

Christmas Tree: Ritual, Globalization, and Ocean Preservation in Tanimbar Island

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the entanglement of ritual practice, globalization, and indigenous ecological ethics through the unique case of Christmas tree performances in Tanimbar Island, Eastern Indonesia. While the Christmas tree originates as a European Christian cultural invention, its arrival in Tanimbar—mediated by Dutch missionaries—generates a radically different mode of ritualization and ecological engagement. Drawing on autoethnographic fieldwork, this study identifies three key dynamics: (1) the Christianization and emotionalization of the Christmas tree as a liturgical symbol; (2) the community's deliberate rejection of industrial and plastic Christmas trees associated with global markets; and (3) the use of mangrove trees (Tongke) as Christmas trees framed within local cosmology, SASI customary law, and oceanic ecological ethics. The findings demonstrate that Tanimbar communities situate Christmas not merely as a religious ritual but as a negotiation of identity, ecological stewardship, and resistance to global debates on religion, ecology, and indigenous knowledge by demonstrating how Christian rituals are reindigenized, ocean-centered, and ecologically restorative.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Christmas tree, globally recognized as a symbol of Christian festivity, is historically rooted in European ritual innovations dating back to the 15th century [1], [2]. Yet its circulation across missionary networks reveals a longstanding pattern in the globalization of Christian material culture. In most parts of the world, Christmas trees are imported—symbolically and literally—from Western imaginaries, industrial production, and global consumerism.

However, in Tanimbar Island, the Christmas tree is not taken from the forest as

in European tradition, but from the ocean—specifically the mangrove ecosystem. This distinctive practice generates profound anthropological, theological, and ecological questions. What does it mean when a community transforms a Western ritual symbol into an oceanic, indigenous, and ecological medium? How does this rearticulation challenge global Christian norms? And how do ritual performances become a site for expressing ecological ethics and resisting capitalist homogenization?

This article responds to these questions by situating the Tanimbar Christmas tree within broader debates on

religion and ecology, globalization, indigenous knowledge, and the politics of ritual materiality.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Christianity, Nature, and the Question of Sacred Space*

Scholars argue that Christian cosmology—especially its desacralization of landscapes—has historically rendered nature “available” for human exploitation [3]. Christian universalism often displaced local cosmologies that sacralized forests, rivers, or oceans. Within this logic, the Christmas tree emerges not from biblical mandate but from European cultural adaptation, turning nature into symbolic ornamentation.

[4] critiques modernity’s tendency to treat nature as object, quantity, and raw material—a perspective reinforced by Enlightenment rationality. [5] extend this critique, noting that modernity reduces both nature and ritual into manipulable commodities.

2.2 *Globalization of Religion and Material Culture*

Global Christianity frequently circulates through ritual objects—icons, liturgies, music, architecture—producing what [6] names the “global interpenetration of the sacred.” Christmas trees are part of this global religious economy, where European Christian aesthetics become standardized symbols of festive identity [7]. Yet globalization also triggers counter-movements: local communities reinterpret, hybridize, or resist global religious forms, producing what [3] calls “parochial ecology”—a rooted, place-centered religious ethic.2.3 Indigenous Ecologies and SASI.

Indigenous communities in Eastern Indonesia maintain SASI, a customary regulation prohibiting the extraction of natural resources during designated periods. SASI blends social contract, cosmology, and ecological management [8]. It frames nature not as resource but as kin, agent, and moral

subject. In this article, SASI is central to understanding why mangrove trees—protected by customary law—are used only once annually and with ritual permission.

3. METHODS

This study employs autoethnography [9] to explore the meaning-making processes embedded in Christmas rituals in Tanimbar Island. Autoethnography is used for three reasons:

1. Insider Perspective – The author participates directly in the Christmas rituals, enabling thick description and cultural critique.
2. Reflexivity – The method examines intersections of personal experience, communal memory, and broader socio-religious structures.
3. Ethnographic Depth – It captures emotional, symbolic, and ecological dimensions often inaccessible to conventional objectivist methods. The analysis integrates field notes, ritual observations, oral histories, and dialogues with church leaders and customary elders.

4. RESULT AND FINDING

4.1 *Christmas Tree in the Age of Globalization*

Globalization expands the distribution of Christmas aesthetics, creating a standardized European-Christian imaginary across continents. Commercial plastic trees—in malls, churches, and homes—exemplify the commodification of religious symbols. In Indonesia, these trees dominate Christmas displays, reflecting urban consumerism and prestige culture. However, Tanimbar communities resist this global narrative. They refuse imported plastic trees and industrial pine replicas, perceiving them as: ecologically destructive, culturally alien, and symbols of capitalist ritualization.

Instead, they emphasize local materiality—the mangrove—thereby

challenging the homogenization of Christian ritual practice.

This resistance aligns with [10] argument that globalization is not inherently Western but becomes hegemonic when particular histories dominate others. Tanimbar's reinterpretation exemplifies "reverse globalization," where local cosmologies reshape Christian symbols.

4.2 *Modernity vs. Local Ecological Knowledge*

a. **Enlightenment Reason and the Objectification of Nature**

Modernity's rationalization turns nature into object, resource, and commodity. The Western Christmas tree tradition, as domesticated ornament, reflects this transformed relationship: nature becomes symbolic décor.

[11] argues that the category "nature" itself emerges from Western philosophical abstraction, separating humans from ecological entanglement. This separation fuels ecological crisis.

b. **Tanimbar: Ritual as Ecological Counter-Narrative**

In Wermatang, Marantutul, and Batuputih villages, the Christmas tree—Tongke (mangrove)—reflects the people's marine identity. The mangrove is not ornament; it is ecological kin. Its presence in church generates two theological movements:

1. Church as "Common Home"
The mangrove brings the ocean into the sanctuary, dissolving boundaries between sacred space and ecological space. The church becomes a relational home for both humans and non-humans.
2. Reframing the Sea from Threat to Blessing
Ocean-centered ritual challenges older Christian pedagogies that depict the

sea as chaos or threat. The Christmas tree becomes a liturgical affirmation of the ocean as life-giver, protector, and kin.

c. **The Ocean as a Person**

For Tanimbar communities, the ocean is not object but personhood—a being with agency, memory, and moral weight. Children learn to swim and navigate early, cultivating a relational oceanic identity. Mangrove ecosystems protect the shoreline and sustain fisheries; thus, to cut a mangrove is to wound a family member.

Through SASI, the ocean speaks, commands, and disciplines. The ocean is a subject within the moral order. This aligns with [12] call for ecological humility and Bonaventuran spirituality, which views creation as sibling rather than resource.

In contrast to Western Christian tendencies to desacralize nature, Tanimbar communities re-enchant Christianity through indigenous ecological ethics.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the Christmas tree in Tanimbar Island is not a passive adoption of global Christian tradition but an active site of negotiation between ritual, ecology, and identity. Three conclusions emerge:

Firstly. The Christmas tree is a cultural invention, not a biblical mandate, and its global circulation often homogenizes Christian practice.

Secondly. Tanimbar communities reject global standardization by adapting Christmas rituals to local ecological realities through mangrove trees and SASI.

Thirdly. Indigenous ecological ethics reshape Christian ritual, producing an ocean-centered theology and a model of contextual Christianity grounded in ecological stewardship.

These findings contribute to global debates on religion and ecology by demonstrating how indigenous knowledge

can transform Christian traditions toward a more sustainable, relational, and place-based spirituality.

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