

THE SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL PARADIGM OF BELIEF COMMUNITIES AS A STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE NATURAL RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to analyze how cosmology, social norms, and the spirituality of the indigenous faith community shape harmonious interactions with nature as a sacred, dynamic, and interconnected whole. All are creations of God that must be respected as subjects. This study uses qualitative methods through a literature study. Data were obtained from Google Scholar and Scopus using the criterion of articles published in the last 5 years (2020-2025). The keywords used are *believers, indigenous peoples, beliefs, ecological crisis, and environmental conservation grounded in local wisdom*. The collected data were analyzed using a descriptive-analytical approach to map the relationship between the social and spiritual systems of believers in environmental conservation practices. The study's results show that adaptive traditional ecological knowledge and customary laws practiced by indigenous peoples serve as strategies for sustainable natural resource management. Rituals and social norms reinforce environmental ethics, limit overexploitation, and ensure community welfare in line with ecosystem health. Although believers still face stereotypes, stigma, and discrimination, their presence is important for maintaining ecological balance. The socio-ecological paradigms of believers include: (1) a cosmological paradigm that views nature as a sacred entity that must be preserved; (2) a social-communitarian paradigm, in the form of customary rules and mutual cooperation in environmental conservation; (3) a spiritual-ethical paradigm that emphasizes the value of harmony, such as *memayu hayuning bawana*; and (4) a practical sustainability paradigm, which is the direct application of cosmological and spiritual values in resource management.

Keywords: Socio-Ecological Paradigm, Believers, Natural Resource Management

1. Introduction

The ecological crisis is a serious problem in Indonesia, a country rich in natural resources. Global Forest Watch data for 2024 shows that Indonesia lost 259,000 hectares of primary forest, leaving 88.5% of its primary forest area intact [18]. This damage has resulted in a decline in biodiversity and in the weakening of ecological functions [28]. In addition to deforestation, energy consumption continues to increase in line with population growth. According to Agbede *et al.* [3], a 1% increase in energy consumption is associated with a 0.4172% increase in long-term environmental damage. These facts show that the ecological crisis is not just a physical problem.

Various studies conclude that the root of the ecological crisis does not lie solely in natural disasters or climate change, but in how humans view nature [10],[30]. The anthropocentric mindset places nature as an object to be exploited, not as a partner in life. This view has given rise to unsustainable practices that accelerate environmental damage [38],[4]. According to Rees [44], human consumption has even exceeded Earth's capacity to regenerate its resources

(overshoot). In agrarian societies such as Indonesia, land is not only regarded as economic potential but also as essential to life and valuable to the community [19]. This is because humans and land have an inseparable reciprocal relationship. Land provides space, food, and resources, while humans have an obligation to preserve it to ensure its sustainability.

Local wisdom and traditional spirituality have long shaped the way humans relate to nature. Studies from Wasil & Muizudin [55] and Wulandari & Laksono [58] show that values such as balance, the sacredness of nature, and collective rituals play a major role in ecosystem preservation. In the Indonesian context, belief groups are part of Indonesian society that have a distinctive view of nature. Believers in indigenous beliefs constitute a reality of locality-based religion, or indigenous religion, grounded in the practice of noble character derived from local wisdom [40][46]. Although they have received legal recognition through Constitutional Court Decision Number 97/PUU-XIV/2016, adherents of indigenous beliefs still face discrimination and stigma when practicing their spirituality [35]. According to the International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development (INFID), there are 188 indigenous belief organizations in the center and more than 1,000 branch organizations across various regions, with approximately 12 million adherents [41]. Therefore, this study seeks to position adherents of indigenous beliefs as socio-ecological actors, rather than merely as cultural or spiritual objects.

This study aims to identify and analyze the cosmological views and social structures of indigenous faith practitioners that shape human relations with nature, analyze the spiritual and social values within indigenous faiths that can support environmental conservation practices, and analyze the social and political challenges faced by indigenous faith practitioners in maximizing their contribution to environmental conservation. The urgency of this research is to promote the integration of local wisdom into environmental conservation efforts, particularly through the cultural and spiritual traditions of indigenous faith communities. By highlighting the systems embraced by believers, this research not only shifts the perspective on religious groups from marginalized subjects to socio-ecological actors but also positions them as offering alternative approaches to environmental conservation rooted in sustainable local spiritual values.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach to examine human or social issues [34]. Its main purpose is to make facts or phenomena easier to understand and enable new hypotheses to be generated according to the model [20].

The method used in this study is a literature study, which is a method of data collection by understanding and studying theories from various literature related to the study. In this study, the literature study is used to systematically examine various literature discussing believers mediated by social and spiritual values. The sources used are scientific articles discussing believers.

The data collection technique was carried out by searching Google Scholar and Scopus with the keywords “believers, indigenous people, belief, ecological crisis, environmental preservation based on local wisdom.” The criteria for selecting literature were scientific articles published in the last 5 years, or from 2020 to 2025. In addition, at least five scientific articles indexed by Scopus were selected.

The collected data were then analyzed using a descriptive analysis approach that focused on mapping the relationship between the social and spiritual systems of indigenous people in shaping environmental conservation practices.

3. Results And Discussion

3.1 Cosmology and Social Structure of Believers in Socio-Ecological Relations

3.1.1 Believers' Cosmology Views Humans and Nature as a Unity

The concept of cosmology is a term from ancient Greek consisting of the word *cosmos*, which means order or harmony, and *logos*, which means knowledge. From this definition, it can be understood that cosmology refers to a conceptual framework that interprets the universe as an orderly system, in terms of space, matter, and movement, encompassing other entities such as humans, animals, spirits, and other supernatural beings [6]. In this view, the cosmos is inhabited by different subjects that are interconnected with one another [56]. Humans are seen as entities that are interconnected with a larger and broader life. The relationship is reciprocal; depending on the reaction of the cosmos or a part of it, it will affect other parts. In many beliefs, this understanding of cosmology gives rise to a deep ethic in how humans interact with their environment.

The function of cosmology is to guide humans in understanding their living space. Cosmology has basic principles regarding the elements of the universe in creating order and tranquility in life. In other words, cosmology is the study of understanding how the relationship between humans and nature on a small or large scale creates order within it [14]. The relationship tends to be dynamic, requiring responsibility, ethics, and reciprocity [29]. This encourages believers to always act with full obedience because they must pay attention to cosmic balance.

The development of the relationship between humans and nature can be classified into three stages. *First*, the mythological stage, where humans live in dependence on nature. This is because nature is perceived as a great force that cannot be controlled by humans and is integrated into the sacred rhythm of nature. *Second*, the ontological stage, where humans begin to separate themselves cognitively from nature by studying and developing natural philosophy. The second stage views the relationship between humans and nature as still being based on traditional values and harmony. *Third*, the functional stage, the relationship between humans and nature began to be technological and instrumental. Nature was positioned as an object that could be used to fulfill modern human life [25]. From these three stages, it can be understood that the relationship between humans and nature has undergone a fundamental shift over time in terms of attachment to nature.

Believers can be said to be part of indigenous communities and cosmological values. Believers have been globally recognized in shaping the ethical and spiritual foundations of nature conservation practices [8]. This view is certainly in line with eco-spirituality in contemporary environmental studies, which emphasizes mutual harmony between humans and nature. This view states that humans owe their existence to heaven and earth [59].

This knowledge comes from the practices of ancestral teachings, such as those practiced in several areas in Indonesia, such as the village of Dukuh in Garut Regency. The practice of *pamali* helps maintain ecological balance by fostering a respectful relationship with nature, which is seen as a divine creation [23]. In addition, the *barong wae* ritual in the Manggarai community embodies local wisdom in water management, as this ritual involves ethical and moral standards that guide the community in protecting water resources [33]. Furthermore, the study by Dawson *et al.* [9], found that conservation efforts are more effective when local communities, including active believers, are involved. The combination of traditional ecological knowledge and local institutions will lead to positive social and ecological outcomes. The values of gratitude, reciprocity, and service that they practice are very important for conservation efforts [52]. Thus, within this framework, the cosmology embraced

by believers has the potential to contribute to value-based environmental sustainability in Indonesia.

3.1.2 Social Structure and Customs Mediate Ecological Relations

Human awareness of the meaning of the universe is reflected not only in architectural forms and philosophical reflections, but also in the social order and value systems that govern life. Social structures and customs in society play a role in shaping and mediating the relationship between humans and nature. Every human action towards nature has social, spiritual, and ethical dimensions that are regulated by norms that exist within society [48]. Human actions and behaviors are shaped through daily interactions. With existing social structures, humans will be better able to control and manage the sustainability of nature itself.

Believers demonstrate a strong form of symbolic awareness through mythological practices that directly lead to the formation of a safe and sacred ecological space. With values that have been preserved for generations, believers establish social rules and laws holistically [54]. Protection of nature is not only based on modern ecological considerations, but is embedded in the value systems and customary norms that govern collective life. For believers, protecting nature is part of a code of ethics that must be followed. These practices are a form of environmental ethics that originate from culture and contain high spiritual and moral values [31]. The reciprocal relationship between humans and nature is considered sacred. This view is based on how harmony with nature is a reflection of oneself and the Creator. Violating nature means violating social and spiritual norms and will have consequences later on.

This is part of the unwritten customary norms that regulate individual behavior. These norms aim to guide social behavior, maintain order and harmony, identity and solidarity, teach values, and improve quality of life [53]. The norms will automatically be followed because they are deeply rooted in the social system. Individuals will tend to learn the existing rules through daily social interactions. This is especially true in the preservation of nature and the surrounding environment, which is deeply rooted in customs.

This traditional knowledge has been recognized as an important pillar in maintaining environmental sustainability while preserving the cultural heritage of indigenous communities. This inherited heritage takes the form of a deep understanding of local ecosystems, adaptation strategies, and natural resource management that have been practiced for generations [32]. Customary rules are not only interpreted as social norms, but also as ethical boundaries in managing the environment. This is evident in oral traditions, myths, and folklore, which function as a semiotic system for encoding ecological wisdom [12]. These oral traditions and rituals can be an important means for believers to not only remember but also actively practice and strengthen themselves spiritually and physically to ensure their continued survival and relevance in this era of rapid development.

There are several classifications of indigenous beliefs in Indonesia that generally cannot be separated from the social and customary structures that surround them, such as:

- a. Local beliefs or tribal religions such as Parmalin, Kaharingan, Sunda Wiwitan, and so on.
- b. Belief in God Almighty, such as Kejawen, Subud, Sapta Darma, and other mystical traditions.
- c. Followers of indigenous beliefs that are similar to or indicate religion, including religious sects and groups, such as the Ahmadiyya Congregation.

- d. Adherents of traditional beliefs that are mystical or occult in nature, such as traditional medicine and metaphysics [13].

These classifications emphasize that beliefs are a tradition that has been passed down from one generation to the next. Therefore, believers cannot be separated from society and have been ingrained since the time of their ancestors and passed down to the present day. As long as society exists, believers will continue to exist with the beliefs taught by their ancestors [49]. The real actualization of this is local wisdom, which can be understood as local ideas that are embedded in and followed by society. This local wisdom is good behavior when interacting with nature or the surrounding environment, taken from local customs [6]. Local wisdom that has long existed in society is an important part of controlling the balance of life in establishing relationships with the surrounding environment. Actions that are commonly practiced in society at large and passed down from generation to generation will grow into values that are upheld in everyday life.

3.1.3 Ecological Practices Emerge from Social Systems

Ecological practices among indigenous peoples do not exist as isolated technical activities, but arise from complex and meaningful social systems. Believers view nature as a dense and interconnected network. Ecological understanding is spread through oral tradition, and principles of nature conservation are always based on local knowledge [45]. The practices carried out show how believers interact with their environment; they are not merely a set of rules, but also a comprehensive cosmological understanding that places humans as part of nature.

This understanding is in line with what Western scholars have expressed regarding Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is defined as a collection of knowledge, practices, and beliefs that have developed through adaptive processes and have been passed down from generation to generation through cultural transmission that sees how humans relate to their environment. This knowledge is essentially a way of life, not just knowledge [22]. For believers, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is not only abstract knowledge, but also the foundation of life that guides actions or deeds towards nature.

The practices of believers in managing natural resources are based more on cultural values and underlying knowledge. The management system is guided by traditional knowledge and laws that lead to the observation of the sustainability of natural systems. Customary laws grow and develop organically within communities as a result of local wisdom passed down from generation to generation [16]. Customary law was born from thousands of years of experience, forming the morality, values, and traditional knowledge that make this law the main foundation of environmental management [5]. This long experience has taught us that knowledge about nature includes natural cycles, ecosystem regeneration, and the consequences of excessive exploitation of nature. Customary law is vital to a local wisdom-based management system that upholds the principle of sustainability.

This is because believers generally have strong social, cultural, and spiritual ties to the “land.” Their welfare, health, and livelihoods are closely related to environmental management activities [17]. As taught by Sedulur Sikep, who teaches the noble values of life, such as the value of love for the universe. In addition, traditions or customs that are still practiced include *deder* (prohibition of sitting for one night), *pasa ngrowot* (not eating rice and corn), the use of *cok bakal* (offerings) at the time of planting and harvesting, and performing *slametan* in the month of Sura as an expression of gratitude to God [11]. Overall, these are forms of symbiotic interaction

with nature that are the actualization of spiritual teachings and wisdom in ensuring ecological balance and maintaining the sustainability of the lives of believers.

In addition, there is the term *Pantrangan*, which has social and spiritual sanctions in Baduy society. *Pantrangan* refers to customary rules or prohibitions that must be obeyed by members of the Baduy community to maintain balance with nature, their ancestors, and their community, such as the prohibition of overexploiting nature, which would disturb the harmony of the cosmos maintained by their ancestors [24]. *Pantrangan* is inseparable from the goal of protecting nature. Nature is treated as a subject that should not be exploited and whose sustainability must be maintained.

3.2 Social-Spiritual Values and Environmental Conservation Practices

The basic belief of believers is that everything in this world is essentially one. All things are closely related to the cosmos and filled with deeply ingrained spiritual experiences. The goal is to achieve harmony and balance between macrocosmic and microcosmic life [27]. This balance will bring comfort to life. The relationship between humans and nature will lead to a reciprocal relationship because everything that exists is considered to be an inseparable part of a single entity in the course of life.

This is closely related to the concept of *memayu hayuning bawana*, which is one of the concepts held in achieving harmony. In practice, *memayu hayuning bawana* must be carried out based on *hamemasuh mamalaning bumi* or washing, purifying, and distancing oneself from human deeds and actions that violate the balance of nature and can destroy the environment [57]. This concept contains socio-spiritual values that are essential in maintaining the balance of nature. Nature will be well preserved if humans are able to control their actions.

As in the Sunda Wiwitan teachings, such as *silih asih* (mutual love), *silih asah* (mutual sharing of knowledge), and *silih asuh* (mutual guidance) are ethics of life that can be applied in the current context of environmental degradation, social conflict, and spiritual crisis [39]. Similarly, local wisdom in the teachings of sapta darma reflects the values of balance, simplicity, and respect for ancestors. Sapta Dharma reflects a combination of local values and the search for a deeper meaning in life. The values practiced through rituals are a way to achieve harmony with nature and the Creator [50]. The concept of simplicity that is practiced promotes the reduction of excessive use. In addition, respect for ancestors often takes the form of rituals that are not only ceremonial but also serve as a collective reminder of humanity's dependence on nature and the obligation to preserve it.

This view is inseparable from the values contained in the life of the nation and state, as outlined in Pancasila as the foundation of the state, especially the first principle. This principle has an inclusive meaning that encompasses traditional beliefs that teach noble values and respect for nature [47]. This is closely related to environmental ethics, which are not only understood as ecological norms but also reflect the values of harmony and balance between humans and nature from generation to generation [26]. In addition, *welas asih* (compassion) is another value held by believers. *Welas asih* emphasizes the importance of inner transformation in achieving personal growth and spiritual enlightenment in maintaining harmony between humans and the universe. *Welas asih* is an important value in establishing relationships between fellow creatures to bring about reciprocity in accordance with one's actions. This is nothing less than a form of respect for others by emphasizing balance and harmony.

3.3 Social and political challenges faced by indigenous peoples in environmental conservation

Despite their enormous potential, indigenous peoples still face various social and political challenges that hinder their active role as socio-ecological actors. These challenges stem not only from structural limitations but also from a historical legacy of marginalization and stigma that has placed them on the fringes of social and governmental systems.

3.3.1 Social Challenges Facing Believers

One of the challenges faced by believers in expressing their values and teachings in environmental conservation is the continued existence of negative stigma and social discrimination against them. Believers in Indonesia are often viewed as primitive, irreligious, and even heretical [35]. This stigma is accompanied by social exclusion from various public services that should be accessible to all without discrimination [36]. Similarly, these negative stereotypes also occur in schools, where Abdillah *et al.*[2], findings show microaggressions against students who are believers, such as cornering words, demeaning humor, and others, can rise to the level of psychological trauma based on the cumulative effect over time. This hinders their ability to express the values and teachings of their ancestors in society [51]. Many people are unaware that the spiritual system of indigenous beliefs has strong ecological values, which could actually be an alternative in responding to the current ecological crisis.

Belief groups maintain traditional teaching systems inherited from their ancestors, which are also subject to the threats of modernization and globalization. The review by Abas *et al.*[1], highlights the importance of integrating local policies into a scientific framework to address sustainable development by 2030, ensuring that these practices are preserved and adapted to contemporary challenges. Furthermore, the lack of recognition and support for traditional conservation methods within the global conservation framework, which is largely based on Western scientific approaches, weakens their involvement even though their practices have ecological, sociocultural, and economic relevance and contribute to conservation [37]. The traditional ecological knowledge possessed by indigenous peoples is also very important for adaptive place-based environmental management, but ignoring the rights of indigenous peoples, such as skepticism about their knowledge and insufficient funding, will certainly obscure their role in environmental management [21].

3.3.2 Political Challenges Facing Believers

Of course, these social challenges are closely related to the political obstacles faced by believers in environmental conservation. Although there has been legal progress, particularly through Constitutional Court Decision No. 97/PUU-XIV/2016. However, this recognition has not been fully implemented in the environmental governance system. Areas that have sacred and spiritually important values for believers, such as sacred forests, worship sites, or ancestral springs, are not legally protected. The lack of formal legal recognition and protection makes sacred sites vulnerable to exploitation of resources and land conversion for industry, agriculture, and urbanization [42]. This not only causes conflict between communities and external entities but also increases environmental degradation in the sacred spaces of communities, including indigenous peoples [43]. Thus, when indigenous communities do not have legal status over their customary territories or sacred sites, collective conservation efforts through customary prohibitions and spiritual rituals become fragile and easily ignored by external actors, both private and state.

Furthermore, due to widespread discrimination, indigenous peoples have not been given sufficient space in decision-making forums, including those concerning

environmental issues, at both the local and national levels [15]. Their political involvement in customary institutions, environmental organizations, or natural resource management forums is still very limited. This means that the aspirations and local knowledge of indigenous peoples are not facilitated in public policy. This imbalance is exacerbated by the absence of local spiritual values in education curricula, the media, and scientific discourse. This creates a gap between modern science and the local knowledge systems that believers have long used to maintain ecological balance.

4. Conclusion

Believers in the socio-ecological paradigm in Indonesia show that: *first*, the cosmological views and social structures of believers can fundamentally shape socio-ecological relationships that refer to the balance between humans and nature. The cosmology of believers views nature as an inseparable object and is capable of fostering a sense of belonging and responsibility. The communal and customary-based social structure can effectively internalize the interactions carried out. *Second*, the spiritual and social values in indigenous beliefs have been proven to support environmental practices. Local knowledge passed down from generation to generation has created a network of life in understanding everything, both in terms of actions and behavior in utilizing nature. *Third*, although the socio-ecological model of indigenous beliefs is very valuable, its contribution or actual practice in nature conservation still faces social and political challenges. These challenges include negative stigma, discrimination, and other issues that hinder and limit the scope of contribution to the environment.

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