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SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY IN PRACTICE: RELIGIOUS VALUES AND FOREST SUSTAINABILITY IN LAMPUNG, INDONESIA

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Abstract

Sustainability studies have been predominantly shaped by economic and institutional approaches, with limited attention to the role of religious values as a foundation for ecological practices in local communities. This gap is particularly significant in contexts where social and environmental relations are deeply embedded in spiritual and cultural belief systems. This study aims to examine how Islamic religious values are internalized and operationalized in forest management practices within the Repong Damar agroforestry system in Krui, Lampung, Indonesia. This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, which are further analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings reveal that key Islamic values tauhid (divine unity), amanah (trust), khilāfah (stewardship), mīzān (balance), and the moral framework of reward sin function not merely as normative beliefs, but as a lived ethical system that governs human environment relations. These values constitute a form of moral-ecological governance that shapes sustainable practices, including controlled resource extraction, intergenerational responsibility, and the ritualization of ecological activities. The study proposes a conceptual framework termed the Tauhidic Sustainability Paradigm, which integrates ontological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions of sustainability grounded in Islamic theology. This framework extends the scope of Islamic environmental ethics from a predominantly normative discourse to an empirically grounded understanding of lived practices, while also contributing to the broader discourse on sustainability by incorporating spiritual and culturally embedded perspectives. Sustainability is not solely a technocratic or economic project, but also a moral and spiritual endeavor. The integration of religious values and local wisdom plays a crucial role in fostering resilient, context-sensitive, and sustainable resource management systems.

Keywords: Sustainability, Spiritual Ecology, Islamic Environmental Ethics, Community-Based Resource Management, Agroforestry; Religious Values, Social-Ecological Systems, Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

The increasingly complex global ecological crisis, characterized by massive deforestation, biodiversity degradation, and accelerating climate change, has given rise to fundamental critiques of the modern development paradigm, which tends to be exploitative and anthropocentric. In the past two decades, the discourse on sustainable development has undergone a significant shift from a technocratic approach to a more integrative one, recognizing the importance of ethical, cultural, and spiritual dimensions in shaping people's ecological behavior (IPBES, 2022;

Steffen et al., 2020). Recent studies confirm that the failure of many environmental policies is not solely due to regulatory weaknesses, but also to the absence of a transformation of values and moral awareness within society (Otto et al., 2020; Wamsler et al., 2021).

In this context, the study of religion and the environment has rapidly developed as an interdisciplinary field seeking to understand the role of religion in shaping environmental ethics and sustainability practices. Recent research suggests that religious values can be a powerful source of intrinsic motivation in encouraging pro-environmental behavior, particularly through the construction of cosmological meaning, moral responsibility, and eschatological orientation (Grim & Tucker, 2020; Taylor et al., 2021). Furthermore, the concept of spiritual ecology has emerged as an approach that integrates spiritual, cultural, and ecological dimensions within a holistic analytical framework (Sponsel, 2020; Vaughan-Lee, 2021). This approach views the human relationship with nature not only as a material relationship but also as a sacred relationship imbued with transcendent meaning.

However, studies in this area still exhibit several limitations. First, most research is still dominated by Western contexts or non-Islamic religious traditions, thus underrepresenting the diversity of ecological epistemologies within the Islamic tradition (Gade, 2019; Khalid, 2020). Second, empirical studies examining how theological values are internalized in concrete ecological practices at the community level are still relatively limited, particularly in the context of Muslim societies in the Global South (Hassan, 2021; Amri et al., 2023). Third, literature integrating Islamic ecotheology with local practices based on traditional wisdom within an operational sustainable development framework has yet to develop systematically.

In Indonesia, community-based resource management practices, such as the Repong Damar agroforestry system in Krui, Lampung, have long been recognized as models of resilient sustainability. Previous studies have highlighted the strength of local institutions, customary norms, and economic mechanisms in maintaining the sustainability of this system (Berkes, 2018; Michon et al., 2019). However, these studies tend to place the socio-economic and institutional aspects as the primary focus, while the religious dimension, particularly that rooted in Islamic values, remains underexplored. In fact, from an Islamic ecotheological perspective, the concepts of tawhid (the unity of God), amanah (responsibility), and khalifah (humanity's role as steward of the earth) have direct implications for ecological ethics and sustainable practices (Nasr, 1996; Foltz et al., 2020).

This research aims to address several scientific issues, including: (1) the limited empirical studies linking Islamic theological concepts to community-based ecological practices; (2) the lack of a conceptual framework capable of bridging Islamic ecotheology and the contemporary sustainable development paradigm; and (3) the limited exploration of how religious values are internalized in concrete and sustainable natural resource management practices.

In response to this gap, this study aims to analyze how religious values shape ecological practices in the Repong Damar system in Krui, Lampung, and to formulate a conceptual framework that integrates Islamic ecotheology with locally based sustainability practices. This research explicitly positions the religious dimension not as an additional variable, but as the primary ontological and epistemological framework for understanding the relationship between humans and nature.

This research aims to contribute to the development of the concept of the "Tauhidic Sustainability Paradigm," a sustainability paradigm rooted in the principle of monotheism as the ontological (unity of reality), epistemological (source of knowledge), and ethical (guideline for action) foundation of human relations with the environment. Unlike conventional sustainability paradigms, which tend to be secular and utilitarian, this paradigm positions nature as a manifestation of God's verses (ayat kauniyah) that must be preserved as part of worship and moral-spiritual responsibility. Sustainability, in the context of this research, is understood not only as an effort to maintain ecological balance but also as a form of religious devotion oriented toward intergenerational justice and cosmic sustainability.

The main contributions of this research encompass three aspects. First, a theoretical contribution, enriching the literature on religion and ecology through a systematic integration of Islamic ecotheology and locally based sustainability practices. Second, a conceptual contribution, formulating the Tauhidic Sustainability Paradigm as an alternative to the dominant sustainable development paradigm. Third, an empirical contribution, presenting contextual evidence of the Repong Damar practice as a sustainability model based not only on local wisdom but also on spiritual values internalized within the community.

Thus, this research is expected to not only enrich the academic literature but also provide practical implications for developing sustainable development policies that are more inclusive, contextual, and rooted in the community's religious values.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with an interpretive ethnographic design to deeply understand the relationship between religious values and environmental management practices within the Repong Damar system in Krui, Lampung. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to holistically capture the meanings, symbols, and social practices that exist within the community's cultural and religious context (Geertz, 1973; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In the context of religious and ecological studies, an interpretive qualitative approach is considered relevant because it can reveal ontological and ethical dimensions that cannot be reduced to quantitative variables (Tucker & Grim, 2017).

The research location was purposively selected in the Krui area, Pesisir Barat Regency, Lampung, known as the center of traditional Repong Damar agroforestry practices. This location was chosen based on the consideration that the system represents an integration of local wisdom, economic practices, and religious values

that has persisted across generations. Research informants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, with criteria including traditional leaders, religious leaders, and damar farmers as community members directly involved in repong management. This strategy enabled data collection from key actors with in-depth knowledge of the practices and socio-ecological meanings of the system (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data collection techniques included observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation enabled researchers to understand the community's daily practices in managing repong, including tapping activities, harvest rituals, and social interactions related to resource management (Spradley, 1980). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to explore informants' perspectives on religious values such as amanah (trust), khalifah (vicegerent), rewards and sins, and the concept of balance (mīzān) within an ecological context. Documentation was used to supplement the data through field notes, local archives, and relevant written sources.

Data analysis was conducted thematically, adopting a constructivist approach, where meaning is constructed through the interaction between empirical data and the conceptual framework used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process included data reduction, categorization, coding, and the extraction of key themes that represent the relationship between religiosity and ecological practices. To strengthen the validity of the analysis, this study employed data and source triangulation techniques, comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation, and involving various categories of informants (Flick, 2018).

Conceptually, this study utilizes an integrative framework between Islamic ecotheology and community-based sustainability theory. This approach allows for analysis that is not only descriptive, but also interpretive and critical in understanding how transcendental values shape sustainable ecological practices. In this regard, concepts such as tawhid (monotheism), amanah (trust), and khalifah (vicegerent) are analyzed as normative structures that guide human action in relation to nature, as well as serving as a moral basis for locally based sustainable development (Foltz, 2003; Nasr, 1996; Berkes, 2018).

The methodology used in this study not only aims to describe the management practices of Repong Damar, but also to reveal the construction of religious meanings underlying these practices, as well as to formulate a conceptual framework that can contribute to the development of studies on religion and ecology and sustainable development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The traditional agroforestry practice of Repong Damar in the Krui community of Lampung does not merely function as a local economic system, but rather as a manifestation of religious ethics internalized in the community's social and cultural structures. The values of amanah (trust), khalifah (vicegerent), reward and sin

(reward and sin), mīzān (balance), and the transcendental dimension form an eco-theological framework operational in daily practice. Thus, the sustainability of Repong Damar cannot be understood solely through the perspective of the political economy of resources, but must be read as a system of knowledge and practice of monotheistic values that integrate spiritual, ecological, social, and economic dimensions.

Conceptually, this finding aligns with Islamic eco-theological literature, which asserts that the human-nature relationship is rooted in the principles of monotheism, amanah (trust), and khilāfah (vicegerent) as the moral basis for environmental management (Foltz, 2003; Nasr, 1996; Izzi Dien, 2000). In the context of Krui's Repong Damar, the concept of trust (amanah) does not exist as an abstract doctrine, but rather as a structure of meaning that limits and directs ecological action. Informants refer to damar as "God's blessing" and "God's trust," demonstrating the internalization of the concept of divine trust in local practices (Foltz, 2003). This relativization of ownership establishes ethical boundaries for exploitation, ensuring that management rights are always subject to transcendent norms.

These findings correspond to stewardship theory in religious and environmental studies, which states that when resources are understood as divine trusts, stronger self-control mechanisms emerge than mere formal regulation (Palmer & Finlay, 2003; Jenkins et al., 2018; Berry, & Kreider, 2018). From a sustainable development perspective, this internalization of values constitutes crucial social capital in community-based resource management (Ostrom, 1990; Berkes, 2018). Repong Damar functions as a shared moral space bound by collective religious norms, making preventing damage a social obligation, not an individual choice.

The concept of the caliphate deepens this normative structure. Data show that failure to properly manage Repong Damar is understood as a sin with consequences in this world and the hereafter, even linked to potential ecological disasters such as flooding. Within an eco-theological framework, this demonstrates a structure of moral causality, where ecological violations are understood as a form of fasād (damage) that disrupts the cosmic order (Nasr, 1996; Khalid, 2002; Izzi Dien, 2000).

This finding is also relevant to critiques of modern anthropocentrism, which is considered to have contributed to the global ecological crisis (White, 1967; Gottlieb, 2006). In Krui, human authority as managers is limited by the awareness that God is the absolute owner, so that the human-nature relationship moves within the logic of rights and obligations, not absolute domination. The integration of transcendent legitimacy (God) and genealogical legitimacy (ancestors) strengthens the binding power of conservation norms. In sustainability studies, legitimacy based on local values has been shown to enhance the resilience of socio-ecological systems (Berkes & Folke, 1998; Pretty, 2003).

The reward-sin dimension demonstrates how ecological actions are interpreted as a platform for moral-spiritual evaluation. Caring for repong is understood as an act of worship that bears reward, while destroying it is considered

an act of injustice. Within the framework of religious motivation theory, eschatological beliefs can strengthen long-term commitment to pro-environmental actions (Sherkat & Ellison, 2007; Tucker & Grim, 2017; Deane-Drummond, 2008). Sustainability depends not only on economic incentives but also on the normative strength of faith.

The concept of mīzān (balance) in the data demonstrates the integration of ecological, moral, and genealogical balance. Ecological imbalance is understood by the Repong Damar management community as a plague and a sin, indicating that cosmic order has a normative dimension. In sustainability science literature, intergenerational balance is a fundamental principle of sustainable development (WCED, 1987; Sachs, 2015), although in local contexts it is rooted in religious cosmology, not simply modern rationality.

Technical practices such as moderate tapping, not digging holes too large for immediate results, demonstrate an awareness of the trade-off between short-term profit and long-term sustainability. In natural capital theory, overexploitation will reduce future production stocks (Costanza et al., 1997). However, in Krui, these restrictions are based not only on economic calculations, but also on the ethics of "not oppressing" fellow creatures of God.

The transcendental dimension is further strengthened through harvest rituals such as reciting the Basmalah (the name of God) and the tradition of asking permission from the Damar tree (nangguh) before climbing. This ritualization of economic activity creates an ecological habitus imbued with etiquette. In the study of religion and.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that the sustainability of the Repong Damar agroforestry system in Krui, Lampung, cannot be adequately understood through economic or formal institutional approaches alone. This sustainability is firmly rooted in a religious ethical system internalized in the community's social life. The values of tawhid (monotheism), amanah (trust), khilāfah (vicegerent), mizān (reward and sin), and the moral framework of reward and sin have been shown to function as normative mechanisms that effectively guide individual and collective ecological behavior in forest resource management.

The findings of this research confirm that community religiosity exists not merely as a symbolic belief system but also serves as the foundation of moral-ecological governance that regulates human relations with nature. In this context, Repong Damar functions as a shared moral commons bound by religious norms, so that sustainable practices do not rely solely on formal regulations but are strengthened by transcendental awareness and spiritual responsibility.

Theoretically, this research makes an important contribution through the formulation of the Tauhidic Sustainability Paradigm, which integrates ontological dimensions (nature as a sign of God), epistemological (ecological knowledge as an

interpretation of Divine will), and ethical (ecological action as a form of worship and trust). This paradigm expands the study of Islamic eco-theology from the normative realm to the realm of empirical practice, while bridging the gap between theology and sustainability practices in community life.

Furthermore, this research enriches the global discourse on sustainability and spiritual ecology by demonstrating that community-based resource management systems can be more resilient when supported by the legitimacy of religious values and local wisdom. Thus, the integration of spirituality, morality, and ecological practices is a key element in building sustainable socio-ecological systems.

Practically, these findings imply that sustainable development policies need to accommodate and integrate local religious and cultural value systems as part of environmental management strategies. A solely technocratic and economistic approach tends to be less effective if it fails to consider the value dimensions inherent in society. However, this study is limited by its specific socio-cultural context, so generalizations of the findings should be made with caution. Therefore, further research is recommended to conduct comparative studies across various cultural and religious contexts to test the relevance and adaptability of the monotheism-based sustainability paradigm in various socio-ecological settings.

Thus, this study confirms that sustainability is not merely a technical and economic issue, but also a moral and spiritual project. The integration of religious values and ecological practices, as reflected in the Repong Damar tradition, provides a significant contribution to formulating a more contextual, rooted, and resilient model of sustainable development.

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