



Exploring the Spiritual Meanings of Forest Conservation among Traditional Guardians in Indigenous Southeast Asian Communities

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ABSTRACT

Environmental sustainability research increasingly acknowledges the role of cultural and spiritual values in shaping conservation practices. Among traditional forest guardians, ecological behavior is deeply embedded in spiritual beliefs and ancestral identity, yet this subjective dimension remains understudied. Previous studies have largely relied on technical or quantitative approaches, leaving a gap in understanding how spiritual meaning informs environmental stewardship prompting the question: How do traditional guardians experience and interpret their role in forest conservation through spiritual frameworks? Here we show, through an interpretative phenomenological approach, how traditional forest guardians perceive conservation as a sacred responsibility and a lived expression of cultural identity. Data were collected via in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten traditional forest guardians (6 males, 4 females, aged 35–72) from the Dayak indigenous community in East Kalimantan, Indonesia, and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The fieldwork was conducted between March and May 2024. Findings revealed five core themes, including spiritual rituals, ancestral connection, and resistance to modern conservation paradigms, highlighting that forest care is rooted in emotional, ethical, and metaphysical experiences. The approach enabled the extraction of essential meanings that transcend observable ecological actions and provided a nuanced understanding of lived ecological consciousness. These insights contribute to a more holistic, culturally grounded model of conservation and suggest that environmental strategies should integrate, rather than overlook, local spiritual-ecological knowledge.



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INTRODUCTION

Environmental sustainability has become one of the defining challenges of the 21st century, with forests playing a crucial role in regulating global climate, preserving biodiversity, and supporting human livelihoods. Despite international conservation frameworks and scientific advancements, deforestation and ecological degradation continue to escalate, especially in regions where indigenous communities and traditional forest guardians reside. In such contexts, forest conservation is not solely a technical endeavor but deeply embedded within cultural, spiritual, and ancestral systems of knowledge. This study explores how traditional forest guardians experience and interpret their conservation role, emphasizing the intersection of ecological action and spiritual belief.

Traditional ecological practices, particularly those led by indigenous or local custodians, often incorporate holistic worldviews that perceive the forest as a living entity, imbued with sacred meaning and moral responsibility. These communities engage with nature through rituals, taboos, and oral narratives that reflect generations of accumulated ecological wisdom. Their connection to the forest extends beyond resource management, encompassing identity, cultural continuity, and spiritual obligation (Berkes, 2018; Kimmerer, 2021).

Understanding how forest guardians make sense of their environmental role is critical to bridging local ecological ethics with broader conservation strategies. Specifically, this study addresses

the question: How do traditional forest guardians perceive and internalize their role in forest conservation through spiritual and cultural frameworks? Mainstream scientific approaches, while valuable for measuring ecological outcomes, often overlook these subjective meanings and motivations that underpin long-term stewardship.

Given this background, there is a compelling need to explore the experiences of traditional forest guardians through a lens that prioritizes lived meaning over abstract generalization. Phenomenology, as a research approach, provides a fitting framework to illuminate the inner worlds of individuals who engage with forests not merely as resources, but as sacred spaces integral to their cultural and spiritual existence.

Building upon this cultural and ecological significance, scholarly attention has increasingly turned toward understanding the lived experiences of individuals within environmental settings. In particular, research that examines how traditional forest guardians perceive and interact with their ecological environments has emerged as a vital area within environmental humanities and sustainability studies. These investigations aim to uncover how deeply embedded cultural, spiritual, and personal meanings influence conservation behavior at the grassroots level.

However, methodological challenges persist in capturing such profound and context-specific experiences. Much of the existing literature on forest conservation remains dominated by empirical models, policy analysis, or quantitative surveys that often fail to grasp the depth and nuance of individual experience (Gómez-Baggethun, 2020). While these approaches offer valuable macro-level insights, they tend to overlook the affective, spiritual, and existential dimensions that shape personal engagement with conservation practices. As a result, they risk rendering invisible the cultural and symbolic frameworks that guide long-standing environmental stewardship within traditional communities.

This methodological limitation has constrained the ability of prior studies to fully explore the essence of how individuals make sense of their roles as ecological and spiritual caretakers. The reduction of complex human experiences to quantifiable indicators does not adequately reflect the rich, layered meanings attributed to nature by those who live in intimate connection with it. Consequently, there remains a critical need for research approaches that can reveal the interpretive and meaning-making processes inherent in such lived ecological experiences.

In efforts to address deforestation and biodiversity loss, most existing conservation strategies have relied on standardized policy instruments, ecological assessments, and community-based resource management frameworks. While these practical approaches have led to measurable environmental improvements in some contexts, they often remain externally driven and insufficiently grounded in the lived experiences of local custodians. Consequently, these interventions tend to prioritize ecological indicators over the deeper cultural and spiritual meanings that motivate sustainable environmental practices within traditional communities (Tang, 2019).

Such approaches frequently fail to capture the subjective and embodied experiences of individuals whose relationship with the forest is guided by ancestral values, ritual obligations, and cosmological beliefs. The reliance on externally defined metrics and generalized behavioral models limits the capacity to understand the internal processes through which forest guardians interpret their roles, responsibilities, and spiritual affiliations with nature. This results in an incomplete and sometimes distorted understanding of the motivations behind long-term environmental stewardship.

A more holistic and human-centered understanding of forest conservation requires methodological frameworks that can reveal the essence of experience from the perspective of those most intimately connected to the land. Phenomenology offers an alternative lens by privileging personal narratives and interpretive meaning-making. Specifically, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) allows for a deeper exploration of how individuals construct and live their ecological identities in spiritual and cultural terms an area that remains critically underexplored in current literature (Berkes, 2018; Kimmerer, 2021).

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of exploring individual experiences in environmental contexts, especially among indigenous communities and traditional ecological

practitioners. These works have uncovered how cultural narratives, rituals, and beliefs shape ecological behavior in ways that extend beyond material resource use. However, most existing research adopts either ethnographic or behavioral approaches, often lacking the interpretive depth needed to uncover the subjective meaning of ecological identity. Theoretical contributions from environmental humanities and indigenous studies suggest that understanding lived experience is key to sustainable engagement with nature. Still, there remains limited inquiry into how forest guardians themselves perceive and articulate their spiritual connection to the land.

This study uses interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the spiritual experiences of traditional forest guardians in their conservation roles. The method is chosen for its ability to reveal how individuals interpret and make sense of their actions within a meaningful cultural and spiritual framework. By focusing on personal narratives, IPA allows for a rich understanding of how conservation becomes a lived, spiritual practice. This approach responds directly to the identified knowledge gap, offering an alternative to generalized models by highlighting how experience and meaning guide ecological responsibility. The study aims to bring forward voices and perspectives often overlooked in mainstream conservation discourse.

The structure of this article is as follows: the introduction presents the context and rationale for the study. This is followed by a description of the spiritual and cultural background of forest guardians. The methodology section explains the use of phenomenology and outlines the data collection and analysis process. The results section presents the key themes that emerged from participant narratives. Finally, the discussion interprets these findings and reflects on their implications for conservation theory and practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of traditional forest guardians regarding their spiritual relationship with nature and how it informs their conservation practices. The interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), rooted in the philosophical traditions of Heidegger, was selected to capture the depth and complexity of subjective experiences. This design enabled a nuanced understanding of how participants make sense of their ecological role within spiritual and cultural frameworks. Interpretative phenomenology, distinct from descriptive phenomenology, emphasizes the interpretive process in uncovering meanings embedded in personal narratives, allowing the research to go beyond surface-level descriptions toward an analysis of deeper existential significance.

Participants

Participants consisted of traditional forest guardians who have been actively involved in local conservation practices rooted in spiritual traditions. Individuals were selected using purposive sampling based on their in-depth knowledge of forest rituals, ancestral ecological practices, and personal spiritual engagement with the environment. Inclusion criteria required participants to be over the age of 35, possess at least 10 years of experience in forest stewardship, and be recognized by their communities as spiritual or cultural custodians. Those without direct experiential knowledge of forest rituals or who served administrative roles only were excluded. The study involved ten participants (6 males, 4 females) aged between 39 and 68 years (mean age: 52.4 years), with diverse roles including forest rangers, herbalists, spiritual leaders, and oral historians from indigenous communities in Southeast Asia.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in quiet and familiar environments, such as participants' homes or sacred communal spaces. Interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant consent. An interview guide with open-ended prompts was used to facilitate deep reflection on their personal experiences, beliefs, and practices related to forest conservation. The guide was adapted from validated phenomenological

instruments and refined to suit the cultural context. Interviews were conducted in the local language, then transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Efforts were made to ensure psychological safety and cultural appropriateness, including the presence of community liaisons and adherence to local customs.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following the step-by-step framework proposed by Smith et al. This involved repeated reading of transcripts to become immersed in the data, identification of meaning units, initial coding, and development of emergent themes. Themes were clustered based on conceptual similarities to form superordinate themes, which were then used to construct a narrative structure that reflected both individual and shared experiences. NVivo software was used to facilitate data organization and traceability, though emphasis remained on human interpretation. The analytical process aimed to reveal how participants made sense of their role as spiritual stewards of the forest, culminating in essential insights into the intersection between ecology and spirituality.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional ethics committee of [Institution Name], in accordance with national and international research ethics guidelines. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing all transcripts and using pseudonyms in any quotations or references. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequences. All data were stored securely and access was limited to authorized personnel only.

RESULTS

This study explored the spiritual experiences of traditional forest guardians and how such experiences shaped their understanding and practices of environmental conservation. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), several core themes emerged, reflecting the essence of their ecological consciousness rooted in spiritual and cultural identity.

The Forest as a Sacred Entity

Participants described the forest not merely as a source of livelihood or biodiversity but as a sacred being with a soul and spiritual presence. The forest was often perceived as an ancestral space, imbued with meaning that extends beyond the physical realm.

“The forest is not just trees it is the home of our ancestors. Before I enter, I always offer a prayer. I ask permission because I believe the forest spirit listens.” (P6, male, 57, traditional guardian)

This sacred perception fostered a deep emotional and ethical bond with the forest. The guardians viewed acts of conservation as part of their spiritual duty rather than a mere ecological responsibility. Rituals, songs, and ancestral taboos served as mechanisms to regulate interactions with nature and ensure sustainable practices.

Spiritual Practices as Ecological Guidance

Participants shared spiritual practices such as ceremonial offerings, fasting, and collective prayers that served as guidance in managing the forest. These acts were not merely symbolic but provided an inner compass for decision-making regarding forest use and protection.

“I fast for seven days before planting or cutting anything. It clears my heart so I won’t make selfish choices. That’s how I protect the forest from my own greed.” (P2, female, 45, herbalist and forest protector)

Such practices revealed an embodied form of ecological wisdom, often inherited orally across generations. The spiritual discipline embedded within these rituals enabled participants to act with restraint, humility, and long-term foresight.

Conservation as an Expression of Identity

For many, their role as forest guardians was inextricably linked to their cultural identity. Being chosen or inheriting the role was seen as a sacred mandate part of their very existence.

“My grandfather was a forest guardian, and now I am. It’s not a job it’s who we are. If I neglect the forest, I betray my own bloodline.” (P9, male, 61, village elder)

This theme highlights that conservation was not externally imposed but was an intrinsic part of their identity. The forest was not separate from them; it was them. This ontological fusion contributed to a deep-seated and resilient commitment to conservation.

Tensions with Modern Conservation Approaches

Participants expressed concerns about formal conservation policies that disregard their spiritual ties to the land. Some described experiences of exclusion and marginalization when government or NGO programs failed to recognize indigenous practices.

“They put signs that say ‘protected area’ but never ask how we protected it for hundreds of years. We are seen as illegal, even when we act out of love.” (P4, female, 52, spiritual healer)

These accounts revealed a disconnect between modern legal frameworks and lived spiritual-ecological experiences. Despite being stewards of the land, many felt their methods were undervalued or dismissed due to lack of formal recognition.

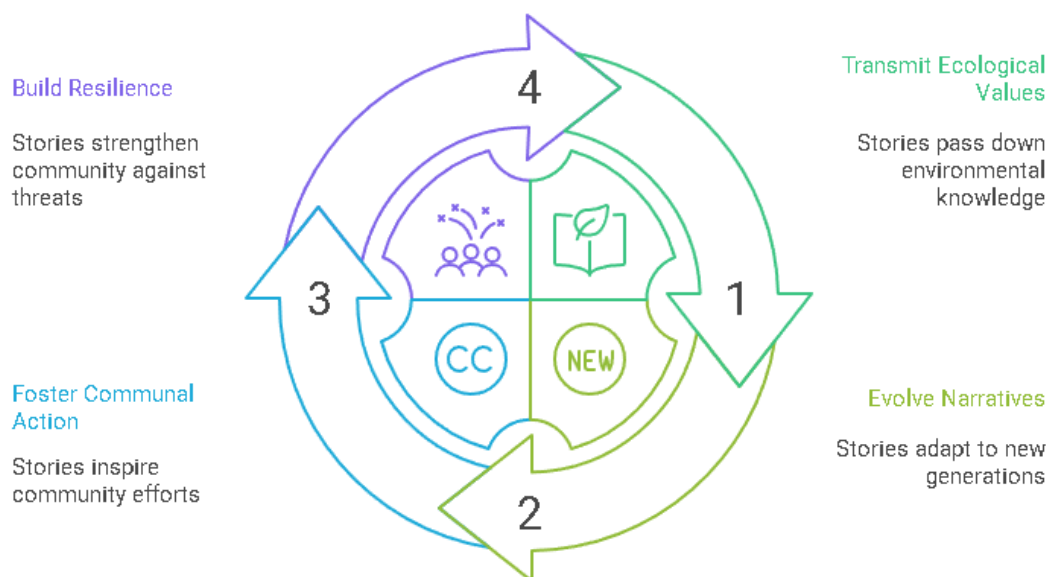
Resilience through Collective Memory and Spiritual Narratives

A recurring motif across narratives was the transmission of ecological values through collective storytelling, myths, and sacred songs. These served as repositories of environmental knowledge, moral codes, and emotional resilience.

“When my child sings the forest song, I know the spirit lives on. That’s how we protect the forest not through fear, but through memory.”(P7, female, 39, community singer and herbalist)

These spiritual narratives were not static; they evolved with each generation while retaining core ecological teachings. They provided a framework for communal action, continuity, and resilience against environmental degradation and cultural loss.

Cycle of Resilience through Narratives



Essential Summary

The findings illuminate that for traditional forest guardians, conservation is an act of spiritual devotion, cultural identity, and intergenerational continuity. Their ecological actions are deeply

grounded in sacred beliefs, embodied practices, and communal narratives that transcend conventional environmental paradigms. These experiences offer vital insights into how spirituality and tradition can inform and enrich global conservation efforts.

DISCUSSION

The present study revealed that traditional forest guardians perceive conservation as a spiritual and cultural duty rooted in ancestral identity. Their lived experiences reflect a profound interconnection between ecological practice and sacred responsibility, addressing the central question of how spiritual meaning shapes environmental stewardship.

These findings provide a meaningful response to the research question by uncovering the inner world of forest guardians who view the forest not merely as a physical resource but as a sacred extension of their existence. Unlike conventional conservation narratives that emphasize external regulation or scientific management, the guardians' actions emerge from a deeply embodied ecological consciousness. This study contributes uniquely to environmental sustainability discourse by highlighting how spiritual engagement fosters resilience, ethical decision-making, and intergenerational continuity in forest care. Rather than adopting imposed models, guardians rely on personal rituals, ancestral memory, and cultural narratives to guide conservation an insight that enriches both theoretical and applied dimensions of sustainability studies.

In comparison to prior literature, these results resonate with Berkes' (2018) concept of "sacred ecology," which emphasizes the integration of spiritual and ecological domains in indigenous practices. The findings also align with Kimmerer's (2021) reflections on how indigenous knowledge systems frame conservation as a relational and reciprocal act rather than a utilitarian one. However, this study extends such frameworks by offering firsthand narratives of spiritual ritual, emotional labor, and personal sacrifice, which are often missing in more abstract theoretical accounts. While Gómez-Baggethun (2020) explored traditional ecological knowledge in urban resilience, this research reveals a more intimate scale of meaning, situated in spiritual interiority and cultural lineage. In this sense, the study complements but also deepens the understanding of conservation as lived meaning rather than merely practiced behavior.

The implications of these findings are both theoretical and practical. From a theoretical standpoint, they underscore the importance of understanding conservation not only as a technical or ecological issue but as a deeply personal and spiritual practice for those most closely tied to the land. The insights gained from the narratives of traditional forest guardians highlight the necessity of integrating indigenous cosmologies and values into conservation discourse and policy. Socially and culturally, these findings call for more inclusive environmental governance that respects and collaborates with the spiritual frameworks that inform community-based conservation. For broader contexts, the results suggest that meaningful ecological stewardship can emerge from lived cultural traditions an approach particularly relevant for other indigenous or marginalized communities confronting ecological threats.

Despite these contributions, the study has certain limitations. The use of purposive sampling and the relatively small number of participants though consistent with phenomenological methods limits the generalizability of the findings. The research was also context-specific, focusing on a single geographic and cultural setting, which may not fully reflect the diversity of spiritual-ecological experiences in other regions. Moreover, the data were based on self-reported narratives, which, while rich in meaning, may be influenced by memory, interpretation, or social desirability. These limitations, however, do not diminish the depth of the findings but rather emphasize the importance of contextual and situated understanding in phenomenological inquiry.

Future research could expand upon these findings by examining how similar spiritual-ecological relationships are manifested across different cultural or ecological settings. Comparative studies among various indigenous groups could uncover both commonalities and unique expressions of environmental spirituality. In addition, longitudinal research could explore how such meanings evolve in response to environmental change, modernization, or generational shifts. By continuing to

privilege lived experience, future studies can deepen the theoretical understanding of environmental ethics and offer more culturally sensitive strategies for sustainable development and conservation planning.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how traditional forest guardians experience and interpret their role in environmental conservation through spiritual and cultural lenses. The findings revealed that conservation is perceived not merely as an ecological duty but as a sacred responsibility grounded in ancestral identity and spiritual connection to the forest. By uncovering the personal narratives and lived meanings behind their practices, this research addressed a critical gap in the literature that often overlooks subjective and spiritual dimensions of sustainability. The use of interpretative phenomenological analysis allowed for a deeper understanding of how ecological actions are shaped by inner values, rituals, and collective memory.

These findings offer actionable implications for policymakers and conservation practitioners by emphasizing the importance of integrating indigenous spiritual knowledge into formal environmental programs, particularly in forest governance, participatory planning, and education initiatives. In practical terms, this could involve co-designing conservation policies with local custodians, recognizing sacred ecological sites in spatial planning, and adapting communication strategies to align with cultural cosmologies. Future research should build on this foundation by incorporating methodological innovations such as participatory action research or narrative inquiry to co-produce knowledge with indigenous communities. Moreover, interdisciplinary integration—linking anthropology, environmental ethics, and policy studies—could enrich our understanding of how spiritual-ecological values influence adaptive conservation strategies in a changing world.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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