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Spiritual Ecology and Identity in Crisis: Indigenous Lived Meanings of Forest Conservation Amid Modern Pressures in Southeast Asia

Sulfikar Sallu
Universitas Sulawesi Tenggara, Indonesia
datasulfikarr@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how indigenous communities experience and interpret fores conservation as a deeply spiritual and identity-rooted practice in the face of acceleratin modernization. Specifically, it seeks to answer the research question: How do indigenou forest custodians make meaning of their conservation practices amid modern ecologica and sociopolitical pressures?
Moving beyond technical conservation models, this study employs an interpretativ phenomenological approach (IPA), selected for its emphasis on capturing the lived subjective realities of participants. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structure interviews with nine forest custodians from a tropical Southeast Asian region, all o whom were selected through purposive sampling based on their sustained role i community-based forest stewardship. The interviews were transcribed, thematicall coded, and analyzed using multi-stage IPA procedures involving iterative coding contextual interpretation, and cross-case synthesis.
The findings reveal that the forest is perceived not as a utilitarian resource, but as sacred entity integral to spiritual heritage, ancestral connection, and intergenerationa responsibility. Participants described conservation as a moral and cosmological duty expressed through ancestral rituals, symbolic resistance to ecological intrusion, an narratives of profound loss resulting from external development agendas.
The study highlights deep tensions between indigenous cosmologies and state-le conservation frameworks, which often marginalize or erase spiritual meanings in favo of technocratic and extractive paradigms.
By uncovering the inner worlds through which indigenous communities relate to thei environment, the study calls for a reimagining of environmental policy—one that honor cultural sovereignty, spiritual ecology, and the lived experiences of local custodians. Th insights contribute to environmental humanities and indigenous studies, offering human-centered perspective on sustainability that is often absent from conventiona conservation discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

The global discourse on environmental sustainability has increasingly recognized the vital role of indigenous communities in preserving tropical forests and biodiversity (Ekadinata dkk., 2023; Puspitasari dkk., 2022). These communities engage in conservation not merely through technical interventions but through spiritual, relational, and cultural practices rooted in ancestral knowledge (Wenang dkk., 2022). In many tropical regions, indigenous forest dwellers engage in conservation not through formalized policies or technical interventions, but through embedded rituals, oral traditions, and collective memory that guide their interactions with the natural world.

Despite their marginalization within mainstream environmental governance, these communities contribute significantly to biodiversity protection and ecological balance (Salsabiila dkk., 2021; Yamada dkk., 2020). Forests are seen not as resources, but as sacred entities intertwined with identity, memory, and intergenerational responsibility (Santy dkk., 2024). In this context, the

forest is not perceived as a passive resource, but as a living entity with whom they share reciprocal relationships of care, reverence, and responsibility. These perceptions and practices stand in contrast to dominant developmental paradigms that often prioritize resource extraction, infrastructural expansion, or market-driven conservation mechanisms.

Given the intensifying pressures of modernization, including land commodification, extractive industries, and state-led development programs, the lifeways of indigenous forest guardians are increasingly under threat (Widayanti dkk., 2020). This dissonance raises critical questions about how such communities experience and respond to ecological disruption, not merely in terms of loss of habitat, but as existential challenges to their cultural identity and spiritual belonging.

Understanding this phenomenon requires more than empirical measurement; it calls for an exploration of lived experience—the emotions, meanings, and narratives through which individuals and communities make sense of their evolving relationship with the forest (Mudzengi dkk., 2021; Yacoob, 1991). A phenomenological approach provides the epistemological framework to access these inner worlds, emphasizing the subjective, situated, and meaning-laden nature of human experience. By foregrounding indigenous voices and experiential accounts, such inquiry contributes not only to academic knowledge but also to more inclusive and respectful conservation practices.

In recent years, the study of lived experiences in the context of environmental conservation has emerged as a critical area of inquiry, particularly within the broader field of environmental humanities and indigenous studies (Adjei dkk., 2023; Smyth & Vanclay, 2017). Scholars have increasingly emphasized the value of capturing how individuals and communities perceive, embody, and narrate their relationship with the natural environment (Yamada dkk., 2020). This focus on the subjective and affective dimensions of ecological engagement offers a counterbalance to dominant ecological models that often prioritize empirical indicators over experiential depth.

However, methodological challenges remain in accessing the rich interiority of such experiences (Singh dkk., 2001; Warner & Sullivan, 2017). Conventional environmental research, often rooted in quantitative paradigms, tends to reduce complex human-environment interactions to measurable outcomes, overlooking the emotional, spiritual, and existential layers that shape indigenous conservation ethics. Surveys and statistical models, while useful in policy design, are ill-suited to uncovering the symbolic meanings or moral universes that inform indigenous relationships with their land and forests.

This limitation has resulted in an incomplete understanding of the phenomenon (Ballew & Klosterman, 2012; Kalakbandi & Mittal, 2018). While descriptive accounts of indigenous environmental knowledge exist, many fail to grasp the essence of how individuals make sense of ecological threats and spiritual dislocation in the face of modernization (Zid dkk., 2020). Without approaches that can engage directly with meaning-making processes, such as phenomenology, research risks misrepresenting or marginalizing indigenous voices. Therefore, a methodological shift is required—one that moves beyond observable behavior to explore how environmental realities are experienced, interpreted, and lived.

Current strategies addressing forest conservation in indigenous territories tend to rely on established practical frameworks—ranging from community-based resource management to participatory development models (Armsworth dkk., 2013; Hanna, 2005). While these approaches have demonstrated operational benefits, they often employ externally driven metrics and procedural engagement that overlook the depth and nuance of local cultural meanings. As a result, conservation programs frequently operate without fully understanding the experiential world of those they intend to empower.

Despite growing recognition of indigenous ecological knowledge, much of the existing research continues to apply methodologies that prioritize observable behaviors and policy outcomes over lived experiences (Jadeja dkk., 2018; Marshall dkk., 2017). Quantitative assessments and structured environmental assessments, for example, may capture forest coverage trends or participation rates but fail to reveal the symbolic, spiritual, and affective meanings embedded in forest

relationships (Adjei dkk., 2023). These methodological limitations constrain our ability to grasp the inner logic through which indigenous communities interpret ecological disruption and resilience.

What remains largely underexplored is how indigenous individuals experience the existential and spiritual dimensions of forest conservation in the face of modernization, and how these experiences shape their ethical stance and cultural continuity (Ayre dkk., 2018; Omer, 2011). A phenomenological approach offers a vital alternative—one that seeks to access the essential structures of experience and illuminate how individuals construct meaning in relation to their environment. By privileging subjective narratives and interpretative depth, this approach promises a more holistic and human-centered understanding of conservation that aligns with indigenous epistemologies and lifeworlds.

Previous studies have explored indigenous environmental practices, often emphasizing traditional ecological knowledge and community-based conservation (Levidow, 2013; Olko, 2021). However, these works tend to focus on external behaviors, resource management models, or ecological outcomes (Armsworth dkk., 2013). Few have examined the subjective, emotional, and spiritual experiences of indigenous individuals as they engage with environmental disruption. Some research has highlighted the symbolic role of forests in indigenous identity, but rarely through methods that access lived meaning. Therefore, the need remains to investigate how indigenous forest guardians interpret and embody conservation within their lifeworlds.

This study uses an interpretative phenomenological approach to address that need. The method was selected for its ability to uncover how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences in specific cultural contexts (Misra, 1998; Mrdjenovic, 2023). By focusing on the subjective narratives of indigenous forest custodians, the study seeks to understand the spiritual, emotional, and existential layers of conservation. This approach responds directly to the limitations of prior research and aims to fill the knowledge gap identified. The result is a more nuanced view of conservation grounded in the inner worlds of those who live it daily.

The structure of this article is as follows. The introduction presents the background, the research context, and the rationale for using phenomenology (Ayre dkk., 2018). The methods section outlines participant selection, data collection, and analysis using interpretative phenomenological analysis (Miranda dkk., 2022; Warner, 2017). The results describe thematic findings supported by direct quotes from participants. The discussion then interprets these findings in light of existing literature and the broader implications for conservation policy. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the study's contributions and suggests directions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of indigenous communities in preserving tropical forests amidst the pressures of modernization (Hanna, 2005). Interpretative phenomenology, rooted in the philosophical foundations of Heidegger, focuses on how individuals make sense of their experiences within their socio-cultural contexts. The design was deemed appropriate due to its ability to uncover deep, subjective meanings and nuanced interpretations of participants' spiritual, emotional, and ecological engagement with the forest. Rather than seeking generalizability, the approach prioritized rich, contextualized understanding of the phenomenon as experienced by those directly involved.

To enhance trustworthiness, the study followed criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with the community, triangulation of data sources (interviews and field notes), and member checking where participants were invited to verify the accuracy of their statements. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of cultural and ecological contexts. Dependability and confirmability were addressed through an audit trail that documented the research process, decisions, and reflections throughout the study.

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Participants

Participants were members of an indigenous community located in a tropical forest region of Southeast Asia, recognized for their active role in forest stewardship and customary ecological practices. Selection followed a purposive sampling strategy to ensure that individuals had firsthand experience and sustained engagement with forest conservation. Inclusion criteria required participants to be adults (aged 30 and above), recognized within their community as traditional knowledge holders, ritual practitioners, or forest custodians. Individuals without direct involvement in forest preservation or those who had permanently migrated to urban areas were excluded (Jadeja dkk., 2018). A total of nine participants (5 males and 4 females) were included, with ages ranging from 34 to 67 years. Their roles included farmers, herbalists, cultural leaders, and spiritual custodians, offering diverse perspectives grounded in indigenous environmental relationships.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in person within the participants' local environment. Interviews were guided by an open-ended protocol designed to elicit reflections on participants' relationship with the forest, their ecological knowledge, and their responses to external pressures. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in a setting chosen by the participant to ensure comfort and authenticity. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim (Levidow, 2013). Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal expressions and environmental contexts. When necessary, a community liaison assisted with translation and cultural interpretation to maintain the integrity of participants' expressions.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework, which involved a multi-stage process of immersion, coding, theme development, and interpretative synthesis. Transcripts were first read multiple times to develop familiarity and identify significant meaning units. These units were then coded, clustered, and refined into emergent themes through iterative comparison (Misra, 1998). NVivo software was used to support the organization and retrieval of data segments, though thematic interpretation remained grounded in manual engagement with the texts. Special attention was given to contextualizing meanings within participants' cultural and ecological frameworks, leading to the identification of essential structures of the lived phenomenon.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics review board. Written informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained by using pseudonyms and omitting identifying details from transcripts and reports. The study adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with local protocols respecting indigenous knowledge systems and cultural sensitivities.

RESULTS

The Forest as a Spiritual Entity and Kin

Participants consistently described the forest not merely as a resource, but as an extension of their spiritual and familial identity. This relational ontology positioned the forest as a sacred space—imbued with ancestral presence, spiritual guidance, and moral obligations.

"The forest is our mother. She gives us food, heals our sickness, and punishes us if we forget our ways." (Participant 3, male elder, 62 years old)

Such expressions reflected a deeply embedded cosmology wherein nature is animate, and humans are custodians within an interdependent spiritual ecology. The forest was not seen as a passive backdrop but as a living relative—respected, nurtured, and feared.

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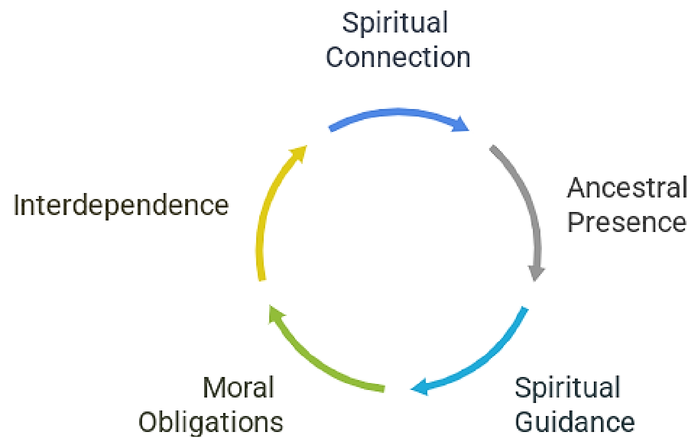
The Forest as a Spiritual Entity



Intergenerational Responsibility and Ecological Identity

Another dominant theme was the transmission of ecological values and responsibilities across generations. Many participants voiced anxiety over the younger generation's weakening ties to the forest, often attributed to formal education systems and urban migration.

"My grandfather taught me how to listen to the trees. I now try to teach my grandson, but he says it is old stuff—his world is concrete and internet." (Participant 6, female herbalist, 54 years old)

This decline in cultural continuity raised concerns about the sustainability of indigenous conservation practices, especially as modernity introduced alternative identities detached from ancestral land.

Participants expressed that ecological wisdom is not inherited passively, but cultivated through ritual, storytelling, and embodied practice—forms of knowledge that risk erosion without deliberate cultural transmission.

Ritual, Resistance, and Preservation under Pressure

Participants also narrated the integration of ritual into conservation acts. Annual ceremonies, offerings to the spirits of the forest, and customary laws (adat) were used as mechanisms for ecological balance and resistance to external threats, such as mining companies or illegal logging.

"We dance and sing to ask permission before entering sacred zones. This is not just culture—it is how we protect the land from greedy hands." (Participant 1, cultural leader, 48 years old)

These rituals were not merely symbolic but acted as socio-political statements of land ownership and ecological governance rooted in spiritual authority. However, several participants reported that their rituals were increasingly marginalized by state and commercial actors.

The Burden of Modernization and Cultural Displacement

A pervasive sense of marginalization emerged when participants discussed encounters with modern governance and economic development. State-driven reforestation projects, corporate expansion, and infrastructure development were often imposed without community consent, resulting in feelings of disempowerment and cultural dislocation.

"They come with papers and bulldozers. They say it's for development, but for us, it is death—death of the forest, and death of who we are." (Participant 7, male farmer, 41 years old)

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The dissonance between traditional ecological knowledge and modern environmental frameworks created cognitive and emotional burdens, as participants struggled to navigate the disjuncture between imposed progress and inherited values.

The essence of participants' lived experience reveals that for indigenous communities, the forest is not a commodity but a sentient, sacred entity intricately tied to identity, memory, and survival. Their ecological practices are deeply spiritual, communally governed, and threatened by the imposition of external modern systems. This tension underscores the urgent need for inclusive conservation paradigms that honor indigenous epistemologies.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that indigenous forest custodians experience the forest as a spiritual and familial entity, deeply embedded in their identity and worldview (shoib dkk., 2022; Soehl, 2020). This understanding is strongly supported by participant narratives, such as referring to the forest as a mother, healer, and moral agent—a sentiment repeatedly emphasized in the interviews. This understanding directly responds to the research question by illuminating how modernization challenges are interpreted not only as environmental degradation but as existential and cultural dislocation.

These insights contribute significantly to answering the central question posed in the introduction—namely, how indigenous communities make sense of their relationship with the forest amidst modernization. The study demonstrates that for these communities, conservation is not merely a technical or economic act but a moral and spiritual obligation (Mrdjenovic, 2023). This is evident, for instance, in how participants conduct rituals before entering sacred forest zones and view reforestation projects without consent as acts of cultural violence. Their ecological commitment emerges from relational values transmitted across generations, embodied in rituals, and sustained through lived resistance. This phenomenological lens uncovers layers of meaning often overlooked in mainstream environmental discourses, offering a more comprehensive understanding of what forest preservation signifies to those most intimately connected to it.

The results align with previous phenomenological studies that emphasize the role of meaning-making in environmental experience (Mudzengi dkk., 2021). They also extend existing literature on indigenous ecological knowledge by grounding it in the interior life of participants (Cetrez dkk., 2022; Rahman, 2022). For instance, Rahman (2020) identified local wisdom in forest practices, but this study deepens that insight by revealing the emotional and spiritual dimensions of such wisdom. Moreover, the study affirms Heideggerian perspectives on being-in-the-world, where place and identity are co-constitutive. The findings challenge reductionist conservation models by emphasizing the ontological significance of place, thus supporting a shift toward culturally attuned environmental policies.

The implications of these findings are both scholarly and practical (Chow dkk., 2021; Phillips, 2021). From a scholarly perspective, the study provides a deeper understanding of how indigenous ecological ethics are shaped not only by tradition, but by lived, embodied experiences grounded in place and ancestry. These insights emphasize the necessity of integrating spiritual and cultural dimensions into environmental frameworks, particularly in regions where conservation intersects with indigenous sovereignty. Practically, the findings advocate for participatory conservation models that respect and center indigenous voices—not merely as stakeholders but as epistemic authorities. Such integration has the potential to enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of sustainability policies in culturally diverse contexts.

Despite its strengths, the study has several limitations that should be acknowledged (Lipira dkk., 2019; Rahiem, 2021). The phenomenological approach, while rich in depth, limits the generalizability of findings to broader populations or different cultural settings. Additionally, the study relied on a relatively small number of participants from a single community, which may not capture the full diversity of indigenous experiences across regions. Language barriers and cultural translation, though carefully managed, may also have shaped the interpretation of some meanings

(Singh dkk., 2001). These limitations are intrinsic to qualitative inquiry but should guide caution in applying the findings beyond their specific context.

Future research may build on these findings by exploring how similar experiential structures emerge in other indigenous or marginalized groups facing environmental transformation (O'Rourke dkk., 2021; Zahodne, 2021). Comparative phenomenological studies across different ecological and cultural landscapes could uncover shared patterns or unique divergences in the meaning of place-based conservation (Liddle dkk., 2022; Sumbulah, 2019). Moreover, interdisciplinary integration with policy studies, education, or environmental psychology could deepen the impact of such research, fostering more inclusive and holistic sustainability paradigms (Smyth & Vanclay, 2017). These avenues highlight the continuing need to engage with experience as a legitimate and valuable source of ecological knowledge.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how indigenous forest custodians experience and interpret their relationship with tropical forests amid the pressures of modernization. Through an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research uncovered that the forest is not merely a resource but a spiritual and familial entity essential to indigenous identity and cultural continuity. The findings highlight emotional, spiritual, and intergenerational meanings often overlooked by policy-driven conservation models. By revealing the existential dimensions of ecological engagement, this study addresses significant gaps in previous research that lacked attention to subjective experiences. These insights provide valuable guidance for culturally inclusive conservation efforts that honor indigenous lifeworlds. In practical terms, the study suggests that conservation policies must go beyond technical and economic considerations to meaningfully incorporate indigenous spiritual and cultural worldviews. Policy frameworks should recognize indigenous communities not only as stakeholders but as knowledge holders and co-creators of ecological governance. This includes legal recognition of sacred forest sites, integration of customary laws into conservation planning, and participatory mechanisms that respect indigenous rituals and cosmologies. Environmental programs that ignore these dimensions risk undermining the very communities they aim to support.

For practitioners, the findings call for deeper engagement with indigenous leaders, spiritual custodians, and youth to co-design strategies that sustain ecological practices across generations. This may involve community-based education, cultural revitalization initiatives, and partnerships that elevate indigenous epistemologies in forest management. Future research could expand this approach across different communities to examine the universality and diversity of ecological meaning-making.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. This research was conducted independently, and no commercial or financial relationships were involved that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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