation behavior and regulate human–nature relationships. Berger & Luckman (1966), explain that social reality is formed through a continuous dialectical process consisting of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. The myth of a bird provides a clear illustration of this process in action.

The social constructionist perspective is used to understand mythic reality as the result of social interaction and symbolic legitimation. In the transformation of education, innovation, and tourism development, this Berger framework becomes particularly relevant. In education, the myth is reframed as a medium for ecological ethics, integrating cultural narratives into environmental learning. In innovation, the symbolic meaning of the bird inspires creative industries, branding, artistic production, and community-based enterprises.

4. Results and Discussion

In line with the title and problem formulation above, the main discussion of the results of this study, which will be described, consists of two parts. First, it describes how the myth of the Manguni bird and the Bali Starling is constructed and transformed by the Minahasa and Balinese Hindu communities as a marker of identity, a medium for education, conservation, and the development of the creative economy and ecotourism. Second, it presents the results of the analysis of the integration model and challenges of conservation, creative economy development, and ecotourism based on local wisdom. The discussion will be discussed as follows.

4.1 Construction and Transformed the Manguni Bird Myth in Minahasa

4.1.1 Construction and Transformed the Manguni Bird Myth as a Spiritual Sign and Identity

The Manguni bird occupies a central position in the cosmology of the Minahasa people of North Sulawesi, Indonesia. In oral tradition, the distinctive call of the Manguni is considered a supernatural message from ancestors, signaling moral guidance, omens of good or bad fortune, or indications of natural change. The Manguni is also regarded as an ancestral messenger and a guardian of cosmic harmony and human-nature relationship (Mamoto, 2007; Liando, 2021). This role elevates the bird beyond a mere species, making it a spiritual marker that bridges the material and immaterial dimensions of Minahasan.

Semiotically, the Manguni functions as a “text of the sacred,” a symbol that embodies transcendent power. This belief simultaneously fosters ecological ethics, as prohibitions against disturbing the Manguni or damaging its habitat carry both social and spiritual consequences. Within traditional Minahasan cosmology, the universe is perceived as a sacred space where humans, nature, and ancestral spirits interact (Wenas, 2007). The Manguni is believed to serve as a medium of communication between ancestral spirits and the community. Its role as a spiritual signifier is present in various Minahasan rituals, such as village cleansing ceremonies (Foso Rumages), traditional weddings, funerals, and healing rites. When the bird calls at specific times—especially at night—people interpret the direction and intensity of its sound as messages. A local informant explained that a call heard from the north is often interpreted as a sign of good fortune, whereas one from the south may be taken as a warning of danger. The tone of the call is also significant; for instance, a “huu-huu” sound at night is believed to signal a warning or guidance.

Others explain, during village or agricultural field cleansing rituals, if the Manguni’s call is heard from a certain direction before the planting season, farmers interpret the direction of the call as a sign to begin or delay planting activities. In wedding ceremonies, hearing the Manguni’s call before the procession is understood as an ancestral blessing. In funeral rites, its appearance is believed to signal a smooth journey of the soul to the afterlife. These spiritual interpretations position the Manguni as a medium between the visible and invisible worlds, reinforcing the belief that human life must remain in harmony with nature and the ancestors (Liando, 2021). From a social construction perspective, this tradition affirms that the presence of the Manguni structures social conduct, serving as a symbol of group and religious identity as well as a link connecting the community to its origin narratives.

Empirically, the Manguni myth demonstrates a clear process of social construction and symbolic transformation beyond its original cosmological context. Traditionally understood as a hierophanic mediator between ancestors and the living community in Minahasan belief systems (Mamoto, 2007; Liando, 2021), Manguni has gradually been reconstructed as a marker of collective identity at multiple institutional levels.

At the regional level, the image of Manguni has been incorporated into district and municipal cultural branding in North Sulawesi, appearing in official logos, public monuments, socio-spirituality, and regional festivals. In this context, Manguni no longer functions solely as a spiritual signifier but is rearticulated as a cultural emblem representing vigilance, wisdom, and ancestral heritage. This institutional adoption reflects a shift from sacred cosmology to civic symbolism, where myth becomes a resource for regional

identity consolidation, and social solidarity (Marbun, 2025). Within military institutions, particularly in North Sulawesi-based units, Manguni imagery has also been used in insignia and unit emblems. Here, the bird's attributes—sharp vision, alertness, and strategic awareness—are selectively reinterpreted to align with military values such as readiness and territorial guardianship. The myth is thus transformed into a symbolic framework that legitimizes institutional ethos and collective discipline.

Similarly, among spiritual and cultural organizations in Minahasa, Manguni is maintained as a sacred symbol of ancestral continuity. For example, the Gereja Masehi Injili (MAESA) in Minahasa uses the Manguni as its spiritual identity symbol. Certain spiritual groups incorporate Manguni imagery in ritual spaces, regalia, and ceremonial narratives, reaffirming its role as a mediator between the visible and invisible realms. Thus, the spiritual construction of the Manguni signifies the interconnectedness of humans, nature, and the supernatural within Minahasan culture.

These empirical examples indicate that the Manguni myth is not static but dynamically reconstructed across political, military, and spiritual and religious institutions. Through processes of institutionalization and symbolic recontextualization, Manguni shifts from a localized cosmological sign into a multi-layered identity marker simultaneously cultural, strategic, and spiritual. In this domain, rather than being fully secularized, the myth undergoes a process of reinterpretation that preserves its sacred dimension while adapting to contemporary organizational structures. In relation to this matter, the symbolization of Manguni within formal institutional domains as an emblem of Minahasa Regency identity (Figure 1), spiritual and religious group identity (Figure 2), and Brigade Military Minahasa District (Figure 3) is visually reflected in the following photographs.



Figure 1. Symbol of Minahasa Regency (Left). Figure 2. Symbol of Religious Injili Organization (Middle). Figure 3. Symbol of Brigade Manguni North Sulawesi (Right) (Source: Minahasa Regency Profile, 2024).

4.1.2 *The Manguni Bird as a Transformative Medium of Cultural and Environmental Pedagogy*

The Manguni myth has also been constructed as a transformative educational tool for transmitting cultural values to younger generations of the Minahasa people. Folktales told by parents at bedtime emphasize values such as cooperation, caution, and harmony with nature. In nonformal education settings, the Manguni story is used to teach social norms: for example, repeated calls of the Manguni may be interpreted as a sign to postpone night travel, instilling respect for natural signs. Culturally based education programs initiated by local schools in Tomohon and Tondano incorporate the Manguni story into local curricula, linking oral tradition with wildlife conservation. In this way, the myth becomes a pedagogical medium that integrates traditional ecological knowledge into modern learning.

Field observations found that in the City of Manado, State Elementary School No. 49 Manado and Malalayang Early Childhood Education School, Manado, have incorporated learning materials on the importance of environmental and cultural conservation for sustainability into their educational curriculum. In interviews with Felny Liando (43 years), teachers at this elementary school, the main learning materials provided to students did not focus solely on Manguni, but were integrated into local content subjects, including the teaching of Minahasan folklore, local culture and language, character education based on Manguni values, art activities and creative projects, as well as school habituation programs that foster care for culture and the environment.

Myths play an important role as a medium for transmitting cultural values across generations. In the Minahasa community of North Sulawesi, the Manguni bird myth is not merely folklore but also a vehicle for cultural education. The distinctive call of this nocturnal bird is viewed as both a message from ancestors and a source of moral instruction that binds the community together (Liando, 2021; Mamoto, 2007). Cultural pedagogy refers to educational practices rooted in local wisdom, where knowledge, ethics, and spirituality are passed down through narratives and rituals (Tilaar, 2004; Sukmawan & Febriani, 2023). Thus, the Manguni myth functions as a “living classroom” that instills moral values, ecological ethics, and collective identity.

Cultural pedagogy, the “living classroom” emphasizes that learning takes place not only in formal school settings but also through the everyday practices of the community. This concept aligns the idea of sociocultural learning, where social interaction and cultural symbols serve as mediating tools of education. In the Manguni myth, the bird’s call serves as both a sign of communication with the ancestors and a medium for moral reflection. Empirically, informants explain that, in the Minahasa community, every parent recounts Manguni

stories to their children not merely for entertainment but also to instill respect for nature and to maintain social harmony.

A traditional figure from Paniki Village named Sinyo Rondonuwu (50 years) also stated that the Manguni myth contains various pedagogical messages. First, the value of environmental ethics: the Manguni's call on certain nights is believed to be a warning for the community to protect forests and avoid indiscriminate tree cutting. Second, the value of social solidarity: the Manguni is thought to appear to warn of danger, encouraging residents to protect one another. Third, the spiritual value: the Manguni's call is understood as communication from ancestors, reinforcing the belief in human connectedness with the supernatural world. These messages teach children that humans are not the sole rulers of nature but part of an interconnected ecosystem.

For example, Sendow et al. (2023) in his ethnographic study of Woloan Village, describes the practice of cultural pedagogy through the "Malam Manguni" (Manguni Night) tradition. In in-depth interviews with Pdt. Prof. Dr W.A. Roeroe (70 years) as Catholic Priest and Yuliana Sundalangi (50 years) as a customary leader explained that each year, when the Manguni population becomes more vocal during the rainy season, the community holds an *adat* (customary) gathering. This event involves children and teenagers who listen to ancestral stories about the Manguni while waiting for the bird to call. When the Manguni's voice is heard, the village elders pause their storytelling and invite participants to reflect, interpreting the direction of the call as a symbolic message from the ancestors. The session concludes with a discussion of values, children are asked to express the moral lessons they have learned, such as the importance of keeping the forest clean or helping one another during disasters.

4.1.3 Construction and Transformation of Manguni Bird Myth as Medium of Creative Economy and Tourism Development

The creative economy and culture-based tourism are strategic sectors that complement each other in promoting sustainable development. UNWTO (2022) described, the creative economy emphasizes the use of creativity, knowledge, and cultural heritage to generate added value. In the context of tourism, the creative tourism approach encourages visitors to actively participate in local cultural activities.

The myth of the Manguni bird in Minahasan society originally derives from a local cosmological system that views the bird as a spiritual sign and a symbol of ancestral wisdom. In traditional practice, the sound and appearance of the Manguni are interpreted as specific signs influencing collective decision-making, particularly in customary contexts and in shaping human–nature relations. However, within contemporary social dynamics, this myth has undergone a

process of reconstruction through interactions among indigenous communities, local government, creative economy actors, and educational institutions.

In North Sulawesi, the construction and transformation of the Manguni myth as a medium for the creative economy and tourism promotion—particularly through the Manguni Festival—proceeds through three stages: (1) symbolic reinterpretation, (2) creative commodification, and (3) transformation toward ecotourism. In the stage of symbolic reinterpretation, the spiritual values of the Manguni—vigilance, ecological harmony, and communal identity—are codified into visual and narrative representations that are more communicative to a broader public. The Manguni symbol is manifested in woodcrafts, textile motifs, performing arts, and destination promotional materials. At this stage, the myth shifts from the sacred sphere to the public domain, without entirely relinquishing its cultural legitimacy. This transformation reflects a negotiation mechanism between the preservation of traditional values and the demands of the modern economy.

In the stage of creative commodification, the Manguni myth is translated into cultural narrative-based products and tourism experiences. Empirically, in Woloan Village, wood artisans have developed Manguni-themed carvings marketed as distinctive Minahasan souvenirs. These products possess not only aesthetic value but also identity narratives that enhance their appeal in the tourism market. Furthermore, thematic art performances and storytelling-based tour packages—combining the Manguni story with village visits and craft demonstrations—create educational and participatory tourism experiences. This approach aligns with the trend of experiential tourism and culture-based creative economy development (UNWTO, 2022).

This empirical evidence is consistent with Marbun's (2025) assertion that Manguni serves as a sign of nature, a bearer of divine messages, and a social symbol that strengthens the collective cohesion of the Minahasa community. Meanwhile, Gosal et al. (2024) show that, in the contemporary era, Manguni has also been reconstructed as a Minahasan cultural identity through the medium of art, indicating that its meaning does not end within the mythological sphere but continues to be reproduced in modern cultural practices. Thus, for the Minahasa people, Manguni has become a dynamic cultural symbol that moves from the realm of traditional myth toward representations of identity, spirituality, and contemporary cultural expression.

The transformation toward ecotourism occurs when the Manguni myth is linked to ecological awareness. The forest habitat around Tondano is positioned not merely as a narrative backdrop but as a conservation space with educational value. The Tondano ecotourism tour packages represent this transformation by connecting the myth with knowledge of forest ecosystems, thereby expanding

the meaning of Manguni from a spiritual symbol into a medium of environmental literacy. This integration demonstrates that myth can function as a bridge between traditional knowledge and modern science, while simultaneously reinforcing the dimension of sustainability. The process illustrates that myth is not a static entity but a social reality that can be reproduced and transformed in response to contemporary needs.

The impacts of this construction and transformation are widely regarded as positive by festival organizers and the local community. Since its inception in 2018, the Manguni Festival—organized through collaboration between indigenous communities and local government—has integrated MSME exhibitions, art performances, local culinary offerings, and educational tours. A report by the BPS Kabupaten Minahasa (2023) indicates that the festival attracts approximately 15,000 visitors annually, generating an estimated economic circulation exceeding IDR 10 billion. The largest contributions derive from the sale of Manguni-themed woodcrafts, woven products, and ecology-based tourism packages. These data indicate that the myth has functioned as both destination branding and a source of local economic value added. Visually, the construction and transformation of the Manguni myth in the contexts of culture festival and creative economy activities is illustrated in Figure 4.



Figure 4. The Minahasa Cakalele dance, inspired by the spirit of the Manguni bird in both its choreography and costume (left); children happily interacting with a Manguni bird at the Bukit Kasih tourist attraction (centre); and a Manguni bird calmly visiting a village administrative office without showing any fear of being captured (right). (Photos: Rev. Sepmy Fricilya Langkay, S.Th. [left]; and Dr. Aldjon Dapa [centre and right].)

Positive impacts are also evident in increased community participation and income diversification. MSME actors gain access to new markets through product differentiation rooted in cultural identity. Moreover, the integration of the Manguni myth into educational programs in several indigenous schools in Tomohon has strengthened youth awareness of forest conservation and cultural heritage. This synergy between the creative economy and ecotourism generates a multiplier effect: increased income, cultural preservation, and enhanced environmental literacy.

Sendow's et al. (2023) study in Woloan Village also demonstrates how the Manguni myth has transformed into a systematic pedagogical practice, ranging from storytelling and sensory engagement (listening to the bird's call) to collective reflection. More recently, several schools and community organizations have integrated the Manguni narrative into environmental education and cultural tourism programs. For instance, the Indigenous School in Tomohon has adopted the "Malam Manguni" tradition as part of its extracurricular activities, combining traditional storytelling with scientific knowledge of forest ecology. These efforts position the Manguni myth as a bridge between traditional education and modern science.

Another positive impact is the emergence of young entrepreneurs who develop creative products such as bamboo-based souvenirs, digital tour guide applications featuring the Manguni story, and interactive storytelling performances. This model aligns with the concept of value co-creation, in which local communities, government, and creative industry actors collaborate to generate added value. Conservation-oriented tourism initiatives have proven effective in enhancing ecological awareness. It is estimated that there has been approximately a 20% increase in community-managed protected forest areas since the festival began, as a portion of tourism revenue is allocated to conservation activities.

Conceptually, the construction and transformation of the Manguni myth can be formulated as an integrative model based on three dimensions: cultural legitimacy, creative economic innovation, and ecological sustainability. The myth functions as a core narrative linking these dimensions within a collaborative governance framework. These findings affirm that the Manguni myth, as an element of intangible cultural heritage, holds strategic capacity as an instrument for economic development and conservation, provided that commodification processes are conducted in a participatory and culturally sensitive manner.

4.2 Construction of the Bali Starling Myth in Balinese

4.2.1 Construction of the Bali Starling Myth in Balinese Religious Tradition and Ecology

The Bali Starling (*Leucopsar rothschildi*) is an endemic bird of Bali Island that carries both ecological and spiritual significance for the Balinese Hindu community. With its pure white plumage accented by black wing markings and bright blue eye rings, the Bali Starling symbolizes purity and natural balance (Figure 5). For centuries, Balinese society has embedded this bird within layers of religious narratives and myths that affirm the interconnectedness of humans, nature, and divine forces (Lansing, 2006).



Figure 5. The Bali Starling's striking beauty and immaculate white plumage symbolize purity. (Photo: Courtesy of Bali Bird Park, 2026)

In oral tradition and Bali mythology, the Bali Starling is often told as an incarnation of Dewi Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge and wisdom (Suarka & Bawa, 2023). Its beauty and melodious song are believed to convey messages of harmony, marking the presence of virtue in village life. On many occasions, the appearance of the Bali Starling before religious ceremonies such as *odalan* or *piodalan* temple festivals is regarded as a good omen, as if the universe itself is blessing the ritual. Naturally fallen feathers are even kept as instruments for *tirtha*, or holy water, reinforcing the belief that this species embodies sacredness. The myth that venerates the Bali Starling as a sacred being influences community behavior. Many customary villages incorporate prohibitions against hunting the Bali Starling into their *awig-awig*, or traditional laws violations of these prohibitions not only incur social sanctions but are also believed to invite spiritual misfortune. Ecological awareness grows alongside

the belief that protecting the Bali Starling means maintaining cosmic balance (Geertz, 1973). Local knowledge about breeding seasons, nesting tree locations, and methods for maintaining forest ecosystems has been passed down through generations as part of religious obligations (Ardhana, 2017; Sukmawan & Febriani, 2023).

These sacred values intertwine with modern conservation efforts. When the Bali Starling population declined sharply due to hunting and habitat loss in the late 20th century, various release programs were designed by leveraging customary legitimacy (Birdlife International, 2020). Rituals such as “*melaspas burung*” (bird consecration) and temple festival were combined with bird release ceremonies to emphasize the unity of spiritual and ecological elements. Empirically, these activities have been carried out in several conservation areas, such as in Tengkundak Village, Penebel District, Tabanan Regency, and in Ped Village, Nusa Penida, Klungkung Regency. This approach proved effective: community participation increased because conservation was viewed not merely as a scientific project but as an act of devotion to safeguard a divine trust.

Furthermore, the Bali Starling myth has inspired a creative economy rooted in local wisdom. The bird’s motif appears in paintings, wood carvings, silver jewelry, and *endek* textiles sold to tourists. The Bali Starling Festival in Buleleng, for example, festival participants and committee explained that integrating art performances, conservation exhibitions, and environmental education, can be generating economic value while instilling ecological awareness in younger generations. The beauty and symbolism of the Bali Starling serve as an artistic inspiration that supports community well-being without compromising environmental sustainability (Richards, 2018).

Nevertheless, challenges remain, as the high black-market price of the Bali Starling continues to drive illegal hunting (BirdLife International, 2023). Tensions between short-term economic needs and the long-term religious–ecological values present an ongoing test for conservation sustainability. To address these issues, cross-sector collaboration—among government, academics, local communities, business actors, and the media—is essential (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). A pentahelix approach that uses myth as a communication framework has proven effective in mobilizing collective emotions, fostering a sense of ownership, and strengthening community-based conservation (Hall, 2011).

4.2.2 Construction of Bali Starling as a Conservation Icon and Collective Identity

The Bali Starling, the only bird endemic to Bali, is not merely an endangered species but also a symbol of pride and collective identity for the Balinese people. Known for its pure white plumage, black-tipped wings, and

striking blue eye rings, the bird has been recognized as a protected species since the 1970s and designated as the official fauna emblem of Bali Province Birdlife (BirdLife International, 2023). Its high ecological value combined with deep cultural meaning makes the Bali Starling a conservation icon closely intertwined with the island's collective identity.

The uniqueness of the Bali Starling has long captivated researchers and nature enthusiasts. This species is found only in the western part of Bali, with its primary habitat in the monsoon forests of Bali Barat National Park (Pramatama et al., 2022). Threats from illegal hunting and habitat loss caused the wild population to plummet, at one point declining to only a few dozen individuals in the 1990s (Jepson, 2016). This critical condition prompted various science-based conservation initiatives, including breeding and release programs involving government agencies, NGOs, and local communities (van Balen et al., 2009). The success of these programs is measured not only by the increase in population but also by greater community engagement, highlighting a conservation process that is both social and ecological (Sutomo & van Etten, 2021).

Integrating religious values with modern conservation programs creates a distinctive preservation model often referred to as biocultural conservation (Maffi, 2010). In this model, culture and ecology are inseparable and mutually reinforcing. Preserving the Bali Starling means preserving Bali's identity itself, as the bird embodies harmony at the core of the Balinese Hindu philosophy Tri Hita Karana, which emphasizes harmonious relationships among humans, nature, and the divine (Pitana, 2019). Thus, the Bali Starling myth in Balinese religious tradition and ecology is more than inherited folklore; it is a living social force. It affirms the awareness that protecting endangered species is a form of reverence for nature and the Creator. The Bali Starling stands as a concrete example of how cultural narratives can drive sustainable conservation actions while simultaneously creating opportunities in the creative economy. Protecting this bird safeguards not only spiritual heritage and ecosystem balance but also the continuity of Balinese identity for future generations.

Within Balinese culture, the Bali Starling holds a special place in the collective imagination of the Hindu Balinese community. The bird is often associated with purity and natural harmony, which emphasizes balanced relationships among humans, nature, and God. The appearance of the Bali Starling during religious ceremonies is believed to bring good omens, while customary village laws (*awig-awig*) in several villages protect it from hunting (Ardhana, 2017). The mythological narratives surrounding the Bali Starling reinforce its role as a collective symbol uniting religious and ecological dimension. The integration of these two dimensions within conservation efforts has been

initiated by customary institutions in several Balinese villages in collaboration with international organizations, successfully increasing the bird's population significantly. The population increased from approximately 6–10 individuals to 600 individuals, representing an approximately 60–100-fold increase over the period. Although the population declined by 48 individuals from 600 to 552 as of April 2023, the total number of Bali Starlings remains relatively high (Budiastrawan, 2024; Sakti, 2024). This success cannot be separated from the involvement of customary villages and the penta helix approach in conservation efforts.

The Bali Starling conservation initiative has also been implemented in Desa Tengkudak, where it builds upon a local tradition of releasing birds during the annual celebration of Indonesia's Independence Day on 17 August. This symbolic practice later evolved into an ecological movement when, in 2024, the community began collaborating with Friends of the National Parks Foundation (FNPF) Bali through the Kampung Jalak Bali release–care program. Through this community-based approach, residents became involved as habitat guardians, population monitors, and environmental educators for the village's younger generation.

Since the program began (2024–2026), Made Sukadana, head of the conservation group, explained that 24 pairs of Bali Starlings had been released into the wild. Regular monitoring has shown significant progress: the population has grown to 60 individuals, including 24 offspring born from the released birds. This success not only reflects the effectiveness of community-based conservation strategies but also strengthens the position of Tengkudak village as an example of collaborative practice between local wisdom and modern conservation in Bali. This achievement then became the starting point for developing Tengkudak village which has been developed into a tourism village with the Bali Starling as its local branding icon. Another example of integrated Bali Starling conservation and ecotourism development can be found in Ped Village on Nusa Penida Island, which actively involves the local community. Visually, these activities in Tengkudak village are shown in Figure 6.



Figure 6. The Bali Starling conservation program in Tengkudak Village, Tabanan, involves the government, local community, and students (Source: private document, 05/27/2026; The Bali Natural Resources Conservation Agency (BKSDA) Bali Starling Tengkudak Tabanan, 2026).

The iconization of the Bali Starling is also reflected in various art products and the creative economy. The Bali Starling motif frequently adorns *endek* textiles, wood carvings, and visual artworks sold to tourists. Local governments and cultural communities regularly organize Bali Starling themed festivals, such as the Bali Starling Festival in Buleleng, which combines art performances, environmental education, and conservation exhibitions. These activities not only generate income but also strengthen a shared identity rooted in the symbol of this endemic species. Thus, the Bali Starling has become a cultural “brand” that harmoniously integrates conservation values and the creative economy.

Empirically, various institutions in Bali have shown tangible contributions to the conservation of the Bali Starling. The Bali Natural Resources Conservation Agency (BKSDA) collaborates with Tegal Bunder and Tengkudak villages to develop breeding and release programs, while local schools integrate environmental learning through bird-friendly gardens and educational visits. Bali Green Education also incorporates the Bali Starling into ecological literacy practices, as illustrated by Green School Bali’s collaboration with Begawan Foundation. Students were involved in feeding Bali Starlings, monitoring breeding pairs, fundraising, and auditing released birds in Nusa Penida. The release of four breeding pairs from the Begawan breeding facility on the Green School campus demonstrates how school-based ecological education can be linked directly to endangered species conservation.

Within the framework of collective identity theory, construction of the symbols like the Bali Starling function as shared signifiers that foster community pride and a sense of belonging. Collective awareness is built through social practices such as community involvement in bird-release programs or

habitat monitoring, which reinforce social and ecological bonds (Hall, 2011). Conservation programs that leverage cultural narratives have proven more effective because they engage the emotional dimensions of society. A study in Bali Barat National Park shows that community participation increases when conservation is linked to religious teachings and customary rituals (Gandhiadi et al., 2023).

Although significant progress has been made, challenges remain. Illegal hunting continues to pose a threat due to the high international market price of the Bali Starling (Birdlife International, 2020). Climate change and land conversion further add to the complexity of the issue. In the context of conservation efforts in Tangkudak village, local informants explained that the main challenges include the birds' dependence on humans due to being accustomed to being fed by residents and visitors, as well as threats from predators such as cats.

4.2.3 The Bali Starling Myth in the Context of Creative Economy and Sustainable Cultural Tourism

The Bali Starling myth provides a cultural lens for linking ecological conservation with the creative economy and sustainable cultural tourism. As Bali's endemic and endangered bird, the Bali Starling carries ecological, symbolic, and cultural significance. Its myth can inspire storytelling, local art, educational media, and community-based tourism products while strengthening conservation awareness. When managed ethically, this narrative can support local economic creativity without reducing the bird and its cultural meaning into mere tourism commodities.

Community-based tourism programs engage residents in conservation activities, such as bird-watching tours and conservation workshops that instill environmental education values. The narrative of the Bali Starling myth adds a unique dimension for visitors, combining spiritual experience, natural beauty, and ecological learning. This approach aligns with the principles of sustainable tourism, which emphasize biodiversity protection and the enhancement of local economic well-being (UNWTO, 2022). Thus, conservation-based tourism not only safeguards ecosystems but also strengthens Balinese pride in their cultural heritage.

Despite its great potential, threats such as habitat destruction, hunting, and illegal trade continue to endanger the survival of the Bali Starling (BirdLife International, 2023). Successful conservation efforts require cross-sector collaboration among government, indigenous communities, business actors, academics, and the media within a pentahelix governance framework. Strategies such as certifying eco-friendly creative products, promoting conservation-based tourism, and running educational digital campaigns can raise public

awareness while fostering global commitment to Bali Starling preservation. This collaboration underscores that environmental conservation, and economic development need not be in conflict, but can progress hand in hand when supported by a shared commitment.

Empirically, the conservation success of the Bali Starling in Desa Ped has become a catalyst for local ecotourism development. Through community-based breeding, habitat protection, and custom-supported regulations, the village successfully increased the population of the once-critically endangered species. This achievement transformed Desa Ped into a learning site where visitors can observe conservation practices, participate in environmental education, and engage with local guides. As a result, the village's conservation efforts function not only as ecological action but also as a driver of sustainable ecotourism and community empowerment.

In other area, the integration of the Bali Starling release program, environmental conservation, and the creative economy to support tourism development through the regular organization of the Buleleng Festival (Bulfest) has been implemented by the regency government. According to Mr. Hartika, S.T., M.A.P. (Acting Head of the Environmental Agency of Buleleng Regency) and I Gede Suyasa, S.P. (Head of Tejakula Subdistrict), who both served as members of the organizing committee, the festival held in 2024–2025 not only received a positive response from the community but also contributed to the development of tourism in Buleleng Regency.

4.3 Integration and Challenges of Conservation, Creative Economy, and Sustainable Tourism

The myths of the Manguni Bird in Minahasa and the Bali Starling on the Island of the Gods embody local wisdom rich in both ecological and spiritual meaning. Both serve as markers of collective identity, reminders of environmental balance, and symbols of humanity's harmonious relationship with nature. Integrating these myths into conservation strategies and creative-economy development offers significant potential to create sustainable tourism rooted in culture.

In the context of Minahasa society, discussions of signs or practices considered good (permissible) and bad (prohibited) are closely connected to local belief systems, customary law, and cosmological worldviews that have been passed down through generations. These signs function as ethical guidelines shaping social behavior, spiritual life, and the relationship between humans and nature (Mamoto, 2007; Liando, 2021; Berkes, 2012; Maffi, 2010; Marbun, 2025). These religious and spiritual meanings open opportunities for preservation campaigns that resonate with the community's emotions.

Conservation efforts can be strengthened through myth-based education, such as interpretive forest tours in Minahasa, highlighting the Manguni as a forest guardian. While the Bali Starling stands as a protected endemic species icon or conservation programs in Bali Barat National Park emphasizing the Bali Starling as a symbol of purity (Suarka, 2023; Ardana, 2017); economic creative (Howkins, 2013); good moment to activities and the relationship between rituals and community participation in nature conservation (Gandhiadi, et al., 2023). Such mythic narratives help raise ecological awareness and foster a sense of stewardship for endangered species.

From the perspective of the creative economy, the Manguni and Bali Starling myths inspire performing arts, handicrafts, and other creative products of economic value. For instance, Manguni motifs can be adapted into textile designs or souvenirs, while the Bali Starling's image is utilized in wood carvings, dance performances, and themed culinary creations. These practices empower local micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), create employment opportunities, and expand the cultural creative-economy value chain. In sustainable tourism, integrating these myths adds a unique dimension to visitor experiences. Cultural festivals, ritual performances, and educational tour packages centered on the stories of the Manguni and Bali Starling can become distinctive attractions. Tourists not only enjoy natural beauty but also gain insight into the life philosophies of local communities, aligning with the principles of sustainable tourism that balance economic, socio-cultural, and environmental aspects in a national context. The striking beauty of the Bali Starling and the Manguni bird enriches the appeal of bird parks and zoological gardens in various regions, including Bali. Tourism enterprises that showcase these iconic birds as visitor attractions also contribute to conservation by supporting captive breeding and releasing the birds into the wild, thereby offsetting the commercial use of these species through tangible conservation efforts.

However, significant challenges remain. Commodifying these myths risks reducing their sacred value to mere commercial attractions. Increased tourist visits could also put pressure on the natural habitats of both birds, conflicting with conservation goals. Collaborative governance among indigenous communities, government, business actors, and academics is essential to ensure that these mythic narratives remain authentic and undiminished. Through participatory approaches and management grounded in local wisdom, integrating the Manguni and Bali Starling myths can become a model of harmonizing conservation, the creative economy, and sustainable tourism—maintaining a balance between economic use and the preservation of culture and nature (Imlabla & Sahusilawane, 2025).

5. Conclusion

The representations of the Manguni bird in Minahasa and the Bali Starling in Bali show that myths and fauna symbols are not static, but are continually reshaped through social, political, and ecological interactions. From a social construction perspective, both birds are positioned as markers of identity and local knowledge that are constantly reinterpreted by communities, institutions, and the state. Within political ecology, these myths function as instruments of legitimacy that guide conservation practices, resource governance, and the distribution of power among customary authorities, government actors, and economic stakeholders.

In terms of cultural and environmental conservation, both myths play strategic roles as mediums of preservation. The Minahasa people view the Manguni as a forest guardian and an indicator of ecosystem health, whereas the Bali Starling has become a nationally and internationally recognized conservation icon. The construction of these myths encourages community participation in protecting habitats and traditions, demonstrating that conservation is not merely a technical task but also a ritual and ethical one. A notable difference lies in institutionalization: Bali Starling conservation has been incorporated into international organizations: Rare Animal Conservation Center and Bali Barat's Tourism Policies, while Manguni conservation relies more on customary practices and civil society movements.

Using a multi-perspective approach this study finds that both myths offer significant opportunities for praxis-based and theoretical development rooted in local support. In practical terms, the Manguni inspires performing arts, woodcraft, and cultural festivals that highlight Minahasa's spiritual narratives. Meanwhile, the Bali Starling, with its exotic image, drives ecotourism, dance performances, and high-value souvenir products. Theoretically, the study of these two birds affirms that myth-based conservation operates not only at the ecological level but also as an arena of meaning-making, narrative contestation, and identity negotiation. This underscores the need for a multi-perspective approach to fully understand the transformations of values, practices, and policies that accompany these evolving mythic constructions.

However, this study focuses only on bird myths from two ethnic groups—Minahasa and Bali—so it does not represent the functions and meanings of myths from the thousands of other ethnic groups across the Indonesian archipelago. Recommendations for further research comparative studies of bird myths among other ethnic groups in Indonesia, using different theories and approaches, are needed to enrich and expand upon the existing body of research.

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In writing this article, we utilized AI to assist in drafting sentences; however, we consciously treated it solely as a supplementary tool rather than as research data.

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