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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Involving God: Local Based Conservation of Forest within the Tae Indigenous Community in West Kalimantan

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**Abstract:** This study aims to explore the nature of God's involvement, the driving factors, and the impact of God's involvement in the management of customary forests. The researcher employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach aimed at uncovering the meaning of God's involvement in the management of customary forests by the community of Tae Village. Based on the research findings, the researcher draws the following conclusions: 1) The manifestation of God's involvement in the management of customary forests is evident in the recitation of incantations during traditional rituals, which invoke the name of Jibata or God in the Tae indigenous community's belief system; it appears in the form of symbols serving as intermediaries in communication between the indigenous community and God; and it manifests as taboos and prohibitions within customary laws; 2) The driving factor for the Tae indigenous community to involve God in the management of customary forests is the awareness that involving God in all aspects is a fundamental necessity for them in warding off the threat of forest destruction from external parties, and this involvement of God is also a cultural legacy passed down from their ancestors; 3) The impact felt by the community from involving God is that the forest's sustainability is preserved from corporate expansion that could destroy it, and they reap abundant harvests accompanied by a sense of peace when God is involved in every activity.

**Keywords**: Involving God; Conservation of Forest; Tae Indigenous Community.

***Abstrak***: *Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap tentang wujud pelibatan Tuhan, faktor pendorong dan dampak pelibatan Tuhan dalam pemeliharaan hutan adat. Peneliti menggunakan jenis penelitian kualitatif dengan pendekatan fenomenologi yang ditujukan pada penggalian makna terhadap pelibatan Tuhan dalam pemeliharaan hutan adat oleh masyarakat Tae. Berdasarkan hasil penelitian, maka peneliti dapat menarik kesimpulan sebagai berikut: 1) Wujud pelibatan Tuhan dalam pemeliharaan hutan adat dapat terlihat dari penggunaan mantra yang dibacakan ketika melaksanakan ritual adat dengan menyebut nama Jibata atau Tuhan dalam kepercayaan masyarakat Tae, muncul dalam bentuk simbol yang menjadi media perantara komunikasi antara masyarakat adat dengan Tuhan, dan bentuk pantang larang sebagai aturan adat; 2) Faktor pendorong masyarakat adat Tae melakukan pelibatan Tuhan dalam pemeliharaan hutan adat adalah kesadaran bahwa melibatkan Tuhan dalam segala aspek menjadi kebutuhan pokok bagi mereka dalam menahan ancaman kerusakan hutan dari pihak luar dan pelibatan Tuhan ini juga merupakan warisan yang telah diajarkan dari nenek moyang mereka sebagai faktor budaya;3) Dampak yang dirasakan masyarakat dalam pelibatan Tuhan adalah hutan tetap terjaga kelestariannya dari ekspansi perusahaan yang dapat merusak hutan dan diperolehnya hasil panen yang melimpah disertai perasaan tenang ketika telah melibatkan Tuhan dalam setiap aktivitas.*

***Kata kunci****: Pelibatan Tuhan; Konservasi Hutan Adat; Masyarakat Tae.*

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## 1. Introduction

Religions and beliefs have long taught harmony between God, humanity, and nature. Islam, in Surah Ar-Rum verse 41, emphasizes the prohibition against harming nature. Similarly, Christianity, through Proverbs 19–22, calls on people to love nature (Simanjuntak & Marulita, 2020). Meanwhile, Confucianism teaches Xiao as a form of filial piety that encompasses one's relationship with nature (Tanuwibowo, 2020). Local beliefs, such as those held by the Baduy community, also demonstrate that customary laws and Pikukuh Karuhun can help prevent natural disasters and preserve forests (Senoaji, 2004). This fact demonstrates that every belief system contains teachings that support environmental conservation. However, despite Indonesia's vast forest areas, deforestation remains a serious issue (Suprayitno, 2008). Data from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry indicates an 8.4% reduction in deforestation during 2021–2022 (Kehutanan, 2023). However, forest conservation efforts have yet to explicitly incorporate a spiritual dimension. Yet, the involvement of God in forest conservation practices could serve as a strong foundation for sustaining nature's preservation. Therefore, it is crucial to examine how the inclusion of God in indigenous forest conservation can help address the ongoing environmental crisis.

Research on forest conservation by indigenous communities largely remains focused on technical and social aspects. Research on forest conservation by indigenous communities largely remains focused on technical and social aspects. Some studies discuss community contributions to the management of customary forests, such as (Liani et al., 2015) study, which examines the active role of communities in preserving forest sustainability. Other studies, such as Munadi and Kaslam (2020), highlight forest conservation from a religious perspective, though they remain general and have not yet addressed specific local practices. Meanwhile, studies on the potential of ecotourism for the management of customary forests are also emerging, such as Norsidi (2019) work, though these tend to emphasize economic and tourism aspects. From these various studies, it is evident that the spiritual or theological dimensions of forest conservation have not received adequate attention. Yet, in many indigenous communities, belief in God serves as the foundation for preserving the natural environment. God's involvement in indigenous forest conservation practices is still rarely explored academically. This indicates a research gap that needs to be addressed, particularly within the context of indigenous communities that still hold firmly to spiritual values. Therefore, it is important to explore how God is involved in indigenous forest conservation and how this impacts ecological sustainability.

The main limitation of previous studies lies in their tendency to explain the management of customary forests from social, economic, institutional, and environmental conservation perspectives, without adequately revealing the theological foundations that shape the community's ecological behavior. A study by Yanti (2016) on indigenous communities in West Sumatra, for example, highlights the practice of mixed-use farming as a form of local wisdom in natural resource management, but fails to explain how belief in God plays a role in shaping and sustaining this practice. In fact, for many indigenous communities, including the Dayak Tae in Balai Subdistrict, Sanggau Regency, the forest is understood not only as an ecological resource but also as part of a sacred order that connects humans, nature, and God. Unlike previous studies that have emphasized social, economic, institutional, or religious teachings at the normative level, this study focuses on how the concept of divinity is experienced, manifested, and passed down through the Dayak Tae community's practices of traditional forest stewardship. This focus is important because it allows for a deeper understanding of the role of religious beliefs as a moral mechanism that shapes the community's ecological behavior. Thus, this study not only enriches the literature on the relationship between religion and the environment but also offers a new perspective on the contribution of the Dayak Tae's local theology in supporting the sustainability of customary forests.

This study aims to examine how God is involved in the management of customary forests by the Dayak Tae indigenous community, assess the importance of God's involvement in forest management practices, and evaluate its impact on forest conservation and the lives of local communities. This study argues that God's involvement in the management of customary forests not only strengthens the community's spiritual aspects but also positively impacts ecological sustainability. Based on the ancestral religious beliefs of the Tae indigenous community, they have, to this day, consistently lived in harmony and with great happiness. The presence of vast forests has enabled them to live prosperously. Meanwhile, their belief in God has made them a "traditional" community (a community that upholds the customs and traditions inherited from their ancestors). It does not stop there; in reality, the Tae indigenous community continues to evolve, keeping pace with the times. The phenomenon of God's involvement in forest conservation within the Tae indigenous community is worth further examination in a comprehensive study. Such research could fill a critical gap, offering strategic contributions to forest conservation in the modern era while still preserving the local identity of indigenous communities.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Sacred and Profane

The theory of the sacred and the profane is one of the fundamental concepts in the sociology of religion, as proposed by Émile Durkheim. In his view, Durkheim defines religion as a system of beliefs and practices related to the sacred—that is, things that are set apart and forbidden. The sacred is understood as something exalted, powerful, and revered, so its existence is safeguarded to prevent it from being mixed with profane matters (Durkheim, 1992). Elizabeth K. Nottingham adds that the sacredness of an object does not lie in the object itself, but in the attitudes and feelings of humans that imbue it with mysterious and transcendent meaning. Thus, the sacred is relative because it depends heavily on the belief system of the society that reveres it, whereas the profane is part of the routine of ordinary life, containing no mystery (Nottingham, 1985). Durkheim asserts that religion is built upon this dichotomy, and all religious practices aim to maintain the boundary between the sacred and the profane so that they do not contaminate one another. In traditional societies, sacred things are often associated with natural objects such as mountains, trees, and large rocks, which are believed to possess spiritual power (Durkheim, 1992).

The terms "sacred" and "profane" are used to categorize various religious phenomena within the Dayak Tae indigenous community, including forest conservation practices. This categorization is evident in how the people of Tae Village treat the customary forest and its objects as sacred entities, respected and protected. This aspect of sacredness is manifested through the invocation of God in every forest conservation ritual, indicating that supernatural forces are believed to play a crucial role in preserving the natural environment. A concrete example of the application of this theory can be seen in the practices of indigenous communities that designate specific locations as sites for religious rituals, as is also found at Borobudur Temple, which serves as a sacred structure for Buddhists (Yanto, 2020). Unlike other communities that might view similar objects as ordinary, the Tae community reinforces this sacredness through collective sentiment and traditions passed down through generations. Thus, this theory not only explains how beliefs are formed but also how these beliefs directly impact environmental conservation behavior.

### 2.2 Social Dynamics

Social dynamics is a concept developed by Auguste Comte to explain changes in the structure and order of society over time. According to Comte, as cited in Muttaqin (2022), social dynamics serve as the driving force propelling humans toward a new equilibrium in social life. These changes are not merely material but also encompass shifts in thinking, attitudes, and

social behavior. From this perspective, social dynamics are understood as a natural, ongoing process that evolves alongside the development of human knowledge and experience. Comte, as cited in Chabibi (2019), formulated the law of the three stages of societal development—the theological, metaphysical, and positive stages—which explains how human understanding of the world transforms from belief in supernatural forces toward belief in empirical data. The theological stage itself is further divided into fetishism, polytheism, and monotheism, reflecting the evolution of human belief in transcendent entities. Thus, social dynamics serve as an analytical tool to understand how societies adapt to both internal and external changes.

Social dynamics theory can be used to analyze changes in the ways of thinking and acting of the Tae Village community in maintaining their customary forest. For example, initially, the community viewed bamboo plants merely as wild, worthless weeds. However, over time and with the involvement of private institutions such as the Bambu Lestari Indonesia Foundation, there has been a significant shift in the community's perspective. Today, bamboo is cultivated and utilized as an economic commodity. This change reflects a shift from the theological stage toward the positive stage, where belief in empirical data and practical benefits begins to influence collective decisions. Nevertheless, the involvement of God remains the primary foundation in every forest conservation practice, indicating that social dynamics do not simply eliminate sacred elements but rather integrate them with new knowledge. This pattern of change follows a linear trajectory as described in Comte's three-stage law, where theological beliefs persist alongside positive rationality. Through this approach, the social dynamics of the Dayak Tae indigenous community can be understood as a continuous process of adaptation between tradition and innovation.

### 2.3 Religion and the Environment

In religious traditions, the universe is often viewed as God's creation, possessing sacred value and requiring preservation. This approach emphasizes that environmental crises cannot be addressed solely through science and technology but also require the active participation of religion as a source of values and ethics. Religion provides its adherents with a moral foundation for treating nature with full responsibility, as nature is understood as a trust that must be preserved (Munawar-Rachman, 2024). The concept of khilafah in Islam, for example, positions humans as stewards tasked with maintaining the balance of nature (Ka'ban, 2016). In local religious traditions, the relationship between humans and nature is often reciprocal and governed by customary norms rooted in ancestral beliefs. Therefore, religion can serve as a transformative force in fostering ecological awareness within communities

The Dayak Tae indigenous community believes that the customary forest belongs to God and must be safeguarded as an expression of spiritual devotion. This belief is manifested in various rituals and taboos that govern their interactions with nature. When compared to findings from previous research, such as among the Riau Malay community, which uses incantations and proverbs to protect the environment, or the Karampuang community, which interprets the forest as an "anthropomorphized" entity (Thamrin, 2013; Saudi and Saudi, 2023). The Dayak Tae community exhibits a similar pattern, with an emphasis on the presence of God as the center of all conservation practices. This is also consistent with the concepts of Al-Intifa' (utilization), Al-I'tibar (lesson), and Al-Islah (sustainable maintenance) (Ka'ban, 2016). Thus, God's involvement is not merely a religious symbol but an effective cultural strategy for preserving the forest. This concept helps explain how theological values can be internalized into social practices that have a tangible impact on the environment.

## 3. Method

The issue of God's involvement in the management of customary forests was chosen because this phenomenon demonstrates how spiritual beliefs can serve as the foundation for sustainable management practices among the Dayak Tae indigenous community. The selection

of this issue was also based on several fundamental considerations. First, Tae Village possesses 2,189 hectares of customary forest designated by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (Kemen LHK), making it a legally recognized area managed by the indigenous community. Second, the village has been designated as a model indigenous village in Sanggau Regency, indicating that its customary practices remain intact and serve as a reference. Third, the people of Tae Village continue to consistently perform traditional rituals even though the majority have embraced a religion. Fourth, customary law is still effectively enforced in forest management, including sanctions for violators. This phenomenon is relevant for study because it illustrates the relationship between spirituality, local wisdom, and environmental conservation. This study employs a qualitative research design, which allows the researcher to explore the underlying motivations of the indigenous community in maintaining their customary forests (Gunawan, 2022). The chosen approach is phenomenological, as it focuses on the experiences of the Tae community in engaging with God through forest-maintenance rituals. The data used consists of primary data obtained directly from the field and secondary data from various written documents (Harahap & Tirtayasa, 2020).

Primary data sources in this study were selected purposefully to ensure depth of information. The informants consisted of five individuals who play strategic roles within the Tae indigenous community, namely traditional leaders (Wakil Temenggung), village environmental activists, the Tae Village Head, Dukun/Tukang Paca, and ordinary community members involved in the management of customary forests. This selection was based on the consideration that they possess direct knowledge and experience in customary practices as well as forest management policies. Secondary data was obtained from books written by the Tae indigenous community, scientific journals, customary law documents, and documentation of forest conservation activities. The data collection techniques used included non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Non-participant observation was conducted by directly observing ritual processes and forest conservation activities without participating in them, using a pre-designed observation guide. Semi-structured interviews were chosen so that the researcher could gather information flexibly while remaining focused on the topic of God's involvement. Documentation was carried out to preserve physical evidence such as photos of activities, texts of customary rules, and relevant village archives. The entire data collection process was carried out in stages at the research site.

Data analysis in this study followed an interactive model comprising data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions (Rijali, 2018). During the reduction phase, raw data from observations and interviews were transcribed, then selected, focused, and simplified by eliminating irrelevant information. The results of observations regarding traditional rituals were analyzed to identify patterns of God's involvement, while interview transcripts from informants were classified by theme. Subsequently, the reduced data were presented in the form of brief descriptions, tables, or charts to ensure clarity and facilitate the researcher's identification of relationships between themes. To ensure data validity, the researcher applied source triangulation and methodological triangulation (Suhaeddy, 2017). Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from various informants, while methodological triangulation verified interview data through observation and documentation. This process ensures the credibility of the findings. Conclusions were drawn continuously throughout the research by testing the data's alignment with the research questions and identifying new findings emerging in the field. The final conclusions were formulated descriptively to illustrate the significance of God's involvement in the stewardship of the Tae customary forest.

## 4. Result

### 4.1 The Role of God in the Management of the Tae Indigenous Forest

As an indigenous community with management rights over the forest, the Dayak Tae people continue to practice the teachings of their ancestors in caring for the forest. The forest management practices of the Dayak Tae indigenous community involve God in various ways. From the data collected, several forms of God's involvement were identified, as follows Authors must adapt to the journal format when writing the results using tables, figures, and direct interview quotations. Direct quotations from interview narratives should be done in the following:

**a. Mantra**

In the management of customary forests, God is invoked through the recitation of chants. In the various chants recited by a shaman—who serves as the ritual leader—the term "Jibata" consistently appears and is used. "Jibata" is a local term meaning God. This was evident in observations made on several occasions during forest conservation rituals. The following is an example of a chant in traditional forest conservation that mentions the name Jibata.

The following chant is an opening chant that is always recited at the beginning of the chanting session before proceeding to the next chant or to the main prayer/intention of the traditional ritual:

> *" i.. nye, due, taru, empat, rima, enam, tu…juh, Jibata pejaji penampa".*
> Meaning: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, … 7, God Almighty.

Thus, the chant recited during the maintenance of indigenous forests is as follows:

> *"i.. nye, due, taru, empat, rima, enam, tu…juh, Jibata pejaji penampa. ha kanak muah ka dakem neng kuasa, ka tana turutn, kanak muah ka kepm mada njaga wilayah kanak. Taji tek pengaraknng magokng, mawaknng kelaka, sampai ka nanggot jeramih, lo, lusui, gente, polo noko, tunu perapi."*

> "Artinya: 1..2,3,4,5,6,….7, Tuhan Allah, Yang Maha Kuasa, pencipta alam semesta, ini kami memberi tahu kepada Mu Yang Maha Kuasa, di tanah, hutan isi bumi, kami memberitahukan, agar dapat menjaga wilayah kami dari hutan rimba, tembawang sampai dengan sawah ladang, kubangan, tebing lereng, serta kuburan (S, 50)"

These mantras are recited in various traditional rituals such as Besiakng (a ritual to seek permission), Mpaya Buah (a ritual for the care of fruit trees), and Nyesei/Bepuwei (a ritual to ward off misfortune and repel pests) (Sembolon, 2023; Sakira, 2023). These mantras serve as prayers and a means of spiritual communication with God and the supernatural guardians of the forest. The mantras recited can be tailored to the specific type of maintenance activity being performed, including the use of available natural resources. Such utilization requires seeking permission from the owner of the universe. For example, when cutting down a tree to build a house, it is necessary to perform the traditional besiakng ritual. The Dayak Tae people's belief in the existence of evil forces leads them to always perform rituals to avoid unwanted outcomes. The prayers offered through these rituals are intended to bring good fortune and positive results, as a sign of divine blessing from God or Jibata.

Besiakng is also practiced in various local community activities, such as shifting cultivation, harvesting forest products, and so on. As explained by one of the environmental activists in Tae Village:

> "In terms of shifting cultivation, the forest management system usually involves asking for permission first. People here believe that clearing land without performing the traditional prayer ritual may invite misfortune. 'Cempelek,' as the locals say. According to local belief, misfortune strikes because the ritual wasn't performed.

> That's why the first thing that must be done is the paca siakng. The most important prayer, and the one with the greatest significance, is the paca siakng (KS, 25)."

The Besiakng Traditional Ritual can be likened to the most important traditional ritual before performing any others. The Besiakng Traditional Ritual also serves as a means of praying to the Creator and Ruler of the Universe. The purpose of this ritual is to seek permission from Jibata Pejaji Penampa in accordance with the community's desired goals or aspirations. The materials used in the Besiakng Traditional Ritual include bake or betel leaves, betel lime, seven pieces of tobacco, and seven slices of young areca nut with their husks. These are then wrapped in kayo or layakng leaves. The chants recited are not merely a string of words, but prayers possessing magical power because they embody the presence of God. This demonstrates that the spiritual aspect forms the foundation of every forest management action; communication with God is conducted verbally through a ritual language passed down through generations.

**b. Symbols**

Sacred symbols scattered throughout the customary forest area, such as large stones believed to be the dwelling places of guardian spirits and manifestations of God's presence. At Bukit Tiong Kandang, there are four sacred stones Batu Pedagi, Batu Kepet, Lako Ninyo, and Batu Kasih, which serve as the sites for performing the besiakng ritual before entering the area.

> "These large rocks are a sacred place inhabited by beings invisible to the eye. They are the ones who guard the Bukit Tiong Kandang area. There are four large rocks there, and people often pray at them; some also leave money in the area around the rocks (LI, 50)."

When viewed from a distance, the four stones are arranged in the following order:



***Figure 1.*** *Tiong Kandang Hill*
Source: Field Observations

Based on the observations conducted, it can be seen that the four large stones serving as ritual landmarks for the Besikang ritual are located in different places. During the first stage of the ascent, one encounters Batu Pedagi as the starting point. Then, at an even higher elevation, there is Batu Kepet, which resembles a gateway leading to the next area. In the third stage, there is a stone called Lako Ninyo, and the stone situated precisely at the summit of Tiong Knadang is Batu Kasih. Local residents also believe that each of these four stone sites holds its own profound significance.

| Image description | Image/Photo |
|---|---|
| **Batu Pedagi**<br>This location also serves as a rest stop for hikers |  |
| **Batu Kepet**<br>Hikers must pass through the gap visible between the two rocks. According to local belief, only someone with a pure heart can pass through it. |  |
| **Lako Ninyo**<br>This location is believed to be inhabited by soldiers who guard this area. |  |
| **Batu Kasih**<br>This is the summit of Tiong Kandang Hill. Many people offer special prayers at the final site of the besiakng ritual. |  |

***Figure 2.*** *Large Stones at Ritual Sites*
Source: Field Observations

These symbols serve as reminders of the transcendental forces that oversee and protect the forest, while also functioning as a means of spiritual communication between the community and the supernatural realm. This belief is reinforced by customary rules prohibiting certain actions near sacred sites, such as defecating or using coarse language. Thus, symbols not only represent the presence of God but also serve as effective instruments of social control in preserving the forest.

### c. Taboos and Restrictions

These taboos and restrictions are divided into three zones: Bukit Tiong Kandang, the forest surrounding the village, and the residential area. At Bukit Tiong Kandang, for example, menstruating women are forbidden from climbing, and all hikers must not litter or defecate indiscriminately. In the Polo Noko area, the community is prohibited from cultivating the land because it is considered the dwelling place of dangerous supernatural beings. In the village area, there is a prohibition against burning shrimp paste and dried shrimp, as it is believed to attract the arrival of evil spirits from the forest. Violations of these taboos are believed to bring disaster,

both individually and collectively, such as illness or even death. This taboo system demonstrates that the involvement of God is not merely ceremonial but is also internalized in daily life through norms that are morally and spiritually binding.

### 4.2 Factors Motivating the Involvement of God

The involvement of God in the management of the Tae indigenous forest is not coincidental, but rather driven by interrelated theological, historical, and sociological factors. The first factor is a theological belief that views the forest as part of God's sacred creation. The Tae community believes that Jibata is both the owner and ruler of the universe, so any action taken regarding the forest must be with His permission. This view is reflected in various rituals performed before utilizing forest resources, such as cutting down trees or clearing land. In fact, the customary forest is positioned as a tangible "manifestation of God," so damaging the forest means damaging one's relationship with God. This belief is reinforced by myths about the origins of sacred sites and tales of supernatural punishments for those who violate customary laws, which are continuously passed down across generations. Thus, the spiritual dimension serves as the ontological foundation driving the community to consistently involve God in every aspect of forest management.

> "Involving God is one of the fundamental needs. Because without God, we lack the wisdom to preserve or utilize the forest and what lies within it. If we look at the concept of indigenous customary law, the existence of God is indeed very important to them. For us, if the forest is gone, they feel they have lost their God. Because they would no longer be able to perform rituals at the oil palm trees and so on. But in our indigenous community, we view the traditional forest as a visible manifestation of God (MY, 52)."

The second factor is the system of passing down traditional knowledge and practices from one generation to the next. Traditional leaders, such as shamans and ritual officiants, play a key role in teaching incantations, ritual procedures, and taboos to the younger generation. Although some young people are beginning to be influenced by modernization, in the context of traditional rituals related to the forest, they still adhere to the authority of traditional leaders. This is evident in the continued practice of the besiakng ritual before climbing Bukit Tiong Kandang, which may only be led by a shaman or a descendant of a shaman. Additionally, the existence of local organizations such as Rombokng Ria Gandi Ria Kudur (RRGRK) further strengthens efforts to document and reinforce traditional practices.

The third factor is external and internal pressures that trigger a spiritual response as a form of defense. On one hand, the designation of customary forests through the Minister of Environment and Forestry's Decree in 2018 provided legal recognition while strengthening the community's position in defending the forest against corporate expansion. On the other hand, growing economic needs have driven some residents to clear land for oil palm plantations, which contradicts the concept of preserving customary forests. In this situation, invoking God serves as a form of symbolic protection to maintain a balance between economic fulfillment and environmental conservation. Traditional leaders address this by continuing to emphasize the importance of rituals as a spiritual bulwark to minimize negative impacts. In other words, the sociological factor of a values conflict between tradition and modernity actually reinforces the need to invoke God as the supreme power that transcends all worldly interests

### 4.3 The Impact of God's Involvement on Forest Conservation and Community Life

God's involvement in the stewardship of customary forests has led to the creation of effective social control mechanisms rooted in spiritual beliefs. The belief that God and the forest guardian spirits will be angered if customary rules are violated causes the Tae community to act with great caution. To date, cases of timber theft or forest encroachment have been relatively rare due to the existence of customary sanctions and supernatural punishments believed to befall

offenders. Rituals such as mpaya buah and nyesei, performed periodically, also serve as collective reminders of the obligation to protect the forest (Sembolon, 2023; Sakira, 2023). A tangible impact of this system is the preservation of most of the customary forest areas, particularly those considered sacred, such as Polo Noko and Bukit Tiong Kandang. Thus, the invocation of God not only strengthens a sense of community but also directly contributes to conservation efforts for living creatures within the Tae customary forest.

Furthermore, a sustainable environmental ethic has taken root within the community. The belief that the forest is a manifestation of God or a creation that must be respected fosters a sense of reverence and responsibility toward nature. This is reflected in the wise use of natural resources, such as the prohibition against cutting down productive, living trees except for basic necessities. The community also practices the concept of “tembawang” (heritage fruit gardens), managed through generations with specific rituals, thereby preserving biodiversity. This ethic is not solely anthropocentric (human-centered) but also theocentric (God-centered). The relationship between humans and nature arises from their connection to God (Fuad & Soedarto 2018).

In the long term, this value has the potential to serve as the foundation for the development of sustainable ecotourism, agrotourism, or agroforestry, as is currently being pioneered by local organizations in collaboration with external partners. As the Village Head of Tae noted, there is significant tourism potential within the Customary Forest area as well as on Tiong Kandang Hill.

> “Tiong Kandang hill has become a major icon for religious tourism. In addition to hikers, Bukit Tiong Kandang is also visited by people who wish to pray or make a wish on this sacred hill. Furthermore, there are many waterfalls formed naturally, each with its own legend. Two of them are Riam Batu Ikan and Batu Labi-Labi (MM, 55).”

There is a growing awareness of the need to integrate local wisdom with modern policies. Although there are oil palm plantations in some areas, traditional leaders and environmental activists continue to seek solutions that do not compromise spiritual values. They recognize that customary laws need to be updated to remain relevant to contemporary challenges without losing their sacred essence. For instance, the proposal to incorporate a ban on oil palm cultivation into customary law is under consideration, but this must be accompanied by the development of viable economic alternatives for the community. Additionally, the potential for religious tourism at Bukit Tiong Kandang and other sacred sites is being promoted as a new source of income based on the preservation of culture and nature. This transformative impact demonstrates that the role of God is not static but dynamic and adaptive, capable of responding to socio-economic changes while maintaining the core of its spirituality.

## 5. Discussion

This study found that the involvement of God in the management of indigenous forests by the Dayak Tae community is manifested in three main forms: chants, symbols, and taboos. Chants serve as a medium of spiritual communication that consistently invoke Jibata as the Almighty God in every traditional ritual, such as the Besiakng ceremony performed before utilizing forest resources. Sacred symbols in the form of large rocks such as Batu Pedagi, Batu Kepet, Lako Ninyo, and Batu Kasih on Bukit Tiong Kandang serve as sites for ritual ceremonies and are believed to be inhabited by supernatural guardians of the forest. Taboos and prohibitions govern community behavior when interacting with the forest, such as the prohibition against defecating in sacred areas, the prohibition against menstruating women climbing Tiong Kandang Hill, as well as the prohibition against cutting productive trees and entering the Polo Noko area, which is considered dangerous. The driving factor behind this divine involvement is a hereditary legacy from ancestors who viewed Jibata as a fundamental necessity and a source of wisdom in preserving the forest. The impact of this divine involvement is evident in the sustained conservation of the customary forest, the minimal occurrence of timber theft, and the community’s belief that their prayers can ward off disturbances and bring blessings to the harvest. Although

oil palm plantations are visible in some areas, spiritual values remain the primary foundation of efforts to preserve the Tae customary forest.

The phenomenon of divine involvement in the preservation of the Tae customary forest cannot be separated from the community's theological concept of Jibata as the ruler of the universe. As explained by Durkheim, belief in sacred things gives rise to a system of beliefs and rituals that distinguish between the sacred and the profane. The Tae community views the customary forest, particularly Bukit Tiong Kandang, as a sacred area protected by taboos and requiring special rituals to enter. This belief is reinforced by myths and legends about supernatural guardians of the forest, such as the spirits in the rivers and the ethereal beings at Polo Noko, which necessitate that any forest utilization activity must begin with a request for permission through the Besiakng ritual. This belief predates the arrival of official religions in West Kalimantan by a long time. When the community later embraced Catholicism and Christianity, belief in Jibata did not simply disappear but was integrated into cultural practices and customs. This demonstrates that local spirituality possesses strong resilience because it is integrated with the community's cultural identity and value system.

The involvement of God in the stewardship of customary forests carries far-reaching implications, both ecologically and socially. Ecologically, the belief that the forest is God's creation and must be preserved has prevented exploitation and maintained the forest's function as a life-sustaining ecosystem. Rituals such as Mpaya Buah and Nyesei Amot are not only spiritual in nature but also function as conservation mechanisms ensuring the sustainability of natural resources. Socially, the involvement of God strengthens community cohesion through collective participation in traditional rituals and adherence to binding customary laws. However, social dynamics and economic pressures have triggered changes, such as the conversion of rubber plantations to oil palm plantations in some areas. This highlights a tension between sacred values and mundane needs, which traditional leaders adaptively address by updating customary rules without losing their spiritual essence. From the perspective of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's ecosufism, environmental crises arise from the loss of spiritual values in humanity's relationship with nature (Nasr, 2021). In contrast, the Tae community maintains harmony between God, nature, and humanity through rituals that strengthen ecological awareness. This harmony aligns with the concept of Tri Hita Karana in Hinduism, where well-being arises from a balanced relationship between humans, God, fellow humans, and the environment (Sena, 2018).

The findings of this study both reinforce and expand upon previous research on the relationship between religion and the environment. In line with Dinata et al., (2014) research on the Dayak Kanayatn community, the Tae people also recognize Jibata (or Jubata) as the supreme spirit who rules the universe and created the world and all its contents. Both communities believe in two realms of existence the physical world and the spiritual realm whose balance must be maintained through customary practices. Compared to the Baduy community, which adheres to the strict sacred guidelines of the pikukuh karuhun, the Tae community is more flexible in adapting customary rules to meet contemporary economic needs (Senoaji, 2004). In the context of the challenges of modernization, this finding differs from Anna Tsing's study of the Dayak Meratus, which emphasizes the clash between local traditions and capitalism as the trigger for open resistance movements (Tsing, 1998). Among the Tae people, resistance to capitalist expansion remains manageable, and efforts to strengthen spirituality and invoke God as a transcendental force protecting the customary forest continue. On the other hand, the ritual practices of the Tae community share similarities with the Kawit and Wiwit rituals of Javanese society as well as the harvest rituals of the Dayak Iban and the Malo Jelayan community, though with a stronger emphasis on seeking permission from supernatural rulers rather than merely expressing gratitude (Jatiningsih & Al Hasani, 2014; Aini et al., 2016; Asmeliati et al., 2020).

The research findings indicate that the involvement of God in the stewardship of customary forests among the Dayak Tae community contributes to the formation of an

environmental ethic that supports ecological sustainability. Based on these findings, this study offers conceptual, methodological, and policy recommendations aimed at strengthening research on religion and the environment and supporting the sustainable conservation of customary forests.

a. Conceptual Recommendations: The concept of Jibata should not only be understood as a transcendent entity within the Dayak Tae belief system but also as a moral foundation governing the relationship between humans and nature. This finding enriches the discourse on contemporary environmental ethics by demonstrating that ecological responsibility can be cultivated through spiritual awareness that positions nature as part of a sacred order. Therefore, the concept of Jibata has the potential to make a significant contribution to the development of ecological theology grounded in local wisdom.
b. Methodological Recommendations: Future research could expand the phenomenological approach through long-term participatory engagement. This approach enables researchers not only to understand the narratives and experiences of indigenous communities but also to directly observe the ecological practices that are sustained in daily life across generations.
c. Policy Recommendations: The Sanggau Regency Government and the Ministry of Environment and Forestry need to strengthen the recognition and protection of areas managed by indigenous communities, including those under the guidance of the Rombokng Ria Gandi Ria Kudur (RRGRK) organization. These efforts can be achieved through strengthening indigenous institutions, facilitating community-based forest management, and integrating religious-ecological values into regional conservation programs. This approach not only supports the preservation of the forest's ecological functions but also strengthens the cultural sustainability and local knowledge systems of the Dayak Tae community in the Bukit Tiong Kandang area.

## 6. Conclusion

This study identified three key findings regarding the role of God in the management of customary forests by the Dayak Tae community. First, God's involvement manifests in three primary forms: chants that consistently invoke Jibata in every traditional ritual such as Besiakng, Mpaya Buah, and Nyesei/Bepuwei; sacred symbols in the form of large stones on Bukit Tiong Kandang, believed to be the dwelling place of guardian spirits; and taboos that regulate community behavior based on three zones of customary territory. Second, the driving factors behind the involvement of God include theological beliefs that view Jibata as the owner of the universe, a system of knowledge transmission passed down through generations via traditional leaders and shamans, and external pressures such as modernization and oil palm plantations, which have actually triggered a spiritual response as a form of defense. Third, the impact of invoking God is evident in the preservation of the customary forest, the establishment of sustainable environmental ethics, the minimal occurrence of timber theft, and the emergence of awareness to integrate local wisdom with modern policies through the development of religious tourism and agrotourism potential. Although oil palm plantations exist in some areas, spiritual values remain the primary foundation in efforts to preserve the Tae customary forest, demonstrating that the invocation of God is adaptive to socio-economic changes without losing its sacred essence.

The significance of this study makes an important contribution conceptually, theoretically, and methodologically. Conceptually, this research enriches the discourse on ecological theology grounded in local wisdom, particularly in understanding how the concept of Jibata can be integrated into contemporary environmental ethics. Theoretically, this study expands the application of Durkheim's theory of the sacred and the profane by demonstrating that sacredness

is not only inherent in inanimate objects but also in ritual practices and taboo systems that govern human interaction with nature. Methodologically, the phenomenological approach has proven effective in capturing the symbolic meanings behind traditional rituals that may not be accessible through quantitative approaches. The combination of non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation was able to reveal deep layers of meaning regarding how the Tae community interprets the presence of God in every forest conservation activity. Thus, this study offers an integrative analytical framework between spiritual, cultural, and ecological dimensions in understanding community-based forest conservation.

This research has several limitations that can serve as recommendations for future studies. First, the limited research timeline prevented the direct observation of all traditional ritual cycles, particularly seasonal rituals that occur only once a year, such as Mpaya Buah and Nyesei Amot. Second, the study's focus on a single indigenous community (Dayak Tae) opens opportunities for comparative studies with other Dayak communities or indigenous peoples outside Kalimantan to examine variations and unique aspects of the practice of invoking God in forest conservation. Third, this study relies heavily on qualitative data and thus has not quantitatively measured the extent to which invoking God is effective in preventing deforestation compared to other conservation mechanisms. An interdisciplinary study combining ecological, anthropological, and forestry approaches is highly recommended. Fourth, the dynamics of the younger generation in interpreting and practicing the invocation of God need further research, given the threat of modernization that continues to erode traditional values.

### Author Contribution Statement

Contributions of the authors in this article: Elis Nurhadijah contributed as a field data collector, an analyst of field findings, and the draft author of the article. Zaenuddin Hudi Prasojo contributed as an analyst and interpreter of field data by linking the findings to theory and providing academic interpretations. Syukron Wahyudhi contributed to the critical revision of the article, specifically by reading, critiquing, and providing substantive feedback to improve the manuscript. All authors agree to take responsibility for all aspects of this work.

### Disclosure of Interests

We have no conflict of interest to declare

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