

LANGUAGE, ENVIRONMENT, AND IDENTITY: AN ECOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF JAJANG A SONJAYA'S *MANUSIA LANGIT*

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ABSTRACT: This study applies Stibbe's ecolinguistic framework to analyze how Jajang A. Sonjaya's novel *Manusia Langit* constructs Nias cultural identity and environmental consciousness. Ecolinguistics examines the intersection of language, culture, and environment, focusing on narratives that shape human-nature relationships. The analysis examines Stibbe's concept of "stories-we-live-by" – culturally embedded narratives that influence perception and behavior toward the environment. Through linguistic analysis of modal expressions, presuppositions, and culturally significant terms such as *banua* (heaven) and *niha* (human), the study reveals how the novel reinforces Nias cosmology and the sacred relationship between the Nias people and their ancestral land. The protagonist Mahendra's first-person narration, which traces his transformation from skeptical outsider to cultural participant, provides a narrative framework for exploring ecological identity formation. By focusing on the ecolinguistic concepts of conviction, identity, and ideology, this research reveals how *Manusia Langit* constructs an ecological worldview grounded in local epistemology. It demonstrates the value of ecolinguistics in analyzing Indigenous narratives by showing how specific linguistic choices – such as metaphor, repetition, and appeals to authority – construct ecological meaning rooted in local cosmology. *Manusia Langit* portrays the Nias people's response to ecological disruptions, particularly deforestation driven by rubber and patchouli cultivation. These changes are linked to the loss of sacred traditions, such as ancestral stone sites and house-building rituals. By analyzing these narratives, the research contributes to ecolinguistic debates on how Indigenous worldviews shape sustainable relationships with the environment in Southeast Asia.

KEYWORDS: discourse and ideology; ecolinguistics; environmental discourses; indigenous values; Indonesian literature

Introduction

The interconnectedness of environmental processes and human existence has become a central concern in the humanities. According to Adamson, defining "environment" requires examining power, agency, and responsibility within ecological systems (see, Adamson, 2016, pp. 2-3). However, a traditional Anglophone literary focus limits environmental imagination, making broader non-Western and Indigenous narratives necessary for a more inclusive ecological understanding. Contemporary discourse increasingly values Indigenous viewpoints, recognizing the extensive ecological knowledge these communities have developed through long-term interaction with nature. Caminero-Santangelo (2011, p. 8) further notes that narratives from the Global South and Indigenous peoples offer distinct insights and present varied traditions for addressing ecological crises. These perspectives emphasize the close connection between cultural practices and environmental systems, thereby challenging Eurocentric frameworks. They also provide practical approaches to current environmental problems.

Indonesian literature increasingly incorporates diverse ethnic traditions, mirroring a global trend in narrative diversification. Prominent regional authors like Oka Rusmini (Bali) and Arafat Nur (Aceh), alongside events such as the Makassar International Writers Festival (MIWF), exemplify this shift. Historically, however, a singular, often exoticized national narrative obscured Indonesia's cultural pluralism by portraying the nation as monolithic. The concept of *Nusantara*¹, intended to symbolize archipelagic unity, also predominantly reflected a Javanese-centric viewpoint that marginalized non-Javanese voices. This cultural centralization paralleled broader national development trends, positioning Java as the political and cultural core. Consequently, diverse ethnic and regional traditions across Indonesia were underrepresented and often undervalued. The early 2000s marked a turning point with the move towards regional autonomy. This transition, notes Putra (2011, p. 24), began to elevate regional cultures and their literary expressions. Watson further observes this decentralization highlights the growing influence of diverse local voices in reshaping the national literary canon:

Hosting an enormous variety of languages and detached ethnic groups, each with its languages and cultural traditions, insular Southeast Asia is characterized by a vibrant collection of local oral and

¹ Etymologically, the term *nusantara* originates from two Sanskrit words: *nusa*, meaning island or archipelago, and *antara*, which signifies the sea or what lies beyond. According to the Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education of Indonesia, this combination reflects the geographical and cultural unity of the Indonesian archipelago (Simarmata et al., 2023, p. 339).

stage traditions that have increasingly been fostered and vigorously preserved recently. In particular in Indonesia, this trend has continued and was enhanced in recent years as a consequence of regional autonomy laws that were implemented at the beginning of the new millennium and have boosted the nation's as well as the people's interest in their cultural heritage (2017, pp. 1–2).

Regional Indonesian literature, historically subordinate to the Jakarta-centered tradition, is undergoing a notable transformation. Putra proposes models for its study focusing on ethnic identities, regional literary development, and the national influence of regional centers (2011, p. 268). Among these, the model emphasizing ethnic identities is particularly important, as it amplifies voices from marginalized communities like the Nias people of North Sumatra.

Jajang Agus Sonjaya, an Indonesian archaeologist, environmental activist, and novelist, exemplifies the integration of regional and ecological perspectives into national discourse. He has led over 120 research and development projects in culturally significant areas such as Nias, Kalimantan, and Mount Ciremai. As a co-founder of the Mangrove Action Project Indonesia (now Blue Forests) and a bamboo-construction entrepreneur, Sonjaya promotes sustainable practices rooted in local knowledge. His 2010 novel *Manusia Langit* reflects this commitment by depicting Nias cosmology and sacred traditions as foundations of ecological identity and cultural resilience.

Manusia Langit presents Nias culture through the Banuaha community, depicting megalithic rituals, kinship obligations, and sacred law (*Huku Fona*) as active social forces. The novel contrasts rural life in Nias with Mahendra's urban academic background, highlighting cultural tensions through his discomfort with omens, spirit offerings, and ancestral myths. As Mahendra becomes immersed in local customs – such as revering the *bekhu* (menhirs) and invoking Lowalangi with ritual sacrifice—the narrative reveals how cosmological beliefs structure everyday ecological and social practices. Sonjaya integrates customary law, oral traditions, and sacred topography to show how the Nias worldview frames the environment not as a resource, but as sacred ancestral space. Moreover as Indriyanto and Darmawan (2023, p. 67) note, “space, which connotes abstraction” can be transformed into “place”, a site imbued with cultural meaning. Referring to the Nias people as *Manusia Langit* (Sky People), the novel grounds their identity in a myth of celestial descent that legitimizes both social authority and land stewardship.

Ecolinguistics, also known as language ecology or linguistic ecology, explores the intricate relationship between languages and various social factors. Einar Haugen's seminal work, *The Ecology of Language* (1972), explores the primary focus on lexicons within environmental discourse texts. In this work, he defines ecolinguistics as the study of interactions between a language and its environment. In this context, “eco,” originating from ecology, encapsulates the relationships among organisms, including humans, and the physical environment. On the other hand, “Linguistics” relates to the study of human speech. From an ecolinguistic viewpoint, both environmental language and the language environment are perceived as metaphorical expressions elucidating the intricate connection between linguistic elements and the environment, a relationship that unfolds through language use (Wei, 2018; Zhou, 2021).

Additionally, Fill and Pater (2001) expand the scope of language ecology by considering it to explore inter-language interactions within the environment. This perspective encompasses not only the social environment, including aspects like religion, ethics, and forms of political organization, but also the physical geography, which encompasses factors such as topography, climate, and rainfall intensity. It is further asserted how ecolinguistics is the study of the impact of language on the life-sustaining relationships among humans, other organisms, and the physical environment. It is normatively orientated towards preserving relationships that sustain life. In other words, ecolinguistics concerns how language forms, maintains, influences, or destroys relationships between humans, other life forms, and the environment (see Alexander & Stibbe, 2014, p. 104).

The connection between ecology and language is rooted in the idea that our treatment of both fellow humans and the natural world is shaped by our thoughts, concepts, ideologies, and worldviews, all of which are intricately entwined with language (A. et al., 2018; Yuniawan, 2017). Ecolinguistics seeks to identify forms contributing to ecological harm while actively searching for new language approaches promoting environmental preservation. In his work *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology, and the Stories We Live In* (2015), Stibbe underscores how ecolinguistics can explore overarching linguistic patterns that influence how individuals think about the world and engage with it. The task involves examining the narratives that shape our thinking and actions, which are central to the ecological

challenges we face; to address these challenges, we must reconsider the core stories that define our culture and human identity (Wei, 2018). Stibbe defines stories as “cognitive structures residing in the minds of individuals that shape their perceptions of the world” (2015, p. 15). Consequently, his ecolinguistic model seeks to analyze texts, uncover implicit narratives, and critically evaluate their impact on our behavior.

This study employs Stibbe’s ecolinguistic model to examine the intricate interplay among language, environment, and text in *Manusia Langit*. The primary objective is to reveal the underlying narratives that shape the experiences of individuals, with a specific focus on the Nias people and Indonesian society as a whole, emphasizing narratives about the natural world. Since the stories are mental models, they cannot be analyzed directly, but we can get clues by analyzing common ways people use language. As further explored in the methodology, the analysis mainly concerns stories of identities, convictions, ideologies, and discourses.

Previous studies have examined the cultural and mythological aspects of *Manusia Langit*. Didipu (2017) analyzes the cultural values of the Nias tribe. The study highlights their strong commitment to traditions and customs. Mulayani (2018) focuses on the novel’s portrayal of love myths and religious beliefs. This work emphasized the Nias community’s reverence for spirits and divine representations. Lisa and Wasono (2022) compare leadership, culture, social hierarchies, and educational differences between the Nias and Javanese peoples. However, no studies have examined *Manusia Langit* through an ecolinguistic lens. None have analyzed how the novel constructs ecological worldviews through cosmology, cultural identity, and environmental discourse. This study fills that gap by applying Stibbe’s ecolinguistic framework. It shows how language both reflects and shapes the Nias people’s relationship with their environment.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach based on Creswell’s framework to examine the relationship between discourse and human experience (see 2009, pp. 80–82). It adopts Stibbe’s (2015) ecolinguistic model to analyze how language in *Manusia Langit* reflects and shapes the Nias people’s environmental worldview. Central to this model is the concept of “stories-we-live-by” (2015, p. 7), cultural narratives embedded in language that influence how communities perceive and interact with their environment. In the novel, these stories emerge through indigenous beliefs that emphasize a sacred relationship with land and natural resources. They offer insight into the community’s ecological values and sustainable practices.

The analysis will focus on three key concepts from Stibbe’s framework: ideology, identity, and conviction. This analysis centers on three key concepts from Stibbe’s ecolinguistic framework: ideology, identity, and conviction. These concepts were chosen for their relevance to the novel’s environmental themes and their ability to illuminate how language shapes ecological understanding. The textual excerpts are selected based on their significance in expressing these concepts within the narrative. Data were collected through close reading of *Manusia Langit*, focusing on passages that reflect ecological relationships, cultural values, and cosmological beliefs. These excerpts were then analyzed using discourse analysis to identify linguistic patterns—such as metaphor, modality, and framing—that reveal underlying ecological worldviews.

Ideologies, as belief systems shared by groups, shape how individuals perceive the world and their role within it. According to van Dijk (2011, p. 382), ideologies are social cognition beliefs that influence group behavior and are reflected in language. These ideologies determine how groups interact with their environment and justify their ecological practices. Fairclough further asserts how discourses represent the world as it is (or rather is seen to be), and they are also (...) imaginaries, representing possible worlds that are different from the actual world and tied into projects to change the world in particular directions (2003, p. 124).

In an ecolinguistic analysis, the focus is not on whether these ideologies are “true,” but on whether they encourage behaviors that preserve or destroy ecosystems. Destructive discourses, particularly those rooted in economic or anthropocentric ideologies, will be examined for their role in perpetuating environmental harm, as they often commodify the natural world (W. et al., 2003; Indriyanto, 2023). These harmful ideologies are frequently expressed through language, which helps to perpetuate societal norms that undermine ecological sustainability.

Identity in this context is understood as a narrative people hold about belonging to a particular group, encompassing values, behaviors, and societal roles. Giddens (1991, p. 54) emphasizes that identity is a fluid construct shaped by individuals' narratives about their lives. In this study, the paper analyzes how *Manusia Langit* constructs ecological identities, specifically how the Nias people's relationship with their environment is portrayed through language. In this sense, ecological identities refer to how individuals and groups understand their role in the environment, which may either promote sustainable practices or reinforce harmful environmental behaviors. If these identities align with ecologically sustainable behaviors, the linguistic elements expressing these identities will be highlighted to show how they support or challenge ecological norms.

Conviction refers to individuals' beliefs about the truth or certainty of specific world descriptions. In the ecolinguistic model, convictions shape how individuals respond to environmental issues and influence their actions. Stibbe's concept of facticity patterns – clusters of linguistic elements that either support or undermine the truth of particular descriptions – will be a key tool in this analysis. These patterns help identify how language reinforces or challenges commonly accepted ecological narratives. For instance, the Banuaha people's conviction about their descent from *Manusia Langit* influences their cultural identity and relationship to the environment. This belief, tied to sacred sites and rituals, underscores an ecological philosophy that sees humans as inherently connected to the land.

The analysis also examined the contrast between tradition and modernity, primarily through the experiences of Mahendra, the central character. The novel is narrated from a first-person perspective, allowing direct access to Mahendra's inner thoughts and reflections. This narrative choice positions Mahendra as the primary lens through which the tension between tradition and modernity is explored. His transformation becomes a central vehicle for conveying the novel's ecological and cultural insights. The study identified key linguistic features – such as metaphors, framing, and narrative structures—that conveyed these convictions, ideologies, and identities. These elements were analyzed to assess how they supported or challenged the dominant ecological discourse.

Conviction and Ancestral Myth in *Manusia Langit*

Manusia Langit examines how the celestial beliefs of the Nias people shape their cultural identity and influence the protagonist's transformative journey. Central to this exploration is the ancestral myth of the Nias people, which traces their origins to the heavenly realm of *Tete Holi Ana'a*. This paradise-like domain shapes their customs and cultural heritage. The Nias people believe their ancestors descended from heaven, bringing with them the foundation of Nias culture, including *Huku Fona* (customary law), which is regarded as having divine and celestial origins (Gustanto et al., 2005, p. 12). According to this belief, superior beings landed exclusively on Nias Island, leading to a perception of others as incomplete or imperfect humans. This worldview underpins the narrative of *Manusia Langit*, positioning it as an ethnographic account of Nias society and its unique cosmological convictions.

These cosmological stories are central to Sonjaya's narrative, aligning with Stibbe's concept of convictions. Stibbe argues that convictions are expressed through facticity patterns—linguistic elements that shape individuals' perceptions of reality (2015, p. 130). In *Manusia Langit*, these patterns work systematically to embed belief as fact. Modal expressions like “You must never say Lowalangi's name without offering a sacrifice” (Sonjaya, 2010, p. 19) establish moral obligations rooted in spiritual tradition. Presuppositions such as “The *bekhu* are the stones where our ancestors reside” (Sonjaya, 2010, p. 20) present belief as assumed truth rather than contested claim. Quantifiers universalize myth as collective identity, as in “all true Nias people know that we came from the sky” (Sonjaya, 2010, p. 23). The narrative further relies on appeals to authority through Ama Budi, whose words carry unquestioned legitimacy as cultural guide. Recurring lexical choices – *banua* (heaven) and *niha* (human) – embed cosmological meaning in everyday language. These linguistic features actively construct and sustain an ecological worldview grounded in cultural identity rather than merely reflecting existing beliefs.

In *Manusia Langit*, modality is critical in reinforcing the Nias people's belief in their creation myth. For example, the statement, “Gomo is significant to Nias because it is from there where the first man descended from the sky” (Sonjaya, 2010, p. 8), employs the adverb “very important” to emphasize the speaker's firm conviction in the claim. Similarly, another passage states, “In the middle of the village, not too visible from the hill, there are nine *bekhu* (menhirs) which are believed to be monuments of nine important ancestors who passed down the great clans on Nias” (Sonjaya, 2010, p. 10). Here,

“believed to be” reaffirms the community’s commitment to the cosmological creation story, where the ancestors are depicted as divine beings descending to Earth.

The Nias cosmological worldview also regards heaven, or *banua*, as the dwelling place of cultured human beings (Feldman, 2011, p. 37). However, *Manusia Langit* introduces the idea that embracing mortality and departing from their celestial origins is essential for achieving completeness as human beings. This thematic element represents the Nias people’s belief that actual human existence can only be realized through engagement with the earthly world, moving beyond divine origins. This transition symbolizes the human quest for wholeness, where the divine and the earthly are reconciled to form a complete understanding of what it means to be human. The villagers of Banuaha embody this belief, as their name – *banua niha*, meaning “human village” – reflects their focus on becoming fully human. As Sonjaya writes, that is why they came down to Earth; they wanted to learn about the perfection of life and the process of becoming a real human being. This village is called Banuaha, an abbreviation of *banua niha*, which means human village. The name contains hope: How we become human (2010, p. 111).

Conviction in *Manusia Langit* extends beyond affirming the creation myths; it is also reflected in the reverence for deities and sacred places. Central to this theme is the respect for Lowalangi, the God of Heaven, whose divine presence is woven throughout the narrative. The Nias people’s unwavering belief in Lowalangi is demonstrated through their actions and words, invoking his name with great reverence and trust in his power to intervene in their lives. One prominent example is the personal story of Ama Budi, an Indigenous leader in the Banuaha community, who recounts how Lowalangi saved him from a stillborn fate:

At that tense moment, Grandma remembered to pray to Lowalani, the ruler and the sky, that the newborn me would have her airway smoothed. Lowalani answered Grandma's plea through lightning that struck the sky (Sonjaya, 2010, p. 18).

Invoking Lowalangi’s name is not casual; it requires prayer and sacrifice. Ama Budi reflects, “When I mentioned our ancestor's name, Lowalani, I cannot do so casually. I should have recited the prayer and made the chicken sacrifice before saying his name. He who resides in the sky can become angered” (Sonjaya, 2010, p. 19). This ritualistic reverence emphasizes the sacredness of the divine and the Nias people’s connection to their celestial origins.

The prevalence of stone monuments, such as *bekhu* (menhirs), in Banuaha society further articulates the conviction of the Nias people as *Manusia Langit*. These stone monuments, often associated with sacred ancestral figures, transcend their physical form to embody the spiritual and cultural links between the Nias people and their divine ancestors. In *Manusia Langit*, these monuments are not only historical artifacts but also active symbols of identity and continuity. The stones are regarded as sentient, often believed to house the spirits of the ancestors (see Janowski, 2020, p. 105). Nearly every facet of Banuaha life, from birth to death, is connected to these stones, symbolizing a tangible link to the celestial realm. As the novel describes, “In the middle of the village, not too visible from the hill, there are nine *bekhu* (menhirs), which are believed to be monuments of nine important ancestors who passed down the great clans on Nias” (Sonjaya, 2010, p. 10). These menhirs reinforce the Nias people’s belief in their celestial origins, marking the village as both a spiritual and physical locus of their cultural heritage.

Identity Transformation in *Manusia Langit*

The Nias people’s belief in their celestial origins forms the foundation of their cultural identity as *Manusia Langit*. According to Stibbe, identities can be understood by analyzing how texts assign labels or subject positions to individuals and attribute specific characteristics, values, or behaviors to them (2015, p. 108). According to Telaumbanua et al. (2007, p. 14), members of the tribe refer to themselves as *Ono Niha*/the children of the human being, while Nias and the surrounding islands are called *Tano Niha*/the land of people. These terms emphasize their collective identity, rooted in a shared worldview and celestial origins. In contrast, self-identity involves introspection and continuously creating and revising personal narratives. This section explores how Mahendra’s journey of self-discovery reflects this process as he immerses himself in Nias traditions and culture.

Mahendra's transformation shows how conviction and identity interact. His journey reflects Anthony Giddens' "project of the self" (1991, p. 124), the idea that people continuously reshape their identities through new experiences. Initially, Mahendra is an outsider. As a rationalist anthropologist from Yogyakarta, he views Nias culture with skepticism. He approaches his research with detachment, reflecting urban Indonesian society's scientific worldview. Early encounters with Nias customs challenge this perspective, especially those rooted in spiritual beliefs. One key moment occurs during his excavation near the Gomo River. When an eagle flies overhead – considered a bad omen in Nias culture – Mahendra abandons the site. Reflecting on this experience, he admits: "I was silent. It is difficult for me to argue such a thing with the Banuaha people. Belief and knowledge are mixed here" (Sonjaya, 2010, p. 9). The following dialogues further highlight Mahendra's internal conflict between his scientific understanding and the Nias people's belief in their celestial origins. While he recognizes the cultural importance of their beliefs, he cannot easily reconcile them with his rationalist background.

"Our ancestors were not from Asia but from the sky!"

"Yes, Ama, I mean from the sky." I do not want to argue about this sensitive issue. I suspect that pickaxes and pots characterize the lives of Neolithic people who carry ancestor worship traditions with megaliths as one of the mediums. They came to the archipelago and displaced the humans who had come before, who lived off hunting and gathering food in the jungle (Sonjaya, 2010, p. 112).

However, over time, Mahendra begins to transform. His skepticism gradually shifts as he becomes more immersed in Nias culture, mainly through his relationship with Ama Budi, the indigenous leader of Banuaha. Mahendra's evolving self-identity aligns with Ashcroft's (2001, p. 4) assertion that identity is inherently tied to material existence and constantly subject to redefinition. Mahendra's shift from a modernist intellectual to someone who embraces Nias epistemology underscores this dynamic process. His mentor, Ama Budi, plays a pivotal role in this transformation. Mahendra's reflection, "I want to be as firm as a rock when I am silent. I want it to be like water when it moves" (Sonjaya, 2010, p. 96), illustrates how Nias philosophy shapes his understanding of life. Here, Mahendra expresses his desire to embody the strength and fluidity of natural elements, reflecting the internalization of Nias values.

Mahendra's evolution from a modernist intellectual to a figure embedded in Nias culture exemplifies a transformative "project of the self". According to Ashcroft (2001, p. 4), identity is shaped by changing circumstances and continuously redefined through personal experiences. Mahendra's self-identity undergoes significant changes as he immerses himself in Nias traditions. His transformation centers on a growing reverence for natural elements, particularly stones. In Banuaha, Mahendra discovers a new perspective on life. He reflects, "I want to be as firm as a rock when I am silent. I want it to be like water when it moves. I want to let myself flow without caring where it will boil down. Isn't that the cycle of life?" (Sonjaya, 2010, p. 96) This reflection reveals Mahendra's evolving self-awareness. He internalizes the resilience and adaptability he observes in Nias culture through Ama Budi's teachings about living like stone. He aspires to be "firm as a rock" in silence and "flow like water" without worrying where it leads—reflecting the values instilled by Ama Budi's teachings (Sonjaya, 2010, p. 96).

Mahendra's self-identity is shaped by Nias epistemology, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of nature and society. His mentorship with Ama Budi, the Indigenous leader of Banuaha, and his emotional connection with the natural world play pivotal roles in his evolving "project of the self". This sense of place is rooted in the lived experiences of Banuaha, characterized by an awareness of and emotional connection to the natural environment (Indriyanto, 2021, p. 4). His mentorship with Ama Budi and his emotional connection to the natural environment are crucial in his evolving identity. Nias culture teaches him that nature and society are not separate but intertwined. This shift in perspective is captured when Mahendra acknowledges, that "nature and society are the perfect teachers" (Sonjaya, 2010, p. 175). This realization marks a critical point in Mahendra's transformation, as he begins to see the natural world as a physical entity and as a teacher that shapes both his personal and cultural identity. Even after returning to Jogja, Mahendra's experiences in Banuaha influence his sense of self. The novel's closing scene encapsulates his transformation: "Along the way leaving Banuaha, my gaze explored the details of the mountainous realm, to the nature that had taught me many lessons" (Sonjaya, 2010, p. 187). This moment illustrates Mahendra's ongoing connection to Nias

culture and its influence on his self-narratives. His journey highlights a paradigm shift in his self-identity, shaped by his immersion in the environmental discourse and cultural traditions of Nias.

Ideologies and Environmental Discourses in *Manusia Langit*

This analysis examines how *Manusia Langit* construe competing ideologies within its narrative. It reveals the complex relationship between language and environmental change. Ecolinguistic analysis focuses on how linguistic patterns shape human behavior. These patterns can lead toward either ecological preservation or environmental harm (Stibbe, 2015, p. 51). The novel shows modernity's impact on Nias cultural heritage through the traditional house-building ceremony. This cultural practice now faces crisis due to the scarcity of large *sinuringi* trees, essential materials for constructing traditional homes. The shortage of these trees reflects the ecological toll of modernization. Deforestation and resource extraction have disrupted both the natural environment and the cultural practices it once sustained. This example demonstrates how modernization creates what Stibbe coins as “destructive discourses” (2015, p. 71). These are narratives that prioritize economic development over ecological sustainability. While the house-building tradition itself represents ecological wisdom, the modernizing forces that deplete its material foundation embody destructive thinking.

The novel highlights the inherent conflict between traditional practices and the ecological challenges posed by modernity. On the one hand, these traditions embody the cultural identity and spiritual values of the Nias people. On the other, they reflect a dependence on environmental resources that are increasingly strained under the pressures of deforestation, population growth, and economic development. As postcolonial ecocritics observe, rapid socio-economic changes often threaten Indigenous practices, transforming sustainable customs into unsustainable modes of resource extraction (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011, p. 24). These discourses align with “destructive discourses”, which prioritize human desires at the expense of the environment.

The tradition of slaughtering pigs in *Manusia Langit* demonstrates the connection between cultural identity and environmental discourse. In Nias culture, rituals like the *mangowasa* ceremony to appoint a community leader require significant resources. These include sacrificing hundreds of pigs, large amounts of gold, and numerous sacks of rice (see Didipu, 2017, p. 7). Such practices affirm personal and familial dignity, elevating social prestige within the community. However, these traditions also reflect a destructive relationship with nature. From an ecolinguistic viewpoint, repetitive narratives of excess—such as sacrificing large numbers of animals—can normalize unsustainable practices (Alexander & Stibbe, 2014, p. 104). The sacrifice of pigs places a heavy burden on local resources. This destructive discourse is rooted in pre-Christian beliefs, where humanity was seen as the gods' creation. Constant sacrifices were thought necessary to appease divine anger.

Before the arrival of Christianity on Nias, the Ono Niha understood themselves as ‘creatures’ of the gods. Nias people sometimes called themselves ‘the Pigs of the Gods,’ as human beings were the pigs of Lowalangi and Laturedano. The humans were at the complete mercy of the Gods, just like the Pigs on Earth are at the mercy of Humans (Telaumbanua et al., 2007, p. 20).

Modernity has significantly transformed the lifestyle and agricultural practices of the Nias community, mainly through deforestation for land cultivation. Oppermann (2007, p. 186) argues that nature is stripped of its intrinsic value and commodified, often without considering its ecological suitability. This transition is evident in Nias, where natural forests have been replaced by cash crops such as rubber, chocolate, and patchouli. While these crops provide economic benefits, they also carry severe ecological costs. The deforestation associated with these changes has exacerbated natural hazards in the region, particularly flooding. The Gomo River, which plays a central role in Nias culture and economy, has become increasingly prone to floods. Dewa and Kertawidana (2019) highlight that South Nias Regency is now one of the areas most vulnerable to such hazards, primarily due to deforestation. The consequences of these environmental changes are narrated in *Manusia Langit*:

Floods that often occur in the Gomo River cause students to be held for several hours across the river, even once several times did not reach school because the flood did not recede all day. According to the stories of parents, there used to be very few floods. Since natural forests were replaced by rubber,

chocolate, and patchouli plantations, floods began to frequently occur because forests could no longer hold and store water (Sonjaya, 2010, pp. 132–133).

Manusia Langit exposes the fundamental tension between economic development and ecological sustainability through the Nias community's experience. The novel reveals how modernization narratives justify environmental exploitation by promoting cash crop cultivation as economic progress while ignoring its ecological costs. The shift from subsistence farming to market-driven agriculture disrupts the community's sustainable relationship with their environment. As Stibbe (2015, p. 74) argues, market-oriented thinking prioritizes short-term profits over long-term ecological health. In the novel, this economic transformation accelerates deforestation, threatens biodiversity, and increases flood risk along the Gomo River. While financially motivated, this modernization erodes traditional practices that once sustained both livelihoods and ecological balance. *Manusia Langit* demonstrates how development rhetoric can mask what Stibbe calls “destructive discourses” – narratives that ultimately threaten both cultural heritage and environmental resilience.

Conclusion

This ecolinguistic analysis of *Manusia Langit* reveals how language shapes the ecological worldview of Nias society. Through examining modal expressions and adverbs, the study shows how linguistic choices reflect the community's cosmological beliefs and creation myths. The protagonist Mahendra's journey—from skeptical outsider to cultural participant—demonstrates how exposure to indigenous knowledge systems can transform personal identity. His transformation occurs through encounters with Nias traditions: stone worship, reverence for Lowalangi, and communal rituals that maintain ecological balance. These practices contrast sharply with modern threats like deforestation and cash-crop agriculture that disrupt the community's sustainable relationship with their environment. Drawing on Stibbe's “stories-we-live-by” framework and Giddens’ theory of reflexive identity formation, this analysis demonstrates how *Manusia Langit* uses language to construct ecological meaning. The novel's metaphors, narrative structures, and belief representations delineates broader tensions between cultural continuity and environmental destruction. This study contributes to ecolinguistics by applying its framework to an Indigenous Indonesian context, highlighting how local cosmology and linguistic expressions shape ecological worldviews. It demonstrates how specific narrative and lexical choices reflect the Nias people's environmental ethics.

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