

For Church or People: The History of Land Dispute in Sikka Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province from the Perspective of Tana' Ai Community

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ABSTRACT

This study employs a political ecology approach to analyze the dynamics of land ownership in Indonesia, focusing on the Tana' Ai community in Sikka Regency, East Nusa Tenggara province. We argue that agrarian change is driven by external actors, including private companies that religious institutions and government agencies own. The latter often impose their will on indigenous populations, which can result in land conflicts, marginalization, and uneven capital accumulation. In particular, the church's status as a land use permit holder from the colonial era complicates the Tana' Ai ethnic community's ability to assert its ancestral land rights. To understand this further, this study examines the interactions between the church, local communities, and the state in land management and their impact on the dynamics of power and resistance of ethnic Tana' Ai communities to social and policy change. We ask, is land managed by the community or the church? The research contributes to the growing body of literature. It fills a significant gap on land disputes in Indonesia, which also appear to be conducted by religious institutions, and the long-term impacts of such conflicts on indigenous societies. We used qualitative methods, including interviews, participant observation, and archival analysis, across 3 villages in Sikka Regency. This understanding is crucial for addressing the socio-political and cultural challenges the Tana' Ai community faces in reclaiming their land rights and ensuring their sustainable livelihoods.

KEYWORDS

Political ecology; Land dispute; Tana' Ai community; Religious institution; Capital accumulation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Land disputes are deeply embedded in Indonesia's history of agrarian change, especially in areas where customary land rights clash with external authorities, such as religious institutions and the state. In the case of the Tana' Ai ethnic community in Sikka Regency, the narrative of land disputes has been shaped by a complex interplay between customary traditions, colonial legacies, and modern legal frameworks. At the heart of these conflicts is the Catholic Church, which has played an important role not only in the spiritual life of the local community but also in shaping the land tenure system in the region (Basyir, 2006; Kian et al., 2018; Kuipers & Fox, 1997).

Land conflicts in Sikka District, particularly about the former Cultivation Rights Title (HGU) in Nangahale, have a complex history rooted in colonial practices and ongoing disputes over land rights. The conflict primarily involves indigenous Tana' Ai ethnic communities asserting their ancestral claims to the land against various corporate interests that have managed the area since colonial times. The land conflict at the former Nangahale HGU involves the indigenous Tana' Ai ethnic community, particularly the Soge and Goban tribes, with PT Krisrama. This company previously managed the land. The conflict is rooted in different claims and historical interests over

the land, which the indigenous people consider their ancestral territory. At the same time, PT Krisrama views it as a valuable economic asset.

There have been several previous studies on the history of land disputes. These studies have focused on tensions between local communities and religious institutions over land rights (Basyir, 2006; Kian et al., 2018; Kuipers & Fox, 1997; Lewis, 1998; Lewis, 1989a). In the Sikka district, conflicts often revolve around contested boundaries between communal and church-owned land. The Tana' Ai Ethnicity has been the subject of limited detailed analysis regarding land disputes in the Sikka Regency despite previous studies addressing this issue (Prior, 2013; Jon et al., 2023). Notably, these studies lack a focus on the historical and contemporary perspectives of the Tana' Ai community and do not examine the role of religious institutions, specifically the Catholic Church, in land accumulation for profit.

This research highlights long-standing grievances in indigenous communities such as Tana' Ai. A political ecology perspective of agrarian change as a political ecology framework is applied to examine how agrarian reform policies and social forestry programs affect land tenure. Peluso's (2018) and Bryant (2021) study examines how external actors interact with indigenous communities, such as state institutions, churches, and private companies. The studies reveal how local communities navigate these shifting power dynamics to maintain access to land.

Prior (2013) asserts that the Catholic Church in Eastern Indonesia emerged as one of the preeminent landowners throughout the colonial period. This history currently affects land disputes, particularly in regions like Sikka District, where communal (customary) land rights frequently clash with ecclesiastical claims.

The Tana' Ai indigenous community, residing in eastern Flores, NTT, possesses a profound cultural and spiritual bond with their territory, forests, and forebears. Their designation, "Tana' Ai," denotes this connection, as "Tana'" translates to land and "Ai" translates to tree. Historically, they delineated their area through leaders like Sugi Sao, whose legacy influences their tribe identity, with the Soge and Goban being the most prominent. Notwithstanding land disputes stemming from colonisation and government-imposed forest regulations, the Tana' Ai persist in their traditional rituals and changing farming practices grounded in indigenous knowledge. Sacred sites, traditional dwellings, and the Prohibition Forest are significant symbols of identity and spirituality, indicating their dedication to safeguarding ancestral heritage and sustainable livelihoods.

The Tana' Ai ethnic community's unique position between religious loyalty and economic needs creates a complex landscape for land rights negotiations. Customary law and land tenure, a study of customary governance systems, illustrates the importance of customary law in mediating land disputes (Forth, 2019). This analysis shows that the customs of the Tana' Ai ethnic community are often overridden in favor of state law, a tension that is exacerbated by church claims.

Several previous studies have shown that churches can participate in patterns of land grabbing through partnerships with the state or private companies, especially in the Global South. Case examples in Latin America and Africa highlight how religious institutions and other economic actors claim land for investment or conservation purposes, sometimes under the guise of development or public service. In Guatemala, for example, land grabs in the Polochic Valley were driven by a combination of agribusiness investment and interference by state actors, resulting in the forced displacement of indigenous Maya-Q'eqchi communities. Churches often play a complex role in such cases, both as mediators of conflict and beneficiaries of legal and illegal land grabs, which are linked to the capitalization of land for further development (Borras et al., 2018; Borras & Franco, 2011; Franco et al., 2013).

How churches engage in capital accumulation can vary; in Uganda, churches claim land based on concepts of ownership linked to community and colonial history. Churches there engage in business activities that utilize their land, leading to greater land control, capital accumulation, and long-standing conflicts with communities. Customary landowners are dissatisfied with whether the church only has usage rights or full land ownership. This creates tension and harms local communities who feel their rights are being ignored (Alava & Shroff, 2019).

So, in general, church land tenure can lead to the accumulation of capital to the detriment of communities through the transformation of ownership relations, association with businesses, use of land for development, and contentious restitution processes (Alava & Shroff, 2019; Havlíček, 2018; Reidy, 2024).

Although several studies have touched on land disputes in Sikka district, few have provided detailed analysis focusing on the historical and contemporary perspectives of the Tana' Ai ethnic community. Most studies have focused on the short-term outcomes of land reform and social forestry programs. However, few have examined the long-term socio-economic and cultural impacts, particularly how the Tana' Ai ethnic community has adapted to or resisted these changes. The evolving role of the Catholic Church in agrarian disputes has generally been well studied. However, it does not explain how church ownership and influence evolved after 2000, particularly in the Sikka district.

A historical overview of land tenure in Indonesia suggests that the country's land tenure system is a product of colonialism, where colonial rulers, religious institutions, and the state often appropriated large tracts of land. According to (Prior, 2013), the Catholic Church in Eastern Indonesia was one of the largest landowners during the colonial era. This legacy continues to influence land disputes today, especially in areas such as Sikka District, where communal (*adat*) land rights often conflict with church claims.

The political ecology of the agrarian change approach serves as a framework for analyzing power dynamics related to land ownership (Blaikie, 1999). This perspective emphasizes the interplay between power, society, and the environment, highlighting how power influences access to and control over resources. Examining power relations encompasses the interactions among state actors, churches, indigenous populations, and economic entities framed through the lenses of conflict and accommodation. This analysis is historically significant for understanding the ongoing impacts of colonialism, privatization, and nationalization on agrarian inequality. Additionally, it highlights perspectives that illustrate the marginalization yet persistence of indigenous peoples' conflicts and resilience, as they uphold their customary rights and value systems (Robbins, 2012; Bryant et al., 1997; Peluso & Watt, 2001). Bryant (2021) and Peluso (2018) contend that external actors, such as state institutions, private companies, and religious organizations influence agrarian change in Indonesia. These actors frequently exert influence over indigenous communities, resulting in land conflicts that contribute to marginalization and dispossession. The church's status as a landowner in Sikka complicates the community's efforts to secure rights to their ancestral lands.

The theory used in analyzing this case study is the theory of land ownership and communal identity, as the church often claims land based on colonial history and religious missions, while from the perspective of indigenous peoples based on the view that land is an integral part of their identity and cultural sustainability (Alava & Shroff, 2019; Northcott, 2012). Human rights and social justice theories are also used to see that denial of indigenous peoples' rights to their land is often at the root of human rights violations and intra-state tensions, so conflict resolution requires recognition and

strengthening of indigenous rights through fair legal and administrative mechanisms (Hidayah & Al-Fatih, 2019; Northcott, 2012).

Sociological theories provide insights into land conflicts' social, political, and economic dimensions, while anthropological theories emphasize land's cultural, spiritual, and environmental significance to indigenous communities. These theories can contribute to understanding the dynamics of conflicts between religious institutions and indigenous communities over land ownership, shedding light on the complex interplay of legal, cultural, and political discourses in delivering or denying indigenous peoples' rights to their traditional territories (Howitt, 2009).

This paper uses a political ecology approach to examine the history of the former HGU land dispute in Sikka Regency from the perspective of the Tana' Ai ethnic community. Specifically, this paper will examine the research question of how the interaction between the church, indigenous people, and the state in land management affects the power dynamics and resistance of the Tana' Ai ethnic community to social and policy changes that occur.

Focusing on the Tana' Ai ethnic community, this research contributes to the growing literature on land disputes in Indonesia while filling a critical gap in understanding the long-term impacts of such land conflicts on indigenous peoples. The research provides a detailed and localized case study of Tana' Ai villages, their historical relationship with the church, and the consequences of these dynamics for their livelihoods.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative methodology with a case study analysis to explore the perspectives of the Tana' Ai ethnic community on land disputes in the Sikka Regency. Semi-structured interviews were collected using snowball sampling with local community leaders (Soge Tribe chief, Tana Puan Soge Tribe, Soge Tribe members, Goban Tribe chief, Tana Puan Goban Tribe), church representatives (Director of PT. Krisrama-Romo Allo, Romo Yan), and government officials (Tua Bao Village Chief, Runut Village Secretary, and Nanghale Village Chief), CSOs (Chairman of AMAN Eastern Flores, John Balla), field observations, literature studies and archival document reviews were also conducted to trace the history of land transfers between the church and the community. Field observations and interviews were conducted from March 2024 to September 2024. The field study visited three locations: Tua Bao Village, Waiblama Sub-district, Runut Village, Waigete Sub-district, and Nanghale Village, Talibura Sub-district. Tua Bao Village is the location of the Soge tribe, Runut Village is the location of the Goban tribe, and Nanghale Village is the location of the ex-HGU conflict land on the coast.

Informed by political ecology, our analysis contextualizes power relations between Tana' Ai households, the church, CSOs, and the state. This approach allows for a holistic examination of how land disputes relate to broader socio-political and environmental dynamics in Sikka District. This research describes the phenomenon of conflict over agrarian resources by various actors with diverse interests. The analysis was done through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing cyclically and interactively. Data reduction was done to sort and abstract data during data collection. Data was presented as field notes, charts, and matrices text narratives. Meanwhile, conclusion drawing and verification present patterns and causal flow and build several propositions while remaining open and skeptical. This process was repeated until a conclusion was found to answer our proposed research questions (Sitorus, 1998).

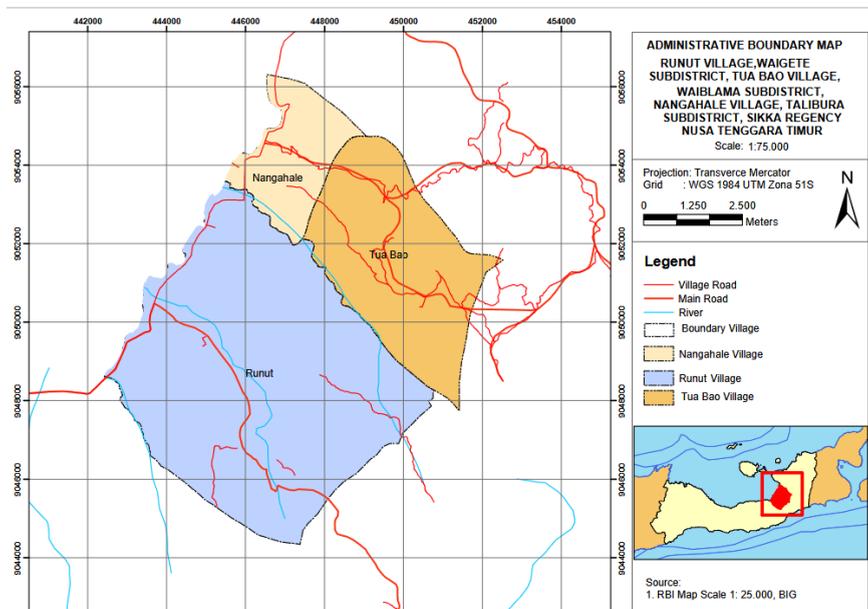


Figure 1. Location Runut, Tua Bao and Nanghale Village, Sikka Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province

3. RESULTS

3.1 Who are the Indigenous people of Tana' Ai Ethnicity?

The indigenous people of Tana' Ai inhabit the area from Wodong, Wae Hekang up to the south coast, and from Talibura to Boru Kojang to Patiahu. Over time and the occupation of outside communities, the Tana' Ai indigenous territory is better known from the border of Talibura (Pedan River) to the West to Hito Halok Patiahu, from the north coast along the area until it goes up in the Egon Illin Medo mountains to the south coast. The Tana' Ai people have inhabited and spread in this area for generations. Tana' Ai itself comes from the word Tana' meaning land, and Ai is a tree, and means that the Tana' Ai indigenous people interpret their existence as closely dependent on the land, trees, forests and their ancestors. The Tana' Ai indigenous people also believe in the power of the Supreme Being as the one who created and regulates their lives so that their way of life is very attached and gives high respect to these values as outlined in traditional poetry and traditional rituals that are carried out until now.

It is said that the control of the customary area began long before the Dutch colonizers came to the place. It was controlled by a man named Sugi Sao and his wife named Tuwaeli Enina, who came from Siam Malacca. The name Sugi eventually became the name of one of the largest tribes of the Tana' Ai people, the Soge Tribe. Sugi Sao sailed and arrived at a beach, stuck a kris into the ground, and named the area Pedan/Sungai Pedan (Talibura). There is a traditional poem that recounts the event. After that, Sugi Sao walked around the area to see if there were already people living there as a code/sign that the place had no right to be lived in because someone already owned it. Finally, Sugi Sao established an empty area as the extent of his control area, bordering Magelaja, Likong, and Wae Kolong from the north coast to the south coast. Sugi Sao finally built the first house known as Liri Watu (Liri = Pole; Watu = Stone) and lived there. Until now, this Liri Watu still exists.

Changes occurred when the Dutch colonials came and occupied the land and expelled the indigenous people through propaganda as a mosquito breeding area and others. The community finally moved to run up the mountains until they reached Lebu Labang (Wuta Detun) and built a traditional house (Lebu Labang) there. To this day, the traditional house still exists; it is a symbol of culture, identity, and spirituality, a place to perform various rituals, store heirlooms, and house the spirits of ancestors, which are only opened on special traditional occasions. The Tana' Ai indigenous people had children and grandchildren and lived spread out in the area until now.

The Tana' Ai has customary structures and systems that are still maintained today. Some of the customary positions that are widely recognized are Tana Puan and Tribal Chief. The Tana' Ai indigenous community is a collection of indigenous people from various tribes due to a history of inter-tribal marriages. The two largest tribes are the Soge Tribe and the Goban Tribe, while the other tribes are smaller and are commonly referred to as tribal children of the two large tribes. In addition to having a traditional house, the Tana' Ai community also has a Prohibition Forest as a traditional ritual center located in a hilly forest (Pal 32) far from the villages. The indigenous community still maintains and carries out obedience to customary rules/principles and various customary rituals. The Tana' Ai believe that land is not only material but also immaterial as a symbol of their existence as an indigenous community that preserves and respects ancestors and is obliged to pass it on to future generations. The loss of land ownership in the state forest area, as well as the displacement of the Tana' Ai indigenous people to the location of the former HGU PT DIAG / PT Krisrama, did not change their ritual activities, so traditional rituals continue to be carried out in the upper and lower villages in several nuba (traditional rite places) that still exist.

Therefore, the Tana' Ai indigenous people depend on the existence of their land and forests for their livelihoods as farmers. Using a shifting cultivation system, Tana' Ai communities apply local wisdom to the cultivation system, such as knowing the limits, time, and fertility of their land, so they have a knowledge system about when to stay and when to move with a pattern of opening, closing, and reopening. Since their ancestors, most of their gardens or fields have been in the forest through several processing stages, namely land clearing, land burning (burning bushes and trees to increase soil fertility), planting, and harvesting, carried out collectively and alternately. The Tana' Ai people recognize two types of plants: annual and seasonal. Annual crops are perennials such as Candlenut, Mente, Cocoa, Mahogany, Teak, and Tamarind. Meanwhile, seasonal crops such as rice, corn, and sweet potatoes fulfill daily food needs and are grown in gardens in the forest. However, over time, open and closed gardens can no longer be done in the forest due to the state's territorialization of forest areas. As a result, the Tana' Ai households began to work on land outside the forest area, namely on owned land and borrowed land.

3.2 The origins of the church's role in agrarian disputes in Tana' Ai

The Tana' Ai ethnic community, like many other indigenous groups in Indonesia, operates under a customary land tenure system where land is collectively owned and managed. However, the land ownership of the Catholic Church in Sikka District has been a source of contention. Historically, the colonial government often granted church land, sometimes without the full consent of the local community. Today, the church's role as a spiritual and economic entity complicates its relationship with the Tana' Ai community. For many, the church's claim to land symbolizes an external force that continues to undermine local autonomy. The Tana' Ai community is currently in an agrarian dispute with the church (formerly the Diocese of Ende but now the Diocese of

Maumere, since 2005), which has been using land claimed as their customary land since 1926 in the form of coconut plantations.

Tana' Ai communities have oral histories whose narratives derive from the inspiration of ancestors as well as traditional rites, ancestral graves, ceremonial altars, and other ritual markers (Kami, 2023; Lewis, 1989b; Maria, 2018; Olivia et al., 2022). These artifacts and rites were indeed found within the HGU plantation area. In addition, there are also clumps of trees on the north coast, such as coconut, tamarind, palm, and mango, which are also included in the Tana' Ai claim.

The Soge mention that they are the oldest and the first of the 22 Tana' Ai tribes to arrive in Flores.

"We have various stone altars where we celebrate annual cleansing rituals, fertility rituals, and good harvests, and even once celebrated a war victory. The church and the government used to ban traditional rituals, but we still performed them in secret because we were also afraid of being labeled 'infidels.' However, now we do not care anymore about being labeled 'infidels' or 'trespassers.'" (Soge tribe leader).

According to the community, King Nai Roa of Sikka had forced the Soge tribe up the mountain inland because the land in Nanghale (coastal) was unhealthy. There was malaria and frequent flooding, so the community finally went up into the hills. However, by the time the ancestors had ascended, the coastal area they had left behind had been turned into a cotton plantation by King Nai Roa, who had leased 1,483 hectares of land to a private Dutch company in 1912. This angered the community, and they came down to burn down the cotton plantation, which stopped operating in 1915-1916. However, the commodity on the land later changed to coconuts, and in 1926, the company sold the plantation to the Vicariate Apostolic of the Lesser Sunda Islands for £22,500. Since then, the church has controlled the land known as the Nanghale Mission Plantation.

With the independence of the Republic of Indonesia in 1945 and the birth of the Basic Agrarian Law No.5 of 1960, colonial land rights were nationalized into land rights according to Indonesian law. Therefore, Hak Sewa/Hak Erfpacht became Hak Guna Usaha (HGU). In 1956, the Apostolic Vicariate of Ende wrote to the Sikka Swapraja government to return part of the Nanghale concession of 783 hectares, so since that year, the HGU of the Mission plantation in Nanghale has become ± 700 hectares.

In 1979, based on Presidential Decree No. 32 of 1979, the status of the Nanghale Mission Plantation was upgraded to a Limited Liability Company (PT) in January 1989 with an area of 879 hectares, and the Mission Plantation became HGU PT DIAG Nanghale. PT DIAG is a company owned by the Archdiocese of Ende, which is engaged in coconut plantations and is based at the Catholic Church Stasi Nanghale, Talibura District.

In 1992, the HGU land area changed again, as 29 hectares were handed over to settle earthquake and tsunami victims. The diocese also leased one hectare of land to a private pearl cultivation company and 15 hectares to the Sikka Regency Plantation Office for a laboratory for hybrid coconut cultivation. The diocese also provided land to build permanent houses and gardens for their permanent workers and their families, mostly from the Bajawa area, now known as Kampung Baru.

On April 21, 2007, PT DIAG's HGU area was transferred or changed to PT Kristus Raja Maumere (PT Krisrama) with the same domicile and continued to carry out company activities to harvest coconuts in all of PT DIAG's ex-HGU land area as well as providing security on the plantation land. With the expiration of the HGU in 2013, according to PP No.40 of 1996 and Permen ATR No.7 of 2017, the ex-HGU land should return to state land under the control of the Ministry of ATR/BPN.

The four primary dimensions in the aforementioned findings encompass the colonial legacy, which illustrates a coerced disposition that established a hierarchy of power rooted in colonial institutions and religious frameworks, resulting in enduring structural inequalities that persist today. Secondly, how post-independence nationalisation marginalised indigenous narratives reveals a significant accommodation of formal institutions, such as the church, thereby illustrating the state's preference for "modern" institutions over indigenous systems, which were deemed legally invalid. Third, the church's privatization of the HGU positions is not merely as a spiritual entity but also as a capitalist participant that engages customary land for capital accumulation. The transformation of land into a commodified economic asset alters its social value, exacerbating the marginalisation experienced by indigenous peoples. The ongoing adherence of Tana' Ai to traditional rituals and practices on former HGU territory manifests resistance grounded in customary and spiritual principles. This reflects a profound struggle for identity and cultural sustainability in the face of modernization's encroachments. Fourth, it elucidates the mechanisms of exclusion and accommodation, highlighting exclusion when the state and church disregard genealogical narratives and customary rights. In contrast, a measure of accommodation is evident in land allocation for victims of natural disasters or permanent workers.

3.3 Chronology of the ongoing land dispute

3.3.1 Period 2000-2012

Between 2003-2004, the Utan Wair indigenous community in Sikka Regency was relocated from Kokan Wukon to Ojang under the insistence of PT DIAG and the local government, with 112 families initially occupying 25 x 30 meters of land per family. The land conflict arose when, on December 20, 2013, and February 1, 2014, the community stopped the measurement of the Cultivation Rights Title (HGU) land by BPN Sikka, claiming that the land had been seized since 1912. From a customary perspective, this action was considered an attempt to restore traditional rights and customary rites that had been lost. However, the government and the Church viewed it as manipulating adat for personal gain. A dualism of narratives emerged: the general public perceived the land as common property but utilized by the adat elite, while the elders claimed that their struggle was in collective interest. This tension caused the struggle of the Goban and Soge communities to stall because there was no unity of vision among themselves.

3.3.2 Period 2013-2016

PT Krisrama's application for HGU renewal in November 2013 was stalled due to objections from the Tana' Ai indigenous community, particularly the Goban and Soge tribes. On August 9, 2014, around 250 residents from several hamlets simultaneously occupied PT DIAG's ex-HGU land, claiming that the land was their ancestral customary land, the HGU contract had expired, and the limited land in the village made it difficult for them to survive. The community's disappointment grew as the refugees of Pulau Babi Kecil were given land certificates, while the Tana' Ai community felt their land rights were ignored. After occupying the land, the indigenous community divided the land according to the Tana Puan mandate, set up huts, and began to open gardens to grow crops.

Protests continued, and on November 5, 2015, indigenous representatives reported to the Ministry of ATR/BPN. Although BPN postponed granting HGU rights to PT Krisrama, the conflict continued. A mediation dialogue in May 2016 resulted in recommendations to regulate land use and create customary maps. However, the dispute deepened as indigenous tribes were accused of encroaching on state land and

declared not part of the Tana' Ai ethnicity. Komnas HAM eventually mediated the conflict, and the Sikka Regent issued a decree requiring the formation of an identification and verification team. However, the decision was not realized because the local government never formed the promised team, prolonging the uncertainty of resolving the problem.

3.3.3 Period 2020-2022

On April 6, 2020, the Sikka Regent issued Regent Decree No. 134/HK/2021 to form an Integrated Team to resolve the Nangahale ex-HGU land conflict. The team was tasked with identifying and inventorying problems, involving representatives of the government and PT Krisrama, but without direct representation of indigenous peoples in the team. At the socialization in Hitohalok and Nangahale, indigenous people were asked to be resource persons, not decision-makers, even though the land conflict was directly related to them. Initial plans included the creation of an existing map to negotiate land allocations between HGU blocks, indigenous communities, conservation and state reserve lands.

However, the negotiation process did not go smoothly. Tensions peaked when the indigenous community was disappointed with the land allocation of only 92 hectares. In comparison, the HGU block received 302 hectares, which was later increased to 380 hectares after a visit by the Regent and Bishop to ATR/BPN. The community also refused to move from the location they were occupying. Tensions worsened when PT Krisrama installed land boundary pillars with police and Indonesian National Army (TNI) escorts, but they were met with strong resistance. The protest culminated in the removal of the pillars and their handover to the Regent as a symbol of resistance, showing the indigenous people's dissatisfaction with the unilateral decision of the government and the company.

3.3.4 Period 2022-2024

In early 2024, the Tana' Ai community heard that 10 new HGU certificates had been issued to PT Krisrama for 320 hectares, covering the area they had occupied since 2014. This information was conveyed through church pulpits, with appeals for the community to leave the land immediately. However, until the research was conducted, the community had not seen any direct evidence of the existence of these certificates. This news encouraged the community to strengthen their struggle to defend their customary land through peaceful actions such as installing rejection signs along the Patiahu to Pedan road. In addition to this action, they have also uprooted boundary pillars and coconut planting poles installed by the Mission as a form of protest. The community is committed to not abandoning the land and will continue fighting for their rights until they succeed.

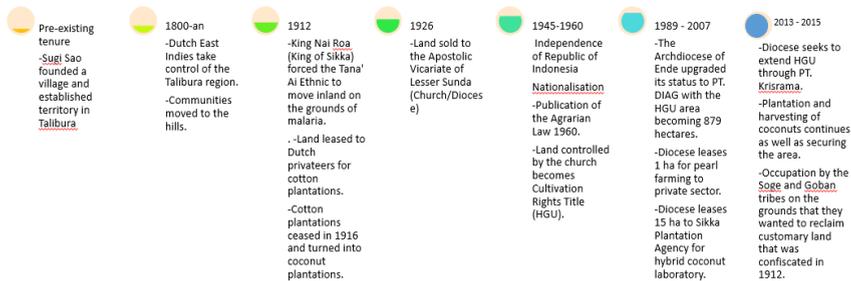


Figure 2. The history of land dispute in Tana' Ai Community

Throughout the years spanning from 2000 to 2024, it becomes increasingly clear that prevailing power dynamics illustrate the persistence of colonialism within land governance. This ongoing process entails the displacement of customary rights via both colonial and contemporary legal frameworks while simultaneously disregarding the genealogical assertions of indigenous communities, who regard the land as a vital aspect of their ancestral heritage. Privatization via PT Krisrama exemplifies converting customary land into an economic asset, employing legal frameworks to uphold the church's preeminence over land ownership. Structural exclusion is multifaceted, encompassing legal frameworks, decision-making processes, and economic disenfranchisement. The mode of resistance enacted by the community occasionally exhibits internal dynamics that undermine the struggle, owing to the duality of narratives in Tana 'Ai. The government's mediation reveals an imbalance in power dynamics, perpetuating a dominance in the conflict resolution process that favors more influential entities, particularly PT Krisrama. In this context, the church functions as a multifaceted entity, embodying a distinctive role that intertwines spiritual, political, and economic dimensions. It holds a position of authority over the land while utilizing the pulpit to urge the community to vacate the occupied territory.

3.4 History of the indigenous Tana' Ai people who resisted

In the 1990s, Josef Lewor Goban from Likong Gete Village took the initiative to establish several Indigenous Peoples Alliance Institutions (LPMAs) in the Tana' Ai region of Flores to represent indigenous peoples against government agencies and other organizations. There are four LPMAs, including in Utan Wair and Likong Gete, which have been instrumental in fighting for the return of plantation land owned by the diocese. The indigenous peoples' efforts coincided with a revival of local culture through traditional rituals and sites. In 1996, they asked the Sikka Regent to release some of the HGU land for settlement, but this request was unsuccessful. In February 2000, mass action was taken against the Sikka DPRD, and several meetings were held, but no concrete solutions were produced.

Indigenous efforts intensified on August 26, 2000, when 86 families cleared the Nangahale HGU land to build a new village. The diocese reported this action as an illegal occupation, leading to the arrest of several residents on September 13, 2000. Hundreds of residents then protested at the police station and managed to get the detainees released. In November 2000, LPMA and the government met in the hope of resolving the conflict, but 40 families remained in detention for land grabbing. In early 2001, with the help of organizations such as LBH Nusra, the indigenous community conducted participatory mapping of their land. Unfortunately, this effort was stalled due to protests from elders over the publication of confidential customary information.

In 2003, the indigenous community and LPMA continued to fight for the Nangahale HGU land, even though the bishop affirmed the diocese's right to the land and suggested a legal settlement. Internal tensions among indigenous clans and a lack of support from other LPMAs slowed the consolidation of their struggle. By 2013, when the HGU contract expired, the indigenous community drafted a "Proposal for the Reconstruction of Nangahale's Post HGU Land Use." Although the LPMA movement faced internal and external challenges, they gained recognition by relocating their village to the HGU land as part of their customary rights struggle. In addition to land occupation efforts since 2014 and before as a struggle to take back their customary land, the Tana' Ai people have carried out struggles in various forms. Their struggle is carried out through regular internal consolidations, demonstrations at local government offices, consultations with the central government, consultations and

assistance from several non-governmental organizations and several figures, and several peaceful actions at the location of the struggle.

The struggle of the Tana' Ai indigenous people is also intended to maintain the ancestral mandate for the existence of a customary system that is still believed and practiced today. They believe that indigenous people are subject to customary rules and customary sanctions if they violate them. At the location of the struggle, there are several heritage sites in the form of rite places (*nuba*), which are routinely used as places to perform traditional rituals by the community. Currently, there are 5 *nuba* that are still maintained by the indigenous community, and there is 1 *nuba* that has been damaged due to the actions of other communities to build houses. Efforts have been made to prevent damage to the ritual site by the indigenous community, but it is still damaged. Therefore, according to the indigenous people, the efforts to occupy the PT DIAG Ex HGU land and the struggle to have their customary land rights are also considered their obligation to maintain and defend the ancestral customary system and their existence as Tana' Ai indigenous people.

In the field at this time, the land occupied by the community is still arid and only overgrown with several trees such as *Mente*, *Tamarind*, *Cocoa*, *Mango*, *Banana*, and several other plants. In addition, there are still many coconut trees owned by PT DIAG in the residents' yards. Until the beginning of 2024, households had various fruit crops, some of which had already begun to produce fruit. However, the Mission randomly and unilaterally cut down these fruit trees. The land is dry and sandy and, as such, is unsuitable for rice, corn, and yam cultivation.

Most houses or huts in the village are relatively small and have bamboo walls, cement/soil floors, and tin roofs. On average, each house is occupied by one household. However, not all houses are occupied by residents every day, as some people go up and down to their home villages to farm the land they still own, collect candlenuts in the forest, and clean their houses above. Some huts already have access to electricity and water, but most do not.

The struggle of the Tana' Ai people continues to be opposed by the Mission in two ways. First, the Mission rejected the occupation and struggle of the Tana' Ai indigenous people through provocation and stigmatization through the church pulpit. The Tana' Ai indigenous people, the majority of whom are Catholic, stated that the church/Mission had conveyed information about land grabbing, land grabbing, land eviction, and land vacating to Tana' Ai households. In addition, stigmatization efforts were also made against them as lazy, thieves, and robbers. Secondly, the Mission arrested indigenous people who took coconuts to eat at the beginning of their arrival by cutting their nails and hair and made efforts to evict residents' houses using heavy equipment. However, the action failed because the tire broke, and the driver died. Finally, the latest opposition action was carried out in early 2024 by cutting down trees in residents' yards randomly and unilaterally. The last few attempts at destruction by the Mission were not responded to reactively by the indigenous community; they reported it to the authorities, but the response was not as expected.

This explanation elucidates the dynamics of multi-level power relations, highlighting the structural exclusion faced by the Tana' Ai ethnic group, which is often labeled as criminal for their struggle, such as through accusations of illegal seizure or control. Social and cultural exclusion is also perpetuated by disseminating stigma within church worship settings. Furthermore, acts of provocation and intimidation, exemplified by the cutting of trees, serve to illustrate the imbalanced power relations that exist among the Tana' Ai ethnicity, the church, and the state. The Tana' Ai struggle manifests its resistance through collective action, the revival of customs and rituals, and advocacy and participation, including engaging in participatory mapping and legal

consultations. Nevertheless, certain factors contribute to fragmentation and undermine the consolidation of the struggle, stemming from the dualism of narratives and the tensions present within the internal dynamics of LPMA.

4. DISCUSSION

The central question of this research is whether land is managed for the community or the church, which reveals a deeper conflict between indigenous peoples' rights and institutional power. The church's involvement in land management, particularly HGU land tenure, highlights the ongoing struggle of Tana' Ai households for land sovereignty in Sikka district. On the one hand, the church justifies its land ownership as a means to promote development and conservation. On the other hand, Tana' Ai communities view the church as an outsider imposing its authority over land that should be governed by customary law.

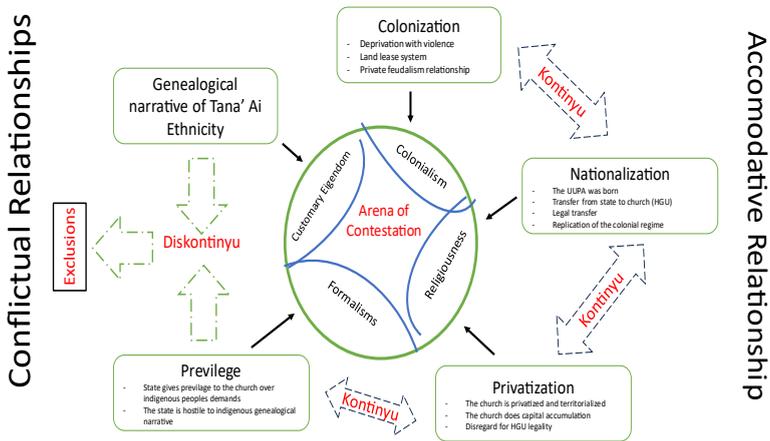


Figure 2. The arena of contestation and power relations in the context of agrarian and land governance in the Tana' Ai ethnic community

Figure 3 explains contestation and power relations in agrarian and land governance, focusing on the genealogical narrative of the Tana' Ai ethnic community. This chart shows how various forces, such as colonialism, nationalization, privatization, and religiosity, compete with each other or work in an accommodating or exclusive manner.

Through the historical framework of power relations, it can be seen how colonialism worked. During the colonial period, power over land was obtained through violent dispossession, the land rent system, and feudal relations between colonists and local rulers. This created hierarchical structures that prolonged the conflict into the postcolonial period. The continuous relationship saw colonial legacies carried over into modern systems such as land regulation and formal state law, creating land ownership inequalities. Later in the nationalization era, the Basic Agrarian Law (UUPA) and the transfer of land into Cultivation Rights Title (HGU) illustrate the nationalization process in Indonesia. The state positioned itself as the sole authority in land distribution and allocation, replacing customary narratives. Colonial continuity is seen in how land transfers from colonial rulers to churches or private institutions often occurred legally but without taking into account the rights of indigenous peoples.

The process of privatization through the church or the private sector involves the commodification of land and the accumulation of capital. Privatization not only marginalizes local communities but also distorts the social value of land into mere

economic assets. In this case, the church is a religious institution and a political and economic actor that plays a role in strategic land control.

Through the framework of ecological politics, we will see how exclusion and accommodation occur. In contestation, concepts such as colonialism, formalism, religiosity, and privatization illustrate the contested relations between various forces in the struggle for land. This arena signifies how the forces of the state, the church, and indigenous communities compete, with indigenous communities often being marginalized. Conflictual relations versus accommodative relations occur. In conflictual relations (exclusion) occurs when the state or church ignores the genealogical narratives of indigenous communities, customary rights become legally unrecognized, and indigenous peoples lose access to natural resources. While accommodative relations (continuity) in some cases, the state and church build accommodative relations by integrating indigenous peoples into formal structures, but often in subordinate positions.

The picture also shows that the genealogical narrative of the Tana' Ai ethnicity and customary law (*eigendom adat*) experienced discontinuity when it clashed with colonialism, privatization, and nationalization. The state tends to give privileges to the church rather than fulfill the demands of indigenous peoples. This shows the state's bias towards certain institutions that are considered more modern and civilized than customary structures.

From a political ecology perspective, the focus is not only on ecological or environmental aspects but also on the power relations that shape access to and control over natural resources. The agrarian conflict in Tana' Ai can result from complex interactions between local actors, the state, and religious institutions, which struggle for access and legitimacy over land.

This figure illustrates the historical and contemporary tensions surrounding agrarian change in Tana' Ai. The dynamics between colonialism, privatization, nationalization, and customary rights reflect multi-level contestations. A political ecology perspective clarifies how power regulates resource access and allocation, with indigenous communities often vulnerable.

The actors involved are PT Krisrama, the Company managing the plantation, which is often perceived as using a competitive and conflict-avoidant conflict management style, the Indigenous Peoples who are actively occupying the land in question, and the Local Government, which is involved in mediation but criticized for lacking effective mediators with the necessary competencies.

Complex power relations between the state, the Catholic Church, and indigenous communities influence agrarian history in Sikka. Power has often been held by state actors and entities such as religious institutions, which have had extensive land holdings since colonial times (reference). Prior (2013) points out that the Catholic Church in NTT, including in Sikka, received much land from the Dutch colonial authorities, which then solidified its power over land through a legal system that did not fully respect the rights of indigenous peoples.

The occupation of PT DIAG's former HGU land was not only carried out by indigenous people from the upper villages around the state forest area but also by Tana' Ai indigenous people who have long lived on the land from several other villages scattered on the land. According to one of the tribal chiefs, the Tana' Ai indigenous people who live on PT DIAG's former HGU land are 1070 families in an area of 780 ha. The Soge Natarmage tribe and the Goban Runut tribe are the two largest tribes in the Tana' Ai indigenous community, followed by several other tribes. Flood victims include the indigenous people who have occupied the land for a longer time, people from Gere Village because the village is very narrow and on the edge of the ravine, and people

from other villages who have come down to occupy the land to support the joint struggle of the Tana' Ai indigenous people on the PT DIAG Ex HGU land. Most indigenous people work as farmers in fields and paddy fields. In some locations, the community has built permanent houses and has access to sufficient electricity and water, as well as receiving various forms of assistance from the government. However, none of the communities have land titles and local identity cards. In addition, in several locations believed to be the customary land of the Tana' Ai indigenous community, several public facilities have been built, such as schools and markets.

In this analysis, the Catholic Church holds power as a religious institution and an economic and political actor involved in land management. While the Tana' Ai ethnic community maintains land rights based on adat (*hak ulaya*), the Church often utilizes its influence on control land resources. This results in an ongoing tension between the institutional interests of the church and the economic needs of indigenous communities who depend on the land for their survival.

Peluso (2018) emphasizes that agrarian change in Indonesia is often inseparable from the intervention of external actors that undermine local control over natural resources. In the Sikka District case context, programs such as agrarian reform could exacerbate conflicts if the lands included in the program are lands indigenous communities have claimed as part of their territory. Conflicts arise when church or state authorities attempt to regulate the use of these lands without involving local communities in decision-making, which can become a tool for consolidating the power of external institutions that ignore the customary rights of communities.

Political ecology analysis also shows how indigenous marginalization and loss of customary rights can impact environmental sustainability (Afiff, 2022). The Tana' Ai ethnic community is closely related to nature, where they practice a land management system based on local knowledge rooted in indigenous traditions. Forth (2019) notes that customary practices are often more aligned with the principles of ecological sustainability, as indigenous peoples tend to preserve forests and land for future generations. However, when customary rights are ignored and land is controlled by outsiders, patterns of land management change, often leading to environmentally damaging exploitation. This marginalization of custom affects local ecosystems and leads to social disintegration, where indigenous communities lose their identity and connection to the land (reference). In this regard, the Catholic Church is often seen as an actor in this marginalization process, either directly through land claims or indirectly through its involvement in government programs that pay little attention to local perspectives. For example, in some cases, land claimed by the church is used for commercial or conservation purposes that do not necessarily benefit indigenous communities.

In response to marginalization and land loss, the Tana' Ai ethnic community carried out various resistance strategies. One form of resistance is through the re-enforcement of adat as a legal basis that they use to counter external claims. Political ecology looks not only at the environmental impacts of conflict but also at the way indigenous peoples use their relationship with nature as a tool of resistance. Dove (2020) shows that resistance often manifests as demands to restore customary rights, maintain traditional rituals, and reject land management forms incompatible with local traditions. From a political ecology perspective, agrarian policy in Sikka Regency needs to consider the technical aspects of resource management and the underlying dynamics of power and customary rights. Agrarian reform in Indonesia will not succeed without full recognition of long-standing customary rights. As one of the essential actors in land disputes, the church should play a more constructive role by opening an inclusive dialog with indigenous communities and participating in efforts to preserve local ecosystems.

The historical analysis that has been conducted is also very useful for investigating the historical processes that led to the current land distribution and agrarian practices, as colonial land tenure significantly shaped how the agrarian landscape came to be (Chigumira, 2018).

With the above analysis, it has been possible to show how power relations in natural resource management in Sikka Regency are strongly influenced by historical, social, and political factors and offer policy recommendations that focus on customary rights and environmental sustainability. In terms of broader implications for agrarian reform, this study contributes to the wider discourse on agrarian reform in Indonesia by highlighting how religious institutions, such as the Catholic Church, have become entrenched actors in land disputes. The findings of this study suggest that any successful reform effort must pay attention to the historical claims of indigenous peoples and recognize the unique challenges of church land ownership.

Poverty in Flores is more caused by accumulation through dispossession, namely the long history of colonialism, the inequality of the agrarian structure, and the depoliticization of the masses of people. This means that the problem of poverty in Flores is a "political-economic problem" (Li, 2001, 2007:11) and not a "psychological-cultural issue" (Budiman & Pujiono, 2022; Budiman, 1990; Wuryandari, 2014). Power holders in the realms of bureaucracy, politics, and the Catholic church are traditional aristocrats who have succeeded in social mobilization through the accumulation of dispossession (Tolo, 2016).

According to Jon et al. (2022), factors that contribute to HGU land disputes include historical claims. Indigenous communities claim the land is communal property (*tanah ulayat*) based on oral traditions and historical ties. In contrast, PT Krisrama's claim is based on legal permits granted by the state. Cultural and Religious Context: The management of the Nangahale plantation is historically linked to the Catholic Church, which has fostered a strong community identity among the indigenous people, influencing their claims to the land. Economic Interests: For the indigenous community, the land is critical for subsistence and cultural identity, while for PT Krisrama, the land represents economic productivity through agriculture and commercial interests. Legal Framework: PT Krisrama's land management rights expired on December 31, 2013, leading to a dispute over whether they should be allowed to renew their rights or return the land to the community. With its stages of conflict, namely: Pre-Conflict Stage (1912-1989): Initial tensions began with the establishment of plantations controlled by Dutch companies, which caused community unrest; Confrontation Stage (1989-2000): Formal conflict emerged with the issuance of HGU permits, which triggered organized resistance from local communities; Crisis Stage (2000-2014): Increased activism and public demonstrations by communities highlighted the ongoing struggle for land rights, leading to significant social tensions and violence.

A political ecology perspective on the Nanghale HGU land dispute concerns the contextual situation surrounding the conflict, which includes the socio-political and cultural factors that influence the actions and decisions of stakeholders. The community's claim to the land as "*tanah ulayat*" (customary land) contrasts sharply with the company's interests, reflecting a fundamental power struggle between the local community and the company. The relationship dynamics between the conflicting parties are characterized by an imbalance of power, where indigenous communities often do not have the same negotiating power as companies. This dynamic significantly affects the outcome of conflict resolution, while the role of government is portrayed as inadequate, often failing to mediate effectively between the parties, perpetuating the conflict.

Different interests in land use trigger conflicts: local communities seek to maintain their traditional land rights, while companies want to exploit these lands for economic gain, leading to competing claims. From a historical context, the use of land for plantations exacerbates tensions, as it disrupts traditional communal land use practices. Indigenous peoples' interests and positions revolve around maintaining their cultural identity and land rights, while companies prioritize profit and land development. These different positions create barriers to reaching agreements, with local communities often adopting a more accommodating stance, contrasting with the competitive nature of company strategies.

5. CONCLUSION

The Tana' Ai community's land dispute with the Catholic Church is emblematic of broader tensions between indigenous rights and external authorities in Indonesia. By examining the case through a political ecology framework, this research highlights the complexity of the land tenure system in Sikka District, where spiritual and secular interests often collide. The findings highlight the need for agrarian policies that promote the sovereignty of indigenous peoples and ensure that agrarian reform programs genuinely benefit local communities. Further research is needed to explore how long-standing land disputes impact the socio-cultural fabric of indigenous communities such as the Tana' Ai ethnicity, especially in the face of climate change and ongoing development pressures.

We reveal the complex social, political, and economic interactions influencing land conflicts. It underscores the need for a fair mediation process that recognizes and considers marginalized communities' interests while considering companies' objectives. By examining these elements, the study highlights the complex relationship between land use, community rights, and corporate interests, illustrating the broader implications of political ecology in conflict situations. The study concludes that agrarian reform in areas involved in agrarian conflict cannot succeed without full recognition and protection of customary rights. Efforts to resolve land disputes must consider the historical, social, and cultural dimensions underlying these conflicts. To create sustainable solutions, there needs to be an open dialogue between the Church, the state, and indigenous peoples based on respect for local rights and a shared commitment to environmental sustainability. Thus, the question "For whom is the land managed for the people or the Church?" reflects broader conflicts related to power and identity. Appropriate solutions can only be achieved if indigenous rights are recognized and respected within a more inclusive and equitable policy framework.

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