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THE SACRED MEANING OF FORESTS IN A COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTHEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN TELUK KEPAYANG VILLAGE, SOUTH KALIMANTAN

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Abstract

Forest conservation has become an increasingly urgent ecological concern and is often discussed within normative theological frameworks. However, limited research has examined how forest communities interpret and relate to the forest. This article analyzes how forest communities construct meanings and relational practices toward the forest within a community-based ecotheological framework. This study employs a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis among members of the forest community in Teluk Kepayang Village, South Kalimantan. Data were analyzed thematically through data condensation, categorization, and interpretation. The findings indicate that forest communities perceive the forest as a living space, a source of livelihood, and a sacred space. This collective ecological awareness aligns with creation theology and integral ecology, emphasizing the interconnectedness between humans and creation. However, this awareness is in tension with economic pressures and weak institutional support, preventing it from developing into stable and sustainable collective practices. Conceptually, this article expands community-based ecotheology by arguing that the formation of ecological subjects depends not only on faith-based awareness but also on strengthened social and economic structures, sustained community accompaniment, and cross-sector collaboration. This study contributes to contextual Catholic ecotheology in Indonesia by engaging in dialogical exchange with the lived realities of forest communities.

Keywords: ecotheology; forest communities; integral ecology; creation theology

Abstrak

Pelestarian hutan merupakan kebutuhan ekologis yang semakin mendesak dan sering dibahas dalam kerangka teologis normatif, namun belum banyak penelitian mengenai pemaknaan masyarakat hutan terhadap hutan. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis pemaknaan dan praktik relasi masyarakat hutan dengan hutan, serta merefleksikannya dalam kerangka ekoteologi berbasis komunitas. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan teknik pengumpulan data berupa wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi, dan dokumentasi terhadap masyarakat hutan di Desa Teluk Kepayang, Kalimantan Selatan. Data dianalisis secara tematik melalui kondensasi, kategorisasi dan interpretasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan masyarakat hutan memaknai hutan

sebagai ruang hidup, sumber penghidupan, dan ruang sakral yang patut dihormati. Kesadaran ekologis kolektif tersebut selaras dengan prinsip teologi penciptaan dan ekologi integral yang menekankan keterhubungan manusia dengan ciptaan. Namun, kesadaran tersebut berada dalam ketegangan dengan tekanan ekonomi dan lemahnya dukungan kelembagaan, sehingga belum sepenuhnya berkembang menjadi praktik kolektif yang stabil dan berkelanjutan. Secara konseptual, artikel ini memperluas pemahaman ekoteologi berbasis komunitas dengan menegaskan pembentukan subjek ekologis tidak hanya bergantung pada kesadaran iman, tetapi pada penguatan struktur sosial, ekonomi, pendampingan komunitas yang berkelanjutan, serta kolaborasi lintas pemangku kepentingan. Artikel ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan ekoteologi Katolik kontekstual di Indonesia yang lebih dialogis terhadap realitas masyarakat hutan.
***Kata Kunci**: ekoteologi; masyarakat hutan; ekologi integral; teologi penciptaan*

INTRODUCTION

The ecological crisis constitutes one of the most pressing challenges confronting the contemporary world. Over the past several decades, numerous scientific studies have demonstrated increasing pressure on ecosystems, declining biodiversity, and the reduced resilience of ecological systems, particularly forests, soils, and aquatic environments, resulting from production and consumption patterns driven by an ideology of limitless growth. This crisis is not merely biophysical; it is also embedded in global political-economic structures that promote excessive exploitation of natural resources, thereby exacerbating ecological imbalance and social inequality.

In Indonesia, the ecological crisis is manifested in the accelerating rate of deforestation, forest degradation, and widespread ecosystem damage resulting from extractive-based development models. The state's structural dependence on extractive sectors, such as mining, monoculture plantations, and large-scale forest exploitation, has intensified environmental degradation and triggered socio-ecological conflicts across various regions. Flooding events in Sumatra, accompanied by the discovery of large timber logs in December 2025, indicate the disruption of forest functions, particularly in regulating hydrological systems. Data from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (KLHK), as reported by CNBC

Indonesia, show that as of September 2025, Indonesia's deforestation rate had reached 166,450 hectares (CNBC Indonesia, 2025).

A similar phenomenon has occurred in South Kalimantan. Floods inundating dozens of villages and urban wards, affecting hundreds of thousands of residents, illustrate how ecological pressures exacerbate social vulnerability (Detik.com, 2026). Records from WALHI South Kalimantan indicate that more than half of the province's territory has been allocated for mining concessions, plantation estates, and forest utilization permits. In contrast, primary forest cover continues to decline (Wicaksono, 2025). The flood cases in Sumatra and South Kalimantan demonstrate that Indonesia's ecological crisis cannot be understood merely as a consequence of climatic variability; rather, it is also the outcome of political-economic relations that shape patterns of natural resource governance.

As a country endowed with vast tropical forest areas, Indonesia faces significant challenges in preserving forest sustainability amid development pressures and economic demands. Forest degradation not only threatens ecological balance but also directly affects communities whose livelihoods, social identities, and cultural practices are deeply intertwined with forest ecosystems.

The ecological crisis, therefore, cannot be understood solely as a technical or scientific problem; it must also be approached as an ethical and spiritual issue concerning humanity's relationship with God, with one another, and with creation. In the Christian theological perspective, nature is not merely an economic resource but a sacred sphere of God's creation. The Book of Genesis affirms that humanity was placed in the garden "to till it and keep it" (Gen. 2:15), indicating a participatory and responsible mandate of stewardship rather than domination or exploitation.

In practice, however, this theological mandate has often been misinterpreted, leading to an anthropocentric posture that positions humanity at the center and as the sovereign of nature. Lynn White's critique (1967) prompted renewed reflection on the meaning of creation

and humanity's place within it. In this regard, Aquinas' concept of *Vestigia Dei* underscores that creation possesses intrinsic value and purpose embedded within the order of creation itself; its existence is not solely for human benefit or economic utility (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.45, a.5, ad 3). This reflective framework provides the theological foundation for examining the relationship between humanity and nature in the present study.

Theological reflection on the environmental crisis has continued to develop alongside growing awareness that environmental degradation is not merely a technical or economic issue, but also a matter of values, faith, and ethics. Within this perspective, ecotheology emerges as an effort to understand more holistically the relationship among God, humanity, and the natural world. Ecotheology interprets the ecological crisis as a crisis of faith and ethics arising from humanity's failure to comprehend its proper place within creation. Consequently, it calls for ecological conversion, a transformation in ways of thinking, acting, and relating to the natural world as an expression of faithful responsibility.

Subsequently, ecotheology has evolved not only as a theoretical discourse but also as a contextual and practical approach. In line with this development, community-based ecotheology has emerged as an approach that positions local communities as primary agents of ecological reflection and action. This perspective begins from the recognition that ecological crises are experienced concretely by local communities in their daily lives. Therefore, theological and ethical responses to such crises must be rooted in the lived experiences, values, and practices of the communities themselves.

Within the context of South Kalimantan, the significance of this approach becomes increasingly evident. The region has been subjected to intense ecological pressure from the expansion of extractive industries, which have transformed forests and reshaped the living spaces of local communities. For forest-dependent communities in Teluk Kepayang Village, the forest is not merely an economic resource; it constitutes an integral dimension of life that shapes identity, social relations, and spiritual practices. This

relationship demonstrates that the forest is not simply an object of utilization, but a sacred space that sustains collective existence. For this reason, the lived experiences of the forest community in Teluk Kepayang Village are crucial for enriching ecotheological discourse, particularly in understanding how the forest is construed as a sacred space within communal life.

Previous studies have explored the relationship between humans and nature (Aritonang et al., 2023), ecological faith education (Jimmy, 2024), and the institutional role of the Church (Crespany & Imelda, 2025). However, most of these studies remain focused on conceptual reflection or institutional engagement, without sufficiently examining how forest communities themselves interpret and experience the forest as a reflective subject.

This study seeks to address this gap by foregrounding the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of forest communities as the locus of theological reflection. By situating the research within the forest community of Teluk Kepayang Village, South Kalimantan, this study not only examines a local case but also advances a community-based theological framework. It argues that forest conservation is not solely an ecological concern; it also entails the restoration of social, spiritual, and ecological relationships, in which the forest is understood as a sacred sphere of God's creation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs an interpretive qualitative method to understand how forest communities in Teluk Kepayang Village construe the forest as a sacred space within their everyday lives. This approach was selected to focus on a particular community with a distinct social, cultural, and ecological context, thereby enabling an in-depth exploration of communal experiences, values, and practices (Creswell, 2014).

The research participants include customary leaders, local environmental activists, and community members residing within or around forest areas whose livelihoods depend on forest resources. Informants were selected purposively for their direct

involvement in forest utilization and management practices and for their knowledge of cultural and customary values associated with the forest.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted to elicit participants' subjective interpretations of the forest, their lived experiences, and their perspectives on forest conservation and utilization practices. Participant observation enabled the researcher to directly observe daily interactions between the community and the forest, including economic activities, customary rituals, and community-based forest management practices. Document analysis complemented field data by reviewing relevant reports, records, and scholarly literature related to the research context.

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman, which involves data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2014). During the data condensation phase, interview statements reflecting community–forest relationships were selected and categorized. For example, expressions such as "the forest as a dwelling place," "the forest as a source of life," "the forest as a livelihood," and "the forest as ancestral heritage" were identified as units of meaning and subsequently grouped into thematic categories, including the meaning of the forest, the sacredness of the forest, and forest management practices. These themes were then interpreted in dialogue with a community-based ecotheological framework to elucidate how concrete communal experiences serve as the foundation for theological reflection.
Data validity was ensured through source and methodological triangulation by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and documentation. Furthermore, the study adhered to the ethical principles of qualitative research, including obtaining informed consent from participants, maintaining the confidentiality of respondents' identities, and respecting the customary values and cultural traditions of the forest community.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Forest Community's Interpretation of the Forest

The findings indicate that the forest community in Teluk Kepayang Village attributes diverse meanings to the forest, shaped by lived experience, levels of economic dependence, and long-standing historical and cultural relationships with the surrounding environment. Statements expressed by informants during interviews—such as "the forest is a friend," "the forest is where we find food," and "the forest is where we live"—demonstrate that the forest is not perceived merely as an economic space, but as an integral dimension of social life and communal identity.

Beyond functioning as a living space, the forest is also understood as a source of livelihood, providing non-timber forest products, agricultural land, and other resources necessary for daily subsistence. One informant stated, "Take from the forest only as needed." This expression reflects an instrumental relationship between humans and the forest that is not inherently exploitative, as it reveals an awareness of limits and reasonable boundaries of utilization that are non-destructive to the forest's sustainability.

These articulated meanings reflect an underlying consciousness that human beings are part of creation and live in mutual dependence with the natural world. Such a relationship resonates with a theological understanding that positions humanity as steward of creation rather than its absolute ruler. Nevertheless, the study also identifies tensions between the responsibility of stewardship and the economic pressures of meeting daily needs, which, in practice, often place community members in an ethical and existential dilemma.

Perceptions of the Sacredness of the Forest and Local Cultural Practices

The interview findings indicate that the community's understanding of the forest extends beyond its economic and social functions. Several informants stated, "The forest is a sacred place; it must not be treated carelessly." This perception suggests that the forest is regarded as a space endowed with spiritual dimensions and sacred value. Such understanding is embodied in a local cultural

practice known as *adat aroh*, a set of customary norms and rituals regulating the relationship between humans and the forest. The *adat aroh* tradition is typically expressed through prayers and ritual offerings performed before engaging in activities in the forest, as a way of seeking permission and expressing reverence for it.

Customary prohibitions also exist against cutting certain trees, particularly large trees that host honeybee nests. These restrictions reflect an internalized ecological consciousness embedded within local tradition, where the forest is understood not merely as an economic object but as an entity possessing inherent value and dignity. Such customary practices and prohibitions demonstrate a sacred interpretation of the forest that is enacted and transmitted through collective social mechanisms.

From Durkheim's perspective, that which has been sacralized cannot be treated instrumentally without violating the moral order of the community (Émile Durkheim, 1976). Accordingly, these customary prohibitions may be interpreted as expressions of collective morality that link ecological sustainability with social cohesion, rendering forest preservation a shared moral responsibility.

Within the framework of Christian theology, this understanding resonates with the concept of *vestigia Dei*, which holds that creation bears the traces of God's presence and therefore possesses intrinsic value worthy of reverence (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*). The practice of *adat aroh* is thus not merely a local tradition, but can be interpreted as a contextual theological consciousness that aligns with the Christian vision of creation. The integration of customary values and theological reflection strengthens an ecological ethic rooted in the community's lived social experience.

However, this study also observes a significant weakening of the *adat aroh* tradition. The diminishing role of customary leaders, many of whom have passed away without adequate succession, has hindered the transmission of traditional values and norms to younger generations. Consequently, the understanding of the forest's sacredness has become

increasingly diverse and is no longer collectively embodied within the community. From a Durkheimian perspective, this condition may be interpreted as the weakening of social institutions that sustain collective consciousness. When rituals and norms are no longer consistently practiced, the sacred meaning of the forest becomes fragmented and loses its social binding force.

This situation echoes the reflections articulated in *Laudato Si'*, which suggest that such conditions reflect a relationship between humanity and nature that has not yet been fully restored. Pope Francis emphasizes that the ecological crisis is rooted in a crisis of relationships—with God, with others, and with the natural world. When social and cultural values weaken, nature tends to be perceived in purely functional and economic terms (*Laudato Si'*, art. 139). Therefore, the weakening of *adat aroh* practices underscores the importance of restoring social and cultural values as an integral dimension of forest conservation efforts.

Forest Management and Utilization Practices

In their daily lives, the forest community of Teluk Kepayang Village demonstrates efforts to manage and care for the forest, though these remain limited and largely rooted in communal awareness. Forest utilization is generally carried out modestly and regulated through unwritten norms collectively agreed upon, such as the principle of "taking timber or forest products only as needed, without destroying everything." This form of management reflects the presence of internal social control functioning as a restraining mechanism against excessive exploitation.

Nevertheless, the study also identifies small-scale illegal practices, particularly unauthorized mining activities that pose potential environmental risks. Within the community, perceptions of these practices are not uniform. Some residents express concern regarding their environmental impact, while others regard them as an unavoidable economic option. Violations of communal agreements are typically addressed through verbal admonitions by customary leaders or respected elders, rather than the

imposition of formal sanctions. This condition indicates that existing social control mechanisms remain insufficiently robust to prevent long-term forest degradation.

The findings concerning forest management based on unwritten norms suggest that the community possesses an emerging awareness of the importance of sustainability. The presence of internal social control reflects shared values that function as moral reference points in the use of natural resources. However, the informal and legally unrecognized nature of such controls renders them vulnerable to transgression, particularly under conditions of heightened economic pressure.

From an ecotheological perspective, these findings affirm that the ecological crisis is not merely a technical issue of environmental management; it also reveals a crisis of values, ethical consciousness, and human-nature relationships. The weak enforcement of both customary and formal norms underscores the need to strengthen social structures and provide sustained accompaniment so that ecological values may be consistently internalized and enacted within the community.

Forest Communities as Subjects of Community-Based Ecotheology

Findings from interviews and observations indicate that the community in Teluk Kepayang Village generally possesses a collective awareness of the importance of forest preservation. Nearly all informants affirmed that "the forest must be protected," suggesting that ecological values have become embedded within the community's shared consciousness. Nevertheless, this awareness frequently encounters pressing economic constraints. As previously discussed regarding unauthorized forest utilization practices, those involved are not necessarily indifferent to sustainability; rather, their actions are often shaped by limited economic alternatives. This tension suggests that the primary issue is not the absence of moral awareness. However, there are structural economic limitations and insufficient social support systems that would enable such values to be consistently realized.

Field data further reveal that external actors had previously engaged in community assistance programs. However, these initiatives were discontinued due to changes in leadership and policy. One resident remarked, “There used to be a community assistance program, but not anymore.” This statement underscores the extent to which the sustainability of collective action depends upon stable structural support. The lack of sustained accompaniment from external stakeholders, whether governmental institutions, religious organizations, or civil society groups, constitutes a significant obstacle to the development of the community’s role as a collective agent of forest conservation. Although ecological awareness is present, it has not yet matured into a sufficiently structured and institutionalized social practice.

The community’s collective consciousness regarding forest preservation reflects an orientation toward the common good. In Thomas Aquinas’ moral theology, ethical action is not merely an individual endeavor but is ordered toward the *bonum commune*, the common good, realized through structured social life. Law, policy, and social institutions play a crucial role in directing human action toward this shared good (*Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 90, a. 2). In the context of the forest community of Teluk Kepayang. In contrast, awareness of the need to preserve the forest is evident; however, the absence of adequate institutional support hinders the sustainable embodiment of this value.

This situation may be further interpreted through the framework of *lex naturalis*, understood as humanity’s rational participation in divine law, enabling persons to discern the order of creation and to act in accordance with the moral structure embedded within it (*Summa Theologiae* I–II, q.91, a.2). However, the economic pressures faced by residents have prevented this awareness from developing into a collective *habitus*—a stable disposition formed through repeated actions within communal life (*Summa Theologiae* I–II, q.49, a.1). Thus, the core challenge lies not in the absence of ecological values, but in the lack of social structures necessary for those values to evolve into consistent,

stable, and sustainable communal practices.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study demonstrates that the relationship between the forest community of Teluk Kepayang Village and the forest is characterized by a strong ecological consciousness, yet marked by tension arising from economic pressures and weak institutional support. The findings indicate that awareness of the need to protect the forest does not automatically translate into sustainable collective practice. Accordingly, this research identifies what may be termed a “constrained consciousness”, a condition in which the community morally affirms ecological values. However, these values remain only partially realized due to structural social and economic limitations.

The community's ecological awareness requires institutional support and viable economic alternatives to sustain collective action. In this context, the roles of the church, government, and other institutions are essential in strengthening community capacity, providing economic accompaniment, and creating intergenerational spaces for dialogue. Community-based ecotheology, therefore, should not be understood merely as theological reflection on the sacredness of the forest as God’s creation, but as a collective praxis that bridges faith, social structures, and ecological justice within the community's lived realities.

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