Green Sufism Meets Parmalim Eco-Theology: Interfaith Paths Toward Nature Conservation in Indonesia

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A B S T R A C T

North Sumatra's cultural tapestry includes both deep Islamic traditions and the indigenous Parmalim faith, each offering resources for environmental stewardship. This paper compares 'Green Sufism' (ecological readings of Islamic mysticism) and Parmalim eco-theology to identify shared ethical foundations and an interfaith pathway for nature conservation, with Lake Toba as a focal context. Using an interpretive thematic synthesis of secondary sources, we show that Sufi-oriented practices emphasize humility (zuhud), gratitude, and contemplation (tafakkur) as spiritual dispositions that motivate concrete ecological action (e.g., eco-pesantren curricula, reforestation, waste management). Parmalim teachings likewise treat nature as sacred and mandate regenerative norms, including prohibitions on casual tree-cutting and obligations to replant forests and protect water sources. We propose a social-construction mechanism—belief → internalization → objectivation → externalization—to explain how eco-theological commitments become collective conservation practices, and we outline transferable interfaith strategies for North Sumatra. We argue that explicitly linking Sufi and Parmalim values through joint education, ritualized conservation, and community-based projects can complement technocratic governance by strengthening moral motivation, local legitimacy, and social cohesion in environmental programs.

Keywords: Green Sufism; Parmalim; eco-theology; interfaith dialogue; Lake Toba; spiritual ecology; environmental governance.

A. Introduction

Indonesia's environmental challenges, from deforestation to water pollution, demand broad-based solutions. North Sumatra exemplifies these issues: its centerpiece, Lake Toba (the world's largest volcanic lake), has suffered eutrophication and nutrient overload from agriculture and tourism development. Ironically, the Batak Toba people inhabiting the Lake Toba region possess a strong cultural linkage to the lake that could aid its protection. Lumbanbatu (2025) notes that traditional Batak-Toba cultural values—expressed in songs, rituals, and local lore—embody knowledge and awareness that historically fostered Lake Toba's health. Yet, modern economic pressures often 'lack regard for local wisdom or cultural significance', resulting in ecological damage. This gap suggests the need to revive indigenous environmental ethics in tandem with formal conservation efforts. North Sumatra is also religiously pluralistic. Among minority traditions, Parmalim (Ugamo Malim) is an ancient Toba Batak religion officially recognized in Indonesia. Centered around Huta Tinggi (Laguboti, Toba), Parmalim asserts the unity of Debata Mulajadi Na Bolon (the Supreme Creator) with nature, giving its rites a strong ecological dimension. In

parallel, Islam in Indonesia has seen the rise of 'Green Islam' initiatives, including Sufi-inspired ecological education in some Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). However, despite growing religious endorsements of environmental care, grassroots interfaith cooperation on ecological issues remains limited. This paper positions Green Sufism and Parmalim eco-theology as two locally grounded reservoirs of environmental meaning that can be brought into constructive dialogue for conservation.

B. Research Questions, Objectives, and Contribution

To strengthen analytical focus and connect this study to wider debates on environmental governance and sustainable development, the paper is guided by two research questions (RQs) and corresponding objectives (Os):

1. How do Green Sufism and Parmalim eco-theology conceptualize the natural world and human environmental responsibility in North Sumatra?
2. Through what socio-pedagogical processes do these eco-theological beliefs translate into collective conservation practices, and what interfaith opportunities emerge for environmental governance around Lake Toba?

Objectives aligned to these RQs are to map and compare key eco-theological concepts, virtues, rituals, and norms in Green Sufism and Parmalim traditions.

1. To theorize and illustrate a mechanism linking belief to practice (belief → internalization → objectivation → externalization) and to identify which conservation practices are transferable across traditions versus context-specific.
2. To propose policy-relevant interfaith strategies that complement technocratic approaches by improving local legitimacy, moral motivation, and community participation in conservation programs.

The paper contributes to spiritual ecology and interfaith environmentalism by (i) offering a systematic comparison of Green Sufism and Parmalim eco-theology, and (ii) proposing an analytically explicit social-construction pathway explaining how eco-theological meanings become conservation practices that can interface with environmental governance.

C. Methodology

This study uses an interpretive qualitative design. It combines an interpretive phenomenological orientation (focused on how ecological meanings are expressed and experienced) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) with a social constructionist lens that explains how meanings become shared norms and institutionalized practices (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The analysis is conducted as an interpretive thematic synthesis of published secondary sources rather than new field interviews. The core corpus is the set of 24 sources listed in the References section (peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, conference proceedings, and institutional reports) published primarily between 2010 and 2025. Sources were located through targeted searches using combinations of keywords such as 'Green Sufism', 'eco-pesantren', 'Ath-Thaariq', 'Parmalim/Ugamo Malim', 'Lake Toba', 'eco-theology', 'spiritual ecology', and 'interfaith environment'.

We prioritized sources that provide concrete descriptions of beliefs, rituals, educational practices, and community norms that relate to forests, water, agriculture, and land. Sources were included if they contained (i) explicit eco-theological claims or virtues; (ii) reported practices or institutional routines (e.g., reforestation, waste management, watershed care); and/or (iii) discussion of Lake Toba or North Sumatran cultural contexts. Purely doctrinal texts without environmental content and non-Indonesia cases used only for background framing were deprioritized. First pass (open coding): we coded phrases describing theological meanings of nature (e.g., 'nature as divine signs', 'nature as sacred') and concrete practices (e.g., reforestation, water protection). Second pass (axial/thematic grouping): codes were clustered into within-tradition themes (e.g., Sufi virtues: *zuhud*, gratitude, *tafakkur*; Parmalim norms: taboo on casual tree cutting, obligatory replanting, water sanctity). Third pass (mechanism mapping): themes were mapped onto a four-step social-construction pathway—belief → internalization → objectivation → externalization—so that comparisons do not remain purely descriptive.

Throughout, analytic memos were used to document interpretive decisions, and a cross-tradition matrix was produced to identify convergences, divergences, and possible points of interfaith collaboration. For Green Sufism, the code 'contemplation as ecological discipline' was grouped under the theme 'spiritual practice in/with nature' and mapped as internalization (education through daily farming, reflection, and communal routines). For Parmalim, the code 'replant after cutting' was grouped under the theme 'regenerative taboos' and mapped as objectivation (a shared, enforceable norm). These examples illustrate the analytic logic used throughout the synthesis. Because the study relies on secondary sources, it cannot claim statistical generalization and may inherit the biases of the original authors and the cases they reported. Contextual specificity (Lake Toba and selected eco-*pesantren* cases) also limits transferability. To increase transparency, we (i) state inclusion criteria; (ii) distinguish theological claims from reported practices; and (iii) mark interpretive inferences as such. Future work should add interviews and participant observation especially within Parmalim communities and around Lake Toba to validate and refine the proposed belief-to-practice mechanism.

D. Results and Discussion
D.1. Green Sufism and Islamic Ecological Ethics

In Islam, humans are enjoined to be stewards (*khalifah*) of Earth, a principle that acquires mystical depth in Sufism. Sufi teachings emphasize the divine presence in creation: the material world is viewed as God's signs (*ayat al-kauniyah*) for humans to contemplate. To strengthen empirical grounding, the literature provides practice-oriented illustrations from eco-*pesantren* settings. Case studies report that farming, tree planting, and waste recycling are framed as worshipful disciplines that cultivate humility and gratitude. One teacher is quoted as saying, "Nature is like a mother; hence, an agrarian disaster is a mother's disaster," expressing environmental harm as a spiritual injury. Another quotation frames ecological well-being as part of spiritual flourishing: "Human happiness lies in their mingling with nature." These statements exemplify how ecological action is taught not merely as 'ethics' but as spiritual formation through daily routines (Irawan, 2022). Taken together, the reviewed sources indicate that Sufi virtues—humility (*zuhud*), gratitude, and contemplation (*tafakkur*)—function as motivational bridges that connect doctrine to conservation habits. Internalization occurs through repeated eco-*pesantren* routines (gardening, composting, reforestation) embedded in religious education and communal life.

D.2. Parmalim Eco-Theology and Batak Environmental Wisdom

Parmalim theology is inherently nature-centric. Parmalim rituals and beliefs are strongly shaped by natural theology, engaging the Creator through tangible elements of the natural world. Harmony with nature is therefore understood as a sacred duty. Empirical descriptions in the literature emphasize enforceable norms and ritual practices. A recurring example is the taboo against casual tree cutting:

if a tree must be cut, a new sapling should be replanted, reflecting a regenerative ethic (Irmayani, Amin, & Ginting, 2017; Sirait, 2024). Water is also treated as sacred; ritual attention to water sources functions as an everyday conservation rule in communities that depend on Lake Toba and surrounding rivers. These practices illustrate how ecological care is not optional charity but a binding obligation anchored in cosmology and communal accountability.

In social-construction terms, Parmalim eco-theology often appears as objectivated norms shared rules and taboos that structure daily behavior (e.g., selective logging, replanting obligations, forest guardianship, water protection). This helps explain how ecological care persists even when Parmalim communities face marginalization as a minority tradition.

## D.3. Comparative Analysis, Mechanism, and Interfaith Opportunities

Across both traditions, the synthesis indicates convergence on three ethical anchors: (i) sacredness of nature, (ii) critique of greed/excess, and (iii) gratitude expressed through care. Table 1 summarizes the comparative themes and reported practices.

Additionally, we propose a four-step mechanism that connects eco-theological meaning to collective conservation practice: belief → internalization → objectivation → externalization (Figure 1). In brief, beliefs about nature (sacred signs; sacred creation) are internalized through education and ritual learning; they are objectivated as shared norms, taboos, and institutional rules; and they are externalized as observable collective practices (reforestation, watershed care, waste routines) that can support conservation outcomes and social cohesion.

Table 1. Comparative themes linking eco-theology to conservation practices in Green Sufism and Parmalim traditions.

Tradition	Core eco-theological claim	Key virtues/norms	Reported practices	Governance hooks
Green Sufism	Nature as divine signs (*ayat*) and trust (*amanah*)	Humility (*zuhud*), gratitude, contemplation (*tafakkur*)	Eco-*pesantren* education; reforestation; waste/compost routines	Religious education partnerships; faith-based volunteerism
Parmalim	Nature as sacred expression of Debata Mulajadi Na Bolon	Taboos on casual tree cutting; obligatory replanting; water sanctity	Forest guardianship; replanting norms; ritualized water care	Indigenous councils; local-wisdom integration; community rules
Shared	Moral duty to protect land and water	Restraint from greed/excess; communal accountability	Tree planting; watershed protection; shoreline cleanups	Co-produced community programs; interfaith consultation

Figure 1. Social-construction mechanism linking eco-theological beliefs to conservation practice (belief → internalization → objectivation → externalization).
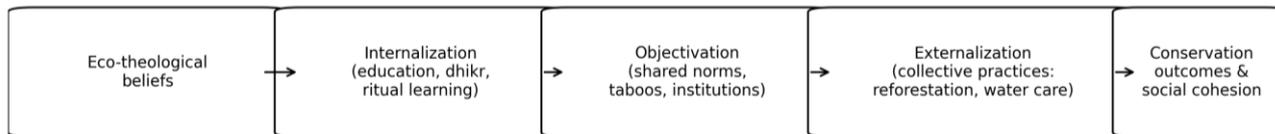
Interfaith opportunity emerges when the internalization and objectivation steps are opened to dialogue and shared learning. In practice, this can include joint environmental education activities (e.g., interfaith youth camps, shared curriculum modules), coordinated community action days (tree planting, shoreline cleanups), and faith-sensitive conservation ceremonies that reinforce protection of the lake and forests. Such activities can increase trust, reduce religious polarization, and support long-term stewardship.

D.4. Transferability: What Can Be Adapted and What Is Context-Specific

Several practices are plausibly adaptable across traditions: (i) eco-*pesantren* pedagogies that connect daily ecological labor with spiritual formation; (ii) community-based reforestation and watershed protection framed as shared moral duties; (iii) public commitments during religious gatherings linking faith identity to environmental responsibility; and (iv) community monitoring norms (e.g.,

communal responsibility to report pollution or illegal logging). Some elements are likely to remain context-dependent: Parmalim sacred-forest taboos tied to ancestral sites, specific Batak rituals of water and kinship, and local mythic narratives that ground authority in particular landscapes. Likewise, Sufi practices such as specific *dhikr* forms, *tariqa* authority structures, or particular *pesantren* curricula are rooted in Islamic educational institutions and may not translate directly as rituals, even if the underlying ethic (gratitude and humility) can be shared and translated into secular-friendly civic actions. Recognizing transferability boundaries helps avoid superficial borrowing and instead supports a respectful approach: translate the ethical logic (care, restraint, gratitude) rather than importing sacred forms.

D.5. Policy and Governance Implications

Complementing technocratic approaches; Faith-based ecological practices can complement technocratic conservation by strengthening moral motivation, local legitimacy, and sustained participation. Rather than replacing scientific management, eco-theological narratives can function as cultural infrastructure that supports compliance, collective action, and long-term stewardship.

Practical entry points include: partnering with religious educators and indigenous councils for environmental education; incorporating local wisdom into community-based forest and watershed management; and designing interfaith consultation forums so that conservation interventions are co-produced with local moral authorities. These entry points can align conservation programs with local meanings and reduce resistance. To prevent tokenism, policy engagement should ensure genuine representation of minority traditions, protect indigenous rights, and avoid instrumentalizing rituals. Transparent benefit-sharing and community consent are essential for durable interfaith collaboration.

E. Conclusion

This review finds that Green Sufism and Parmalim eco-theology independently cultivate strong pro-environment values in North Sumatra. Both traditions treat nature as sacred and emphasize restraint, gratitude, and communal responsibility, providing a shared ethical foundation for cooperation. By clarifying research questions and strengthening methodological transparency, this revised manuscript argues that the pathway from belief to practice can be described as belief → internalization → objectivation → externalization, helping explain how spiritual ecology becomes collective conservation behavior. Interfaith conservation strategies around Lake Toba are therefore plausible, especially when they focus on transferable practices such as joint environmental education, community reforestation, and watershed protection, while respecting context-specific sacred forms. Future research can test these pathways through fieldwork and evaluate pilot interfaith programs for ecological outcomes and social cohesion.

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