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## **Spiritual and Ecological Relations: An Ecotheological Analysis of the Local Wisdom of the Sembalun Community in Environmental Conservation**

Diki Wahyudi

[dikiwahyudi@uinmataram.ac.id](mailto:dikiwahyudi@uinmataram.ac.id)

Universitas Islam Negeri Mataram

### Abstract

This study examines the relationship between spiritual dimensions and ecological practices within the local wisdom of the Sembalun community in East Lombok Regency as a community-based environmental conservation mechanism. Employing an ecotheological framework, the research explores how sacred cosmology, traditional rituals, and social governance function as a holistic and sustainable system of conservation. A qualitative method with an ecological ethnography design is applied through participant observation, in-depth interviews with customary leaders, ritual practitioners, farmers, and village administrators, as well as documentation studies of customary texts and village regulations. The findings indicate that the Sembalun community perceives nature as a sacred living entity, manifested in the concept of *Gumi Sasak*, ecological spatial zoning (protected forests, sacred areas, and productive lands), and rituals such as *Mepanten*, *Environmental Nyepi*, and periods of restriction (*Sasi*). These practices empirically contribute to forest cover preservation, water source stability, and agroecosystem resilience. Ecotheological analysis reveals that the integration of spirituality and environmental ethics within local wisdom offers a relational model that challenges modern anthropocentric paradigms. This study recommends institutional recognition of local knowledge systems in environmental governance policies, as well as strengthening intergenerational knowledge transmission amid the pressures of tourism and climate change.

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### ARTICEL INFO

#### Articel history:

Received 01, 04, 2026

Revised 11, 04, 2026

Accepted 12, 04, 2026

Available online June 06, 2026

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Keywords: *Ecotheology, local wisdom, environmental conservation, Sembalun community, spiritual-ecological relations.*



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## **INTRODUCTION**

The contemporary ecological crisis has prompted the search for conservation approaches that are not solely grounded in technical-scientific frameworks, but also incorporate cultural, ethical, and spiritual dimensions. Ecotheology emerges as an interdisciplinary field that bridges theological-spiritual reflection with ecological responsibility, emphasizing that the relationship between humans and nature cannot be separated from sacred meaning, moral values, and cultural identity (Berry, 1988; Tucker & Grim, 2001). In the Indonesian context, local wisdom has long been recognized as an adaptive and sustainable system of environmental governance, although it is often marginalized by uniform, top-down conservation approaches (Satria, 2015; Koentjaraningrat, 2009).

The Sembalun community, located on the southern slopes of Mount Rinjani in East Lombok, possesses a long-standing tradition of managing mountain ecosystems, forests, and water resources through customary norms integrated with spiritual beliefs. This local knowledge system includes sacred zoning, nature thanksgiving rituals, temporal restrictions on resource exploitation, and customary sanctions for ecological violations. However, modernization, the commercialization of tourism, and climate change have begun to erode the coherence of this system, while academic literature that specifically analyzes the spiritual-ecological relationship in Sembalun through an ecotheological lens remains limited.

Based on this gap, this study aims to: (1) document the forms of local wisdom practiced by the Sembalun community in environmental conservation; (2) analyze the relationship between spiritual dimensions and ecological practices through an ecotheological framework; and (3) identify the theoretical and policy implications of these findings. This study is expected to contribute to the discourse on contextual ecotheology, the recognition of indigenous epistemologies in environmental policy, and efforts to preserve cultural heritage in alignment with ecological sustainability.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative approach with an ecological ethnography design, enabling an in-depth understanding of the cultural-spiritual relationship between the community and its environment. The research is conducted in Sembalun Bumbung Village and Sembalun Lawang Village, East Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara. Data collection techniques include: (1) participant observation conducted over four months during the planting season and periods of customary rituals; (2) semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 18 key informants, including customary leaders (*pemangku*), spiritual figures (*dukuh/pemangku gumi*), farmers, village institutional administrators, and

youth group representatives; and (3) documentation studies of customary regulations (*awig-awig*), ritual records, village policies, and relevant secondary literature.

Data analysis is conducted using an interpretative thematic approach, involving stages of transcription, open coding, thematic categorization, and ecotheological interpretation. Data validity is ensured through source triangulation, method triangulation, and member checking with key informants. The researcher also applies critical reflexivity to minimize interpretative bias. Ethical considerations include obtaining informed consent, respecting sacred knowledge that must not be disclosed, and committing to sharing a summary of the findings with the local community.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Sacred Cosmology and Ecological Spatial Mapping: Beyond the Nature–Culture Dualism**

The Sembalun community constructs nature through a holistic cosmological lens, in which the concept of *Gumi Sasak* is understood not as a material object separate from humans, but as a living network imbued with spiritual forces (such as *penunggu gumi*, *balian gumi*, and ancestral energies). Traditional spatial mapping divides the landscape into three zones: *Hutan Larangan* (sacred forest areas in the upper slopes), Transitional Zones (agroforestry and limited shifting cultivation), and Settlement and Productive Land Areas. This zoning theoretically engages in critical dialogue with Descola (2013), who critiques Western naturalism as an ontological construct that separates “nature” and “culture.” From an ecotheological perspective, this practice reflects the notion of *sacred geography* (Tucker, 2003), where physical space is not morally neutral but embedded with transcendent meaning that regulates ethical boundaries of resource use.

These findings also reinforce Ingold’s (2000) argument on *dwelling* as a mode of being in the world that emphasizes relationality rather than domination. In contrast to modern conservation approaches that frame forests as “natural capital,” the Sembalun community positions sacred zones as entities possessing *more-than-human agency*. Thus, customary zoning is not merely a technical conservation tool, but a manifestation of indigenous epistemology that rejects Cartesian dualism. This dialogue confirms Sallie McFague’s (1993) claim that ecological crises are rooted in theological imaginaries that separate Creator, humans, and the earth; in contrast, Sembalun cosmology offers a relational ontology in which humans are part of the web of life rather than its masters.

## **Rituals and Time-Based Conservation Practices: Ecological Liturgy and Adaptive Calendars**

Customary rituals such as *Mepanten*, Environmental *Nyepi*, and the *Sasi* system function as temporal regulatory mechanisms in resource use. *Mepanten*, as an expression of gratitude and symbolic return of “nature’s share,” can be interpreted through Robin Wall Kimmerer’s (2013) concept of reciprocity in human–nature relations. This ritual is not merely a devotional act, but an ecological pedagogy that teaches ethics of giving and receiving, while internalizing sustainability principles through sacred repetition.

Environmental *Nyepi* and *Sasi* operate empirically as adaptive ecological calendars, aligning with Berkes’ (2012) concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), where rituals serve as reminders of regeneration cycles and ecological limits. In ecotheological discourse, Berry (1988) describes such practices as “earth liturgy,” integrating spirituality with natural rhythms. The Sembalun case confirms that rituals function as forms of temporal governance that prevent overexploitation, while challenging modern narratives that treat time as a linear commodity for economic accumulation (Harvey, 2005).

This theoretical dialogue also highlights tensions between instrumental and relational approaches to environmental management. While conventional ecology often views rituals as “control variables” or “cultural remnants,” ecotheological analysis reveals them as forms of ecological pedagogy that bind communities to moral responsibility toward future generations and non-human entities. This aligns with Leonardo Boff’s (1995) argument that authentic spirituality does not reject materiality but celebrates it as a manifestation of sacredness worthy of protection.

## **Social Norms and Communal Governance: From Commons to Ecological Pluriverse**

Local wisdom is operationalized through *awig-awig* (customary regulations), collectively enforced through social sanctions, customary fines, or ritual purification for violators. Institutionally, this system resembles Ostrom’s (1990) principles of common-pool resource management, such as local monitoring, graduated sanctions, and participatory conflict resolution. However, ecotheological analysis reveals a fundamental distinction: while Ostrom’s framework is grounded in instrumental rationality and economic incentives, Sembalun’s *awig-awig* is rooted in a moral ecology that interprets ecological violations as both social and spiritual transgressions.

This aligns with Escobar’s (2018) critique of universal resource management frameworks that overlook the “pluriverse,” or diverse ways of knowing and governing nature. Within the context of Indonesian ecotheology, Mangunwijaya (1995) emphasizes that indigenous spirituality does not separate

the sacred from the profane; environmental conservation becomes a form of lived religious practice and a subtle resistance to the extractive logic of global capitalism. Thus, communal governance in Sembalun represents a model of relational governance that integrates distributive justice, ecological sustainability, and transcendental responsibility.

This dialogue also critiques fortress-style conservation approaches that marginalize indigenous rights and knowledge (Dowie, 2011). The *awig-awig* system demonstrates that effective conservation does not require separating humans from nature, but rather strengthening ethical and spiritual bonds that sustain long-term ecological balance. Here, ecotheology functions as a critical bridge that validates local knowledge without romanticizing it, while recognizing the need for adaptive transformation in the face of contemporary ecological pressures.

### **Ecological Impacts and Ecotheological Interpretation: Reconstructing the Human–Nature Paradigm**

Field data indicate a positive correlation between local wisdom practices and ecological indicators: forest cover in protected zones remains above 85%, traditional water sources have not experienced severe drought over the past five years, and local biodiversity remains relatively stable. From an ecotheological perspective, these findings affirm three key principles: (1) relational ontology, aligning with Lynn White Jr.'s (1967) critique of Western anthropocentrism, yet moving beyond it by proposing kinship-based relations rather than hierarchical stewardship; (2) sacred responsibility ethics, which Boff (1995) terms *ecospirituality*, where ecological crises are understood as spiritual crises requiring ethical transformation and solidarity with the earth; and (3) critique of modern dualism, reinforced by Latour's (2004) concept of the "parliament of things," yet embodied in Sembalun through customary practices that implicitly recognize nature's agency as a partner in sustaining life.

This theoretical dialogue also highlights the relevance of contextual ecotheology in the Global South. While Western ecotheology often remains confined to the dichotomy of doctrinal reform versus social practice, Sembalun's local wisdom demonstrates an organic integration of cosmology, ethics, and governance. This supports Aloysius Budi P. (2019), who argues that ecotheology in Indonesia must be "contextual-narrative" rather than "abstract-dogmatic," as spirituality is lived in practice rather than confined to texts.

Contemporary challenges—such as generational shifts, tourism pressures, and changing rainfall patterns—underscore the need for an adaptive rather than nostalgic ecotheological approach. Revitalizing local wisdom requires an equitable dialogue between indigenous knowledge and ecological science, recognizing that spirituality is not an obstacle to progress but an ethical

foundation for sustainability. In this framework, ecotheology does not merely “green religion,” but reconstructs the human–nature paradigm based on sacredness, community, and inclusive ecological justice.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study concludes that the local wisdom of the Sembalun community is not merely a cultural tradition, but an ecological knowledge system organically integrated with spiritual dimensions. Through sacred cosmology, temporal rituals, customary norms, and communal governance, the community has successfully maintained the ecological balance of the Rinjani slopes across generations. Ecotheological analysis reveals that the spiritual–ecological relationship in Sembalun reflects a relational ontology and an ethic of responsibility that offers a paradigmatic alternative to technical-anthropocentric conservation models.

The limitations of this study lie in its specific geographical and temporal scope, thus generalization to other contexts requires broader comparative research. Policy recommendations include: (1) formal recognition of customary zoning systems within regional spatial planning; (2) integration of local wisdom into environmental education programs and community-based ecotourism; and (3) participatory scientific assistance to adapt rituals and customary norms to the dynamics of climate change. Future research is recommended to adopt mixed-method approaches to quantitatively measure ecological impacts, as well as to explore interreligious ecotheological dialogue within Indonesia’s pluralistic context.

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