

# TRADITION, SCRIPTURE, AND ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION: TRANSFORMATION OF ECOLOGICAL PARADIGM IN RURAL SOCIETY OF BANGKA ISLAND

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**Abstract,** Bangka Island's artisanal tin mining activity contributes to environmental degradation in the region, affecting certain village areas that have traditionally upheld local wisdom, beliefs, and cultural values. The emergence of an anthropocentric religious perspective, predominantly introduced by educated youth within rural communities, is considered the primary catalyst for a shift in the village community's paradigm regarding the human-nature relationship. Therefore, this study aims to investigate two aspects: firstly, it delves into the contextual factors that lead to the proliferation of anthropocentric viewpoints among educated youth; and secondly, it examines how such perspectives may diminish the significance of local wisdom and villagers' beliefs regarding the human-nature connection. Drawing on data gathered through participant observation and ethnographic analysis, the research identifies two main factors contributing to the rise of anthropocentric interpretations of religious texts among educated youth. Firstly, Ulama Nusantara, the Muslim scholars in the archipelago, widely disseminate anthropocentric teachings in their religious references. Secondly, emerging beliefs regard their traditional beliefs in supernatural beings as part of erroneous teachings. By framing Islam, particularly the interpretation of religious texts such as the Quran and Hadith, as a viable solution to societal challenges, young individuals have effectively instigated a shift towards an anthropocentric paradigm. Consequently, this paradigm shift prompts a gradual erosion of traditional values and local wisdom, which have been handed down through generations.

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## INTRODUCTION

Tin mining activities on Bangka Island have recently drawn widespread public attention following the revelation of a massive corruption scandal amounting to IDR 271 trillion. Law enforcement's exposure of this corruption, widely reported across Indonesian media, has highlighted serious environmental damage on the island. The Regional Environment Agency of Bangka Belitung Province conducted an environmental assessment in the initial 15 years after the surge in illegal mining, classifying 15.15% of the total land area of 1,675,240.51 hectares as critical land, 37.28% as potentially critical, 44.54% as moderately critical, and only 10.79% as non-critical (Sibarani, 2017). A 2020 survey by Wahana Lingkungan Hidup (Walhi) of Bangka Belitung Province indicated that critical land had expanded to cover 1,053,253.19 hectares, or 64.12% of the total area. Additionally, over the past decade, Bangka Belitung has lost 320,760 hectares of productive land (Rosyida et al., 2019).

This study does not investigate the extent of environmental damage or its impact on Bangka Island's ecosystem. Instead, it focuses on the factors that drive the interest in mining among the Bangka people, particularly rural communities that still uphold traditional values governing the relationship between humans and nature.

Despite the fact that tin mining began on Bangka Island in the early 18th century, not all residents have been interested in this activity. This includes communities in several villages within the Mendo Barat sub-district of Bangka Regency, such as Payabenua village, which is known as a centre for the emergence and development of traditional Islam on the island. Payabenua's people have long sustained their livelihoods through rubber plantations. This agricultural lifestyle, inherited from their ancestors, aims to preserve the environment, especially forests and rivers, which are vital for their community. For these villagers, mining is taboo and considered futile, as they believe the tin ore has transformed into ordinary sand, rendering it worthless. Additionally, they believe in a supernatural guardian of their rivers, referred to as the Crocodile Demon (*Siluman Buaya*).

However, since 2017, economic hardships due to falling prices of rubber and pepper have led to a shift in the community's lifestyle and beliefs. Local youth who have pursued higher education, referred to as "educated youth" in this study, are driving the rise of illegal tin mining activities in the Mendo River basin, indicating this shift. By framing the idea that an anthropocentric religious perspective could address economic challenges, the youth's efforts to introduce mining activities were well-received by the community. This marked the beginning of a socio-religious transformation in a traditional society that had long upheld the noble beliefs and values of local wisdom.

Field data revealed that the youth's success in altering the community's outlook on life stemmed from two main factors: 1) the anthropocentric teachings aligned with those found in many religious texts by archipelago's Muslim scholars (*ulama Nusantara*), which are widely taught within the community, and 2) the emergence of new beliefs that regarded their old supernatural beliefs as part of misleading teachings.

### **Youth, religious orientation, and the environment**

In this study, the term "youth" refers to individuals born between 1981 and 1996, although some sources might vary by a year or two. This group is commonly known as the millennial generation. The term was first coined in William Strauss and Neil Howe's book *Generations* (1991), which identified this cohort as the first to come of age in the new millennium. Therefore, we place millennials between Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) and Generation Z (born from around 1997 to the early 2010s).

Field observations in Payabenua village revealed three typologies of religious orientation among the youth: traditionalist, progressive, and conservative. *Traditionalist Typology*: Traditionalist youth are those who have received education or religious instruction at Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and continue to uphold traditionalist religious practices in their daily lives. Most of these young people have formal education up to high school. The main reasons they do not pursue higher education are economic constraints and religious teachings that prioritise religious knowledge (*ilmu agama*) over secular knowledge (*ilmu umum*). Many of the youth in this category are pesantren alumni, such as Banjar in South Kalimantan, Sabital

Muhtadin Kemuja in Bangka, and Darul Muttaqin Payabenua in Bangka.

*Progressive Typology:* Progressive youth are those who engage critically with the entire spectrum of Islamic traditions (tuross) and view Islam as deeply relevant to social issues, not just individual beliefs. Unlike traditionalist and conservative youth, progressive youth have a cosmopolitan outlook. They support a dynamic civil society and embrace contemporary ideas about human rights and gender equality. Muslim scholars such as Harun Nasution, Abdurrahman Wahid, Nurcholish Madjid, Khaled Abou El Fadl, Hassan Hanafi, and Al-Jabiri often influence them. These scholars' works are well known in Indonesian Islamic universities such as the State Islamic University (Universitas Islam Negeri/ UIN), State Institute for Islamic Studies (Institut Agama Islam Negeri/ IAIN), and State College for Islamic Studies (Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri/STAIN).

*Conservative Typology:* Conservative youth are characterised by their exclusivity and monopolisation of religious truth, often judging the beliefs of other groups. They reject modernist, liberal, or progressive reinterpretations of Islamic teachings, adhering strictly to doctrines and social orders they believe are established by the Quran and Hadith. Conservative youth challenge modern hermeneutical approaches to religious texts and resist interpretations deemed to be influenced by non-Islamic traditions.

Across these typologies, the youth's understanding of the environment tends to be anthropocentric. This is evident in their interpretation of Quranic verses about the human-nature relationship, which they reflect through the concepts of *Chalifatullah* (steward of Allah), *amanah* (trust), and *maslahah* (public interest).

### Understanding the concept of *Chalifatullah*

The concept of *Chalifatullah* holds significant importance in both Islamic theology and environmental discourse, embodying a variety of interpretations within Islam. Scholars and researchers such as Llewellyn (2003), Matin (2010), Mangunjaya (2005), and Abdullah (2010) describe *Chalifatullah* as the steward or representative of Allah, entrusted with the responsibility to protect the world and manage its resources responsibly, avoiding disruption of the natural order through excessive exploitation for personal gain.

In contrast, the youth from Payabenua present a different interpretation of *khalifatullah*. They view it as Allah's appointed leader over all creatures, possessing the authority to govern the earth. They believe that God has designated humans, who are considered the most superior beings, as His successors and rulers of the earth. Consequently, they argue that utilising natural resources aligns with religious principles, justified by their belief in human superiority.

Various statements from interviews with young Muslims demonstrate this understanding, reflecting their conviction that their role as stewards of the earth allows them to harness its resources for human benefit without contradicting Islamic teachings. One of their statements reflects this understanding:

The tin ore that Allah has given here is a provision. As a provision, it must be processed, and mining is the only way to get it. Tin mining, in my opinion, is not against the law or the teachings of any religion, including Islam. It is because the Quran mentions that God has created the earth and nature for human beings, who are His representatives on the planet to manage the globe and everything on it. Considering the functions and roles of humans who can utilise natural resources, it would be imprudent to leave tin ore unexploited in this village. Therefore, I believe mining is acceptable as it benefits humanity. (Harun, April 2023)

These youths' interpretations of religious teachings regarding the human-nature relationship indicate their belief in human dominance over nature. This perspective reflects their perceived authority and lack of awareness about natural ecosystems. However, they justify these new interpretations under the guise of religion and poverty alleviation, viewing them as replacements for traditional values that they consider non-Islamic and responsible for the village's poverty.

### **The Meaning of *Amanah***

The youth of Payabenua also invoke the concept of *amanah*, which stems from the idea of *khalifah* (steward). It signifies that humans, as representatives of Allah on Earth, bear the responsibility of safeguarding the planet. This responsibility includes using their rational faculties to manage the earth and all its resources. The concept of *amanah* underscores that this divine trust does not permit reckless exploitation or destruction of natural resources without fair

compensation. Instead, it mandates humans to responsibly manage and preserve nature (Matin, 2010).

In the context of Payabenua, the concept of *amanah* holds that God has entrusted humans as His representatives (*khalifah*) on Earth. As a result, the youth believe it is imperative to honor this trust by avoiding actions that could lead to disloyalty or shirk. The following comments from the youth shed further light on their perspectives on *amanah*.

As *khalifatullah* on the earth, humankind is accountable for preserving their existence. Therefore, among the essential responsibilities that every individual must perform is the obligation to avoid poverty. As *khalifatullah*, humankind is allowed to benefit from surrounding natural resources when poverty and other social issues occur within the society. It is because utilising nature to sustain human life reflects carrying out the mandate (*amanah*) that God had given to mankind. Utilising natural resources, such as mining, to avoid poverty, which is one of the leading causes of disobedience and even doing *syirik* among many people, is, therefore, the essential means of carrying out the mandate (*amanah*) that all people must perform. (Benu, Interview in April 2023)

Based on the youth's perspectives on *amanah*, it is clear they connect this concept closely with upholding the principle of tawhid, which is fundamental in Islam. They stress the importance for Muslims to reject any belief in supernatural entities, including figures like the crocodile demon. Consequently, they see combating and eliminating shirk (polytheism or idolatry) as essential to preserving the integrity of *amanah*.

## Understanding the Concept of Mashlahah

The youth's interpretation of *mashlahah* represents a third new religious concept regarding the human-nature relationship that they have mobilised to justify unregulated mining in Payabenua. In ecological terms, the Islamic concept of *mashlahah*, or public interest, is grounded in the belief that God created humanity with the overarching purpose of conserving and maintaining the planet (Mangunjaya, 2005).

However, the youth interpret *mashlahah* to mean that nature exists primarily to fulfill human needs and provide benefits to them,

diverging from the broader ecological understanding mentioned earlier. Consequently, they argue that humans may utilise any means, such as mining or exploiting natural resources, to obtain benefits from nature, even if these actions could potentially harm the environment in the long run. Reflecting this viewpoint, Kuher, a young progressive, expanded upon this idea:

God created natural resources, including tin ore, for the benefit of humans. In this point, *mashlahab* signifies that God has granted humans the right to exploit nature for their own or others' benefit. In the context of this village, whose community was experiencing economic difficulties, the concept of *mashlahab* can be understood as the community's ability to extract natural resources, such as through mining, to overcome their problems. When issues resolve through this mining, the concept of *mashlahab* will have attained its true meaning. (Interview in November 2023)

From an environmental ethics standpoint, the youths' religious perspective on the relationship between humans and nature, as evident in these statements, is notably anthropocentric. Their views emphasise human centrality, implying that other creatures exist primarily to fulfil human needs and serve human interests (Keraf, 2010).

### Society's Response to Anthropocentrism

The anthropocentric religious understanding among young people, as discussed earlier, reflects a broader cultural trend marked by a limited emphasis on environmental conservation in religious teachings. This is evident in the absence of teachings on the human-nature relationship within the community's traditional religious education system, commonly known as "*ngaji duduk*" (learning Islam while sitting on the floor). It serves as the main venue for imparting Islamic knowledge and education to rural communities on Bangka Island, including Payabenua. A *guru kampung* (religious teacher) typically delivers the religious teachings in this *ngaji duduk*, drawing from fundamental texts such as Shaykh Abdussamad al-Palimbani's *Hidayatussaalikiin* and *Sairussaalikiin*, Shaykh Muhammad Arsyad Al-Banjari's *Sabiilal Muhtadiin*, and Shaykh Daud Ibn Abdullah al-Fathani's *Furu' Masa'il wa Ushul al-Wasa'il*.

Although the exact times when these four books were taught are unknown, they unquestionably continued to be the main sources

of religious education for the Bangka people up until now. After reviewing their content, which predominantly explores spirituality, worship, fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), and Sufism, it is evident that the authors do not prioritise discussion on environmental conservation.

The absence of specific discussions about the environment in religious teachings can have profound effects on societal understanding and actions. *Firstly*, it may lead to a lack of awareness about critical environmental issues such as climate change, pollution, deforestation, and biodiversity loss. *Secondly*, people's understanding of environmental principles may remain superficial, focusing only on general concepts like cleanliness and resource conservation without grasping their application to contemporary environmental challenges. *Thirdly*, this void creates an opportunity for contemporary Muslim scholars, in this case, young people, to innovate and integrate new teachings that address contemporary environmental concerns. In this community, where religious teachings do not extensively address environmental issues, young people's introduction of the anthropocentric perspective has received favourable support.

### **The Diminished Traditions**

The absence of environmental discussion in religious teachings has significantly influenced the evolution of new perspectives on environmental conservation, especially in the Payabenua village. Here, traditional values rooted in ancestral wisdom, including beliefs in entities like *siluman buaya* and *timah asal*, are undergoing a transformation in this context. As traditional Islamic teachings historically do not explicitly emphasise nature conservation, the introduction of new religious teachings, particularly by conservative youth, has led to a decline in these traditional beliefs. Younger generations perceive these beliefs as containing elements of idolatry and superstition, leading them to support activities such as river mining, where the location is associated with the crocodile demon.

### **CONCLUSION**

Artisanal tin mining significantly contributes to environmental degradation on Bangka Island. Local involvement in mining activities is driven not only by economic needs but also by the emergence of an anthropocentric interpretation of religious texts introduced by those deemed knowledgeable in religious matters. This new interpretation

serves to legitimise mining activities and erode longstanding community beliefs that traditionally safeguarded the environment. This phenomenon illustrates that social interpretations of religious texts have the ability to profoundly alter well-established paradigms and traditions.

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