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Comparative Analysis of the Concept of Wu-wei and the Local Imperative of Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga

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Abstract

This study analyzes the ethical crisis in Indonesia, particularly corruption and ecological crisis, as a result of pragmatism that disregards ideal values. The purpose of this study is to explore the relevance of two policy frameworks, namely the Taoist concept of Wu-wei (action without coercion) and the Manggarai ethical imperative of Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga (a wise heart and mind bring goodness) in responding to these crises. Using a descriptive-qualitative method through a literature study, the research focused on the question: how can the principles of these two traditions be a source of ethical orientation for Indonesian society? The results of the comparative analysis show that despite originating from different contexts, both concepts offer an ethic of action that emphasizes harmony with nature, self-control, inner clarity, and an orientation toward the common good (bonum commune) as a transformative alternative in the face of moral crisis.

Keywords:

Wu-Wei, Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga, Corruption, Ecological Crisis, Comparative Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The current situation in Indonesia shows signs of a decline in appreciation for the ethical values that have long served as the foundation of communal life. An increasingly pragmatic mindset and way of acting leads individuals to prioritize what can be done immediately over what ought to be done. Pragmatism does emphasize practical results and immediate solutions, but in practice it often overlooks ethical considerations, moral values, and the ideal processes that should accompany an action. This orientation, which pursues only tangible results without regard for what is ideal is clearly evident in the political sphere, where many parties are more aggressive in fighting for certain rights but are reluctant to prioritize the moral obligations that come with their public positions. Such a pattern not only fosters a "shortcut" mentality but also opens the door wide for the growth of criminal practices

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across various sectors of government.[1] The orientation that prioritizes tangible results over ideals is clearly evident in the political sphere, where many parties are more aggressive in advocating for certain rights but reluctant to uphold the moral obligations that come with their public positions. Such a pattern not only fosters a "shortcut" mentality but also creates ample room for corrupt practices to flourish across various sectors of government.

Corruption and vote-buying are classic examples that continue to proliferate in the life of the nation and the state.[2] This practice tarnishes Indonesia's image as the largest democratic nation in Southeast Asia and simultaneously poses a threat to public safety. The 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) report by Transparency International shows that more than two-thirds of countries scored below 50 out of 100. Indonesia's 2024 score of 37 out of 100, ranking 99th out of 180 countries represents a three-point improvement from its 2023 score of 34 out of 100, yet it still highlights serious challenges regarding public integrity. [3] Weak oversight, low transparency, and poor law enforcement make it difficult for civil society to exercise social control over corrupt behavior.

This phenomenon demonstrates that the weak ethics and morality of public officials are a fundamental factor exacerbating the situation. The legal status of Pancasila as the state ideology is insufficient to instill fear or deterrence in perpetrators; indeed, it is often disregarded in day-to-day political practice. This situation is complicated by the fact that Indonesia is currently undergoing a period of political and cultural transition characterized by demands for freedom, openness, and broad participation. Without moral maturity, this transition process has the potential to lead to social instability and even acts of anarchy as a reaction to an uncertain social situation.[4]

In addition to the moral crisis in the political sphere, public awareness of environmental sustainability has also declined. The exploitation of natural resources

[1] Satryo Pringgo Sejati dan Ahmad Burhan Hakim, "Dimensi Pragmatisme Politik dalam Bingkai negara Demokrasi," *The Republic: Journal of Constitutional Law* 1, no. 1 (2023): pg. 20.

[2] Sejati dan Hakim, "Dimensi Pragmatisme Politik" pg. 16-17.

[3] Transparency International Indonesia, "Indeks Persepsi Korupsi 2024: Korupsi, Demokrasi, dan Krisis Lingkungan," 11 Februari 2025, accessed on 26 November 2025, https://ti.or.id/indeks-persepsi-korupsi-2024-korupsi-demokrasi-dan-krisis-lingkungan-2/.

[4] Dika Sri Pandanari, Setyo Widagdo, dan Harsuko Riniwati, "Anarchism Potentialities towards Social Security in Indonesia," *Wacana: Jurnal Sosial dan Humaniora* 24, no. 3 (2021): 133.

without regard for ecosystem sustainability has led to environmental degradation, resulting in an increase in natural disasters across various regions. The National Disaster Management Agency has identified three primary causes of natural disasters: geographical factors, environmental factors, and social factors.[5] Geographically, Indonesia's tectonic characteristics make it prone to geological and hydrometeorological disasters. Environmental factors include extreme climate change and environmental degradation caused by human activities. Social factors encompass demographic conditions, levels of vulnerability, public policy, and human behavior that can directly trigger disasters (man-made disasters). Thus, while geological conditions contribute, many disasters and climate changes are heavily influenced by unethical human behavior in preserving and caring for nature.

Amid this ethical crisis, reflection on both local and global moral traditions has become crucial. One relevant tradition to examine is the natural ethics of Taoism, particularly through the teachings of Lao-tzu, the central figure and author of the Tao Te Ching. Lao-tzu (Laozi), meaning "Old Master," is a central figure in both the philosophical (daojia) and religious (daojiao) traditions of Taoism. The account of Lao-tzu's life recorded in the Shiji, a work by a Han Dynasty historian, remains a subject of debate regarding its accuracy. Some modern scholars even argue that Lao-tzu may never have existed historically.[6] Nevertheless, his legacy, as expressed in the Tao Te Ching, remains an important reference for understanding the principles of natural order and ethical living.

The core teaching of Taoism is the principle of Wu-wei, or "non-action." This principle emphasizes action without coercion that is in harmony with the laws of nature. It serves as the foundation for the ideal behavior of a wise person: living simply, maintaining a pure heart, and preserving social harmony. This value guides people to let go of selfish ambitions and reconnect with the natural world.[7]

In the local context, the Manggarai proverb "*Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga*," which means "a pure heart brings good," serves as an ethical framework that emphasizes

[5] Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Bencana, "Potensi Ancaman Bencana," diakses pada 26 November 2025, https://bnpb.go.id/potensi-ancaman-bencana.

[6] Alan Chan, "Laozi," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2025 Edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, forthcoming, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2025/entries/laozi/.

[7] Djoko Pitoyo, "Manusia Bijaksana Menurut Taoisme," *Jurnal Filsafat* 16, no. 3 (Desember 2006), pg. 268.

sincerity, patience, and wisdom in weighing one's actions.[8] Borgias notes that understanding and internalizing this proverb strengthens the internalization of democratic principles guided by wisdom, particularly in deliberation and responsible leadership. The value of wisdom, once ingrained in an individual, will be reflected in social relationships and serve as an indicator of human civility.

Although both the traditions of Taoism and Manggarai wisdom have been extensively discussed in various studies, to date no scholarly work has specifically compared their ethical perspectives. This study seeks to demonstrate the integration of these two concepts of wisdom from different cultural contexts, as well as to explore ethical values that can serve as a guide for the development of a harmonious, balanced, and civilized Indonesian society.

The primary question this study seeks to address is how modern Indonesian society can confront ethical crises such as corruption, environmental exploitation, social unrest, the threat of conflict, and the loss of inner balance. By comparing the principles of wisdom from these two sources of natural wisdom teachings and the Manggarai proverb "*Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga*," this study hopes to highlight constructive points of relevance for the revitalization of public ethiz

METHOD

The research method we selected is a qualitative descriptive method, with data collection conducted through a literature review. As a literature review, this study utilizes data obtained from various sources, including previous research findings and books on the themes of Taoism and Manggarai local wisdom. After collecting data relevant to this study, the researcher presented it in tabular form, provided descriptions, and analyzed it. The data was interpreted to identify comparisons between the principle of *Wu-wei* and the proverbs *Nai Ngalis and Tuka Ngengga*, as well as their relevance in fostering ethical awareness amidst the ethical crisis plaguing Indonesian society

CONTENT

In this study, the author obtained data from secondary sources, which were then visualized in the form of a comparative coding table. The data will be described

[8] Fransiskus Borgias, "Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga Manggarai dan Sila Keempat Pancasila," dalam *Filsafat Pancasila: Butir-Butir Pemikiran dari Para Filsuf Indonesia*, ed. Armada Riyanto, Johanis Ohoitimur, dkk. (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2015), pg. 405.

in the discussion section based on the aspects contained therein. The final section will present a comparative analysis to identify relevant insights from both concepts as a response to ethical challenges such as corrupt behavior and the ecological crisis in social life.

Data

Table 1: Data for Concept of *Wu-wei* and the Proverb "*Nai Ngalis, Tuka gengga*."

Aspect	Concept of *Wu-wei*	*Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga*
Definition of the Concept	Lao-tzu's view on the principle of inaction.	Manggarai local wisdom on the moral character of people with a kind heart, good nature, and an open mind.
Personal Values - Human	Live simply, within reasonable limits, and with humility. .	A person who is open-minded, considerate, and thoughtful when making decisions.
Social Values	Minimizing intervention and rejecting man-made systems.	The awareness of creating a harmonious way of life based on the principles of wisdom.
Religious Values	The mystical relationship between humanity and the Tao as the Absolute Principle of Reality.	Wisdom is linked to the relationship with the Creator as the foundation of the community's spiritual tradition.
Ecological Values	Humans can live in harmony with the universe as an integral whole.	Live responsibly and in harmony with nature.

Source: Created by the researcher, 2025.

Description of Aspects

Concept

The concept of *Wu-wei* is a moral principle and the embodiment of ideal action in the Taoist view. *Wu-wei* essentially teaches a way of life in harmony with the

universe. This concept is a practical path that reconnects the individual to the Tao, which in Taoism is regarded as the Universal Principle of Reality. Tao literally means "the way," as a manner of acting or behaving. For Confucius, the Tao serves as a guide for humans in their pursuit of universal happiness a flexible path that allows people to adapt it to their preferences by adjusting to circumstances.[9] According to Lao-tzu, the Tao is the way of God. The Tao—which cannot be seen, cannot be predicted, cannot even be named, and has no form—is everywhere.

The core teachings of Taoism, which are rooted in the philosophy of Lao-tzu as outlined in the "*Tao Te Ching*," meaning "The Way and Its Virtue."[10] The teachings center on three interconnected fundamental concepts: the *Tao, Wu Wei,* and *Yin* and *Yang*. The primary goal of these teachings is to achieve balance, harmony, and inner peace by living in harmony with the universe.[11] The concept of *Wu-wei*, as one of the central concepts in Taoist ethics, is regarded as a non-aggressive principle. Literally, wu-wei means "managing affairs without acting" or "doing nothing," "having no activity," "not acting," or it can also be interpreted as "not interfering" in matters.[12] This concept simply means doing things that do not go against nature. Lao-tzu elaborates on the meaning of wu-wei (doing nothing) in three main points: *first*, living a life that does not go against nature, meaning that one must be close to nature and not do things that are contrary to it. *Second*, living in accordance with one's natural disposition, which is understood as living in harmony with one's natural nature and not having excessive ambition in fulfilling one's desires. *Third*, acting in a reasonable manner, because excessive action will actually diminish the results and may even fail to achieve the intended goal.[13]

Meanwhile, the proverb Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga consists of two key parts: Nai Ngalis and Tuka Ngengga. According to J. Verheijen, SVD, the word nai has several meanings, such as soul, spirit, and life; however, in other contexts, "*Nai*" can also mean heart and mind. Meanwhile, the word "*Ngalis*" conveys the meaning of spacious, open, or wide. This word refers to a large space capable of holding many things. This

[9] Pitoyo, "Manusia Bijaksana Menurut Taoisme," pg. 253.

[10] Heru Syahputra, Lulu Andriani Siregar, dan Kholidah Zul Maharani, "Lao Tze: Sebuah Biografi Spiritual," *Syntax Idea* 7, no. 8 (2025): hal. 1010.

[11] Syahputra, "Lao Tze: Sebuah Biografi Spiritual," hal. 1016.

[12] Pitoyo, "Manusia Bijaksana Menurut Taoisme," hal. 264.

[13] Iriyanto Widisuseno, "Etika Natural Taoisme dan Kemungkinan Penerapannya di Indonesia," *Humanika* 14, no. 1 (2011), hal. 6. https://ejournal.undip.ac.id/index.php/humanika/article/view/4006

interpretation emphasizes that the space of the heart or mind that is "*Ngalis*" (spacious) never becomes narrow, even though it is constantly filled with various things.[14]

Furthermore, the word "*Tuka*" used in this proverb literally means "stomach," which is a part of the physical body, just like "*Nai*" (heart). Meanwhile, the word "*Ngengga*" is a synonym for "*Ngalis,*" which also means wide, broad, large, spacious, not narrow, or not cramped. However, the expression "*Tuka Ngengga*" itself does not mean a large stomach or a protruding belly. There are several terms in the Manggarai language to describe a physically large, fat, or protruding stomach, such as "*tuka ndibol, tuka berat, or tuka bejok.*" Meanwhile, the word "*Tuka Ngengga*" is used metaphorically to symbolize thought, breadth of mind, and depth of heart.[15] The words "*Nai*" and "*Tuka*" share a similar meaning even though they have different literal meanings, and both refer to parts of the body. Meanwhile, the words "*Ngalis*" and "*Ngengga*" in that expression are actually synonyms.

The phrase "*Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga*" thus refers to a person who possesses wisdom and prudence in living their life. A person known for the qualities of "*Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga*" is someone who relies on their heart and reason when deciding on an action deemed appropriate to take. Generally, such a person possesses a broad and visionary perspective, coupled with a generous heart, making them well-liked by many. In short, the proverb "*Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga*" signifies the path to achieving wisdom in life, leading to the realization of good relationships with oneself, fellow creatures, and the Creator.[16]

Personal Values - Human

The principle of Wu-wei aims to cultivate a person who is simple, unambitious, and capable of exercising good self-control. On a personal level, Wu-wei serves as a principle of character development that calls on people to recognize their true selves and return to their deepest nature.[17] This teaching rejects excessive ambition,

[14] Wenseslaus Jugan dan Pius Pandor, "Memahami Peribahasa 'Nai Ngalis Tuka Ngengga' dalam Budaya Hambor Manggarai melalui Konsep Otentisitas Martin Heidegger: Kontribusi terhadap Kesadaran Perdamaian," *Journal of Education, Humaniora and Social Sciences* (*JEHSS*) 6, no. 2 (November 2023): hal. 982, https://doi.org/10.34007/jehss.v6i2.1967.

[15] Borgias, *Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga,* pg. 404.

[16] Jugan dan Pandor, *Memahami Peribahasa 'Nai Ngalis Tuka Ngengga',* pg. 983.

[17] Pitoyo, "Manusia Bijaksana Menurut Taoisme," pg. 274.

aggressive behavior, and the desire to manipulate situations for personal gain.[18] By emphasizing the importance of simplicity and avoiding excessive action, Wu-wei offers an ethic of self-restraint that purifies human nature. Lao-tzu argued that "the wise person should handle affairs without action *Wu-wei* and "spread their teachings without words." This implies a cautious, unhurried, and non-aggressive approach that leads to wiser actions.[19] Actions that are not rushed and are not driven by ego allow a person to assess a situation more wisely and choose the appropriate response.

Inner peace is the most important foundation of this personal value. In Taoism, tranquility is viewed as a productive force in worldly life rather than a complete withdrawal from activity.[20] Through tranquility, people can see reality as it is, undistorted by personal desires. A simple life fosters virtues such as humility, patience, inner clarity, and moral sensitivity. *Wu-wei* shapes individuals of mature character who are not easily swayed by external circumstances and are able to accept the realities of life without a defensive attitude.[21] The humanistic values offered by Wu-wei are those that guide people toward living a life of inner freedom, which arises not from detachment from the world, but from the ability to act naturally, appropriately, and in harmony with nature.

The proverb "*Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga*" seeks to instill a clear and unhurried mindset. Indirectly, the Manggarai people interpret this expression as a call to reflect before speaking or acting, so that decisions are not made in anger or under pressure.[22] The magnanimity and depth of character called for by this proverb are forms of moral maturity, meaning that people not only learn to control their emotions, but also recognize the limits of their actions, purify their motivations and goals, and act based on wisdom and discernment, rather than on unguided, spontaneous impulses.[23]

These personal values shape a mature human identity, one that views problems not as threats, but as opportunities to cultivate the ability to listen, make peace, control one's ego, and broaden one's understanding. When someone is able to

[18] Pitoyo, "Manusia Bijaksana Menurut Taoisme," pg. 265-266.
[19] Kevin Burns, *Eastern Philosophy* (London: Arcturus Publishing, 2004), pg. 140.
[20] Burns, "*Eastern Philosophy*", pg. 140.
[21] Pitoyo, "Manusia Bijaksana Menurut Taoisme," pg. 263.
[22] bdk. Borgias, *Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga,* pg. 405.
[23] bdk. Salahuddin, Life Values of Manggarai People as Reflected in the Oral Tradition Go'et, Kanz Philosophia: A Journal for Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism 9, no. 1 (2023): pg. 1, https://doi.org/10.20871/kpjipm.v9i1.248.

embody the values of *Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga*, they practice stepping back from conflict, assessing the situation comprehensively, and taking actions that restore relationships. Therefore, the proverb Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga fosters the development of ethical character by cultivating a calm, wise individual who is not easily swayed by extreme emotions.

Social Values

In the social sphere, *Wu-wei* serves as a critique of social systems that rely too heavily on control, violence, and strict regulations. When a state is governed by legalism, where obedience is enforced through fear, human nature becomes distorted.[24] This philosophy offers an alternative form of leadership that does not impose its will, but allows society to develop naturally. The less a leader interferes in affairs, the better the results of their governance. An ancient proverb quoted by Lao-tzu goes like this: "A government that governs lightly produces a happy society; a government that governs heavily produces an anxious society."[25] A wise leader, therefore, intervenes as little as possible, because excessive intervention can stifle creativity and disrupt social harmony.

This social value emphasizes that harmony in society arises not from external coercion, but from an inner disposition shaped by moral consciousness. When each individual is able to live without extremes, they can relate to one another in a healthier, non-competitive manner. The Tao itself operates through movements that tend to reverse direction, so that any extreme action will return to the opposite pole.[26] The realization that excessive actions always lead to the opposite outcome fosters a social order characterized by balance and mutual restraint. Thus, in such a community, solidarity no longer stems from mere formal obligation, but from a natural sensitivity to avoid disrupting the collective harmony. Thus, *Wu-wei* makes a significant social contribution: it teaches society to live in balance, tolerance, and non-aggressive collaboration.

In a social context, the proverb "*Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga*" also finds its application in the practice of lonto leok, a dialogic forum that brings together various parties with differing interests in a familial atmosphere. Through this process of

[24] Burns, "Eastern Philosophy", pg. 205.

[25] Lao Tzu, The Way of Life: Tao Te Ching. The Classic Translation, Terj. R. B. Blakney (New York: New American Library, 1955), pg. 111.

[26] Lao Tzu, The Way of Life, pg. 93.

sitting together, conflicts that threaten social relations can be resolved without violence, domination, or interventions that undermine local wisdom. As a principle of local democracy, *lonto leok* serves to regulate communal life, such as maintaining peace and security, enforcing customary law, upholding morality and etiquette, preserving the environment, and fostering various forms of participation in community life.[27] The social values of *Nai Ngalis and Tuka Ngengga* emphasize the importance of deliberation, collective patience, and the search for solutions that take into account the voices of all parties.

This principle prevents hasty actions that could divide the community. Each proverb contains philosophical life values that serve as advice and guidance for living in accordance with the norms of the local community (Manggarai).[28] This proverb teaches that social stability and harmony are built through open communication, respect for the dignity of others, and the ability to set aside personal interests for the common good. In an increasingly pluralistic and complex society, the social values embodied in this proverb are highly relevant because they offer a model for nonviolent, community-based conflict resolution. The role of traditional leaders is crucial in adjudicating matters fairly and objectively for the sake of communal well-being. This is because the process of resolving social conflicts within traditional communities consistently prioritizes social harmony and cohesion.[29] The proverb "*Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga*" also instills the awareness that everyone has a moral responsibility to maintain social balance through constructive dialogue in decision-making. This requires setting aside personal ego and refraining from acting on extreme emotions.

Religious Values

The religious dimension of Wu-wei lies in its orientation toward the Tao as the Universal Principle of Reality. In Taoism, human beings find the foundation of their existence not in social structures or worldly ambitions, but in a direct relationship

[27] Pius Pandor, "Menyibak Praksis *Lonto Leok* dalam Demokrasi Lokal Manggarai," dalam *Filsafat Pancasila: Butir-Butir Pemikiran dari Para Filsuf Indonesia*, ed. Armada Riyanto, Johanis Ohoitimur, dkk. (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2015), pg. 443.

[28] bdk. Salahuddin, *Life Values of Manggarai People as Reflected in the Oral Tradition Go'et*, pg. 1.

[29] Yohanes Wendelinus Dasor, "Revitalisasi Peran Lembaga Adat dalam Penanganan Konflik Sosial: Studi di Manggarai Nusa Tenggara Timur," *Sosio Konsepsia:* Jurnal Penelitian dan Pengembangan Kesejahteraan Sosial 9, no. 3 (2020): hal. 215, https://doi.org/10.33007/ska.v9i3.1859.

with the Tao, as the source and goal of all things.[30] Following Wu-wei means going with the flow of the Tao. Following Wu-wei is a form of religious and moral response to the flowing Tao. Wu-wei requires individuals to let go of their personal desires and ambitions so that the Tao may act through them.

To attain the Virtue of the Tao, one must deny oneself and let go of selfishness and the pursuit of self.[31] One must learn from a woman's passivity so that the Tao may become one's path.[32] The role of human beings is to be still, calm, and passive so that the Tao can act through them without any hindrance. For Blakney, this is often equated with the expression "let God be God in you."[33] This practice is a form of active surrender, rooted in the belief that human life has its own rhythm that must be respected. It is in this context that spiritual values take shape. Wu-wei invites people to trust in the existence of a greater cosmic order that transcends the self.

Reasonable and moderate actions are an expression of existential worship, as they restore humanity to unity with its original principle (Tao). Although Wu-wei has profound ethical implications, this principle does not actually prescribe what one must or must not do in terms of specific ethical conduct. Rather, Wu-wei describes a general ethical orientation that manifests in an attitude of calmness, emptiness, and simplicity.[34] Simplicity in living, humility, and refraining from imposing one's will are the spiritual path to achieving harmony with the Tao. Wu-wei is not merely a code of conduct, but also a spirituality that leads humanity to union with the Absolute Reality (the Tao) by living life as it is.

Meanwhile, the religious significance of the proverb "Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga" lies in the belief that problems must be resolved with a pure heart and noble intentions. In the context of Manggarai life, the process of deliberation is inseparable from the acknowledgment of the existence of Mori Kraeng (God) as the source of wisdom. One concept described as an act of resolving problems and restoring harmony (reconciliation) for the Manggarai people is the Hambor culture. Hambor is a ritual often performed when people are facing conflict, aimed at mending broken relationships.[35] The religious dimension of the Hambor practice is integral and

[30] Pitoyo, "Manusia Bijaksana Menurut Taoisme," hal. 261.
[31] Lao Tzu, *The Way of Life*, pg. 95.
[32] Lao Tzu, *The Way of Life*, pg. 80.
[33] Lao Tzu, *The Way of Life*, pg. 39.
[34] Chan, "Laozi," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2025).
[35] Jugan dan Pandor, Memahami Peribahasa 'Nai Ngalis Tuka Ngengga', pg. 982.

transcendent, as this peace ritual directly involves the Supreme Being (Mori Kraeng) and the spiritual power of the ancestors in the reconciliation process. The proverb "Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga" serves as a guide in the hambor ritual. This proverb guides people to speak and act wisely and with discernment, enabling them to experience the hambor culture as a tangible part of their lives.[36]

The generosity of spirit and depth of character embodied in this proverb also represent a spiritual response to living in accordance with the divine will without forcing oneself, damaging relationships, or imposing one's own will upon all other creation. Furthermore, the attitude of not rushing into decisions also implies an openness to a higher wisdom. Thus, the religious values contained in this proverb form a spiritual response, meaning that humans are able to realize that every good decision always arises from a clear and sincere heart, which always weighs matters wisely.

Ecological Values

One of the most relevant contributions of Wu-wei in our time lies in its ecological value. This teaching regards nature as an existential partner, not an object to be exploited. Wu-wei serves as a warning that when human knowledge and desire become one, the result is the destruction of nature. Pitoyo explains that, "knowledge is both the slave and the master of 'desire': knowledge of nature leads to an unceasing desire to exploit nature; and at the same time, the desire to exploit nature also requires that knowledge." [37] The principle of wu-wei directly critiques modern lifestyles that tend to impose human will upon nature for purely economic gain. Wu-wei serves as an ethical perspective for safeguarding the sustainability of ecosystems.

"Back to nature" is the logical consequence of humanity's efforts to live in harmony with the Tao.[38] By allowing nature to operate according to the principles of natural law, without excessive human intervention, humans can play a part in maintaining cosmic harmony. In Taoism, the world is viewed as a sacred vessel that was not made to be altered by humans. Those who attempt to tamper with it will never succeed; instead, they will only cause it to be damaged.[39] This ecological value encourages people to understand that environmental degradation is the result of

[36] Jugan dan Pandor, Memahami Peribahasa 'Nai Ngalis Tuka Ngengga', pg. 980.
[37] Pitoyo, "Manusia Bijaksana Menurut Taoisme," pg. 270.
[38] Pitoyo, "Manusia Bijaksana Menurut Taoisme," pg. 275.
[39] Lao Tzu, *The Way of Life*, pg. 80-81.

excessive actions a violation of the principle of Wu-wei. Thus, ecological harmony is not merely an external moral imperative, but also an extension of human simplicity and inner balance.

In an ecological context, Nai Ngalis and Tuka Ngengga also contain an implicit critique of extreme actions that disrupt the balance of nature. The principles of moderation and patience also serve as an ethical foundation for maintaining harmony between humans and the natural environment. The Manggarai people's ideal view of nature is also rooted in their creation myths, passed down by their ancestors. Everything on earth was created by Morin agu Ngaran (God the Creator and Owner). Humans themselves originate from the union of Amé Éta (Father in the sky) and Iné Wa (Mother on earth), affirming humanity's origins from both sky and earth. The belief that the Creator is ever-present and actively involved in sustaining His creation (Morin agu Ngaran) demonstrates that nature is perpetually under divine care.[40] This concept promotes harmony between human life and nature.

The creation myth of the Manggarai people teaches that one of the aspects by which humans will be judged at the Last Judgment is the positive impact they have had on other creatures. A person becomes a new creation when they are able to care for and nurture other creatures.[41] Conflicts over land boundaries, land use, or natural resources often spark disputes. However, through the values embodied in the proverb "*Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga*," the community is also encouraged to recognize that nature is part of our shared life something to be protected, cared for, and preserved, rather than exploited.

The generosity of spirit embodied in this proverb applies not only to fellow human beings but also to nature. By not imposing their will on the land, forests, or the environment, communities play a part in maintaining the balance of the ecosystem. This principle aligns with modern ecological awareness, which holds that environmental destruction is the result of human moral failings. Thus, the ecological value of the proverb "*Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga*" offers a sustainable ethical value, rooted in and growing from local traditions, inviting people to live simply, in harmony with the rhythms of the natural environment.

[40] Sefrianus Juhani dan Antonius Denny Firmanto, "Dimensi Eko-Eskatologis dalam Mitos Penciptaan pada Masyarakat Manggarai Nusa Tenggara Timur," *Jurnal SMaRT Studi Masyarakat, Religi dan Tradisi* 7, no. 2 (Desember 2021): pg. 260-261, https://doi.org/10.18784/smart.v7i2.1380.

[41] Juhani dan Firmanto, "Dimensi Eko-Eskatologis," pg. 262.

A Comparative Analysis of the Concept of *Wu-wei* and the Proverb *Nai Ngalis Tuka Ngengga*

The escalating crises of corruption and ecological degradation in Indonesia point to a more fundamental ethical crisis. This indicates that people have lost their bearings regarding how to act rightly in their relationships with one another and with nature. In this context, both the principle of Wu-wei and the Manggarai proverb *Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga* offer an ethical framework that is not only normative but also transformative. These two concepts present a perspective that emphasizes harmony, self-control, and respect for the broader order of life rather than mere individual interests. When applied to the Indonesian context, these two principles can serve as a guide and source of inspiration for government governance and civil society practices to break free from destructive and egoistic patterns of behavior.

In Eastern tradition, *Wu-wei* teaches that the right action is one that arises from inner stillness, clear awareness, and sensitivity to the rhythms of nature. It is not a passive attitude, but rather the ability to act without resisting the current of goodness that is already at work in life.[42] In the context of corruption, the principle of *Wu-wei* offers a critique of manipulative behavior, the imposition of one's will, and the exploitation of office for personal gain. Corruption is particularly prone to becoming manipulative and coercive within contexts of high-level power hierarchies and overly permissive organizational cultures. It can manifest as covert patronage networks, where the distribution of resources, assistance, or opportunities depends on loyalty and compliance rather than merit or equality. In this case, the rule of law is supplanted by economic favors. At its core, corruption combines personal ambition with the misuse of public office to undermine institutions. Corruption occurs when individuals or groups holding positions of power prioritize personal gain over the collective good (bonum commune).[43]

The principle of Wu-wei emphasizes that a government that operates with "calmness in action" will avoid hasty decisions, overly populist yet ill-conceived projects, or policies imposed without listening to the aspirations of the people and without respecting the carrying capacity of the environment. Thus, Wu-wei invites public officials to build personal integrity by acting with courage, honesty, and

[42] lih. Lao Tzu, *The Way of Life*, pg. 39.

[43] Ach Maulidi et al., "Corruption Risk Management: Power Distance, Organisational Culture and Corruption," *AKRUAL: Jurnal Akuntansi* 17, no. 1 (Oktober 2025): pg. 154, https://doi.org/10.26740/jaj.v17n1.p.152-168.

without greed, and by refraining from exploiting state structures to serve personal or group interests that conflict with applicable laws and regulations.

On the other hand, the meaning of the proverb "*Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga*" also embodies local ethical values that emphasize the importance of discerning and weighing matters clearly and wisely when making decisions and taking actions. This proverb underscores the capacity for ethical reflection when making decisions, urging one to pause briefly, step back from emotional impulses, and then choose an option that benefits many people. In Manggarai society, this ethos is not merely a personal moral code but also a communal one, meaning that righteous actions always consider relationships and the sustainability of collective life. In an ecological context, for example, this principle rejects an exploitative mindset focused solely on short-term gains. Naturally, this stems from deep critical thinking and reflection. The proverb implicitly urges communities and policymakers to weigh ecological impacts before implementing development projects. The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) aims to ensure that every step of development is accompanied by efforts to maintain harmony between humans and nature as an interdependent whole.

When combined, *Wu-wei and Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga* offer an ethical framework highly relevant to Indonesia's current moral crisis. An ethics of action not driven by the lust for power, but by inner clarity and openness to the order of the universe. These principles do not merely condemn corrupt and exploitative behavior toward the environment, but also offer a new framework for decision-making. In other words, human actions (policies) must always align with universal values, be non-destructive, and consistently consider the continuity of life to establish intergenerational justice.

Ultimately, neither Wu-wei nor the proverb "Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga" aims to create a perfect human being; rather, these concepts play a role in shaping a mature character. An individual is able to exercise self-restraint, make sound decisions, and act with a sense of responsibility toward others and the natural environment. This is the contribution that Eastern philosophical traditions can offer as an ethical framework to guide society out of a moral crisis toward a more harmonious and just communal life.

For the author, the primary contribution of this comparative analysis lies in the integration of concepts that provide a perspective for addressing ethical crises related to corruption and environmental degradation. Compared to previous research that

often examined the two traditions separately such as Syahputra, Siregar, and Maharani (2025), who explored the spiritual aspects of Lao Tzu, or Johannes W. Dasor (2020) on the role of Manggarai customary institutions, This study demonstrates how the principles of Chinese philosophy (*Wu-Wei*) and the local wisdom of the Nusantara (*Nai Ngalis Tuka Ngengga*) can complement one another.

This integration critiques the tendencies toward pragmatism and legalism in public governance, which often overlook the dimensions of wisdom and ecological harmony. Thus, as a concrete proposal, this paradigm serves as a call for leaders and citizens to cultivate personal integrity rooted in inner clarity and cosmic responsibility. In this context, public policy and social action are no longer driven solely by the ambition for power or short-term material gain, but by a commitment to maintaining harmony in relationships among fellow human beings and between humanity and nature. Thus, this cross-tradition dialogue serves as a discourse that enriches while providing a strong and contextual foundation of values for building a better Indonesian society and nation.

CONCLUSION

This study identifies the common ground between the concept of Wu-Wei in Taoism and the local ethical imperatives of *Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga* from Manggarai. Although rooted in different cultural contexts and systems of thought, both offer an ethical framework centered on harmony, self-control, and non-coercive action. *Wu-Wei* emphasizes actions in harmony with nature (Tao) and rejects excessive ambition, while Nai Ngalis, Tuka Ngengga demands magnanimity, wisdom, and deep reflection before acting. The most compelling and relevant point of convergence for addressing contemporary ethical crises in Indonesia such as corruption and the exploitation of nature lies in the emphasis on sincere and pure action. This action is not a passive stance, but a deliberate choice born of inner stillness, full awareness of consequences, and an orientation toward the broader common good (bonum commune) rather than fleeting egoistic interests.

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