

# Ethical perspectives on the Manguni bird: Integrating nature, humanity, and divine connection

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The Manguni bird plays a central role in the cosmology of the Minahasa people as a symbol of nature, society and spirituality. In Minahasa tradition, the Manguni is not only regarded as a natural sign that provides clues about the good or bad nature of an event but also as a divine intermediary that brings messages from God (Opo Empung). Furthermore, Manguni serves as a social symbol that strengthens the cohesion of the Minahasa community, connecting humans, nature and God in spiritual harmony. This article discusses the role of Manguni in three aspects: as an ecological sign reflecting harmony with the environment, as a social bond representing the collective identity of Minahasa and as a medium that communicates divine messages. The article also highlights the importance of integrating ecology into contextual Christian theology, especially in regions rich in local cultural traditions.

**Contribution:** This study seeks to formulate a new approach that accommodates the relevance of local spirituality and ecological theology, with Manguni as a key symbol in the relationship between humans, nature and God.

**Keywords:** Manguni bird; Minahasa; ecology; contextual theology; social cohesion.

## Introduction

Endemic animals in Minahasa are often merely treated as objects of conquest, whether as food or as tourist attractions. Minahasa, located in North Sulawesi province, is known as one of the regions with a high diversity of fauna. Endemic animals such as anoa, babirusa, tarsier and various species of birds, particularly the Manguni, are unique attractions for tourists. Unfortunately, this wealth of fauna is often not viewed from the perspective of sustainable conservation or specifically from a religious and theological standpoint but rather as an economic resource for exploitation. These animals are commodified for local consumption, especially during traditional celebrations or as tourist attractions without considering the long-term impact on the sustainability of local ecosystems (Kinnaird, O'Brien & Garnett 2003). This reflects a view that nature and biodiversity are merely resources to be conquered, rather than as theological references.

In addition, the hunting and consumption of these endemic animals are also rooted in longstanding local traditions and religions. Some species, such as the Manguni, are even considered luxury food served in the daily lives of the community. Animals such as dogs are served as part of traditional ceremonies. However, these traditions now face commercialisation, where demand from markets outside the region and tourists has increased the rate of hunting. For instance, the protected tarsier is often used as a photography object by tourists without proper management or guidance to ensure their preservation (Shekelle & Salim 2009). Ironically, what should be preserved as natural heritage is now facing serious threats because of conquest, overexploitation and disconnection from religious values.

Therefore, religious awareness is needed from both local communities and the government to change the approach to managing Minahasa's fauna wealth. A contextual theological or other religious-based approach should replace exploitative practices so that future generations can still understand the significance of endemic animals, particularly the Manguni, and enjoy the existing endemic fauna. According to Purwanto (2017), cooperation between the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and indigenous communities is crucial in preserving these endemic animals so they are not just objects of conquest but rather a source of pride and sustainability for the local ecosystem. However, theological studies must also be conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the significance of the Manguni bird.

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This is why this research seeks to explore the Manguni bird from the perspective of the sociology of religion. Although endemic animals native to Minahasa are often seen as objects of conquest, the Manguni bird is a symbol of the relationship between humans, nature and God, as its call serves as a natural sign and a bearer of divine news, even becoming a symbol of the closeness of the Minahasa people. This article will be organised into three interconnected main sections. The first part will discuss the role of the Manguni bird in the life of the Minahasa people as a provider of natural signs, from guidance in building homes, starting wars, to opening new fields. This phenomenon shows how the Minahasa people understand nature through the existence of Manguni as a mediator between humans and nature. The second part will review the Manguni bird as a bearer of divine messages, where the bird is believed to have the ability to convey the will of the spiritual world, both for personal and communal matters. This belief strengthens its position in the traditional beliefs of the Minahasa people. In the final section, this article will discuss how the Manguni bird has evolved into a symbol of kinship, a symbol of the local church and an icon of resistance against enemies, including in the Minahasa people's struggle to defend their identity. This article will use a historical and anthropological approach to understand the symbolic evolution of the Manguni bird over time.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative methodology with an ethnographic approach to explore the role of the Manguni bird in Minahasa cosmology and its relevance to ecological and theological discourses. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with local elders, cultural practitioners and religious leaders to capture their insights and lived experiences. Participant observation was also employed to document rituals, ceremonies and daily practices where the Manguni bird plays a significant role. In addition, textual analysis was performed on local folklore, oral traditions and historical records to contextualise the symbolic significance of Manguni within Minahasa culture. The study integrates these findings with theological frameworks to propose a contextual eco-theology that reflects the interconnectedness of humans, nature and God, emphasising the need for ecological harmony in contemporary Christian practices.

## Discussion

### The messenger of nature

The Manguni plays a crucial role in the Minahasan culture, not only as part of its biodiversity but also as a symbol of sacred identity, unity and guardian of natural balance, particularly the forests. Scientifically named *Otus manadensis*, this bird is one of the protected species in Indonesia according to the Minister of Environment and Forestry Regulation No. P.106/MENLHK/SETJEN/KUM.1/12/2018. In the Minahasan community, the Manguni owl is viewed as a creature with great spiritual power, often regarded as a messenger or indicator from nature or the spiritual world. The name

'Manguni' derives from the word 'mauni', meaning to observe, emphasising its role as a watcher of nature, giving important signs to humans.

More than just a physical being, the Manguni is believed to provide omens through its calls, which the Minahasan people use in significant moments, such as selecting a place to live, planning attacks during war or wishing for the fulfilment of desires. For example, according to Rinto Taroreh (2021), the Manguni owl plays a vital role in Minahasa's agrarian traditions, particularly in the process of opening new lands for plantations and farming. Before beginning such activities, a *tonaas* (traditional leader) would wait and listen for signs from the Manguni owl's calls as a guide from nature. The owl's call is believed to give blessings or warnings regarding the right time to clear land, determine the planting season and the harvest period. This tradition is closely related to the communal work system known as *mapalus*, where the Minahasan people work together in the fields to achieve maximum results (Rumbay, Siahaya & Hartono 2022c; Rumbay et al. 2022a). By listening to signs from the Manguni, the community believes that their work will be blessed, yielding a bountiful harvest. The Manguni symbolises the harmony between humans, nature and ancestral spirits, ensuring communal well-being and continuity through each agricultural cycle.

Furthermore, Rickson Karundeng (2021) reveals that in Minahasan tradition, the birth of a child is often accompanied by natural signs believed to provide clues about the child's future. One of the most sacred signs is when the house where the birth took place is visited by a Manguni owl. The presence of this bird is considered a sign that the newborn child possesses extraordinary power and will grow up to become a *tonaas* (traditional leader) or *walian* (shaman or spiritual healer) in the future (Rumbay et al. 2022b). The Manguni owl, known in Minahasan culture as a messenger from nature or the spirit world, is believed to have the ability to recognise souls destined for important roles in the community. This sign indicates that the child will have a strong connection with the spiritual world and will be able to lead or guide their community. This phenomenon further strengthens the belief that the Manguni owl is not only a symbol of nature but also a bridge between humans and divine forces in everyday Minahasan life.

One of the most revered sounds of the Manguni owl is the 'hoot' or loud call that is repeated three times, nine times in total, known as *Telu Makasiou*, which is considered a sign of great victory. In the Minahasan belief system, the number three represents harmony between three important elements: God, nature and humans. These three elements are interrelated and are considered the foundation for success in life. This symbolism multiplies into nine, which is viewed as a sacred number for the Minahasan people – 999, representing perfection and universal balance. As a nocturnal bird, active after sunset, the Manguni is also called *totosik*, meaning 'active at night', with unique characteristics such as sharp vision and the ability to turn its head fully backward.

Globally, this bird is often associated with wisdom, knowledge and intelligence. In Minahasan culture, the Manguni owl is believed to give warnings through various types of calls. However, only certain ancestors, particularly those known as *opo mamarimbing*, could understand and interpret the meanings of these sounds. For instance, the *lowas* sound, which resembles continuous laughter, is considered a sign that good news is on the way, while a hoarse or raspy sound known as *mangalo* is a warning to be more cautious. Another unique aspect of the Manguni owl is that its meaning also depends on the direction of the sound. If it is heard from the left side, it is a good omen and a blessing, but if it comes from the right, it is seen as a bad or ominous sign requiring vigilance.

In addition to its spiritual significance and omens, the Manguni is also known for its extraordinary loyalty. The bird mates for life, reinforcing its status as a symbol of fidelity and steadfastness in Minahasan culture. These values reflect the noble traits that are cherished by the Minahasan people in their daily lives, including in social relationships, family and community. Over time, the symbolism of the Manguni owl has also been adopted as a symbol of resistance against enemies, where the bird is considered a protector and guardian against impending danger. Moreover, the Manguni has even been adopted as a symbol of the church in Minahasa, signifying the union of ancestral cultural heritage with the religious values embraced by modern society.

Thus, the Manguni is not only an integral part of Minahasa's natural ecosystem but also serves as an important bridge between humans and nature. The bird is considered to have a unique ability to communicate with its surroundings and acts as a messenger connecting the community with the spiritual world. The presence of the Manguni in the traditions and rituals of the Minahasan people reflects a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, where the bird is not only seen as a living being but also as a symbol of deeper existence.

The presence of the Manguni in the everyday life of the Minahasan people reflects their belief in the communication and interaction between humans and the forces of nature. For example, the distinctive sound of the Manguni owl, interpreted as specific signs, provides guidance to the community about the right time to plant, harvest or carry out other important rituals. Thus, the bird becomes a marker of time and hope, guiding the community in living their lives with full awareness of nature's cycles.

Furthermore, the Manguni also reflects local wisdom values that are integrated into the Minahasan worldview. In this context, the Manguni is not just an animal but an entity with profound symbolic meaning. The bird is recognised as a guardian and protector of the forests and natural resources, making the community feel responsible for ensuring its continuity and preservation. Thus, efforts to conserve the Manguni also contribute to preserving local culture and traditions, as well as ensuring the balance of the ecosystem that is essential to the lives of the Minahasan people.

## The divine messenger

The Manguni remains a symbol for the Evangelical Christian Church in Minahasa (GMIM), and it also serves as a symbol for Minahasa Regency, South Minahasa Regency, North Minahasa Regency, Manado City, Tomohon City and Bitung City, reflecting the cultural identity of the Minahasan people. Additionally, the Manguni owl can be found in various carvings and traditional Minahasan batik patterns. According to Denni H.R. Pinontoan (2020), the symbol of the Manguni and Christian nationalism carries the meaning of the Gospel and Christian identity that grew in the land of Minahasa. The arrival of Christianity, particularly by pietist missionaries and the impact of globalisation, has shifted the meaning of the Manguni symbol. Although it was originally considered sacred, its meaning has now focused more on the owl as an animal. However, despite this change in interpretation, the presence of the Manguni owl in the collective memory of the Tou Minahasa people continues to hold strong sacred value. The bird has become an icon in Minahasa, symbolising the identity of the Tou Minahasa, including in the emblem of GMIM.

The sacredness of the Manguni, depicted in GMIM's emblem, represents the church in the land of Minahasa. The brown colour of the Manguni owl in the emblem symbolises the maturity and independence of the church in its congregational life. The rose placed at the heart of the Manguni owl symbolises reformation, with Jesus Christ as the source of church renewal, which has been used in Reformed Church traditions since the 16th century. The blue circle on the chest represents GMIM's mission in the world, while the black colour on the cross in the red heart signifies Christ's sacrifice, giving meaning to GMIM's fellowship, witness and ministry. The sea blue colour represents GMIM's hope to face challenges, both large and small, while the white colour symbolises the holiness and truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The nine outer feathers signify the month of September and the date of its inauguration on the 30th, depicted in the five pointed leaf petals extending to the heart, while the year 1934 reflects the total number of wing feathers. The tail has ten branches representing the areas of ministry, including Manado, Maumbi, Tomohon, Tondano, Langowan, Sonder, Ratahan, Amurang, Motoling and Airmadidi. The inscription 'GMIM' signifies the presence of the church in the land of Minahasa, as well as in the Republic of Indonesia and the world. The black colour represents solidarity until the end (Badan Pekerja Majelis Sinode Gereja Masehi Injili di Minahasa 2016:161–62). Moreover, the Manguni owl also appears in the emblems of the government of Minahasa, including Minahasa Regency, North Minahasa Regency and Tomohon City. In these government emblems, the bird is also seen as a sacred symbol of nature and spiritual guidance. The Manguni embodies values of wisdom, harmony and leadership that are central to Minahasan society.

Thus, the Manguni represents a divine connection between the people of Minahasa and nature, embodying a spiritual bridge that unites humanity, divinity and the natural world.

Its symbolic meaning, deeply ingrained in various aspects of Minahasan life, reflects the community's recognition of divine guidance in their interaction with the environment. While the Holy Spirit is a forgotten divine person (Rumbay 2022), but the role of Manguni resonates with the works of the Holy Spirit in Christian theology as a divine messenger and guide, offering wisdom, discernment and connection to God's will. In some studies, researches attempt to connect the messenger works of the Spirit to the local culture (Rumbay 2021; Rumbay et al. 2023). Just as the Holy Spirit communicates divine truths and fosters unity among believers, the Manguni, within Minahasan cosmology, symbolises a harmonious relationship between humans, nature and the Creator, intertwining local spirituality with theological insights.

### Social cohesion bearer

The important question posed here is whether bird songs can create social stability while simultaneously shaping the sacredness of knowledge within society. The Manguni bird is clearly regarded as a sacred bird by the Minahasa people, whose understanding of this bird continues to be constructed over time, forming a collective knowledge. According to Josef Manuel Saruan (1991:60–75), the song of the Manguni bird has a cultural function for the Minahasa people, and the number of sounds produced by the Manguni greatly influences the meaning of the message from Opo Empung. The number considered sacred by the Minahasa people is 9, which is seen as the culmination of the preceding numbers. The number 9 becomes a holy number for the Minahasa people because it is associated with the nine ancestors who are honoured in Minahasa. Annemarie Schimmel (1993:7–10) states that numbers in certain cultures have a magical dimension, capable of driving the spiritual expression of a society to deeper levels. Therefore, in the Minahasa cultural context, numbers are regarded as symbols of the divine dimension, even through the sound of the Manguni bird. The number is believed to be a representation of the divine enigma that must be interpreted.

Culturally, Manguni is closely linked to the collective memory of the Minahasa people from the past. This memory tells the story of a great flood (*ampuhan*) that devastated the early settlements of the Minahasa people. The event of the *ampuhan* left a deep impression on the life of the Minahasa people, both in the past and today, and the story has been passed down through oral tradition. According to Wenas (2010), the *ampuhan* forced the ancient Minahasa people to relocate in search of fertile land. Oral tradition in Minahasa is practiced in daily life, particularly in the home and garden. Rosalind Thomas (1992:107–110) argues that oral communication only exists among those who hear directly or indirectly in the form of literary tales, such as heroic stories, extraordinary events or stories that have never been printed. This suggests that human hearing tends to absorb extraordinary stories, thus forming cultural memory, both individually and communally. Before the *ampuhan* event, the first ancestors of the Minahasa people were Toar and Lumimu'ut (Toar was a man and Lumimu'ut a woman) and Karema, the first female

priest in Minahasa. Although the transformation brought by Christianity was rapid, stories related to the myth of the first Minahasan ancestors are still told to the next generations today (Pinontoan 2022:35).

According to Bert Supit (1986:16), the story of the first human of the Minahasa people has been embedded in the social and cultural life of the Minahasa people, forming a collective memory passed down through oral tradition. Critiquing the Latin proverb *verba volant, scripta manent* (spoken words fly like the wind, while written ones remain forever), in the context of Minahasa, stories about stirring events still live in the memory of the people, even though they are not in written form, but through oral tradition. This oral narrative plays a vital role in shaping the cultural identity of the Minahasa people, like the Manguni symbol that is passed on through oral culture. Furthermore, many moving oral narratives also colour the socio-cultural journey of the Minahasa people and become part of their folklore. One of the moving events is the *ampuhan*, the great flood that hit the Minahasa people. This flood forced the early Minahasa community living in the valleys of *wulur mahatus* (thousands of mountains) to seek fertile land to continue agricultural activities. According to stories from the Tumaratas people, the early Minahasa community searching for fertile land was guided by the Manguni bird throughout their journey to the valley of *tonderukan* (at the foot of Mount Soputan).

According to J.A.T. Schwarz (1907:16), the bird that often gave signs to establish settlements was known as *sokope*. Meanwhile, John F. Malonda (1952:71) explained that several birds had different cultural functions for the Minahasa people. The sounds of these birds served to foretell various events, both bad and good news. In particular, the sound of the Manguni bird holds much meaning for the life of the Minahasa people. If the bird makes the sound 'keak ...', it indicates that something bad will happen, while the sound 'ot ... ot ... ot ...' is a sign of good things to come (Mamoto 2007). Based on the meaning of these sounds, the Manguni has become part of the community's knowledge (folklore) that contains sacred elements. According to Dundes, one of the functions of folklore is as a tool for indigenous people to narrate their local wisdom (Browne & Dundes 1967:281). Dundes emphasises that the way to understand folklore is not limited to cultural and literary aspects; research on folklore must be analytical and interpretative, using objective-empirical data (Dundes 1979:28). He also explains that folklore is a story or oral tradition passed down from generation to generation, forming knowledge through oral transmission (Bacon 1965:1). In the context of Minahasa, the story of Manguni has been passed down orally across generations, forming a rich folklore filled with knowledge. According to William Bacon, folklore has four main functions. Firstly, it serves as a collective projection of imagination that shapes ideas in community life. Secondly, it functions as a creator and shaper of cultural reality. Thirdly, folklore becomes a medium for learning local wisdom and education based on oral tradition. Fourthly, folklore acts as a tool to monitor and maintain norms in community life (Bacon 1965:3–20).



From its functions, Manguni fulfils every aspect described by Bacon. Firstly, Manguni is the result of the creative imagination of the ancient Minahasa people, which continues to be built upon today. Secondly, Manguni has become a symbol that shapes the cultural identity of the Minahasa people, based on civic nationality. Thirdly, the Manguni symbol contains dimensions of knowledge passed down through oral tradition, creating discourse. Fourthly, Manguni serves as an instrument for indigenous peoples to correct normative deviations committed by the elite. Folklore is not just an ordinary story or myth, but a sacred narrative that explains how society was formed as it is now.

In line with Dundes' view, Izak Y.M. Lattu (2020:91) in his book explains that folklore functions as a living text that brings communities to life. Furthermore, the interaction between multicultural texts places society in the same emotional memory, or *mnemotext* (memory text), as with Manguni. Moreover, the Manguni song plays a role in creating the social structure and social cohesion of early Minahasa society, which began through family ties. An example is the descendants of Toar-Lumimu'ut, known as *taranak* (families with blood ties) (Mawuntu 2017:59). These early family ties were formed based on the number of Manguni bird sounds. The *Makarua Siow* group (2 × 9) had a religious function, *Makatelu Pitu* (2 × 7) functioned in societal structure and *Pasiowan Telu* (9 × 7) was responsible for agriculture and hunting. This social structure was interpreted by religious leaders and discussed with the community. If agreed upon, the decision was established together according to each group's duties and functions. These early Minahasa community groups, as explained, became the foundation of the Minahasa people's social cohesion to this day.

According to Emile Durkheim (2014:11–149), social cohesion is formed because of shared values that function equally within one entity, thus producing strong social bonds. Nicolaas Graafland (1991:10) explains that the name Minahasa itself refers to the union of the groups descended from Toar-Lumimu'ut. E.C.G. Molsbergen (1928:137), through the report of J.D. Schierstein to the governor of Maluku, stated that social cohesion in Minahasa was re-established after the peace process between the Bantik and Tateli through *minaesa* (unity). Therefore, integration in the Minahasa context is greatly influenced by the sounds of nature, especially in the form of *memotext* such as the sound of Manguni. The social stability of the Minahasa people is based on collaboration with nature, as they always involve collective awareness that receives blessings from nature.

As part of the Minahasa community's *memotext*, Manguni becomes an oral narrative passed down through generations, forming the sacredness of folklore and becoming a symbol of religious spirituality and freedom for indigenous peoples in creating knowledge spaces. Minahasa's knowledge of Manguni also serves as a tool to monitor power and as a voice for the oppressed through the sacredness of folklore. Quoting the ideas of Walter J. Ong (1982:10), oral tradition

provides freedom for humans to seek knowledge and reject incapacity. This means that although there has been a shift from oral to written culture, human consciousness in the context of oral-based culture and tradition has not changed. Therefore, Manguni as a text-context formed through oral tradition becomes a narrative that shapes social cohesion from the spiritual and intellectual dimensions of the Minahasa people. As mentioned earlier, in the colonial era, Manguni became a medium for conveying the aspirations of indigenous peoples regarding their resistance to arbitrary actions by the colonial authorities.

Thus, it can be concluded that the Manguni bird not only serves as a social adhesive but also as a highly significant symbol in shaping and maintaining the cultural identity of the Minahasa people. The bird embodies the local wisdom passed down through generations via oral tradition, while also acting as a guardian of harmony between humans and nature. As a social symbol, Manguni represents the spiritual and intellectual bond between the Minahasa people and nature, reflecting how they understand the world through signs and signals from the natural world. Manguni also strengthens communal bonds through its role in cultural rites, collective decision-making markers and reminders of ancestral values that continue to endure amid societal transformation.

## Conclusion

The Manguni bird holds three main roles in the cosmology of the Minahasa people: as a sign of nature, a divine sign and a social symbol. In this context, Manguni not only functions as a biological being that interacts with humans but also holds a deeper meaning as an intermediary between nature and humans, as well as a messenger of the Divine. Therefore, Manguni should not be viewed as an object of conquest or exploitation in the human perspective towards nature, but rather must be respected as a religious and theological entity that facilitates the spiritual relationship between humans, nature and God.

As a natural sign, Manguni provides signals that the Minahasa people believe to indicate the good or bad outcomes of an impending event. As a divine sign, this bird is believed to deliver direct messages from the Creator, affirming its role as a medium of communication between humans and Opo Empung (God). Meanwhile, as a social symbol, Manguni reinforces the cultural identity of the Minahasa people, strengthens social cohesion and serves as a spiritual icon in their traditions and daily lives.

Given the importance of Manguni in the cosmological life of the Minahasa people, a more contextual theological approach is needed to accommodate the ecological relevance within Christian theology. This contextual theology must consider the relationship between humans and nature, emphasise the importance of ecological sustainability and view nature not just as a resource to be exploited, but as an integral part of God's creation with spiritual and religious value. Such an

approach could also facilitate dialogue between local religious traditions, like that of the Manguni, and Christian teachings, fostering a synergy that respects local cultural and spiritual heritage while integrating it into broader ecological theology.

Thus, the future of theological studies in Minahasa and other regions with similar traditions needs to incorporate this ecological dimension, strengthening teachings on the care for God's creation and embracing the spiritual values represented by natural beings such as the Manguni bird. This will pave the way for Christian theology that is not only spiritually relevant but also ecologically conscious, taking into account the balance and harmony between humans and the universe.

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R.C.M. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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