



The Sacred Widow's Forest: Indigenous Values and Socio-Ecological Governance of Kaombo Ohusii in Takimpo Village

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how indigenous communities in Takimpo Village, Buton Regency, sustain forest conservation through a local wisdom-based management system known as Kaombo Ohusii (Widow Forest). Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, the study explores how cultural values, indigenous institutions, and spiritual beliefs operate collectively as governance mechanisms in forest management. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with customary leaders and community members, and documentation of indigenous practices related to Kaombo management. The analysis followed the Miles and Huberman interactive model, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal two main patterns. First, Kaombo Ohusii functions as an integrated socio-ecological governance system in which customary norms and moral authority regulate forest access without reliance on formal enforcement. Second, the system incorporates social protection by prioritizing access for widows and economically vulnerable women, demonstrating that ecological conservation and social equity are mutually reinforcing within indigenous governance structures. Spiritual beliefs associated with ancestral guardianship further strengthen community compliance and long-term forest stewardship. These findings contribute empirically to discussions on community-based conservation and environmental humanities. From a policy perspective, the study underscores the importance of recognizing and strengthening customary institutions in developing culturally responsive and socially inclusive forest conservation strategies in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Indigenous Forest Management; Indigenous Institutions; Kaombo Ohusii; Local Wisdom; Social Equity.*

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is recognized as one of the world's most biodiverse countries, with tropical forests that play a crucial role not only in maintaining global ecological balance but also in sustaining the livelihoods of local communities. However, forest ecosystems in Indonesia have experienced significant degradation due to illegal logging, unsustainable land conversion, extractive resource exploitation, and inadequate

reforestation practices. These pressures, compounded by natural disasters such as floods, landslides, and forest fires, highlight the limitations of forest management approaches that rely solely on technical and regulatory interventions (Budiman & Oue, 2025).

In response to these challenges, increasing attention has been directed toward forest management models that integrate social and cultural dimensions. On Buton Island, Southeast Sulawesi, indigenous communities maintain a customary forest management system known as *Kaombo*, which regulates forest use through traditional norms and values. One form of this system that remains actively practiced is *Kaombo Ohusii*, locally referred to as the “Widow’s Forest,” located in Takimpo Village, Pasarwajo District, Buton Regency (Anggraini et al., 2021; Najib Husain et al., 2024). Rather than functioning as a conventional conservation area, *Kaombo Ohusii* represents a culturally embedded system in which forest access and use are governed by customary authority.

Previous studies have documented the importance of indigenous forest management systems in Indonesia as mechanisms for environmental conservation grounded in local wisdom. Research on communities such as Wana Bulang in Central Sulawesi and Ammatoa Kajang in South Sulawesi demonstrates how customary norms and collective responsibility contribute to forest preservation (Sahlan, 2012; Sabri et al., 2023). In the context of Buton Island, the *Kaombo* system has been recognized as an expression of synergy between social, spiritual, and ecological values (Munafi et al., 2022; Tenri et al., 2019). However, much of the existing literature remains largely normative or philosophical, with limited empirical attention to how indigenous values, institutional authority, and everyday practices interact as an integrated socio-ecological governance system, particularly in relation to social protection for vulnerable groups (Aditia et al., 2024).

In Takimpo Village, *Kaombo* management is conducted under the authority of indigenous institutions (*sara*) led by a *Parabela*, whose leadership is grounded in the philosophy of *pobhinci-bhinciki kuli*, emphasizing empathy, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility. While these values are frequently cited in prior studies, their operational role in shaping forest governance practices and sustaining community welfare has not been sufficiently examined through in-depth ethnographic analysis.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to examine how indigenous values, social institutions, and spiritual beliefs shape forest management practices within the *Kaombo Ohusii* system in Takimpo Village. Specifically, the study seeks to (1) analyze the role of indigenous institutions in regulating access to forest resources, (2) explore how cultural and spiritual values function as mechanisms of socio-ecological governance, and (3) identify how *Kaombo Ohusii* integrates environmental conservation with social protection for vulnerable community groups. By addressing these objectives, this study contributes empirical insights to discussions on community-based conservation and environmental humanities, while offering perspectives relevant to culturally responsive forest governance in Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore local wisdom values, indigenous practices, and patterns of Kaombo forest management among the indigenous community of Takimpo Village, Buton Regency. This approach was selected because ethnography allows for an in-depth interpretation of social, symbolic, and ecological meanings embedded in indigenous forest governance systems. By emphasizing contextual immersion and cultural interpretation, ethnography is particularly suitable for examining how customary norms and beliefs shape conservation practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Roque et al., 2024). Fieldwork was conducted over a three-month period to enable prolonged engagement and continuous observation of community activities related to Kaombo management.

Research informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their roles, authority, and knowledge of the Kaombo system. A total of thirteen informants participated in this study, representing both institutional and community perspectives. These included Parabela as customary leaders, Pocuno Limbo and Wati as customary officials, village imams, youth leaders, widowed women as key beneficiaries of Kaombo Ohusii, and community members directly involved in forest utilization. This diversity of informants allowed the study to capture multiple viewpoints on indigenous governance, social relations, and ecological practices within the Kaombo system.

Data collection was carried out through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Participatory observation involved direct engagement in customary deliberations, rituals related to Kaombo management, and collective forest utilization activities, enabling the researcher to observe the enactment of indigenous norms in everyday practice. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to obtain narratives on indigenous values, institutional roles, leadership dynamics, and environmental conservation practices. Documentation supported these methods through photographs, recordings of customary activities, indigenous archives, and administrative records related to Kaombo forest management.

All data collection processes were conducted in accordance with ethical principles of social research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study, and the confidentiality of informants' identities was strictly maintained. The researcher also respected indigenous values and cultural norms, particularly regarding knowledge considered sacred or sensitive. Throughout the research process, care was taken to ensure that data collection did not disrupt customary practices or social relationships within the community.

Data analysis followed the qualitative interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). The analysis began with data reduction, involving the selection, coding, and thematic focusing of interview transcripts, field notes, and observational records related to local wisdom and indigenous institutions. The data were then organized and presented in descriptive narratives and thematic groupings that illustrated the relationships between social institutions, cultural norms, and ecological practices. The final stage involved drawing conclusions through interpretive analysis and continuous verification of emerging findings.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, data validity was strengthened through triangulation of sources and methods, including cross-checking interview data, observations, and documentary evidence. Member checking was

conducted with key informants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations and ensure that the findings reflected community perspectives and lived experiences. These procedures enhanced the rigor of the study and supported a contextually grounded understanding of Kaombo Ohusii as an indigenous socio-ecological forest management system (Moleong, 2018).

RESULT

Kaombo as an Indigenous Forest Management System in Takimpo Village

The findings indicate that the indigenous community of Takimpo Village practices a traditional forest management system known as Kaombo. In the local Buton language, Kaombo refers to something that is protected or guarded. Community members described Kaombo as a forest area governed by customary rules that regulate access, use, and responsibility. For the Takimpo people, Kaombo is not viewed merely as a physical forest area, but as a shared space where social, ecological, and spiritual activities are intertwined in everyday life.

Field observations and interviews revealed that forest products such as honey, rattan, bamboo, cassava, wild birds, and firewood are utilized primarily to meet household needs and to support customary and social activities. The use of these resources follows customary regulations that have been transmitted across generations. Community members emphasized that resource extraction is conducted cautiously and only when permitted by customary authorities. No formal external supervision was observed during forest utilization, as adherence to customary rules is embedded in community practices.

Indigenous Institutions and Authority in Kaombo Management

Kaombo management in Takimpo Village is regulated through indigenous institutions locally referred to as *sara*. These institutions are led by a Parabela, who is supported by customary officials such as Wati and Pocuno Limbo. The Parabela holds authority to establish customary rules, grant permission for forest resource use, and oversee compliance with indigenous regulations. Observations during community activities showed that decisions related to Kaombo are made collectively through customary deliberations led by these leaders.

Interviews with customary leaders revealed that access to Kaombo areas requires explicit permission from the Parabela. As one Parabela stated,

“All activities in the Kaombo area must follow customary permission, because this forest does not belong to individuals but is an ancestral heritage that must be collectively protected” (Parabela, interview 2025).

Community members consistently acknowledged the authority of the Parabela and customary officials, indicating that compliance with rules is maintained through customary procedures rather than formal sanctions.

The Structure and Functions of the Six Kaombo Areas

The study identified six distinct Kaombo forest areas recognized by the Takimpo community: Kaombo Ohusii, Kaombo Mangrove, Kaombo Wee Mata, Kaombo Wee Ambali, Kaombo Kumbo, and Kaombo Labhou-bhou. Each area serves a specific

function and is governed by customary rules tailored to its ecological and social characteristics. Community members described these areas as interconnected components of a single customary forest management system.

Kaombo Ohusii is the most prominent area and serves as the primary focus of this study. The term *Ohusii* refers to small bamboo, reflecting the dominant vegetation in the area. According to informants, Kaombo Ohusii has long been designated for widows and economically disadvantaged women to collect forest products for subsistence and limited income generation. Kaombo Mangrove is located in coastal zones and functions as a buffer against abrasion and seawater intrusion, while also serving as a habitat for marine resources used by the community.

Kaombo Wee Mata and Kaombo Wee Ambali are forest areas associated with freshwater sources. Kaombo Wee Mata is described as a perennial water source used for daily needs, whereas Kaombo Wee Ambali functions as a seasonal catchment area supporting agricultural activities during dry periods. Kaombo Kumbo is recognized as a forest area where medicinal plants are collected for traditional healing practices, while Kaombo Labhou-bhou is used as a learning space where younger generations are introduced to environmental knowledge and customary values.

As described in the preceding section, the Takimpo community recognizes six Kaombo areas with distinct yet interconnected functions. To facilitate comparison and enhance clarity, Table 1 presents a concise summary of the ecological, social, and cultural roles of each Kaombo area.

Table 1. Functions of Kaombo Areas in Takimpo Village

| Kaombo Area | Dominant Ecological Function | Social Function | Cultural/Spiritual Significance |
|--------------------|---|---|---|
| Kaombo Ohusii | Soil stabilization, groundwater retention | Social protection for widows and poor women | Sacred forest associated with ancestral spirits |
| Kaombo Mangrove | Coastal protection, marine habitat | Support for coastal livelihoods | Boundary between land and sea |
| Kaombo Wee Mata | Permanent freshwater source | Daily water supply | Considered an ancestral gift |
| Kaombo Wee Ambali | Seasonal water catchment | Agricultural support during dry seasons | Protected due to hidden location |
| Kaombo Kumbo | Medicinal plant conservation | Traditional healing practices | Believed to possess spiritual power |
| Kaombo Labhou-bhou | Dense vegetation conservation | Environmental learning for youth | Space for transmitting ecological values |

Kaombo Ohusii and Social Protection Practices

Findings show that Kaombo Ohusii plays a specific role in supporting widows and poor women within the Takimpo community. Informants explained that access to this forest area is prioritized for women who have lost their spouses or lack stable economic

support. Forest products such as bamboo, rattan, and creeping plants collected from Kaombo Ohusii are used to meet daily needs, and in certain cases, may be sold by widows with customary approval.

In addition to its social function, Kaombo Ohusii was observed to contribute to environmental stability. Community members reported that the bamboo-dominated vegetation helps maintain soil moisture and reduce erosion, particularly in areas surrounding water sources. These ecological characteristics were consistently mentioned by informants when describing the importance of preserving Kaombo Ohusii.

The spiritual dimension of Kaombo Ohusii was also evident in community narratives. Informants described the forest as a sacred area believed to be guarded by ancestral spirits. Annual rituals involving forest clearing and prayers are conducted as part of customary obligations. As one Pocuno Limbo explained,

“Kaombo Ohusii is a sacred forest guarded by ancestral spirits, so it must not be damaged carelessly” (Pocuno Limbo, interview 2025).

Community Participation in Kaombo Management

The management of Kaombo Ohusii is carried out collectively through community participation coordinated by indigenous institutions. Observations revealed a clear division of roles during forest-related activities. Men are generally responsible for harvesting and cutting forest products, while women participate in cleaning, organizing, and maintaining forest areas. These activities are typically conducted ahead of annual traditional ceremonies.

All utilization activities require prior permission from the Parabela, which functions as a mechanism for regulating forest use. Community members described this requirement as an integral part of customary practice rather than a formal administrative process. As one community leader stated,

“The management of Kaombo Ohusii is carried out together through decisions made by our customary institutions” (community leader, interview 2025).

Informants emphasized that forest use is limited to essential needs and is carried out collectively to ensure the forest remains preserved.

Indigenous Institutions and Everyday Compliance Practices

The sustainability of Kaombo management is closely linked to the daily practices of indigenous institutions and community members. Parabela, assisted by Wati and Pocuno Limbo, oversees customary regulations, while religious figures such as Moji and Khatibi lead prayers and rituals associated with forest-related activities. These roles were observed to be interconnected during customary events.

Female community members highlighted the importance of customary and religious guidance in shaping everyday behavior related to forest care. As one participant explained,

“We follow the rules set by the Parabela and customary leaders because they guide us in caring for the forest in the right way” (female community member, interview 2025).

Across interviews and observations, compliance with customary rules was consistently described as part of daily social life. Indigenous institutions were observed

to function not only in formal decision-making but also in reinforcing shared norms that guide how forest resources are accessed, used, and preserved over time.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that the Kaombo Ohusii forest management system operates as a culturally embedded governance mechanism through which indigenous values, social institutions, and ecological practices are integrated in everyday community life. Rather than functioning solely as a conservation space, Kaombo Ohusii represents a system in which environmental management is inseparable from social relations and moral obligations rooted in ancestral traditions. These findings reinforce the argument that sustainable forest governance in indigenous contexts cannot be fully understood through technical or regulatory frameworks alone but must be examined through the cultural logics that shape human-nature interactions.

The findings reveal that cultural values among the Takimpo community function not merely as symbolic heritage, but as practical instruments that regulate access to forest resources and guide individual behavior. The philosophy of *pobhinci-bhinciki kuli*, which emphasizes reciprocity, empathy, and mutual responsibility, is reflected in everyday practices such as restricted resource extraction, collective decision-making, and respect for customary authority. This supports previous research indicating that local wisdom plays a critical role in shaping environmentally responsible behavior by embedding ecological norms within moral and social expectations (Budiman & Oue, 2025; Najib Husain et al., 2024). In this sense, cultural values act as an internal governance mechanism that complements, and in some cases substitutes for, formal regulatory systems.

Indigenous institutions (*sara*) emerge as central actors in sustaining Kaombo Ohusii through their capacity to translate cultural values into operational rules. The leadership of the Parabela, supported by customary officials, illustrates how authority in indigenous governance is exercised through moral legitimacy rather than coercive enforcement. Unlike state-centered forest management models that rely on external monitoring and sanctions, Kaombo governance is maintained through shared norms and collective recognition of customary authority. This finding aligns with studies highlighting the effectiveness of customary institutions in regulating forest resources and strengthening social stability through culturally grounded governance mechanisms (Anggraini et al., 2021; Muryunika & Marwoto, 2022).

A distinctive contribution of this study lies in its analysis of Kaombo Ohusii as a mechanism of social protection. The designation of Kaombo Ohusii for widows and economically vulnerable women demonstrates that indigenous forest management in Takimpo integrates ecological conservation with distributive equity. Access to forest resources is structured not only around environmental considerations, but also around social needs and moral responsibility toward marginalized groups. This finding extends existing literature on local wisdom by showing that conservation systems rooted in indigenous values can simultaneously function as social safety mechanisms, reinforcing arguments that equitable resource governance enhances the legitimacy and sustainability of conservation efforts (Aditia et al., 2024; Leberger et al., 2021).

Comparative analysis further indicates that the Kaombo system in Takimpo shares common features with indigenous conservation practices in other regions of Indonesia, such as the Wana Bulang community in Central Sulawesi and the Rongi community in South Buton (Sahlan, 2012; Munafi et al., 2022). Across these contexts, forest management is guided by collective responsibility, spiritual beliefs, and adherence to customary norms. However, the specific social function of Kaombo Ohusii as a designated space for widows highlights a localized adaptation that reflects the social structure and values of the Takimpo community. This underscores the importance of recognizing indigenous conservation systems as context-specific rather than uniform models.

The spiritual dimension of Kaombo management further strengthens the durability of this system. Beliefs regarding ancestral guardianship of forest areas contribute to a moral framework in which environmental degradation is perceived not only as ecological harm, but also as a violation of social and spiritual obligations. Rituals and prayers associated with forest use reinforce this perception, transforming conservation practices into acts of moral accountability rooted in sacred relationships between communities and ancestral land. Consistent with previous studies, the sacralization of nature functions as an informal regulatory mechanism that discourages overexploitation and promotes long-term stewardship (Munafi et al., 2022; Jacoba, 2025; Cunillera-montcusí et al., 2022).

From a broader theoretical perspective, the findings of this study contribute to discussions on socio-ecological governance by illustrating how sustainability is achieved through the alignment of cultural norms, institutional authority, and everyday practices. The Kaombo Ohusii system exemplifies how ecological governance can be embedded within socially legitimate institutions, supporting arguments within Social-Ecological Systems scholarship that emphasize the role of locally grounded governance arrangements in sustaining ecological balance (Galaz et al., 2021). Moreover, the Parabela-led governance structure reflects elements of polycentric governance, where authority is distributed among culturally recognized actors operating through trust-based coordination rather than centralized control (Lawless et al., 2022).

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to certain limitations. The findings are grounded in a single indigenous community and are therefore context-specific, limiting their direct generalizability to other regions. In addition, the ethnographic focus emphasizes depth over breadth, which may not capture variations in Kaombo practices across different villages or generations. Future research could address these limitations by conducting comparative studies across multiple indigenous communities or by examining how indigenous forest management systems adapt to increasing external pressures such as market integration and state intervention.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that Kaombo Ohusii represents a governance model in which environmental conservation, social equity, and cultural continuity are mutually reinforcing. By illustrating how indigenous values and institutions shape sustainable forest management practices, this study contributes empirical insights to broader discussions on community-based conservation and indigenous environmental governance.

Within the broader scope of social sciences and humanities, these findings position Kaombo Ohusii as an example of community-based governance that integrates cultural

preservation, social equity, and environmental sustainability. Viewed through the lens of environmental humanities, the Kaombo system illustrates how indigenous value systems operate as forms of social innovation that strengthen community resilience and inform culturally responsive public policy.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Kaombo Ohusii indigenous forest management system constitutes a culturally grounded form of forest governance in which ecological conservation, social protection, and spiritual values are integrally connected. Forest management in Takimpo Village is shaped not by formal regulatory mechanisms alone, but by indigenous norms, moral authority, and collective responsibility rooted in ancestral traditions. Through these culturally embedded practices, Kaombo Ohusii continues to function as a sustainable system that maintains ecological balance while supporting community welfare.

The findings highlight the pivotal role of indigenous institutions in sustaining this system. Customary leadership, particularly through the authority of the Parabela and supporting institutions, enables forest governance to operate through moral legitimacy rather than coercive enforcement. Notably, Kaombo Ohusii also functions as an indigenous-based social protection mechanism by prioritizing access for widows and economically vulnerable women, demonstrating that ecological conservation and social equity can be mutually reinforcing within customary forest management practices.

From a broader perspective, this study underscores the relevance of indigenous forest management systems for the development of more inclusive and culturally responsive conservation policies. Recognizing and strengthening customary institutions, local knowledge, and spiritual values can enhance the effectiveness and legitimacy of forest governance, particularly in indigenous contexts. While this study is context-specific, it provides a foundation for further comparative research on indigenous governance systems and their contributions to equitable and sustainable environmental management.

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