

Maria as *Nai Mnuke*: Guardian of Land, Body, and Dignity— Reinterpreting Marian Devotion in the Mollo Indigenous Community

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Abstract: Marian devotion occupies a central place in Indonesian Catholic spirituality, yet it is frequently understood as an expression of personal piety detached from questions of gender justice and ecological responsibility. This study examines how Marian devotion is reinterpreted within the Mollo indigenous community of East Nusa Tenggara through the concept of *Nai Mnuke*. This contextual theological construct integrates Catholic Mariology with indigenous relational cosmology. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in reflective ethnography, the study collected data through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis in five villages where Marian devotion and customary practices remain closely intertwined. The findings reveal that Marian devotion functions as a relational religious praxis through which believers cultivate moral agency, communal solidarity, and ecological responsibility. Mollo women emerge as active theological interpreters who negotiate inherited devotional traditions in dialogue with their lived experiences, while *Nai Mnuke* provides a theological language that connects women's dignity, care for the land, and Catholic faith within a shared moral horizon. Rather than representing a departure from Catholic orthodoxy, this reinterpretation deepens Marian devotion through creative dialogue between ecclesial tradition and indigenous wisdom. The study contributes to contextual Mariology by integrating Thomistic personalism, contextual feminist hermeneutics, and ecofeminism into a coherent analytical framework for understanding Marian devotion as lived religion. It further demonstrates that contextual Marian devotion can serve as a constructive theological resource for strengthening women's agency, ecological stewardship, and pastoral engagement within indigenous Catholic communities.

Keywords: Marian devotion; contextual Mariology; *Nai Mnuke*; Mollo indigenous community; Thomistic personalism; ecofeminism.

Abstrak: Devosi kepada Bunda Maria memegang peranan sentral dalam spiritualitas Katolik Indonesia, namun sering dipahami sebagai bentuk kesalehan pribadi yang terlepas dari isu-isu keadilan gender dan tanggung jawab ekologis. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana devosi kepada Bunda Maria ditafsirkan ulang dalam komunitas adat Mollo di Nusa Tenggara Timur melalui konsep *Nai Mnuke*. Konstruksi teologis kontekstual ini mengintegrasikan Mariologi Katolik dengan kosmologi relasional adat. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif yang berlandaskan etnografi reflektif, pengumpulan data penelitian ini dilakukan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara semi-terstruktur, diskusi kelompok terfokus, dan analisis dokumen di lima desa di mana devosi kepada Bunda Maria dan praktik adat masih saling terkait erat. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa devosi kepada Bunda Maria berfungsi sebagai praksis keagamaan relasional yang melaluinya para

penganut menumbuhkan agensi moral, solidaritas komunal, dan tanggung jawab ekologis. Perempuan Mollo muncul sebagai penafsir teologis yang aktif yang menegosiasikan tradisi devosi yang diwariskan dalam dialog dengan pengalaman hidup mereka, sementara *Nai Mnuke* menyediakan bahasa teologis yang menghubungkan martabat perempuan, kepedulian terhadap tanah, dan iman Katolik dalam cakrawala moral yang sama. Alih-alih mewakili penyimpangan dari ortodoksi Katolik, penafsiran ulang ini memperdalam devosi Maria melalui dialog kreatif antara tradisi gerejawi dan kebijaksanaan adat. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada Mariologi kontekstual dengan mengintegrasikan personalisme Thomistik, hermeneutika feminis kontekstual, dan ekofeminisme ke dalam kerangka analitis yang koheren untuk memahami devosi Maria sebagai agama yang dijalani. Penelitian ini lebih lanjut menunjukkan bahwa devosi Maria kontekstual dapat berfungsi sebagai sumber daya teologis yang konstruktif untuk memperkuat otonomi perempuan, pengelolaan ekologi, dan keterlibatan pastoral di dalam komunitas Katolik adat.

Kata kunci: devosi Maria; mariologi kontekstual; *Nai Mnuke*; komunitas adat Mollo; personalisme Thomistik; ekofeminisme.

1. Introduction

Marian devotion occupies a central place in the religious life of the Mollo community in South Central Timor, where it extends beyond formal religious observance and becomes deeply embedded in everyday social and cultural practices. Rather than functioning solely as an expression of Catholic piety, devotion to Mary is interwoven with weaving traditions, customary rituals, communal gatherings, and the community's enduring relationship with land and nature. Within this socio-cultural landscape, Marian devotion serves as a meeting point among faith, indigenous culture, and the everyday struggle for survival. Religious symbols acquire meaning through lived experience, while Mary is understood not only as the compassionate Mother of God but also as a relational figure whose perseverance, suffering, and steadfastness resonate profoundly with the experiences of the Mollo community, particularly women confronting intersecting forms of social and ecological vulnerability (Johnson, 2005; Warner, 2016).

This understanding unfolds within a socio-cultural context characterised by a persistent gender paradox. On the one hand, Mollo women enjoy considerable symbolic recognition through their roles as *Bife Ainaf* (ritual leaders), traditional weavers, and custodians of customary ceremonies, including presenting betel nut during communal rituals. These roles position women as guardians of cultural continuity and embodiments of communal life. On the other hand, customary authority and strategic decision-making remain overwhelmingly male-dominated. Women continue to bear extensive domestic, economic, and social responsibilities, yet they rarely participate substantively in customary leadership, land governance, or community decision-making (Barrkman, 2018; Palmer & McWilliam, 2018). Colonial administrative legacies further reinforced this imbalance by privileging male authority in governance and resource distribution, thereby allowing patriarchal structures to persist within both customary institutions and contemporary development practices.

Within the Catholic Church, Marian devotion through the Rosary, the Legion of Mary, and pilgrimage traditions has become deeply rooted in the spiritual life of the Mollo people. These devotional practices strengthen communal identity and religious commitment; however, they largely remain confined to ritual observance and rarely serve as theological resources for questioning patriarchal structures that shape everyday life (Andaya, 2004). Consequently, Marian devotion often serves as an expression of personal piety rather than encouraging critical engagement with unequal gender relations, asymmetrical power structures, or the ecological challenges facing local communities.

This tendency reflects a broader postcolonial dynamic in which religious traditions, historically intertwined with colonial systems of authority, continue to reproduce hierarchical social relations when local communities appropriate them without sustained critical reflection. Rather than challenging Marian devotion itself, this study argues that the practice contains considerable emancipatory potential. Reinterpreting Marian devotion through a contextual theological lens enables it to move beyond ritual

observance and become a relational religious praxis that nurtures critical consciousness, affirms women's dignity, and strengthens collective responsibility for socio-ecological transformation.

Existing scholarship provides only a partial understanding of the relationship between Marian devotion, women's agency, and ecological engagement within the Mollo community. Previous studies have primarily examined the interconnections between women, land, and resistance to natural resource exploitation, particularly in response to mining activities around Mount Mutis (Palmer & McWilliam, 2018; Parastasia, 2024). The weaving movement led by Mama Aleta Baun has received considerable scholarly attention as an expression of indigenous ecofeminism that affirms the intimate relationship between women's bodies, cultural identity, and the natural environment. Previous studies have examined religious ecofeminism in indigenous women's movements across Indonesia, including in the Mollo context (Adawiah, 2023), yet the specifically Marian dimensions of this spiritual ecology remain underexplored. More recently, scholars have extended ecofeminist frameworks to integrate religious hermeneutics and ecotheology as tools for intergenerational climate ethics (Canete, Daton, & Ching, 2025) a perspective that resonates with the Mollo community's understanding of land as a sacred inheritance binding past, present, and future generations. Despite these significant contributions, researchers have paid limited attention to the spiritual dimensions underpinning this movement. In particular, they have yet to examine systematically how Marian devotion functions as a symbolic, theological, and moral resource that informs ecological resistance and reinforces women's dignity within indigenous Catholic communities.

A similar limitation characterises contextual Mariological scholarship in Indonesia. Existing Indonesian Mariological scholarship has primarily emphasised doctrinal reflection and devotional practice, with comparatively limited attention to the broader social, cultural, and anthropological dimensions of Marian devotion (Pasi, Riyanto, & Martasudjita, 2022). Although feminist theology and ecofeminism increasingly interpret Mary as a symbol of liberation, cultural critique, and social transformation within global theological discourse (Johnson, 2005; Ruether, 1992; Warner, 2016) these perspectives rarely engage with indigenous communities or the socio-ecological realities of Eastern Indonesia. Consequently, current scholarship offers limited insight into how Marian devotion mediates the relationship between faith, gender justice, and ecological ethics within local Catholic contexts.

This study addresses these gaps by advancing an interdisciplinary framework that integrates Thomistic personalism, contextual feminist hermeneutics, and ecofeminism within a reflective ethnographic approach. Thomistic personalism provides the ontological foundation for understanding human beings as moral subjects who exercise freedom and responsibility through conscious action. Contextual feminist hermeneutics enables a critical reinterpretation of Marian devotion from the lived experiences of Mollo women while remaining attentive to the dynamics of patriarchy, culture, and religious tradition. Ecofeminism complements these perspectives by illuminating the structural relationship between gender inequality and ecological degradation, thereby situating Marian devotion within a broader ethical commitment to the integrity of creation. Rather than treating these perspectives as independent theoretical lenses, this study integrates them into a coherent analytical framework for interpreting Marian devotion as a relational religious praxis that shapes moral agency, strengthens women's dignity, and cultivates socio-ecological responsibility.

To address these conceptual gaps, this study adopts an integrated theoretical orientation that combines Thomistic personalism, contextual feminist hermeneutics, and ecofeminism. Rather than treating these perspectives as independent analytical lenses, the study brings them into dialogue to interpret Marian devotion as a relational religious praxis that shapes moral agency, gender relations, and ecological responsibility.

Thomistic personalism provides the ontological foundation for this study by understanding the human person as a rational and free subject whose dignity derives from personhood rather than from social function, cultural status, or external recognition. This perspective originates in Thomas Aquinas's distinction between *actus hominis* and *actus humanus*, which differentiates instinctive human behaviour from actions performed with knowledge and free will (Aquinas, 1947). Building upon this foundation, Wojtyła (1979) argues that the human person realises and affirms oneself through conscious action,

thereby expressing moral freedom and responsibility. Drawing on this anthropological perspective, the present study understands Marian devotion not merely as ritual observance but as a personal religious act through which believers exercise moral agency and affirm human dignity. This interpretation accords with Buttiglione's reading (1997) of Wojtyła's personalism, which emphasises human action as the primary expression of personal subjectivity, a philosophical claim whose anthropological and psychological foundations have been elaborated more recently by Houde (2023), who situates Thomistic personalism within a comprehensive understanding of personal subjectivity and moral self-realisation.

Contextual feminist hermeneutics complements this ontological perspective by examining how religious traditions acquire meaning within concrete historical and cultural relations of power. Schüssler Fiorenza (1993) argues that theological interpretation should critically expose androcentric structures while recovering women's experiences as legitimate sources of theological knowledge through the hermeneutics of suspicion and remembrance. Extending this perspective to Asian contexts, Kwok (2005) contends that feminist theology must engage critically with local cultures, colonial histories, and indigenous realities rather than rely exclusively on universal theological categories. Contemporary scholarship further conceptualises culture as a dynamic arena in which religious meanings, identities, and power relations are continually negotiated (Rufino, 2023). Drawing upon these perspectives, this study interprets Marian devotion from the lived experiences of Mollo women, viewing devotion as a symbolic space in which inherited religious traditions remain open to critical reinterpretation while sustaining communion with Catholic faith.

Ecofeminism broadens this analytical framework by illuminating the structural relationship between gender inequality and ecological degradation. Ruether (1992) argues that patriarchal thought legitimises the domination of both women and nature through hierarchical understandings of human existence. From a political-economic perspective, Mies and Shiva (1993) further demonstrate how capitalist development and colonial systems simultaneously exploit women's labour and natural resources through comparable structures of domination. These perspectives have been extended and synthesised in recent scholarship integrating religious hermeneutics and ecotheology as conceptual tools for ecofeminist ethics (Canete et al., 2025). Within Catholic social thought, Pope Francis (2022) advances the concept of integral ecology, while O'Brien (2019) explains how ecological degradation, social injustice, and anthropological crisis remain fundamentally interconnected. These perspectives resonate strongly with the Mollo worldview, in which land is a sacred, relational reality that sustains communal identity, collective memory, and intergenerational responsibility (Parastasia, 2024). Within this relational cosmology, ecological destruction signifies not only environmental damage but also a moral and spiritual rupture in the community's relationship with creation (Turina, 2024). Accordingly, this study understands Marian devotion as a relational spirituality that nurtures responsibility towards God, fellow human beings, and the natural world (Chambon, 2025).

Against this background, this study addresses three interrelated questions. First, how can Marian devotion be reinterpreted to promote gender justice within the Mollo community? Secondly, in what ways can Marian devotion function as a resource for sustainable social and ecological transformation? Thirdly, how does Marian symbolism cultivate collective ecological consciousness within the cultural and religious life of the Mollo people? By addressing these questions, this study seeks to enrich contextual Mariology in Indonesia while contributing to broader discussions on religion, gender, and ecological ethics.

To address these questions, this study adopts a qualitative approach using reflective ethnography to examine Marian devotion as a lived religious practice situated within the social, cultural, and spiritual life of the Mollo community (Davies, 2012; Wigg-Stevenson, 2014). This methodological choice is consistent with recent discussions emphasising the appropriateness of ethnographic approaches for studying religion in local communities, which underscore attentiveness to contextual complexity and participatory dynamics as essential conditions for generating theologically meaningful empirical knowledge (Rieger, 2023). Fieldwork took place between June and August 2025 in five villages that serve as important centres of customary and devotional practices in the Mollo region: Fatumnasi, O'besi, Ajaobaki, Bijaepunu, and Fatukoto. The study employed purposive sampling to capture diverse religious and social experiences

across the community. Participants included parish priests, customary leaders, traditional weavers, catechists, housewives, and young people, each of whom contributed distinctive perspectives on Marian devotion and its significance within everyday life.

The study generated data through participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis of liturgical and parish materials. The analysis employed a thematic coding procedure to identify recurring patterns across participants' narratives and devotional practices. Thomistic personalism and contextual feminist hermeneutics informed the analytical interpretation, while ecofeminism provided a critical framework for examining the relationship between Marian devotion, women's agency, and ecological responsibility. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study applied source triangulation, peer debriefing with local researchers, and continuous reflexive journaling throughout the research process. These strategies strengthened analytical rigour by ensuring that the interpretation remained grounded in participants' lived experiences while maintaining critical awareness of the researcher's positionality. Through this methodological approach, the study seeks to interpret Marian devotion not merely as a ritual expression of faith but as a relational religious praxis capable of fostering gender justice and socio-ecological transformation within the Mollo community.

2. Marian Devotional Practices in the Mollo Community

Fieldwork conducted over three months revealed that Marian devotion in the Mollo community does not constitute a single, homogeneous religious practice. Instead, it encompasses a range of complementary devotional expressions that have become deeply embedded in the rhythm of everyday communal life. Participants consistently described Marian devotion not merely as formal religious observance but as a collective practice that connects faith with social relationships, cultural identity, and everyday experience. This finding reflects the notion of lived religion, whereby religious practice extends beyond institutional settings and acquires meaning through domestic life, community interactions, and ordinary social practice (Chambon, 2025; Rieger, 2023). Empirical research further confirms that the Rosary cultivates relational spirituality and communal wellbeing beyond liturgical function (Teut et al., 2025).

The most widespread devotional practice was the communal recitation of the Rosary, held every Friday evening in family chapels, with the rotation from one household to another. Participant observation conducted in Fatumnasi Village on 12 July 2025 recorded approximately 25–30 participants, of whom nearly 80 percent were women. The predominance of women's participation indicates that these gatherings provide an inclusive religious space where women actively express and nurture their faith through collective prayer. More importantly, participants described the Rosary as an occasion for sharing personal concerns, discussing family matters, and strengthening communal solidarity. These observations suggest that Marian devotion functions not only as a liturgical practice but also as a socially embedded expression of faith that reinforces interpersonal relationships within the community.

From the perspective of Thomistic personalism, these devotional gatherings represent more than collective ritual. They illustrate how conscious religious action contributes to the formation of moral subjectivity. Rather than participating merely out of a customary obligation, devotees engage in prayer intentionally as an expression of faith that affirms personal dignity, moral freedom, and communal responsibility. In this sense, Marian devotion exemplifies *actus humanus* human action undertaken with knowledge and free will, through which believers actively shape their moral identity (Wojtyla, 1979).

A second form of devotion emerged through the annual pilgrimage to Mount Mutis, celebrated on 15 August to commemorate the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mount Mutis occupies a unique position within the Mollo worldview as both a sacred landscape and the principal source of communal life. Approximately 150 pilgrims from neighbouring villages participated in the 2025 pilgrimage, transforming the mountain into a shared devotional and cultural space. Participants consistently associated the pilgrimage with gratitude for creation, the protection of ancestral land, and responsibility for future generations. These narratives demonstrate that Marian devotion remains inseparable from the ecological and cultural landscape within which the community lives.

This integration of spirituality and ecological consciousness resonates strongly with the Catholic vision of integral ecology, which rejects any separation between religious faith and responsibility for the natural world (Francis, 2022). Rather than functioning solely as a devotional event, the pilgrimage cultivates an ethical awareness of humanity's relationship with creation, a perspective further elaborated in contemporary discussions of ecological spirituality (O'Brien, 2019).

A third expression of Marian devotion comprised the weekly novena and meetings of the Legion of Mary, held every Saturday morning at the parish church. Unlike the domestic Rosary and the annual pilgrimage, these gatherings followed a more structured ecclesial format closely connected with the devotional traditions of the universal Catholic Church. Participants regarded these meetings as opportunities not only for spiritual formation but also for mutual encouragement and communal service, particularly among women actively involved in parish ministries.

These three devotional settings the domestic sphere, the sacred landscape, and the institutional life of the Church demonstrate that Marian devotion in Mollo operates across multiple social spaces rather than remaining confined to ecclesiastical ritual. The findings indicate that devotion continuously mediates relationships between faith, community, culture, and the environment. Consequently, Marian devotion emerges not as a static religious tradition but as a dynamic relational practice through which the Mollo community continually constructs religious identity, communal solidarity, and ecological responsibility..

3. Community Perspectives on Marian Devotion

Changing Meanings of Marian Devotion

Interviews with community members revealed that Marian devotion has acquired new meanings in response to changing social and ecological circumstances. Although participants consistently regarded devotion as an inherited religious tradition, many also described a gradual shift in their understanding of its significance within contemporary community life.

A 65-year-old female weaver from Fatumnasi Village explained that she had long regarded the Rosary as a religious obligation passed down through successive generations. However, the emergence of mining activities around Mount Mutis fundamentally reshaped this understanding. As she reflected, '*Now every Rosary prayer feels like a way of protecting our mountain.*' Her testimony illustrates how prayer has moved beyond an individual devotional practice to become a collective expression of responsibility for the community's living environment. Rather than abandoning inherited traditions, participants reinterpreted them in response to new ecological challenges.

This transformation illustrates a significant shift in devotional consciousness. Marian devotion no longer functions solely as an inherited religious obligation but increasingly reflects a deliberate and contextually informed expression of faith. From the perspective of Thomistic personalism, such a development represents a movement from externally performed religious observance towards consciously embraced moral action, through which believers exercise freedom, responsibility, and ethical commitment within their everyday lives (Wojtyla, 1979).

Younger women articulated this reinterpretation even more explicitly. A 28-year-old environmental activist from O'besi Village described the *Magnificat* as opening a new horizon for understanding Mary as a figure who stands with those experiencing injustice. For her, Marian devotion provides moral inspiration for social engagement and encourages critical reflection on structural inequalities rather than withdrawal into private spirituality. This reading resonates with Utami and Fajriyah's (2025) analysis of Maryam/Mary as a figure who retains elements of resistance and spiritual strength beyond conventional roles an interpretation that the women of Mollo not only affirm intellectually but embody through their ecological and communal engagement. This interpretation demonstrates how biblical narratives continue to generate new meanings when read through the lens of contemporary social realities.

Such reinterpretations resonate strongly with contextual feminist hermeneutics, which understands religious texts and traditions as dynamic sites of meaning-making rather than fixed repositories of doctrine (Fiorenza, 1993). Kwok (2005) similarly argues that theological interpretation must remain attentive to local histories, cultural experience, and postcolonial realities. The experiences shared by

younger Mollo women exemplify this hermeneutical process by locating Marian devotion within their own struggles for social justice and ecological integrity.

Interestingly, this changing perception also emerged among male participants. A catechist from Ajaobaki Village observed that community members increasingly viewed Mary not as a passive symbol of obedience but as a courageous mother who willingly accepted risk to protect life. He interpreted the Flight into Egypt as a narrative of discernment, courage, and moral responsibility rather than passive submission. This perspective suggests that the reinterpretation of Marian devotion extends beyond women's religious experience and has begun to reshape the community's wider theological imagination.

Women's Hermeneutical Reinterpretation of Marian Devotion

Field observations indicate that Mollo women participate in Marian devotion not only as the principal custodians of devotional practices but also as active interpreters of religious tradition. Their engagement extends beyond sustaining inherited forms of piety to rearticulating the theological significance of those forms in relation to everyday social and ecological realities. This dynamic became particularly evident during a women's prayer gathering in Bijaepunu Village on 18 July 2025, where biblical reflection evolved into a participatory dialogue that connected Scripture with participants' lived experiences.

The discussion centred on Luke 1:39–56, particularly the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth. Rather than interpreting the passage solely as an account of personal holiness or exemplary obedience, participants understood it as a narrative of women's solidarity in times of vulnerability. Mary emerged as a figure who willingly crossed social and geographical boundaries to accompany, strengthen, and encourage another woman. Participants repeatedly associated this narrative with their own experiences of mutual support while confronting economic hardship, customary obligations, and environmental uncertainty. In this context, Marian devotion functioned not merely as remembrance of a biblical event but as a living source of moral imagination through which women interpreted their own responsibilities towards one another and their community.

These observations demonstrate that biblical interpretation within the prayer group was neither individual nor exclusively devotional. Instead, participants collectively constructed meaning through dialogue between Scripture, religious tradition, and everyday experience. This interpretative process illustrates how theological understanding develops within communal religious practice rather than through abstract doctrinal reflection alone.

Such findings resonate closely with Fiorenza's (1993) concept of the *hermeneutics of remembrance*, which restores women's experiences to the center of theological interpretation. Rather than treating women solely as recipients of religious teaching, this hermeneutical approach recognises them as active subjects who participate in the production of theological meaning. The experiences of the Mollo women further support Kwok's (2005) argument that theological interpretation acquires its fullest significance when it engages critically with local histories, cultural traditions, and the lived realities of women.

Accordingly, the women's prayer group functions as a living hermeneutical community in which Marian devotion undergoes continual reinterpretation through collective reflection. This process transforms devotion from a predominantly ritual practice into a reflective and emancipatory expression of faith. In doing so, Mollo women emerge not merely as participants in devotional life but as theological agents who shape communal consciousness, negotiate religious meaning, and cultivate moral responsibility within their community. This tension between symbolic recognition and structural subordination is not unique to the Mollo context. Research on Catholic communities in neighbouring dioceses reveals comparable paradoxes in women's participation and leadership (Widyawati, Lon, & Midun, 2026), while the magisterium's gender anthropology has been shown to carry significant consequences for women's agency within ecclesial structures (Anuth, 2022). The women of Mollo navigate these tensions through the hermeneutical space of Marian devotion itself.

Marian Devotion and Ecological Activism

Field observations further revealed that Marian devotion extends beyond personal spirituality and finds concrete expression in collective ecological action. On 30 July 2025, researchers observed a group of women gathering to recite the Rosary before participating in a symbolic protest against marble mining. Participants did not regard the prayer as a ceremonial prelude to public action. Instead, they described it as an integral part of their struggle to protect the land, expressing the conviction that ecological responsibility originates in faith rather than in political activism alone.

Participants also attached particular significance to the Joyful Mysteries, which they associated with God's gift of life and the vocation to safeguard creation. For them, the Rosary cultivated the inner disposition required to confront environmental destruction with perseverance, solidarity, and hope. Devotional prayer functioned not as an alternative to ecological engagement but as the spiritual foundation from which collective action emerged.

These observations suggest that Marian devotion operates as a formative religious practice that shapes ethical commitment before it motivates public engagement. Rather than drawing a distinction between contemplation and action, participants consistently understood prayer as the source of moral discernment informing their ecological responsibilities. This relationship demonstrates how devotional practice mediates the transition from spiritual reflection to collective action within everyday community life.

Such findings resonate with Francis' (2022) understanding of integral ecology, which rejects any separation between faith, social justice, and care for creation. O'Brien (2019) further argues that ecological responsibility emerges from a relational understanding of humanity's place within creation rather than from environmental concern alone. These findings extend the concept of religious ecofeminism as articulated by Adawiah (2023), who identifies indigenous women's spirituality as a foundational force in nature protection movements across Indonesia. A parallel dynamic has been documented among Muslim women in Indonesian coastal areas, where religious values similarly underpin ecological responsibility (Anggraeni et al., 2025), suggesting that faith-based ecological commitment constitutes a broader Indonesian religious pattern that transcends confessional boundaries.

This interpretation also emerged in the testimony of a member of the Legion of Mary from Fatukoto Village, who described Mary's body as a symbol of the womb of life, teaching the community to regard the earth as something to be nurtured rather than exploited. Her reflection expands the symbolic language of Marian devotion beyond conventional devotional imagery without departing from its theological foundations. Instead, it situates Marian symbolism within a broader moral vision that links care for human life with care for the natural world.

These findings indicate that the integration of prayer and ecological activism does not represent a departure from Catholic teaching but rather embodies a contextual expression of faith grounded in the Church's theology of creation. Within the Mollo community, Marian devotion therefore functions as a bridge between orthodoxy and lived practice, enabling believers to embody their faith through concrete commitments to social and ecological responsibility.

4. The Emergence of *Nai Mnuke*

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5. The Transformation of Marian Devotion through Thomistic Personalism

The findings demonstrate that Marian devotion within the Mollo community has undergone a significant transformation in both meaning and practice. Rather than functioning primarily as an inherited religious obligation or customary ritual, devotion increasingly reflects a consciously appropriated expression of faith through which believers understand their responsibilities towards God, fellow human beings, and the natural world. This transformation does not abandon established devotional traditions; instead, it reorients their significance within the community's contemporary social and ecological realities.

This shift can be understood more fully through the perspective of Thomistic personalism. Aquinas distinguishes between *actus hominis*, actions that occur without deliberate reflection, and *actus humanus*, actions performed knowingly and freely (Aquinas, 1947). Building upon this distinction, Wojtyła (1979) argues that the human person becomes an *acting person* by realising and affirming oneself through conscious moral action. Within this conceptual framework, Marian devotion extends beyond habitual religious observance to become an intentional act through which believers exercise freedom, responsibility, and moral commitment.

The experiences shared by participants illustrate this process of personal transformation. Women who associated the Rosary with protecting Mount Mutis, and younger participants who interpreted the *Magnificat* as a call to social engagement, no longer understood Marian devotion solely as an inherited religious practice. Instead, they consciously appropriated devotional traditions to address contemporary concerns related to ecological degradation, gender relations, and communal responsibility. Their narratives reveal that faith is not merely preserved through ritual repetition but continually renewed through reflective engagement with changing social realities.

This transformation also explains why Marian devotion naturally extends into socio-ecological action within the Mollo community. The close relationship among prayer, pilgrimage, and ecological activism does not constitute a politicisation of religion. Rather, it reflects the internal logic of faith

understood as moral responsibility. When believers intentionally connect devotional practice with care for the common good, Marian devotion becomes a formative practice that links contemplation with ethical action. This interpretation resonates with Francis' (2022) vision of integral ecology, which rejects any separation between spiritual commitment and responsibility for creation. O'Brien (2019) further argues that ecological responsibility emerges from recognising the relational character of human existence within creation, a perspective that closely corresponds with the devotional practices observed in Mollo.

From a Thomistic personalist perspective, Marian devotion therefore functions as a process of moral formation through which believers cultivate the virtues necessary for responsible participation in communal life. Buttiglione (1997) emphasises that human action reveals and actualises personal subjectivity because persons realise themselves through freely chosen actions. The devotional practices documented in this study support this interpretation by demonstrating that Marian devotion contributes not only to spiritual formation but also to the development of moral agency, communal solidarity, and ecological responsibility. Rather than remaining a private expression of piety, Marian devotion emerges as a transformative religious praxis through which believers affirm both human dignity and their responsibility for the common good.

6. Reinterpreting Marian Devotion through Contextual Feminist Hermeneutics

The narratives of the Mollo women demonstrate that Marian devotion functions not merely as a devotional tradition inherited from previous generations but also as a space in which women actively reinterpret faith through their lived experiences. Rather than receiving Marian symbolism as a fixed theological construct, participants continuously negotiated its meaning in response to the social, cultural, and ecological realities that shaped their daily lives. Their reflections reveal that Marian devotion provides a framework for understanding solidarity, resilience, and responsibility within the community.

This reinterpretation becomes particularly evident in the participants' reading of the Visitation narrative (Luke 1:39–56). Instead of emphasising Mary's obedience alone, the women highlighted her initiative, courage, and willingness to accompany another woman during a period of vulnerability. For them, the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth symbolises mutual support among women who share common struggles and responsibilities. Consequently, Marian devotion acquires significance not only as an expression of personal piety but also as a theological affirmation of women's capacity to nurture, accompany, and sustain communal life.

These findings resonate with Fiorenza's (1993) *hermeneutics of remembrance*, which recognises women's experiences as legitimate sources of theological interpretation while challenging androcentric readings that have marginalised their voices. The Mollo women did not reject established Catholic interpretations of Mary; rather, they broadened those interpretations by bringing their own experiences into dialogue with Scripture and devotional practice. Their engagement illustrates a constructive hermeneutical process through which inherited religious traditions remain meaningful within changing social contexts.

The findings also reflect Kwok's (2005) argument that contextual feminist theology must engage critically with local histories, cultures, and postcolonial realities instead of relying solely on universal theological formulations. Within the Mollo community, Marian devotion acquires contextual meaning because it is interpreted through indigenous experiences of caring for land, preserving communal relationships, and responding to ecological threats. This process demonstrates that theological meaning emerges through dialogue between faith and culture rather than through the simple application of abstract theological concepts. Such a process also corresponds with Rufino's (2023) understanding of culture as a dynamic space in which religious meanings undergo continual negotiation and reconstruction.

Viewed from this perspective, Marian devotion becomes a site of theological agency. The women who participated in this study not only preserved devotional traditions but also actively reshaped their meaning in ways that affirmed women's dignity, strengthened communal solidarity, and deepened ecological responsibility. Their interpretations extend beyond personal spirituality to contribute to a contextual understanding of Mariology that remains faithful to Catholic tradition while responding to the

concrete realities of indigenous life. Rather than functioning as an alternative theology, this reinterpretation illustrates how Marian devotion continues to generate new theological insights when read through the lived experiences of women and their communities.

7. *Nai Mnuke* as Contextual Theology

The findings indicate that *Nai Mnuke* is a contextual theological construct that emerges from sustained dialogue between Catholic Mariology and the relational cosmology of the Mollo community. Rather than functioning merely as a culturally adapted Marian title, *Nai Mnuke* provides a theological language through which local believers express the relationship between faith, human dignity, and responsibility for creation. This interpretation does not alter Mary's doctrinal identity; instead, it enables Marian devotion to become more deeply rooted in the lived realities of the Mollo people.

The emergence of *Nai Mnuke* reflects a process of contextual theological reflection rather than the simple incorporation of indigenous cultural elements into Catholic devotion. Participants consistently interpreted Mary through symbolic expressions that already carried profound meaning within the Mollo worldview, particularly those associated with land, motherhood, protection, and the continuity of life. Consequently, Marian symbolism became intelligible through concepts that were already embedded in communal memory and cultural experience. This process illustrates how theological meaning develops through dialogue between Christian tradition and indigenous knowledge rather than through the replacement of one symbolic system by another.

The relational cosmology of the Mollo community provides an important interpretative horizon for understanding this development. Land is not regarded merely as an economic resource but as a sacred reality that sustains communal identity, intergenerational continuity, and moral responsibility (Parastasia, 2024). Within this worldview, the protection of nature also signifies the protection of human dignity because both belong to the same relational order. The reinterpretation of Mary as *Nai Mnuke* therefore expresses a theological vision in which devotion naturally extends to the preservation of life in all its dimensions.

This interpretation resonates with ecofeminist scholarship, which has long argued that the domination of women and the exploitation of nature arise from interconnected structures of power. Ruether (1992) identifies patriarchal patterns of domination as the theological basis for these dual forms of oppression, while Mies and Shiva (1993) demonstrate how similar structures operate within political, economic, and colonial systems. The Mollo experience does not merely illustrate these theoretical insights; rather, it shows how a local faith community responds by constructing a symbolic framework that integrates care for women, care for creation, and fidelity to Catholic belief within a single moral vision.

The findings also correspond with Francis' (2022) understanding of integral ecology, which emphasises that concern for human dignity and concern for creation cannot be separated. O'Brien (2019) further explains that ecological responsibility emerges from recognising the interconnectedness of human beings, society, and the natural world. Within the Mollo context, Marian devotion embodies this theological vision by encouraging believers to understand prayer, cultural identity, and ecological stewardship as mutually reinforcing dimensions of Christian discipleship.

Accordingly, *Nai Mnuke* should be understood not simply as a contextual Marian title but as a contextual theological construct that expands the interpretative horizon of Marian devotion. Its significance lies in demonstrating how the Catholic faith can engage in meaningful dialogue with indigenous cosmology while preserving its theological integrity. The emergence of *Nai Mnuke* illustrates precisely what Ballano (2024) identifies as the central challenge of inculturation: moving beyond conceptual adaptation towards an operational theological reality embedded in lived practice. This development also resonates with emerging indigenous ecotheology that calls for reimagining ecological responsibility from within local cosmological frameworks rather than imposing externally derived categories (Aye, 2025). The concept contributes not only to contextual Mariology but also to wider discussions on inculturation, lived religion, and contextual theology by illustrating how devotional traditions can generate ethical commitments that strengthen gender justice, communal solidarity, and ecological responsibility.

8. Reinterpreting Marian Devotion: Theological and Socio-Ecological Implications

The findings of this study demonstrate that Marian devotion within the Mollo community functions as far more than a conventional expression of Catholic piety. Rather than remaining an inherited devotional practice, it has evolved into a relational religious praxis through which believers reinterpret faith in response to changing social, cultural, and ecological realities. The emergence of *Nai Mnuke* illustrates this transformation by showing how Marian devotion mediates a dialogue between Catholic tradition and indigenous cosmology without compromising Mary's theological identity. Consequently, devotion becomes a formative process through which moral agency, communal solidarity, and ecological responsibility develop simultaneously.

This interpretation both confirms and extends previous scholarship on Marian devotion. Studies have consistently shown that Marian devotion adapts to diverse historical and cultural contexts while contributing to the formation of Catholic identity (O'Connor, 2019; Villar, 2019). Similar processes have been documented in post-conciliar Europe (Villar, 2019), in the Philippines, where Marian piety has been reconfigured within urban modernity (Sapitula, 2014), and in Bougainville, where Marian devotion acquires meaning through indigenous cosmology and sacred landscapes (Hermkens, 2026). Likewise, Marian shrines in the United States demonstrate how devotional practices continually negotiate Catholic identity through place, ritual, and community (Dugan & Park, 2024). The Mollo experience enriches this growing body of scholarship by demonstrating that Marian devotion may also function as a theological language through which indigenous communities integrate women's dignity, ecological stewardship, and communal identity within a coherent horizon of faith.

The experiences of the Mollo women further contribute to contemporary debates on Marian theology and gender. While feminist scholarship has questioned Marian interpretations that reinforce passive ideals of femininity, it has also recognised Marian devotion as a potential space for women's agency and theological creativity (Maunder, 2019). The present study supports this latter perspective. Rather than rejecting Catholic tradition, the women of Mollo reinterpret Marian symbolism through their own lived experiences of nurturing families, safeguarding customary values, and protecting the environment. Their interpretations demonstrate that Marian devotion remains a living theological tradition capable of generating new meanings without abandoning its doctrinal foundations.

Viewed more broadly, these findings suggest that contextual Mariology should not be understood simply as an academic project or a strategy of cultural adaptation. Instead, it represents an ongoing ecclesial process through which Catholic faith enters into creative dialogue with local wisdom. The Mollo experience demonstrates that authentic inculturation does not replace Christian symbols with indigenous ones; rather, it allows inherited theological traditions to acquire renewed significance through the symbolic universe of local communities. This interpretation resonates with Chambon's (2025) understanding of Asian Catholicism as a lived and material religion in which faith is embodied through practices, spaces, objects, and social relationships as much as through doctrine and liturgy.

The Mollo experience resonates with broader Catholic engagements with indigenous communities documented in the context of the Amazon Synod, where integral ecology has been operationalised through sustained dialogue between ecclesial tradition and indigenous cosmologies (Deneulin, 2021). The findings also offer a constructive model for the development of contextual Mariology in Indonesia. Three interrelated principles emerge from the Mollo experience. First, Marian symbolism becomes pastorally meaningful when it engages constructively with local cosmologies rather than remaining detached from believers' cultural realities. Secondly, contextual Mariology requires sustained dialogue between Catholic tradition and indigenous wisdom so that theological meaning develops through mutual engagement rather than cultural accommodation alone. Thirdly, the lived experiences of local communities should be recognised as legitimate theological resources because they reveal how faith is interpreted, embodied, and transmitted within everyday life. Together, these principles demonstrate that contextual Mariology may remain faithful to Catholic orthodoxy while responding creatively to Indonesia's diverse cultural and ecological contexts.

The transformative character of this model also deserves particular attention. The reinterpretation of Marian devotion observed in the Mollo community does not seek symbolic rupture or theological

innovation for its own sake. Instead, it promotes gradual transformation through everyday devotional practice. Prayer, pilgrimage, weaving traditions, and communal reflection become interconnected practices through which unequal relationships are reconsidered, particularly those affecting women and the natural environment. Marian devotion functions as a locus for renewing relationships rather than merely preserving inherited religious customs.

These findings carry important pastoral implications for the Indonesian Catholic Church. First, they highlight the importance of developing contextually grounded theological formation in which Scripture, Catholic social teaching, and local cosmologies are integrated within a coherent process of faith formation. Such an approach enables believers to understand faith not as an abstract doctrinal system but as a moral orientation guiding everyday decisions and communal responsibilities. This perspective also reflects the contemporary emphasis on synodality, which recognises attentive listening to the experiences of the faithful as an essential dimension of ecclesial discernment (Anthony, 2023). Such an approach requires what Anthony (2022) describes as intercultural theology competence the capacity to hold in creative tension the particular wisdom of local communities and the universal claims of Christian tradition. This relational dimension corresponds with recent scholarship on Asian Catholic communities, demonstrating that ecological responsibility develops most authentically through a spirituality of relation connecting prayer, communal identity, and care for creation (Chambon, 2025).

Secondly, the study underscores the value of an incarnational approach to liturgy. Local cultural expressions, including woven textiles, ecological symbols, and customary narratives, may enrich Marian celebrations when interpreted analogically and integrated in ways that remain faithful to Catholic teaching. Such integration should not be regarded merely as cultural aesthetics but as a theological pedagogy that enables believers to encounter the Gospel through the symbolic language of their own communities.

Thirdly, the Mollo experience supports a pastoral model grounded in action and reflection. The integration of prayer, theological reflection, and socio-ecological engagement demonstrates that Marian devotion need not remain confined to personal spirituality. Instead, it becomes a sustained communal practice through which contemplation and action mutually reinforce one another. Similar patterns have been observed in Catholic communities where ecological commitment develops most effectively through the interaction of spiritual formation and collective action (Ojeifo, 2025; Turina, 2024). At the same time, the findings suggest that ongoing theological dialogue among local communities, catechists, and Church leaders remains essential to ensure that contextual reinterpretations continue to develop in communion with the universal Church while avoiding both theological reductionism and uncritical syncretism.

Beyond its pastoral significance, this study also contributes to contemporary scholarship on contextual theology and lived religion. Theoretically, it demonstrates the analytical complementarity of Thomistic personalism, contextual feminist hermeneutics, and ecofeminism in explaining Marian devotion as a relational religious praxis. Methodologically, it illustrates how reflective ethnography captures the dynamic processes through which devotional meanings emerge within domestic spaces, sacred landscapes, and ecclesial communities. Empirically, the articulation of *Nai Mnuke* represents the principal originality of the study. Rather than describing a local Marian title, the concept explains how Catholic Mariology and Mollo relational cosmology converge to produce a contextual theological language that connects care for land, women's dignity, and communal wellbeing within a shared horizon of faith. The Mollo experience, therefore, extends beyond a local case study by demonstrating how Marian devotion may serve as a constructive resource for contextual theology, socio-ecological transformation, and the ongoing development of Mariology in Indonesia.

9. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that Marian devotion within the Mollo community constitutes a relational and transformative praxis of faith rather than merely an expression of ritual observance or private piety. Through reflective ethnography, the study reveals that Marian devotion functions as a lived religious practice through which believers cultivate moral agency, renew communal relationships, and develop ecological responsibility. The findings affirm that Marian devotion serves

as a formative space where Catholic faith, social life, and care for creation converge within the everyday experiences of the Mollo community.

The study further shows that the reinterpretation of Marian devotion emerges through the active participation of Mollo women, who negotiate inherited devotional traditions in dialogue with their lived experiences, indigenous cosmology, and contemporary socio-ecological challenges. This process culminates in the articulation of *Nai Mnuke* as a contextual theological construct integrating Catholic Mariology, the Mollo people's relational worldview, and ecological consciousness. Rather than diminishing Catholic orthodoxy, this contextual reinterpretation demonstrates how Marian devotion may deepen ecclesial faithfulness while remaining culturally meaningful and socially transformative.

These findings contribute to the development of contextual Mariology in Indonesia by demonstrating that Marian devotion may be understood as a dynamic religious praxis that bridges spirituality, gender justice, and ecological stewardship. The study also illustrates the value of integrating Thomistic personalism, contextual feminist hermeneutics, and ecofeminism within a reflective ethnographic approach to examine lived religion in indigenous communities. Collectively, these contributions expand contemporary discussions of contextual theology by showing how faith traditions can engage creatively with local cultures while maintaining theological integrity.

Several limitations should nevertheless be acknowledged. The study focuses on a single indigenous Catholic community whose cultural and devotional traditions cannot be generalised uncritically to other contexts. Although triangulation, peer debriefing, and reflexive field practices enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings, the interpretations remain shaped by the particular social, cultural, and ecclesial setting of the Mollo community. Future research should undertake comparative studies across indigenous Catholic communities in Indonesia and Southeast Asia to examine how Marian devotion interacts with diverse local cosmologies and contributes to women's agency, ecological ethics, and contextual theological development. Such investigations would further strengthen the growing field of contextual Mariology while deepening understanding of the relationship between faith, culture, and socio-ecological transformation.

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