The Ontological Foundations Of Resilience: Customary Land And Relationality As An Affirmation Of Customary Territorial Sovereignty In The Ende Lio Indigenous Peoples

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Abstract
In the face of intensifying global land grabbing and liberalized development, this article provides new empirical evidence on how customary land serves as the ultimate ontological defense for indigenous sovereignty. By analyzing the Ende Lio community, we argue that resilience is not merely an adaptive capacity but a profound assertion of territorial rights that challenges modern market-driven logic through sacred and communal land relations. This research aims to determine the meaning of customary lands, especially as an ontological foundation and as customary territorial sovereignty, to ensure the welfare and sustainability of the Ende Lio indigenous people. This qualitative study uses an ethnographic approach, involving the indigenous peoples of Wologai and Saga as representatives of indigenous peoples in the Ende Lio area, Ende Regency. Data collection methods include in-depth interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), field observations, and documentation. This research identifies four key aspects that constitute the meaning of Ende Lio customary land: symbols of identity and existence; sovereignty and welfare; sacred space; and unifying factors among indigenous peoples. These aspects influence indigenous peoples to protect customary lands consistently, often even rejecting development that violates customary values. This article recommends the importance of development policies in customary territories that are more responsive to traditions of conservation and management of customary lands.
Keywords: customary land, sovereignty and welfare, resilience, ontology, indigenous peoples, Ende Lio

1. INTRODUCTION

Indigenous peoples are entities formed by shared origins, territories, norms, and socio-cultural practices, and own customary lands, with their management systems governed by customary law through distinctive customary institutions (Amnesty International, 2022). Customary land is a testament to history and collective memory (Smutz et al., 2025), a source of customary norms and knowledge (Nehusi, 2025), and a place to perform rituals and livelihood practices (Smutz et al., 2025). Customary rituals, in particular, are an integral part of the agricultural system and involve all indigenous peoples in maintaining their solidarity and social cohesion (Ahmed et al., 2022). On the other hand, customary stakeholders serve as ritual actors, distribute customary lands, resolve conflicts, and enforce customary law (Mulyadi & Raharjo, 2019). Ontologically, customary land is a symbol of

identity and religiosity, and a guarantee of the survival of indigenous peoples (Lugo-Espinosa et al., 2024).

Customary lands embody the value of responsibility and collective awareness of indigenous peoples in preserving traditions (Swu & Roy, 2025). Agricultural traditions that are adaptive to the environment are a manifestation of responsibility (Palmeirim et al., 2025), while the pattern of customary land use that prioritizes conservation is a manifestation of the collective consciousness in question (Munshifwa et al., 2020). This collective responsibility and awareness influence indigenous peoples' attitudes toward consistently protecting and upholding respect for their customary lands (Gigue et al., 2012).

Indigenous peoples are very obedient to customary law, especially in the use of resources (Laturette, 2023). This customary law serves as a moral and ethical guide for indigenous peoples in determining planting and harvesting times, ensuring the quality and sustainability of resources (Berlianty et al., 2022). In this context, the role of indigenous leaders is to consistently enforce customary law to prevent internal conflicts over customary lands or resources (Scott, 2021). Empirical evidence indicates that customary land management, according to customary law, provides resilience benefits for indigenous peoples beyond ecological impacts (Fontana et al., 2025).

Customary land is also a symbol of legitimacy for institutions and indigenous stakeholders (Osterlin & Raitio, 2020), especially moral and spiritual authority and responsibility in the performance of important rituals (Subramanian, 2025), the division of customary lands, dispute resolution, and ensuring the use of customary lands solely for the benefit of indigenous peoples (Lin & Robin, 2025). Indigenous stakeholders will have strong legitimacy from within and external parties if they consistently fulfill these obligations (Hangabei & Dimyati, 2021). Therefore, indigenous stakeholders are often considered ancestral representatives in maintaining the integrity of the land and in transferring knowledge about norms, rituals, and other cultural practices (Datta, 2023).

On the other hand, although customary lands are empirically central to the sustainability of indigenous peoples, mainstream development policies in customary territories tend to prioritize economic liberalization and investment (Fforde, 2024). This policy can reduce the function, meaning, and value of indigenous lands, which will structurally marginalize indigenous peoples, reduce the function of indigenous institutions, eliminate livelihoods, reduce the quality of life of indigenous peoples, and trigger massive and permanent environmental damage (Scheidel et al., 2023a). Empirically, clashes between modern development logic and customary governance systems often lead to overt conflicts and undermine conservation traditions, even reducing indigenous peoples' knowledge of the environment (Osterlin & Raitio, 2020). This phenomenon is a long-term challenge for the sustainability and well-being of indigenous peoples (Fly, 2023).

Empirical evidence shows that large-scale development projects often systematically annex indigenous lands without adequate consultation with indigenous peoples, thus failing to consider the fundamental values of their land (Scheidel et al., 2023b). For example, in South America, governments often ignore customary land rights to attract investment in the energy sector (Barrera-Hernández, 2010). Thus, creating academic gaps that need to be overcome so that the non-economic dimension also receives proper attention (Vejchodská et al., 2022). so that it fails to accommodate the fundamental value of customary land as a symbol of identity and the last bastion of the welfare of the indigenous people concerned (Yu et al., 2024).

In the context of the Ende Lio indigenous peoples, maintaining the symbolic function and meaning of indigenous lands is a long-term challenge. However, these indigenous peoples are committed to protecting their customary lands for sustainability, including rejecting development that fails to provide adequate consultation with them. Empirically, pe(Aren,

2025). This development aims for the welfare of the local community (Hufe & Heuermann, 2017), but uses a coercive approach that marginalizes indigenous peoples into poor groups without resources (Busscher et al., 2020). This approach results in a disconnected relationship between indigenous peoples and their lands (Permadi et al., 2025). As a result, their spiritual foundations and social capital are weakened, hindering their efforts to achieve prosperity (de Matos, 2018). Therefore, the transfer of customary lands is a threat to the welfare and sovereignty of indigenous peoples in the future (Chattopadhyay, 2022).

Comprehensive studies of the non-economic symbolic meanings of indigenous lands, such as identity symbols, spiritual entities, 'mothers', and sacred spaces for indigenous peoples, remain limited. However, this is very important in planning (Naibaho & Su, 2025). The phenomenon of building in customary territories without adequate consultation with indigenous peoples has the potential to undermine customary rights and sovereignty (Cornejo, 2024), triggering indigenous peoples' resistance to development, including through open conflict (Rasch, 2012). On the part of the government, it often interprets such rejection as an anti-development attitude (Sanders, 2018), which can lead to social marginalization and economic decline of indigenous peoples (Damman, 2007), as well as fostering indigenous peoples' antipathy to further development initiatives (Heckenberg, 2016). Therefore, the study of the meaning of customary land and its relationship with development policies in customary land areas has not been discussed in depth in previous research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Thrivance's theory, the success of indigenous peoples is not just about cultural survival or resilience. The most important aspect is to evolve toward complete success, so that indigenous peoples no longer struggle merely as victims. With indigenous knowledge and spirituality rooted in indigenous lands, they form a positive identity to realize sustainable sovereignty. This theory offers a contemporary framework through a powerful decolonial declaration: "We are present, we are productive, and we continue to move forward with full vitality" (Baumann, 2023).

Indigenous peoples have local food to meet their daily nutritional needs. According to the theory of indigenous food sovereignty, food is not only a satisfying ingredient but reflects a relational relationship with their customary land. Furthermore, food reflects independence and sovereignty in self-determination, which is based on three ontological pillars: first, relationality, the sacred relationship between man, the earth, and other creations; second, responsibility, ethical awareness to protect land without geographical boundaries; and third, reciprocity, realizing responsibility through a cycle of reciprocity by sharing food and knowledge. This theory is the antithesis of the paradigm of food security through a capitalist and technocratic approach, in stark contrast to a cultural, social, and ecologically-based sustainable food system that is in harmony with customary wisdom and accountability (Miltenburg & Neufeld, 2022).

Indigenous peoples are autonomous entities in the management of customary lands. According to global customary land governance theory, they have sovereignty in regulating living spaces and basic resources for sustainability. To anticipate the issue of indigenous land grabbing, this theory offers a comparative framework regarding the dynamics of autonomy, policy instruments, and economic development prospects of indigenous peoples. This framework is a manifestation of three types of indigenous peoples' control and access to customary lands. First, self-government: indigenous peoples have complete and independent control over their lands; second, joint management: the sharing of authority with the state in its use; and third, coexistence: limited recognition of rights based

on state regulations. To implement these three things, four policy instruments are needed: land-use planning, conservation, regulation of extractive activities, and land-acquisition procedures. This instrument is a strategic tool for indigenous peoples to protect cultural practices and optimize their resource potential. This theory emphasizes the importance of autonomy and flexibility in policy, which are key prerequisites for accommodating a diversity of local aspirations and capacities in support of the agenda of sovereignty, self-reliance, and sustainable development for indigenous peoples (Locher, 2016).

According to the ontological theory of customary relationality, customary lands are relational subjects for kinship, identity, and even agents or capacities for indigenous peoples to act. Meanwhile, the relationship between indigenous peoples and the universe is an equal and holistic network in which humans and the natural environment are connected materially and spiritually. This theory challenged and dismantled the legacy of colonial imperialism by pioneering the recognition of indigenous knowledge as a legitimate and essential source (Datta et al., 2024).

From the perspective of customary resilience theory, environmental change is a fundamental phenomenon that is relationally based on place and socio-political agents, distinct from conventional resilience. Indigenous resilience is formed through a synergistic interaction among local factors, such as customary institutions, collective action, and indigenous knowledge, grounded in spiritual foundations and identities derived from the environment. Therefore, the single narrative of resilience that emphasizes adaptive capacity becomes less relevant because it is constantly threatened and eroded by structural vulnerabilities derived from colonization, land dislocation, and extractive global development patterns. Thus, policy interventions to eliminate structural vulnerabilities are essential for indigenous peoples' sovereignty to be fully recognized, not just to address environmental risks (Ford et al., 2020).

3. METHOD

This article is a sub-part of the author's doctoral dissertation research entitled "Resistance of the Ende Lio Indigenous Peoples to Development Projects in Customary Land Areas." This study uses a qualitative ethnographic approach (Spradley, 2007) to examine in depth the meaning of customary lands, cultural practices, customary institutions, and the symbolic meaning behind indigenous peoples' resistance.

This research was conducted intensively in Wologai and Saga in Ende Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. The two indigenous peoples were deliberately chosen because they were considered sufficiently representative of the entire indigenous population of Ende Lio. These indigenous peoples have a relatively large customary area, a significant number of people, consistently practice customary land conservation traditions, have complete customary figures, have customary villages complete with various cultural artifacts, and routinely carry out various customary rituals to protect their customary lands.

The study lasted for eight months and applied the principle of full enculturation, with researchers directly involved in the field. Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews with indigenous stakeholders using informal conversations to build trust. Secondary data were obtained through participatory observation, including direct involvement in neka tana rituals, the traditional practice of injuring the soil to ask for the blessing of 'mother earth', at the location where the village bridge construction project will be built. These observations allow researchers to better understand the meaning of cultural practices from within, especially in customary lands. Additional secondary data were obtained from FGDs with traditional elders, informal interviews with religious authorities and local governments, and documentation. Data collection went smoothly, although there

were some obstacles in understanding symbolic indigenous languages. This data collection process, both in Wologai and Saga, involves customary rituals to seek the blessings of ancestors and nature, including conversations about indigenous lands and history, which are sacred and secret to indigenous peoples.

The primary informants are indigenous stakeholders who have the spiritual legitimacy to explain customary lands, conservation traditions, and various related rituals. Support informants from NGOs and local church authorities to provide contextual views. The criteria for selecting informants, both primary and supportive, emphasize ethnographic criteria: full enculturation or a deep understanding of the phenomenon studied, direct engagement with the local culture, and the provision of non-analytical information based on direct experience rather than theoretical interpretation. Language barriers, especially customary terms, are overcome by conducting repeated interviews with informants and direct confirmation via WhatsApp.

Data processing fully follows ethnographic patterns, with the following stages: 1) Performing thematic transcription and categorization. Data from interviews and observations, both recorded and in note form, were transcribed and categorized according to the cultural and social themes that emerged in the field, including the meaning of customary lands, the meaning and function of rituals, the role of indigenous stakeholders, and forms of resistance. 2) Conducting thematic interpretation and analysis. The categorized transcription data are then interpreted and analyzed thematically to identify phenomena that are prominent and relevant to the research objectives. The results of the analysis and interpretation of the symbolic meaning behind the actions and narratives of the informants are then analyzed further in depth to conclude, and 3) conduct data validation to ensure data accuracy and interpretation, informant validation, and validation methods (triangulation). Meanwhile, the transcription results, in the form of translations of relatively sensitive customary terms, were confirmed with traditional stakeholders, including via WhatsApp. Thus, the data of this research have achieved validity and can be considered valid from the perspective of indigenous peoples. Ethically, this research is conducted in accordance with ethical principles, avoiding the exploitation of informants. The researchers have appreciated all informants in accordance with the agreement. Academically, this research has passed the Ethical Feasibility Test at Gadjah Mada University, so that the results are free from conflicts of interest and worthy of publication.

4. RESULTS

The Ende Lio indigenous people are an integral part of the people of Ende Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, with a total population of about 190,000. These indigenous peoples are scattered across several smaller autonomous regions, all of which consistently defend their indigenous lands. Indigenous peoples in this region often reject development projects that do not align with the principles of conserving customary lands. Customary land has a fundamental role, so that every indigenous people upholds respect for it. Respect is manifested through traditional rituals, such as *the neka tana ritual* before buildings are erected on the ground (Documentation, Interview, FGD, 2024). The role of customary land for the indigenous people of Ende Lio is illustrated through four primary symbolic meanings, as summarized in Figure 1.
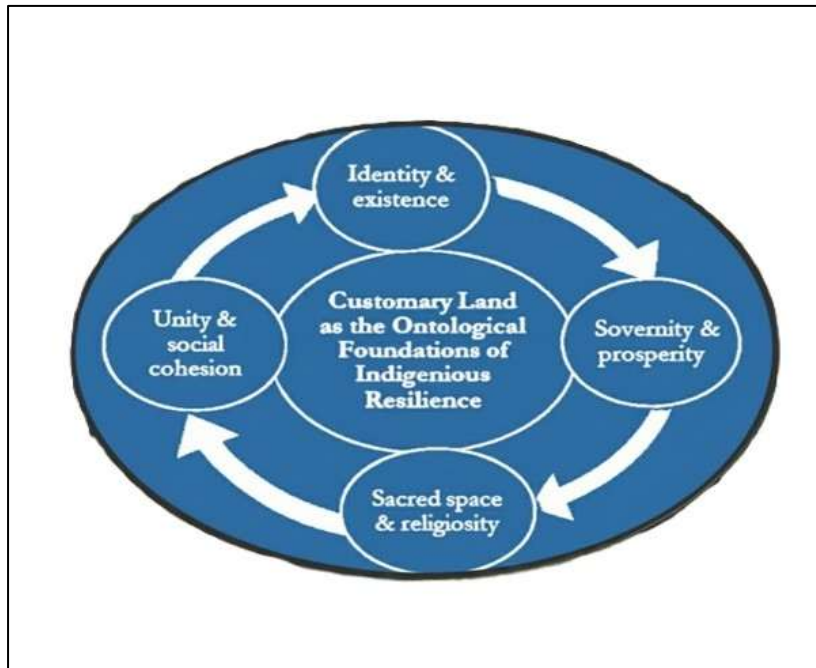
Figure 1: The symbolic significance of customary lands for the indigenous people of Ende Lio (Source: Interview results and FGD)

Figure 1 illustrates the fundamental meaning of customary land for the Ende Lio indigenous people, namely a symbol of identity and existence, a symbol of sovereignty and welfare, a sacred religious space, and a means of unity for all members of the indigenous people.

Customary land as a description of the identity and existence of indigenous peoples
According to the indigenous leaders, every Ende Lio person views their customary land as a symbol of identity and existence. "This land is our mother who gave birth, nurtured, and then called home after leaving this world." All the norms and ways of life of the indigenous people of Ende Lio are rooted in their indigenous lands. Land is the main requirement for establishing traditional houses, customary villages, performing rituals, and forming a customary leadership system. Indigenous peoples in the region are formed by values and norms rooted in customary lands, so that land becomes a symbol of identity and a determinant of existence for the indigenous peoples concerned. For indigenous peoples who lose their customary lands, whatever the reason, they will lose their identity and socio-cultural existence. (Results of Interviews and FGDs, 2024).

Customary land is a symbol of sovereignty and prosperity
According to the informants, customary land is also a symbol of the sovereignty and welfare of the Ende Lio indigenous people. The indigenous people of Ende Lio live freely and peacefully on their own customary lands. Land in customary areas is economic and cultural capital for them. Agricultural activities and rituals carried out on customary lands are guaranteed to be free from outside interference. Customary land ownership in Ende Lio is communal or collective and cannot be transferred to individual property. They reject the government's certification program that legalizes customary land as private property because it goes against the spirit of togetherness and kinship embraced by indigenous peoples. This system of customary governance and communal ownership ensures that indigenous peoples can carry out adaptive agricultural activities without land exploitation. From the results of this agricultural business, the family's needs and traditional ritual obligations can be adequately fulfilled. Each indigenous individual gets permanent

cultivated land obtained from indigenous stakeholders through customary rituals. Thus, each cultivator gains a fairly strong authority over the land without the control of anyone else, except the indigenous stakeholders themselves. The products of rice fields are used to meet daily needs and also contribute to the obligation to perform traditional rituals every year (Results of Interviews and FGDs, 2024).

Customary land is a sacred space for indigenous peoples

The indigenous people of Ende Lio believe that their lands are sacred spaces for performing various rituals and for interacting with ancestors, nature, and creators. According to the informant, "This customary land is the residence of ancestors and rulers of nature, every indigenous people uphold respect for this land." Indigenous peoples respect customary land in a unique way, in which agricultural and other development activities in customary areas always begin with rituals, such as neka tana, pire, keti uta, and nggua ria. The ritual is a moment to offer prayers so that their relationship with nature and with ancestors cut off by development activities can be restored. Literally, the ritual of '*neka tana*' means to injure customary land. This ritual is mandatory for anyone who erects a building on customary land. Indigenous leaders have special prerogatives and authority to perform these rituals because they are believed to have the spiritual legitimacy of their ancestors. According to traditional leaders, 'this ritual aims to restore the sanctity of customary lands that were polluted by human activities during development' (Results of Interviews and FGD, 2024).

Meanwhile, *the 'pire ritual'* is a ritual to start a fast with nature, which usually lasts for a week. During this ritual period, all indigenous peoples are obliged to stop all activities that intersect with customary lands. For them, the earth is just like humans and needs time to rest to recover after a full year of work. Furthermore, the keti uta ritual is a rite of picking new vegetables when the vegetables in the community's garden are ready to be harvested. In Wologai, this ritual involves a mother called a 'queen,' who is about to eat vegetables for the first time. According to them, this queen is a reflection of their customary land, which honors the first time they eat new vegetables.

As the culmination of this series of rituals, indigenous peoples perform *nggua ria,* a celebration of gratitude for the harvest. At that time, all indigenous peoples and their descendants will gather. This ritual emphasizes the importance of genealogical and brotherly relations with fellow tribes or other tribes in the vicinity. Interesting from these findings is the role of traditional stakeholders who are central and very crucial figures, namely, (1) maintaining norms, (2) protecting customary lands, and (3) maintaining unity. Another task, spiritually, is that they become the liaison between indigenous peoples and connect all indigenous peoples with nature, ancestors, and natural rulers. Indigenous peoples believe in the rituals and prayers of these leaders, which can bring them goodness and prosperity. All of these traditions and moral values are rooted in customary lands, making them sacred spaces for the indigenous people of Ende Lio to establish relationships with others, ancestors, and natural rulers (Results of Interview-FGD-Documentation, 2024).

Customary lands are the glue of solidarity and social cohesion

This research also highlights the social function of customary lands as a glue for solidarity and social cohesion among the indigenous peoples of Ende Lio. According to Saga traditional leaders, customary land has united all indigenous peoples and cultivators from outside into one family, regardless of blood, origin, and ancestry. Non-indigenous peoples can obtain permanent customary employment rights if specific requirements are met. They will also become indigenous peoples who will get cultivated land to carry out economic

and cultural activities. However, these non-indigenous peoples also automatically have customary obligations, especially participating in traditional ritual activities, such as those carried out by indigenous peoples. According to the informants, the biggest threat to the unity and survival of indigenous peoples today is the loss of indigenous lands, which can have an impact on the destruction of indigenous peoples' unity (Results of Interviews and FGDs, 2024).

5. DISCUSSION

Referring to the field findings that customary land is a reflection of the four dimensions of the life of the indigenous people of Ende Lio, namely a symbol of identity and existence, the affirmation of the sovereignty and welfare of customary territories, a sacred space for social and spiritual relations, and the glue of solidarity and social cohesion for the indigenous people of Ende Lio. The symbolic meaning of Ende Lio's customary land is crucial in planning, especially in Ende Regency, so that development policies in customary territories in particular are more responsive to the cultural aspirations and values of indigenous peoples.

Affirmation of Identity and Existence: Customary Land as an Ontological Basis
Customary land is at the core of the cultural identity of indigenous peoples (Bowra et al., 2020), fostering a sense of belonging and a sense of connection to previous ancestors (Giminiani, 2016). Customary lands contain various meanings that are spiritually understood (Fisher, 2016), for example, the "mother" symbol for indigenous peoples (Neimneh, 2021), a source of inspiration to define culture (Bird, 2021), and even a prerequisite for forming indigenous peoples (Theresia & Asnawi, 2024). Therefore, customary land ownership is collective (Lavoie, 2021), so all customary laws, rituals, norms, and customary institutions are rooted in that land (Salim et al., 2025).
In the context of Ende Lio, customary land has a much deeper meaning. Land is no longer just a symbol of identity and a vital resource but also a benchmark of dignity for its owners. In this context, the view of the Ende Lio indigenous people towards customary land as a symbol of "mother" has a broader meaning, as, ontologically, land is the primary prerequisite for establishing customary houses, villages, rituals, and stakeholders. It is a rational basis for the indigenous people of Ende Lio to pay special respect to their ancestral lands, both through rituals and in attitudes and actions that always respect the land.
From the perspective of Thrivance theory, indigenous lands are places for indigenous peoples to survive and perform rituals and manifestations of existence, productivity, and movement to advance in full force. In this context, customary lands are not only spaces but also mediums that enable indigenous peoples to express their existence through productive activities, with their own power to move forward. Therefore, customary land is a sign of the existence of all indigenous peoples, who strive to remain productive and move forward independently for the sustainability of the community (Isnaeni et al., 2025).
In the context of the Ende Lio indigenous people, indigenous land is a living space where life is expressed more meaningfully, as seen in a work ethic based on productivity, rituals, and local wisdom values that support sustainable self-reliance. Their deep emotional connection to their indigenous lands reflects that they are not only food producers but also the primary source of knowledge on how to build lives and overcome problems to sustain a harmonious and civilized society. Through this process, the indigenous people of Ende Lio implicitly declared resistance to colonialism, as affirmed by the Wologai indigenous leaders that all forms of colonialism and betrayal were their greatest enemies. Therefore, all forms of customary rituals are a way to uphold respect for customary lands, which are

spiritually a manifestation of their existence and dignity, and state, as it is said (Baumann, 2023), "We are still present, we are productive, and we continue to move forward with full vitality."

This analysis provides a new perspective on customary lands that serve as an ontological basis for indigenous peoples to express their existence and identity to the broader community. The existence and identity in question are expressed through the capacity to build traditional houses, form customary villages, perform customary rituals, and maintain an independent and sustainable customary management system. Therefore, development and modernization in customary territories, especially in the Ende Lio customary territory, are not only focused on growth but also strengthen the identity and existence of indigenous peoples. In line with the opinion of Fu et al. (2023), a regional development approach that emphasizes local characteristics and identities will be very effective in strengthening national identity and counteracting the homogenization of globalization. Thus, integrated development that strengthens identity and existence will increase the dignity of indigenous peoples. This approach further enables indigenous peoples to realize holistic well-being, including economic, social, cultural, political, and spiritual, without being uprooted from their cultural roots.

Customary Land as the Basis of Sovereignty and Welfare of Indigenous Peoples
Etymologically, sovereignty refers to the entity that holds supreme authority, encompassing the power to rule without external interference (Philpott, 2011), which, according to Hobbes, is necessary to create peace and order in society (Sorell, 2021). However, Foucault saw sovereignty as a vulnerable political tool because it was shaped by conflicting power relations, where violence was often used to legitimize that authority (Lichtenstein, 2021). From a social development perspective, sovereignty refers to the community's active participation in controlling the development process to make it more meaningful and sustainable (Anderson et al., 2020). Some argue that sovereignty is the supreme power of a single entity within defined territorial boundaries, granting it domestic supremacy and the capacity to act independently (Persaud et al., 2025; Silverman et al., 2014). Thus, sovereignty is the supreme authority that is independent within certain territorial boundaries, meaning it is free from absolute power and is not subject to political manipulation. It actively participates in controlling the development process to make it more meaningful.

Referring to the concept of sovereignty understood by the indigenous people of Ende Lio, the previous concept had a fairly wide gap. For the indigenous peoples of Ende Lio, the definition of sovereignty must be integrated with indigenous lands, where through these indigenous lands, all needs, such as water, food, essential nutrients, and medicines, can be adequately met without relying on outside parties. Therefore, customary land is a symbol of the highest authority for indigenous peoples, both in resource management and in the broader context. With customary lands, the indigenous people of Ende Lio are free from dependence on others, which empirically is often the biggest obstacle for individuals and groups in achieving the expected quality of life (Shield & Price, 2005). In fact, the land is believed to be the embodiment of ancestors and creators of nature, so it is a place for the indigenous people of Ende Lio to take refuge, both from danger and from all forms of external intervention. Philosophically, the sovereignty of indigenous peoples in relation to customary lands is always related to the welfare dimension (Izudin et al., 2025).

In line with the theory of food sovereignty (Miltenburg & Neufeld, 2022), customary land can be seen as a symbol of the authoritarianism of the indigenous people of Ende Lio through their food. By producing food from their own customary lands, the indigenous people of Ende Lio can meet their nutritional needs. The indigenous people of Ende Lio

have their own very systematic land management system based on local wisdom, from land preparation to harvesting, which is carefully regulated and characterized by traditional rituals. The food production system is a manifestation of their authority in determining their own destiny, as the entire process is carried out on customary land. In line with Maria et al. (2015), these lands have deep spiritual and emotional ties with indigenous peoples, and their local food is a tool for self-determination. Thus, indigenous peoples can realize sovereignty by using an independent and autonomous food system, an alternative system that contrasts with the capitalist global food system (Mandolesi et al., 2025).

However, for the indigenous people of Ende Lio, sovereignty rooted in customary land is not just about food. The sovereignty in question is also related to the sovereignty of customary authority territories, the management of customary resources, the implementation of customary rituals, and an independent agricultural system. The indigenous people of Ende Lio have a unique rice history, considered to have fundamental spiritual value. The indigenous people of Ende Lio use rice, in addition to food, also as a medium to send prayers to ancestors and rulers of nature, also known as *bitter* melon. According to their legends and sacred stories, rice is a manifestation of an ancestral virgin who, at divine urging, sacrificed herself to produce various types of food for indigenous peoples. This legend then became a reference for them, so that rice is believed to channel good prayers from indigenous people to ancestors and natural rulers to secure protection and welfare. Thus, sovereignty is closely linked to customary lands and all aspects of the lives of the indigenous people of Ende Lio. Therefore, the capitalist food security paradigm, which often legitimizes colonialism, stands in stark contrast to traditional food systems that prioritize sustainability and uphold cultural, social, and ecological values rooted in traditional wisdom and accountability.

This analysis offers a new discourse on the nature of sovereignty rooted in customary lands. For indigenous peoples in general, and for the Ende Lio in particular, sovereignty is not just a political authority born of the struggle for power over others, but an entity sourced in customary land as a living space. Customary lands serve as an ontological foundation that enables indigenous peoples to self-determination, including in managing adaptive food systems, autonomous governance systems, unique religious systems, and sustainability-oriented systems. Thus, the sovereignty of indigenous peoples is a harmony between territorial autonomy, spiritual resilience, and ecological sustainability that stands tall as the antithesis of capitalist food hegemony.

Customary Land as a Sacred Entity and the Relational Function of Indigenous Peoples

Empirically, most rituals and respect for customary lands are intended to maintain a balance among indigenous peoples, ancestors, and nature (Giminiani, 2016). All indigenous peoples treat their customary lands as something living (Donaldson, 2022). On the other hand, the current development claims to have adopted a holistic and sustainable approach (Dernbach & Cheever, 2015). However, the development process has not been entirely on the side of the welfare of all humankind and intergenerational justice (Kashani & Hajian, 2021). Development also tends to exploit natural resources, resulting in deforestation, soil erosion, and water pollution (Liu et al., 2023), and does not progressively include cultural and spiritual aspects, including development in indigenous areas or those directly related to indigenous peoples (Laituri, 2004). On the other hand, some indigenous peoples hold that customary lands have a role and function that goes beyond their conventional functions, namely as a medium for establishing a reciprocal relationship with the "Creator" of the universe and the social environment (Perez & Longboat, 2019) which reflects the

spiritual dimension of human connection with nature, and indigenous lands are very powerful and profound.

However, for the indigenous people of Ende Lio, customary land is a sacred entity where ancestors and creators live, a place to perform rituals, and a medium for strengthening relationships among fellow indigenous peoples, ancestors, nature, and natural rulers. Therefore, the indigenous people of Ende Lio have great respect for customary lands expressed through *neka tana* rituals or other rituals. On the other hand, respect reflects the fundamental relationship between indigenous peoples and their customary lands. Thus, the Ende Lio customary land is not only understood as something living but also as an entity that gives life and a place to hang all the prayers and hopes of the indigenous people. Therefore, customary land is an entity that is "sacred and life-giving" beyond something living.

From the perspective of the ontological theory of customary relationality, customary land is a symbol of the deep relationship between indigenous peoples and their environment, serving as the basis for the birth of kinship systems and identity formation, and even as an agent or collective capacity to act. Therefore, customary land is an equal actor in the formation of indigenous identity and existence (Datta, 2015). In this context, customary land is a living entity so that indigenous peoples build a reciprocal relationship with it (Dovchin & Gower, 2024).

This analysis confirms that the Ende Lio indigenous people's respect for indigenous lands carries a deep ontological meaning, in which land is a sacred entity and a subject that initiates an equal, reciprocal relationship among humans, nature, ancestors, and the Sovereign of Nature. This spiritual dimension is even a fundamental differentiator between customary land and land as a shared commodity. As a sacred space, customary land serves as a foundation for the Ende Lio people to knit religious ties and gain spiritual authority to affirm their existence as a dignified, sovereign, and independent entity. In this perspective, customary lands are the spiritual foundation that supports the pillars of inclusive social development. Therefore, development policies in customary territories are not only fixated on material calculations but must also uphold the sacred values of the land. This policy transformation that respects the spiritual dimension will ensure the realization of holistic prosperity encompassing economic, social, cultural, and spiritual aspects, thereby guaranteeing the sovereignty of indigenous peoples.

Customary Land as a Pillar of Social Cohesion of Indigenous Peoples

Social cohesion is the binding bond for all members of a particular group that is connected to positive social processes, for example, solidarity, trust, and mutual support (Macisaac et al., 2023), which includes positive social connections, a sense of belonging, and a collective focus on the common good (Moustakas, 2023). Empirically, social cohesion among indigenous peoples is shaped by kinship, genealogy, customary territories, values and norms, and customary rituals (González et al., 2024). This social cohesion has even become the foundation that turns solidarity into collective action for the welfare and survival of indigenous peoples (Tsegaye, 2025).

In the context of the Ende Lio indigenous people, the social cohesion of indigenous peoples cannot be separated from the role of customary land, where social cohesion takes root. The emergence of kinship systems, shared values and norms, rituals, and genealogy, as well as agricultural systems, is precisely caused by the ownership of customary land and residences, and by the building of civilization. In the land, a sense of solidarity, trust, mutual support, and positive social relationships grows, making it a pillar of social cohesion that allows them to build a sustainable life. Empirically, solidarity fosters a strong sense of belonging and commitment among members of society (Ferguson et al., 2017). Therefore,

customary lands are a means for indigenous peoples to build solidarity and sustainably realize cultural resilience.

From the perspective of customary resilience theory, customary land for the indigenous people of Ende Lio is a place to build intimate relationships between fellow indigenous peoples, ancestors, and the surrounding nature. This relationship is an effective defense mechanism against colonization and external interventions, including destructive development that violates local norms. Thus, structural vulnerabilities arising from development can be minimized, according to Ford et al. (2020), only through policy interventions that recognize the sovereignty of indigenous peoples. However, in the context of the indigenous people of Ende Lio, social cohesion arises from customary land, not from anything else. Thus, customary lands are believed to be the glue of social solidarity and social cohesion of indigenous peoples throughout history. Therefore, indigenous peoples who have lost their customary lands will become groups that have lost solidarity, so that social cohesion between indigenous peoples becomes weaker and may even be lost over time.

This analysis expands the meaning of social cohesion by positioning customary land as a fundamental pillar, beyond just solidarity or trust between individuals. For the indigenous people of Ende Lio, indigenous lands are an active subject as a "living entity" and an epicenter where indigenous peoples' commitment and sense of belonging are deeply rooted. As a symbolic manifestation of the figure of "ine" or "mother", indigenous lands serve as the glue of organic solidarity, transforming the relationships among humans, nature, and ancestors into collective action for the sustainability of life. Thus, social cohesion in this region is not mechanistic, but a strong cosmic bond, so that protecting customary lands automatically strengthens the community's social integration. Therefore, any development intervention must place respect for indigenous lands at the core of its strategy to prevent disintegration and strengthen the social resilience of indigenous peoples.

6. CONCLUSION

Customary land is a resource of significant value to the lives of indigenous peoples. For indigenous peoples, land is not only a place to grow crops, but also a living entity. However, the indigenous people of Ende Lio have a deeper view that indigenous land is something that triggers indigenous peoples to "exist". Therefore, customary land is a symbol of the existence and identity of indigenous peoples, the basis of customary welfare and sovereignty, the space for community religiosity, and a pillar of social cohesion. Mirroring Ende Lio, customary lands play a fundamental role in the resilience of indigenous peoples in general, which includes social, economic, political, cultural, and spiritual aspects. This resilience rooted in indigenous lands is a guarantee for indigenous peoples to declare, 'we are present, we are productive, and we continue to move forward with full vitality and more civilisation.'

Therefore, government development policies need to include customary land sovereignty as a standard protocol in customary areas. This development approach will provide benefits by recognizing their fundamental rights to customary lands while guaranteeing the sovereignty of indigenous peoples themselves. Thus, the process of social development in indigenous territories will be more just, inclusive, and sustainable, making it more effective in realizing the material, cultural, political, and spiritual well-being of indigenous peoples. However, such policies require strong political will from the government, for example, promoting the development of indigenous peoples based on customary lands to strengthen the pillars of sovereignty and welfare of current and future generations.

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