

LOCAL WISDOM IN THE HISTORICAL FORMATION OF ECOTHEOLOGY DISCOURSE IN SOUTH SULAWESI



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Abstract

This study examines the historical formation of ecotheological discourse in South Sulawesi by emphasizing the role of local wisdom rooted in the relationship between religion, humans, and nature, as well as its encounters with Abrahamic religions. Accordingly, the focus of this study is *adat* (customary traditions) and their dynamics within a historical context, including colonial understandings of local religions. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method with a literature review approach, supported by historical analysis to trace religious conceptions of the relationship between humans and nature. The findings show that local wisdom embedded in indigenous/ancestral religion systems plays an important role in shaping ethical relationships between humans and the natural environment, which later interacted with the theological frameworks of Abrahamic religions (such as Christianity). These interactions produced distinctive forms of discourse, reflecting both continuity and religious adaptation. Ultimately, this study affirms that ecotheology in South Sulawesi is not a new construct but a historically rooted discourse that remains relevant to the development of environmental ethics grounded in local cultural traditions.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji pembentukan historis diskursus ekoteologi di Sulawesi Selatan dengan menekankan peran kearifan lokal yang berakar pada relasi antara agama, manusia, dan alam, serta perjumpaannya dengan agama samawi. Oleh karena itu, fokus kajian ini mencakup adat dan dinamika yang menyertainya dalam konteks sejarah, termasuk pemahaman kolonial terhadap agama-agama lokal itu sendiri. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan pendekatan kajian pustaka, yang didukung oleh analisis sejarah untuk menelusuri konsepsi-konsepsi keagamaan mengenai relasi antara manusia dan alam. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa kearifan lokal yang tertanam dalam sistem kepercayaan lokal atau leluhur memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk relasi etis antara manusia dan alam, yang kemudian berinteraksi dengan kerangka teologis agama-agama samawi (seperti Kristen). Interaksi tersebut melahirkan bentuk-bentuk diskursus yang khas, yang mencerminkan kesinambungan sekaligus adaptasi keagamaan. Pada akhirnya, studi ini menegaskan bahwa ekoteologi di Sulawesi Selatan bukanlah sebuah konstruksi baru, melainkan diskursus yang berakar secara historis dan tetap relevan bagi pengembangan etika lingkungan berbasis tradisi budaya lokal.

INTRODUCTION

Ecotheology is a field of study that seems quite familiar to explore nowadays, but it was different during the early emergence of this issue. Ecotheology itself is a study that raises issues concerning religion and ecology/nature (the environment). The rise of this field shows that the discourse on religion and the environment has evolved, marked by advances in science and the environmental crisis. This also indicates that the initial



condition of ecology as a discipline has shifted from its original framework, moving toward a much newer context (Bauman 2011, 376 – 377).

Since the mid – twentieth century, particularly in the 1950s – 1960s, this period has marked the early development of studies on the relationship between the environment and religion. In the 1960s, large – scale exploitation of nature, occurred as countries newly freed from colonial rule were focused on nation – building, including Indonesia. As a result, these countries extracted natural resources without considering the long – term consequences (A.Sunarko and Kristiyanto 2008, 138). Contemporary discourse often positions ecotheology as a modern response to ecological degradation. However, religious understandings of the relationship among humans, nature, and the sacred have long been present in local traditions in Indonesia, particularly in South Sulawesi.

South Sulawesi, as one of the regions in Indonesia with significant ethnic and cultural diversity, possesses a rich body of local wisdom in environmental management (Husain 2025, 339). In particular, South Sulawesi is home to various ethnic groups or indigenous communities, each with its own distinctive belief system. Two major groups discussed in this article are the Toraja and the Kajang, both of which are widely known for their local belief systems or ancestral religions. Although each group has its own teachings and practices, they share fundamental similarities, especially in their cosmological perspectives and in their views of the relationships between humans and nature. Among the Toraja, this belief system is known as *Aluk to Dolo*, which recognizes a supreme deity called *Puang Matoa*. At the same time, among the Kajang, there is *Patuntung*, with belief in a supreme being known as *Turie' A'rakna* (Hasan and Nur 2019, 186 – 7).

Based on this background, the main question examined in this study is how local wisdom shapes the roots of ecotheology in South Sulawesi. To clarify, South Sulawesi is not inhabited by a single major ethnic group or defined by only one ancestral belief system. Instead, the region constitutes a historical unity encompassing various sub – ethnic groups and religious communities, each of which has developed distinctive religious – ecological roles and traditions. Consequently, this article has certain limitations: its analysis remains general and does not examine each community in depth or separately. Nevertheless, these limitations are expected to open space for future research to provide more focused and comprehensive analyses of the roots and discourses of ecotheology within the respective ethnic groups and communities of South Sulawesi.

Among the Toraja community, there is *Aluk To Dolo*, while within the Kajang community, there is the *Patuntung* religion with *Pasang ri Kajang*, all of which position nature as an integral part of the religious and ethical order of life. Human survival is inseparable from cosmology, in which humans continue to exist by recognizing themselves as part of the universe itself. (Manguju 2022, 42).

When religion explains the cosmic system, its adherents usually place religious elements into several hierarchical levels. The supernatural occupies the highest layer, cultural elements (humans) the intermediate layer, and natural elements (nature) the lowest layer due to their material and natural character. Ancestral or local religions possess distinctive characteristics, as they emerge from the empirical fact that before the arrival of major or incoming religions through missionary activities, ancestors or ancient communities had already transmitted teachings that emphasized the preservation of life and spirituality – teachings that can now be understood as forms of religion (Damirah, et al. 2022, 142).

Religion plays a significant role in shaping views of nature and in constructing perspectives on the role of humans within the natural world. This explains why examining diverse religious worldviews is crucial for analyzing the roots of environmental crises or issues, as well as for proposing their solutions (Tucker and Grim 2003, 7). Understanding the concept of ecotheology can be seen as the integration of new scientific perspectives on the "dunia alam (natural world)" with the use of traditional theological concepts, thereby producing a new theological paradigm that may be regarded as having the potential to go beyond "religious environmentalism," offering more ethical and practical responses to critiques of the environmental crisis (Troster 2013, 383).

LITERATURE REVIEW

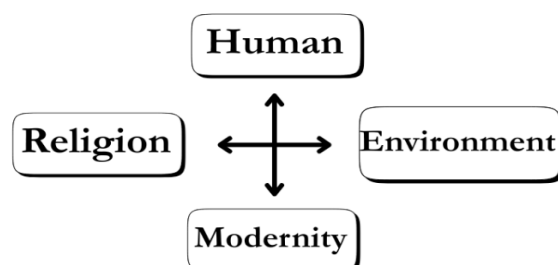
The formulation of the concept of ecotheology itself is based on the development of religious thought in relation to environmental issues influenced by human activities. Climate change, deforestation, and the expanding economic sector have made environmental problems significant events and issues that demand serious attention. As environmental issues have intensified, many people have come to regard environmental studies or concerns as relatively new fields of inquiry. This growing public attention has largely been driven by pollution and the increasing volume of industrial waste, which disrupts human life (Darsono 1995, 11).

Ecotheology itself is a form of constructive theology that explains the interrelationship between religion and nature, with a particular focus on environmental studies. The foundation of eco – theological inquiry lies in the awareness that the current environmental crisis is not merely a secular issue but also an acute religious problem. This is because such perspectives originated from certain religious understandings that were, in some ways, "misguided" regarding life and the environment. On the other hand, ecotheology encourages a reinterpretation of religious doctrines within society, especially concerning the position of humans, their relationship, and their responsibility toward the sustainability of the Earth (Quddus 2012, 317).

The relationship among the three poles (God, nature, and humanity) must exist in harmony, balance, and mutual alignment. The removal of any one of these poles will lead to an imbalance. Eliminating the divine pole results in secularism, which exploits nature and ultimately leads to environmental crises. Conversely, disregarding the natural pole renders humanity impoverished in both knowledge and civilization. (Quddus 2012, 318).

Religion holds such a strong influence that it indirectly creates a dominant position (Dhewayani 2016, 72). Social change and transformation, encompassing aspects such as politics, economy, knowledge, ideology, and religion, are part of Indonesia's dynamic existence. Among these aspects, religion is considered the most significant in the process of national transformation as well as in the lives of individual citizens. The influence of religion is so strong that it has, at times, unintentionally created a dominant position for the majority over the notion of the sacred (Sofjan 2016, 71 – 72).

Figure 1. General Concept of Ecotheology



At the general level, ecotheology is described as an interaction among humans, religion, the environment, and technology/modernity. These four elements are interconnected, with humans positioned at the center, linking religion and environmental ethics with the impact of modernity. This means that ecotheology cannot be separated from the challenges of modernization while simultaneously addressing the need to maintain balance with nature.

The ecological approach employed here seeks to achieve a more precise specification of the relationships among humans, biological interactions, and physical processes by incorporating them into a single analytical system, the ecosystem (Geerts 1963, 3). Therefore, this study employs a descriptive qualitative historical analysis using a literature review approach. The literature review identifies perspectives on ecotheology in South Sulawesi, while historical analysis serves an analytical tool to examine and interpret the findings. On the other hand, the use of the historical research method serves to trace the roots of perspectives or analyses related to the environment, religion, and possibly their preservation. This means that the study positions its subject matter diachronically, extending across a historical timeframe (Nawiyanto 2012, 43).

The research process begins with the collection of references through a literature review, which serves the primary data source. The collected references are then examined through stages of criticism and interpretation to understand the context, meaning, and discursive position of the materials discussed. The next stage involves interpretation and analysis, in which historical analysis is employed as a supporting tool to contextualize the data. All of these stages are subsequently summarized in a synthesis phase to produce a conceptual understanding of ecotheology in South Sulawesi. Overall, the analysis elaborates on the references and concludes with a synthesis that integrates the previously outlined analyses (Herlina 2020, 58 – 59) into a coherent whole.

INTEGRATION OF COLONIAL LEGACY AND LOCAL WISDOM

Indigenous communities such as the Kajang and the Toraja possess rich forms of local wisdom that articulate ethical relationships between religion and the natural environment. These indigenous ecological perspectives developed historically and later encountered colonial interpretations as well as the theological frameworks of Abrahamic religions. By examining South Sulawesi as an integrated historical region, this study enables an exploration of the formation of ecotheological discourse as a process shaped by local wisdom, religious encounters, and environmental experiences, rather than as a purely modern or externally imposed theological construct.

Colonialism and imperialism had a significant impact on environmental degradation. Since the colonial era, the extraction of natural resources has been considered a common practice, as resources have often exploited for the benefit of the colonial powers. In reality, imperialism and colonialism not only harmed the local population but also the earth itself, as their very premise was to exploit the land and extract its natural resources without regard for the long – term condition of the environment.

This view is also in line with Rochwulaningsih (2017, 156), who argues that environmental degradation in developing countries is largely caused by the development of capitalism manifested in the form of colonialism or imperialism, which has taken place in Indonesia since the 15th century. She further explains that the greed inherent in capitalism, with its endless desire for vast capital accumulation, has led to three forms of resource exploitation: first, natural resources through extraction; second, human resources through slavery; and third, socio – cultural resources through colonization carried out in

such a way as to satisfy their capitalist production desires. Thus, it is indeed true that environmental degradation and the depletion of natural resources, including forests, have largely occurred as a result of a state – based development paradigm (Nurjaya 2005, 36). Therefore, it was not only human beings who were destroyed but also the entire ecological systems (Kim 2012, 376 – 377) of the colonized regions.

Colonialism did not arrive alone; it carried various missions with it, one of which was Christianity. Meanwhile, local religions such as *Patuntung* or *Aluk to Dolo* were often interpreted as animism or dynamism. For example, a colonial ethnographic archive entitled *Handleiding voor de Vergelijkende Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië*, published in 1893, outlined classifications of religions in Indonesia, including animism, which was used to refer to local or indigenous religions.

Picture 1. Inleiding Colonial Archive

HOOFDSTUK XXI. Ziekten	483—494
a. Albinisme, 483. — b. Struma en cretinisme, 485. —	
c. Huidziekten, 487. — d. Bloedziekten, 490. — e. Acute	
ziekten, 491. — f. Krankzinnigheid, 494.	
HOOFDSTUK XXII. Godsdienst	495—516
a. Hinduïsme, 495. — b. Buddhisme, 504. — c. Herleving	
van het Brahmanisme, 512.	
HOOFDSTUK XXIII. Godsdienst (Vervolg)	517—543
a. Het Hinduïsme op Java, 517. — b. Hinduïsme op de Bui-	
tenbezittingen, 539. — c. Het Hinduïsme op Bali, 540.	
HOOFDSTUK XXIV. Animisme	544—562
a. Inleiding, 544. — b. Fetisisme, 545. — c. Spiritisme, 547. —	
d. Zielen, 549. — e. Geesten, 550. — f. Vampir en Weer-	
wolf, 558. — g. Pontianak, 559. — h. Opperwezen, 559.	
HOOFDSTUK XXV. Vereering der geesten	563—586
a. Shamanisme, 563. — b. Geestentaal, 568. — c. Geestenbe-	
zwering, 569. — d. Geestenvereering, offers, 573. — e. Gees-	
tenbannen, tooverij, 577. — f. Toovermiddelen, 578. —	
g. Tooverformulieren, 581. — h. Voorspellingskunst, 583. —	
i. Orakelvogels en onminne tekenen, 585.	

Source: *Handleiding voor de Vergelijkende Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië*

Colonialism is a complex concept that has profoundly influenced the course of what is called human civilization, beginning in the 15th century and continuing into the early 20th century. This term, of course, does not merely refer to the process of depicting conquest and domination, but also encompasses cross – cultural interactions and the dynamics leading toward modernity. In practice, colonialism is closely associated with the transformation of nature into a commodity, the appropriation of land from local or traditional communities, and the alteration of social structures that turned the colonized population into a working class. Therefore, any discussion of colonialism cannot be separated from the exploitation of natural resources, which lies at the core of the colonial system itself (Itawan 2023). Before the arrival of major world religions, belief in God already existed, and therefore, elements of local belief systems continue to be reflected in the performance of religious rituals. This phenomenon can still be found in South Sulawesi communities to this day (Hasan and Nur 2019, 187).

This understanding shows that the perspectives of colonialism and capitalism are hegemonic and patriarchal toward nature (including forests), positioning nature as something subordinate to human authority. Furthermore, the exploitation of forests is considered normal and legitimate if carried out to achieve prosperity in the interests of the colony (Itawan 2020, 31).

Religion not only regulates relationships between human beings, but also governs the relationship between humans and nature or their environment (Jamaluddin 2015, 27).

In South Sulawesi, however, the understanding of ecotheology appears to remain limited among the local population. This observation is based on the author's analysis of the surrounding environment and other regions that play a significant role in managing their natural environment and forests. For example, during the Dutch East Indies period in South Sulawesi, one area, such as Tana Toraja, had already become known as coffee – rich region. In 1920, a plantation owner named Van Dijk discovered coffee trees aged 200 to 300 years old, which established Tana Toraja as one of the major coffee – producing regions outside Java (Bigalke 2016, 21). Yet long before the Dutch discovery of coffee, conflicts had already occurred in Tana Toraja with neighboring kingdoms, as this area was contested over its status as the largest coffee – producing region in South Sulawesi. Even several years prior to Van Dijk's identification of coffee as a commodity, the Torajan people living in isolated highland hamlets (Adams 2006, 2) were already inhabiting this uncharted region. To reach Tana Toraja, the colonial government had to clear forests to construct roads providing access to the area.

From the very beginning, the emergence of the issue of ecotheology stemmed from a lack of understanding of the value of ecology and the environment, leading many people to pay little attention to the consequences of activities that damage nature. As explained in the preceding paragraphs, today's environmental crisis is one of the most frequently discussed topics, including the effects of global warming, the increase in industrial waste, and the uncontrolled disposal of garbage. These issues have made the environment not only a matter of concern for governments but also a focus for religious doctrines that have begun to raise their voices in defense of ecology. The approach to religion and ecology/nature is not merely based on humanitarian feelings or a sense of guilt toward nature, but rather on the very duty of humankind to help restore the condition of the natural world, at the very least to protect the earth for the future.

Understanding conservation ideologies originating from outside often encounters significant challenges when applied in practice. This is usually due to the numerous prerequisites and the various issues that must be addressed before conservation policies can be implemented effectively. One aspect often overlooked in conservation policy is the existence of traditional conservation practices, which have long been practiced and developed within local communities (Kusumasumantri 2022, 9).

Local or traditional communities, along with their social institutions and values inherited over hundreds or even thousands of years, possess a wealth of cultural wisdom deeply connected to the management of their natural environment. This wisdom is not merely conceptual but has become an integral part of their daily lives and practices. The principles of conservation have, in fact, long been embedded within many of these communities' traditions long before the emergence of modern concepts such as "ecotheology", and their values have mainly endured because they remain relatively untouched by the influence of the "industrial ideology" (Kusumasumantri 2022, 9).

The religions brought by colonial powers later entered local societies, although they were not initially accepted wholesale but rather through processes of adaptation and cultural negotiation. Over time, interactions between the doctrines of Abrahamic religions and local wisdom gave rise to what is known as religious syncretism. This process was not only ritualistic and symbolic but also ecological in nature. Consequently, the encounter between local belief systems and Abrahamic religions not only provided theological foundations for ecological awareness but also integrated local wisdom in viewing nature as an integral part of human spiritual and social life.

ECOTHEOLOGY IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES OF SOUTH SULAWESI

Since early times, religion has played a major role in shaping views of nature and perspectives on the role of humans within the natural world. Thus, in the context illustrated by the diagram above, ecotheology has manifested and been integrated through the interaction between traditional belief systems such as *Aluk To Dolo* (Toraja) and *Patuntung* (Kajang) and later—developed religious values, including those of the Abrahamic religions, particularly Christianity. Since the colonial period, ecotheology in Tana Toraja and the Kajang regions has taken the form of syncretism, blending spiritual values with an older worldview that emphasizes respect and reverence for nature. The body of environmental discourse began to develop across various aspects, marked by environmental degradation, advances in science, and population movements.

1. Toraja (*Aluk to Dolo*)

The beliefs of the Toraja community originate from their ancestral religion, *Aluk to Dolo*. Within the community's traditional cosmological worldview, funeral rituals are regarded as ancestral inheritances passed down from previous generations. These ritual processes have been carried out continuously and repeatedly, meaning that what is performed and how it is conducted must always reflect practices and values from the past (Tsintjilonis 2000, 2). *Aluk to Dolo* belongs to the highest level within the cultural system, namely the belief system, which profoundly influences the values, norms, and behaviors associated with objects regarded as sacred (Sandarupa 2015, 88).

Puang Matua is the highest god in Toraja (Toraja/*Aluk to Dolo*) (Tenny, et al. 2022, 260). The understanding of conservation ideologies originating from outside often encounters significant challenges when applied at the practical level. This is frequently due to the numerous prerequisites that must be met and the various issues that need to be resolved before conservation policies can be implemented effectively. One aspect that is often overlooked in conservation policy is the existence of traditional conservation practices, which have long been present and developed within local communities themselves (Kusumasumantri 2022, 9).

The values embedded in this belief system are profound (Palm 1979). First, there is a strong emphasis on balance and harmony with the universe. Every ritual, orientation, sacrificial animal color, and even sleeping position is strictly regulated to maintain equilibrium between the forces of life (East) and death (West) (Palm 1979). Furthermore, several elements of this religion continue to persist in the social life of the Toraja community to this day. *Aluk to Dolo*, as a belief system, places strong emphasis on spatial orientation and cosmology (Rappoport 2004, 380). Local or traditional communities often believe that particular places possess sacred qualities and therefore must be protected and preserved from any form of human exploitation or destruction (Yudistira 2014, 57). Efforts to safeguard and preserve nature are clearly reflected in the daily behavioral patterns of these local communities as they engage in environmental passed down through generations from their ancestors (Yudistira 2014, 58).

Ecological crises are generally caused by two factors: natural and human. In reality, however, environmental degradation is far more often the result of human actions than of natural causes. This is driven by human activities and behaviors that disregard the environment and show indifference toward the preservation of nature (Sanjani, Megayanty and Robiyanto 2023, 459).

Within *Aluk to Dolo*, three supporting factors of the ecological—religious relationship are reflected in religious rituals (*Rambu Tuka'* and *Rambu Solo'*). These rituals

influence the life of the Toraja community by creating harmony through three interconnected relationships: between humans and *Puang Matua* and the ancestors, among humans themselves, and between humans and the environment (animals and plants). Holistically, *Aluk to Dolo* emphasizes that all of God's creations – humans, animals, and plants – live in a harmonious relationship that is interconnected with *Puang Matua* as the highest entity (Sapri 2011, 6). These ritual practices demonstrate that caring for nature within *Aluk to Dolo* is not merely a social ethic, but also a religious act that strongly reflects the concept of ecotheology

2. Kajang (*Patuntung/Pasang ri Kajang*)

Patuntung is the local belief system or religion of the Kajang indigenous community. The term *Patuntung* refers to a person who is studying *Passingerang* (knowledge), which is derived from *Pasang ri Kajang*. This body of teachings contains messages, advice, guidelines, and instructions that are followed and practiced to attain happiness in the hereafter (Damirah, et al. 2022, 143). *Pasang ri Kajang* constitutes a system of cultural values within the Ammatoa community; it is an ancestral traditional teaching originating from *Tu Rie' A'rakna* (God) and conveyed through the Ammatoa as the highest leader of the community. *Pasang* teaches individuals how to position themselves in relation to the macro – and microcosmos and how to build harmonious relationships between nature, humans, and God (Dassir 2008, 135). The *Pasang's* role is crucial to the survival of the Ammatoa indigenous community. It functions not only as a guide for daily life but also as a customary legal framework for the community (Ichwan, et al. 2021, 135). The ultimate aim of *Pasang* is to ensure the sustained balance of both social and ecological systems (Fadhel, et al. 2021, 548).

Pasang is often understood as a set of customary rules or moral guidelines rather than as an ecological theology grounded in spiritual belief and cosmological understanding. More than merely an environmental ethic, *Pasang* can be interpreted as a worldview grounded in a revelatory framework that shapes the community's understanding of the sacredness of creation. Thus, *Pasang* functions not only as a guide for social behavior but also as a form of spiritual consciousness that views the preservation of forests and the earth as part of religious worship and devotion (Ridhoh and Alfian 2025, 347). Furthermore, within Kajang cosmology, nature is not perceived as a passive entity, but as part of a spiritual community that must be protected, respected, and revered (Ridhoh and Alfian 2025, 355).

The communitarian relationship among all created elements serves as a binding foundation for preserving the integrity of the earth (Tenny, et al. 2022, 260). In Toraja and Kajang cosmology, *Puang Matua* and *Tu Rie' A'rakna* are understood as the supreme entities who created the universe and serve as the sources of moral and spiritual law. Nature and all creation form an interconnected community in which humans bear responsibility for maintaining balance and the wholeness of the earth. *Pasang* or *Patuntung* functions as a normative and moral guide, rendering environmental protection not merely a practical action but also a manifestation of ecological ethics and spiritual obligation. This ecotheology affirms a holistic relationship between humans, nature, and the supreme entity, in which caring for the environment constitutes an act of moral and religious obedience.

Local or traditional communities often believe that certain places possess sacred qualities and therefore must be protected and preserved from any form of human

exploitation or destruction (Yudistira 2014, 57). Efforts to safeguard and preserve nature are clearly reflected in the daily behavioral patterns of these local communities as they engage in environmental practices passed down through generations from their ancestors (Yudistira 2014, 58).

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study suggests that the discourse of ecotheology in South Sulawesi has strong historical roots in the local wisdom of its indigenous communities. Belief systems such as *Aluk to Dolo* and *Patuntung* demonstrate that the relationship between God, humans, and nature was understood holistically long before the emergence of modern ecotheological concepts. Cosmological values, rituals, and customary norms passed down by ancestors have shaped an ecological ethic that places nature as an integral part of the spiritual and social life of local communities. Thus, ecotheology in South Sulawesi is not a new construct that emerged merely as a response to contemporary environmental crises, but rather a continuation of religious—ecological worldviews that have long existed within local traditions.

Local traditions predate contemporary ecological thought and have provided guidance for environmental stewardship that often extends beyond modern understandings. Furthermore, the encounter between local wisdom and Abrahamic religions has produced dynamic processes of adaptation and syncretism that have contributed to shaping ecotheological perspectives. Colonialism and capitalism introduced exploitative paradigms toward nature; however, at the same time, interactions between incoming religions and local beliefs gave rise to theological forms that helped sustain ecological awareness. By positioning local traditions as theological and moral sources, ecotheology grounded in local wisdom has the potential to serve as a relevant and contextual foundation for responding to ecological crises sustainably.

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