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Local Wisdom and Community Economic Resilience in Lamalera Subsistence Whaling from a Circular Economy Perspective

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Abstract
The subsistence whaling tradition of Lamalera, Indonesia, connects marine resource use with customary exchange and collective distribution. This study examines how Lale Keu barter, the utilization of whale parts, and the Ale sharing and Nobu Visu cooperation systems contribute to community economic resilience. A qualitative descriptive analytical design with an economic ethnographic approach was employed. Data collection comprised in depth interviews with customary actors, including Lama Fa, fishers, and women barter participants, participant observation, and documentation. The findings reported in the 2026 research progress report were interpreted using the five principle resource-use framework and the concepts of reciprocity and redistribution. Three interconnected mechanisms were identified: dried whale meat (Nifi) supports exchange between coastal and inland communities; the use of meat, fat, bones, and internal organs diversifies household benefits from the catch; and customary sharing and collective work organize access to resources and productive cooperation. These mechanisms suggest pathways for food provisioning and reduced reliance on cash in particular exchanges. However, the evidence does not establish stable exchange values, measured inflation protection, complete waste elimination, equal distribution, or ecological sustainability. The study contributes a framework of embedded resource circulation that links material utilization with customary institutions. It highlights the need for household-level verification, transparent distribution records, and conservation-compatible livelihood governance.

Keywords: circular economy; community economic resilience; lale keu barter; lamalera; subsistence whaling

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INTRODUCTION

Small-scale fishing livelihoods depend on more than the availability and monetary value of a catch. Access to food also depends on the institutions through which labor is organized, products are exchanged, and benefits are shared. Lamalera, on Lembata Island in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, provides a documented setting for examining these relationships. Its marine livelihoods and exchanges with inland agricultural communities connect hunting, food provisioning, kinship, and customary obligations (Barnes, 1996). An economic analysis of this setting must therefore consider the circulation of resources across households as well as the extraction of marine resources.

The research progress report describes Leva Nuange as a customary livelihood practice and identifies Tobu Nemu Fatale as a philosophy of collective provisioning. It also identifies Breu and the prohibition on taking pregnant whales as customary restraints (Mura et al., 2026). Published research independently describes restrictions concerning pregnant whales and situates the hunt within wider cultural obligations (Taum et al., 2024). Such descriptions document normative commitments; they do not establish compliance rates or demonstrate that whale populations are maintained. This distinction is essential when interpreting local wisdom through an economic framework.

Circular economy research examines how resource value is retained and waste is reduced, but its definitions and analytical scales vary substantially (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017; Kirchherr et al., 2017, 2023). The household-oriented sequence of refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle, and rot is one particular framework rather than a

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universal classification (Johnson, 2013). Broader resource-retention approaches distinguish between strategies that avoid resource use and those that recover value after use (Reike et al., 2018). Circularity also has environmental and systemic limits: efficient use of an extracted resource cannot by itself demonstrate sustainable extraction (Korhonen et al., 2018). These qualifications are especially important for subsistence whaling.

Research on Lamalera has already established a substantial foundation. Barnes (1996) describes hunting, boat organization, exchange, and household livelihoods. Alvard and Nolin (2002) analyze cooperative hunting, while Nolin (2010, 2012) examines food-sharing networks and their relationships with reciprocity, kinship, distance, and status. More recent studies examine the sea as a cultural space and the human vulnerability associated with hunting (Taum & Baryadi, 2024; Taum et al., 2024). Bliklolong et al. (2025) identify mathematical reasoning in hunting and barter, including comparisons of exchange values. Aur et al. (2026) extend the discussion to legal pluralism and conservation justice. The remaining analytical opportunity lies in integrating these established themes with material utilization and the pathways through which households obtain economic benefits.

Indonesian research also offers useful comparative perspectives. Hidayatullah and Purwanto (2024) examine circular economic practices associated with the Baduy community's Pikukuh, providing a comparison for the interpretation of resource use through local norms. Nyoko et al. (2022) describe the organization of the Wulandoni barter market and its locally defined exchange system. Nevertheless, identifying non-monetary transactions is not equivalent to measuring protection from inflation. An additional analytical task is to connect material utilization, exchange, and distribution while distinguishing documented practices from proposed economic effects.

This study uses community economic resilience to describe the capacity to sustain food access and livelihood cooperation under economic pressures. The term is more precise for the present evidence than financial sovereignty, which could imply monetary autonomy or complete independence from cash markets. Polanyi's (1957) concepts of reciprocity and redistribution clarify how economic activity is organized through social institutions, while Scott's (1976) moral-economy perspective draws attention to subsistence obligations. Five dimensions guide the interpretation: reliance on cash for food, diversity of provisioning channels, community control of distribution, autonomy in exchange, and capacity to cope with shortages or price changes. These are analytical dimensions, not measured scores.

The study aims to examine how Lale Keu connects coastal and inland food provision, how the reported utilization of whale parts relates to circular economy principles, and how Ale and Nobu Visu organize distribution and cooperation. Its contribution is an integrated framework of embedded resource circulation linking these three mechanisms without treating barter or sharing as material recycling. In relation to Sustainable Development Goal 1, the study identifies possible channels of vulnerability reduction rather than a demonstrated reduction in poverty. The conservation context remains integral: previous research identifies gaps in marine mammal governance, and recent scholarship highlights tensions between customary and state norms (Sahri et al., 2020; Aur et al., 2026). This article does not assess population sustainability or infer legal permission from customary practice.

METHODS

Research setting and fieldwork period. This qualitative descriptive-analytical study adopted an economic-ethnographic orientation. Fieldwork was conducted between February and August 2026 in Lamalera A and Lamalera B, Wulandoni District, Lembata Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia (details supplied by the research team). The material available for manuscript preparation does not specify the number, duration, or dates of site visits; the study therefore does not claim continuous presence throughout that period.

Participants, sampling, and data collection. Eight informants were selected using purposive sampling: two customary leaders, four fishers, and two village community members (research-team clarification). Interviews were conducted in Indonesian and documented through written notes rather than a documented audio-

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recording/transcription protocol. The project progress report also identifies observation and documentation as research techniques. Specific observed events, observation dates, individual quotations, and detailed characteristics of each informant cannot be independently verified from the currently available material and are therefore not attributed to named or coded participants. The two community members are not assumed to be women barter traders without confirmation.

Thematic analysis and conceptual interpretation. According to the research-team clarification, interview material was analyzed by grouping information into themes. For transparent presentation in this article, the reported findings are organized under barter and food access, utilization of whale parts, and customary sharing and cooperation. These themes are considered in relation to the resource-use framework of refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle, and rot (Johnson, 2013). The 5R categories are applied only to material use; customary barter and allocation are interpreted separately using reciprocity and redistribution (Polanyi, 1957). No software-assisted coding, multiple independent coders, formal intercoder reliability statistics, or verified codebook is claimed.

Interpretation and boundaries. Lale Keu exchange and Ale distribution are analyzed using reciprocity and redistribution (Polanyi, 1957), not classified as material reuse or recycling. Interpretations are explicitly separated from directly documented practices and from outcomes requiring quantitative or repeated observations. The report does not provide transaction-level ratios, interview quotations, household allocations, income ledgers, or residue weights. Thus, estimates of price protection, income change, equitable coverage, and complete recovery are deliberately excluded.

Trustworthiness and limitations of the evidence. The study used written notes from Indonesian-language interviews and organized findings thematically. The 2026 progress report additionally lists observation and documentary materials; however, an auditable link between particular interview notes, observed episodes, and individual claims has not been provided for this version. Formal member checking, inter-coder agreement and a completed triangulation matrix are therefore not asserted. A detailed evidence appendix would improve traceability without requiring unsupported numerical reconstruction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Lale Keu and coastal-inland food provisioning

The first finding recorded in the progress report is that Lale Keu links coastal households with inland agricultural communities through the exchange of dried whale meat, Nifi. The report interprets this mechanism as an economic safety net because food can be obtained through an exchange of products rather than a cash payment (Mura et al., 2026, p. 5). Table 1 distinguishes this documented mechanism from outcomes that would require further measurement. Its contents are a synthesis of reported findings, not a reconstruction of individual transactions.

Table 1. Reported customary mechanisms and the limits of economic inference

Mechanism	Finding documented in the progress report	Interpretation and evidence boundary
Lale Keu barter	Nifi connects coastal and inland exchange.	An additional food-access channel; exchange ratios and purchasing-power stability are unmeasured.
Whale-part utilization	Meat, fat, bones, and organs provide multiple benefits.	Diversification of resource use; no mass balance or monetary valuation is available.
Ale sharing	Customary distribution is described as inclusive.	Potential collective provisioning; household coverage and share inequality are not quantified.
Nobu Visu cooperation	Collective work supports the productive organization of the community.	Potential sharing of labor and capital burdens; cost savings are not measured.

Source: Authors' synthesis of Mura et al. (2026).

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The non-cash pathway has a plausible resilience function: a household with an exchangeable share can obtain agricultural food without first selling that share for money. This is an institutional explanation, however, not evidence of a fixed exchange rate. The report calls Nifi a local hard currency, but it provides neither repeated exchange ratios nor observations of purchasing power over time. Consequently, this article treats that expression as the report's interpretation of social acceptance, not as proof of monetary stability, inflation immunity, or a financial hedge.

Nyoko et al. (2022) document the use of the monga valuation system and organized trading at Wulandoni. Their work offers regional context for the social organization of barter, but its market details are not substituted for observations by the present research team. Similarly, Bliklolong et al. (2025) show that barter involves comparisons of quantities and values. Together, these studies support attention to locally negotiated equivalence rather than an assumption that avoiding cash eliminates changes in real exchange value.

The research-team clarification identifies two village community members among the eight participants but does not provide their gender or establish whether they personally undertook barter. Hence, the study cannot attribute processing, storage, negotiation or household distribution decisions to a specific participant. Published accounts describe women's participation in coastal-inland food exchange and distinguish panetan from organized barter (Taum et al., 2024). Such descriptions inform the contextual discussion, but are not presented as verbatim statements from the eight interviewees. Similarly, the food types, ratios, market locations and seasonal frequency of particular Lale Keu transactions remain undocumented at transaction level in this study.

Barter also depends on the availability of products and willing exchange partners. Catch variability, preservation, transport, and agricultural availability may constrain this pathway, even where a non-cash transaction is possible. The report provides no measured Nifi storage period or seasonal series and does not quantify cash transactions. The defensible conclusion is therefore that barter can complement cash-based provisioning; the evidence cannot establish independence from cash or the magnitude of protection during a price shock.

Whale part utilization and the limits of circularity

The second reported finding concerns the utilization of meat, fat, bones, and internal organs to diversify the benefits of a landed animal (Mura et al., 2026, p. 5). The report describes this as zero waste, but it does not provide the quantities entering each use, the residual fraction, or the handling of unutilized material. Table 2 consequently retains the documented material categories while distinguishing the detail that remains unverified.

Table 2. Material uses documented in the progress report

Material	Documented utilization	Limit of the available evidence
Meat	Food and dried Nifi for barter.	No quantity, storage duration, or household contribution is reported.
Fat	Included among utilized body parts; oil is identified in the material-mapping discussion.	Processing methods, end-use quantities, and cash sales are not specified.
Bones	Included among materials used for functional benefits.	Specific objects, processing, and commercial status require verification.
Internal organs	Included in the report's description of comprehensive utilization.	Specific preparation and allocation are not documented.
Residual material	No measured residual flow is provided.	Disposal, deliberate decomposition, and recovery rates remain unknown.

Source: Mura et al. (2026)

Within the five-principle framework, the clearest interpretive connection is reduce: obtaining multiple benefits from a catch may reduce the portion discarded relative to a more selective use. Yet this remains an

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unquantified proposition because there is no comparison of discarded quantities. Reuse and recycling are possible interpretations of particular secondary uses, but assigning them requires knowing whether a material is used again directly or transformed through processing. The aggregate description of fat and bones in the report cannot establish every step of that distinction.

Refuse is not separately demonstrated as an observed strategy for avoiding unnecessary inputs. Rot is also not demonstrated: biological degradability is not evidence that residues are intentionally returned to a managed biological cycle. Thus, the report supports a pattern of multiple material uses, but not a verified full five-principle system. This qualification follows the distinction between circular economy frameworks and the empirical evidence required to apply them (Johnson, 2013; Reike et al., 2018). It also avoids interpreting customary motives as an explicit modern circular-design strategy.

Diversifying material uses is distinct from diversifying income. The report contains no household revenue accounts or product-specific valuations, so the findings concern resource benefits and provisioning rather than measured additional earnings. Nor can more complete use of an animal resolve questions of stock depletion or sustainable catch levels. These are different units of analysis, consistent with the systemic limits identified by Korhonen et al. (2018). The commercial status of particular products is not established by the present data; neither non-commercial exclusivity nor lawful trade is inferred.

Ale, Nobu Visu, and the distribution of benefits

The third finding is that Ale sharing and Nobu Visu collective work organize benefits beyond the individual hunter. The report describes these practices as inclusive and associates them with communal economic resilience (Mura et al., 2026, p. 5). At the level supported by the reporting, Ale concerns the distribution of the catch, while Nobu Visu concerns cooperation, including the collective organization of boat construction described in the research background. They therefore connect access to productive activity with access to its proceeds.

Earlier ethnographic research indicates that hunting coordination, rights to shares, and secondary food-sharing networks are influenced by contribution and social position rather than identical individual entitlements (Alvard & Nolin, 2002; Nolin, 2010, 2012; Barnes, 1996). The present report establishes Ale as a customary sharing mechanism but does not document local names for recipient categories, who supervises allocation, distribution order, proportions, procedures for small catches or catches involving multiple boats, or first-hand statements establishing special shares for widows or low-income households. Those details therefore remain research questions, not primary findings of this article.

Ale may be interpreted through redistribution because benefits are allocated under collective rules, whereas reciprocal relations help explain subsequent exchange and assistance (Polanyi, 1957). Nobu Visu may reduce the need for individually purchased labor or spread the burden of boat-related work, but the report provides no cost comparison. The economic mechanism is consequently one of pooled effort and institutional access, not a demonstrated reduction in operating expenditure.

The report's description of inclusiveness should also be distinguished from verified coverage of vulnerable households. It does not identify the recipients, quantities, or frequency of support for widows, poor households, or families without active hunters. The coverage of these groups consequently remains to be established through disaggregated evidence. A moral-economy interpretation directs attention to obligations of subsistence support (Scott, 1976), but whether those obligations are consistently fulfilled remains an empirical question. The relevance to poverty reduction lies in a possible provisioning mechanism rather than an established poverty outcome.

Integrated interpretation, implications, and limitations

Taken together, the three findings suggest an integrated sequence: customary cooperation supports productive activity; distribution creates household access to the catch; utilization generates food and other

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benefits; and barter connects marine products with agricultural provisioning. Material availability alone does not determine resilience, because households must also be able to access and exchange those materials. The proposed framework of embedded resource circulation therefore places institutions alongside material flows. Barter and redistribution remain distinct from the five resource-use principles, even when they help sustain the circulation of benefits.

This contribution is consistent with the wider attention to customary resource practices in Indonesian circular economy research, including Hidayatullah and Purwanto's (2024) study of the Baduy. It differs by focusing on the connection between coastal-inland exchange and the allocation of a variable marine catch. The framework is a contextual analytical proposition, not a universally validated model. Neither this comparison nor the use of circular terminology removes the need to examine distributional exclusions and ecological limits.

The practical implication is to document household provisioning and customary institutions within conservation-compatible governance. Sahri et al. (2020) identify shortcomings in Indonesian marine mammal governance, while Aur et al. (2026) propose legal mediation that addresses the relationship between conservation and Indigenous rights. For this study, relevant next steps include community-agreed documentation of catch and distribution, transparent recording of barter, and assessment of livelihood options. Commercial expansion of whale products is not warranted by evidence that does not establish either ecological sustainability or product-specific legal status.

The study was undertaken in Lamalera A and Lamalera B during February-August 2026, using purposively selected interviews with eight informants (two customary leaders, four fishers, and two village community members) and thematic grouping of the reported findings. Its main limitations are the limited documented detail on individual interviews and observation episodes, the absence of verifiable transaction-level barter ratios and household distribution records, and the lack of measured material balances. Accordingly, exchange-rate stability, waste recovery, household income effects, distributional equality, inflation buffering and whale-population sustainability cannot be quantified from this evidence. Future work should link consent-appropriate interview excerpts and dated observations with longitudinal household and exchange records, separately examining ecological and regulatory conditions.

CONCLUSION

The reported findings identify three connected elements of Lamalera's customary economy: Lale Keu provides a non-cash channel connecting marine products with inland food provision; the utilization of several whale parts diversifies resource benefits; and Ale and Nobu Visu organize distribution and cooperative work. Their combined significance is institutional as well as material. The study contributes an embedded resource-circulation framework that explains how access, exchange, and allocation can support community economic resilience.

The evidence supports these mechanisms as qualitative interpretations rather than measured proof of inflation protection, complete waste elimination, equal distribution, or ecological sustainability. Claims of financial sovereignty and poverty reduction must therefore remain bounded by the available data. Further research should document participants and fieldwork procedures, verify household-level benefits and exclusions, and trace exchange and material flows over time. The wider value of this approach lies in bringing customary provisioning into livelihood and conservation discussions without conflating cultural importance with verified economic or ecological outcomes.

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Katriela Mura: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, writing, original draft.
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Hilaria Ambu Kaka: investigation, interpretation, writing, review and editing.

Conflict Of Interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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