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REINTERPRETING MOUNT ARJUNO RITUALS AND THEIR ETHICAL POTENTIAL THROUGH SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR'S ECOLOGICAL THOUGHT

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Abstract

This study examines how ritual practitioners interpret the sacred landscape of Mount Arjuno and how these meanings can be reconsidered through Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Islamic ecological thought. An interpretive ethnographic approach combined participant observation, in-depth interviews with four purposively selected informants, documentation, and a literature-based interpretation of Nasr's work. Fieldwork took place in Tambaksari Village and nearby sacred sites in East Java from February 14 to May 8, 2026. Accounts of the 1 Suro ritual were reconstructed from interviews and documentation rather than direct observation of that event. The findings identify four related meanings: respect for the mountain and ancestors, self-purification, the maintenance of harmonious relations, and moral restraint in sacred space. These meanings resonate with Nasr's critique of the desacralization of nature, but local ancestral cosmology cannot be equated with his metaphysical concepts. The study therefore identifies an interpretive potential for ecological ethics rather than demonstrating measurable conservation outcomes. It argues for distinguishing practitioners' accounts, philosophical interpretation, and evidence of environmental practice when examining the relationship between local ritual and ecological responsibility.

Keywords: *Ritual Meaning, Mount Arjuno, Interpretive Ethnography, Islamic Ecology, Seyyed Hossein Nasr*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji pemaknaan ritual oleh masyarakat pelaku di Gunung Arjuno serta kemungkinan pembacaannya melalui pemikiran ekologi Islam Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Pendekatan etnografi interpretatif memadukan observasi partisipan, wawancara mendalam dengan empat informan yang dipilih secara purposif, dokumentasi, dan pembacaan kepustakaan atas karya Nasr. Penelitian lapangan dilaksanakan di Desa Tambaksari dan situs sakral sekitarnya, Jawa Timur, pada 14 Februari–8 Mei 2026. Uraian ritual malam 1 Suro direkonstruksi melalui wawancara dan dokumentasi, bukan observasi langsung pada peristiwa tersebut. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi empat makna yang saling berkaitan: penghormatan terhadap gunung dan leluhur, penyucian diri, pemeliharaan relasi harmonis, serta pengendalian sikap di ruang sakral. Makna tersebut memiliki titik temu dengan kritik Nasr terhadap desakralisasi alam, tetapi kosmologi leluhur setempat tidak dapat disamakan dengan konsep metafisiknya. Karena itu, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi potensi etis ekologis yang bersifat interpretatif, bukan membuktikan dampak konservasi yang terukur. Pembahasan menegaskan perlunya membedakan penuturan pelaku, pembacaan filosofis, dan bukti praktik lingkungan dalam menjelaskan hubungan antara ritual lokal dan tanggung jawab ekologis.

Kata Kunci: *Makna Ritual, Gunung Arjuno, Etnografi Interpretatif, Ekologi Islam, Seyyed Hossein Nasr*

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A. Introduction

The ecological crisis concerns not only changes in biophysical conditions but also how humans value and treat nature. In environmental ethics, anthropocentrism is challenged when human interests become the sole measure of value and other beings are treated merely as means to human ends. This criticism does not dismiss human needs; it questions justifications for domination that disregard the value of nonhuman life (Kopnina et al., 2018). Questions of value create an opening for religious studies to examine how beliefs, symbols, and spiritual practices shape human relationships with the environment.

Within the Islamic tradition, discussions of the environment concern creation, human responsibility, ethics, and the common good. The concepts of *tawhid*, *amanah*, and *khalifah* provide a normative basis for limiting human domination of nature (Izzi Dien, 2000). However, the existence of normative teachings does not in itself explain religious adherents' actions. Gade (2019) demonstrates the diversity of social, legal, and ethical foundations and practices within Muslim environmentalisms. An ecological reading of religion therefore needs to consider how these ideas are understood and practiced in particular contexts.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr situates the environmental crisis in relation to humanity's loss of awareness of the sacredness of nature. In *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, he connects imbalances in human nature relationships with a modern outlook that reduces nature to an object of domination (Nasr, 1990). This argument continues in *Religion and the Order of Nature*, which emphasizes the need to recover a religious understanding of the order of nature (Nasr, 1996). Nasr's critique is used here as a philosophical perspective for interpreting ritual meanings, rather than as a single explanation for all causes of environmental degradation.

This framework relates to the concept of *scientia sacra*, or sacred knowledge, which connects an understanding of reality with metaphysical principles and spiritual traditions. In *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Nasr (1989) discusses the relationship between knowledge, sacredness, and nature as theophany, or a manifestation that directs human beings toward divine reality. Widiyanto (2017) explains the ontological, epistemological, and axiological foundations of this concept. Thus, *scientia sacra* cannot simply be treated as another name for any local custom considered beneficial; its use requires attention to the concept's foundations and limits.

Studies of sacred natural sites show that spiritual values are an important part of communities' relationships with landscapes. Verschuuren et al. (2010) discuss the relationship between nature conservation and cultural conservation, taking into account the interests of communities that serve as site custodians. However, sacredness should not be assessed solely in terms of its benefits for conservation. Tatay and Merino (2023) caution that an overly instrumental perspective can simplify sacred meanings, overlook

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intangible values, and exclude stakeholders. Attention to practitioners' accounts is needed to prevent researchers' ecological categories from obscuring communities' religious experiences.

On Mount Arjuno, relationships among space, ancestors, and religious practices have a long historical background. Marsudi (2015) examines the characteristics and functions of neo-megalithic remains on the mountain's slopes in the context of religious developments during the late Majapahit period. Sulistyo et al. (2023) examine the folklore associated with sites on the slopes of Mount Arjuna and the potential for revitalizing their character values and local wisdom. Both studies provide historical and cultural context, but they do not replace the need to understand how present-day practitioners explain the meanings of their own rituals.

In the broader Indonesian literature, Mangunjaya and McKay (2012) discuss a conservation approach that connects Islamic principles, education, and community traditions. McKay et al. (2014) examine a faith-based approach in West Sumatra, while Yardlo et al. (2024) report a participatory ecotheology program at Pesantren Langitan in East Java. Research in the Mentawai Islands also shows connections between religious cosmology and environmental practices in a different social context (Wahyuni et al., 2025). These findings provide points of comparison, but they do not constitute evidence that Mount Arjuno rituals produce the same ecological outcomes.

Nasr's thought has received attention in Indonesian intellectual studies, particularly through the reception of perennialism, traditional Islam, and sacred knowledge (Widiyanto, 2016). Sayem (2021) critically reviews interpretations of Nasr's ecological thought, including questions about its application. Santono et al. (2026) develop a discussion of the resacralization of nature through Sufi ecotheology, while Setiadi and Humaidi (2026) examine Nasr's environmental ethics through a literature-based study. The present study is situated at the intersection of these philosophical readings and ritual practitioners' accounts at the research site.

The gap addressed here is not an absence of research on ritual or Islamic ecology in general, but the insufficient explanation of the relationship, and the limits of that relationship, between the ritual meanings described by this study's informants and Nasr's framework. Koehrsen's (2021) review shows that religious views of the environment are not uniform and that their influence on changes in everyday actions still requires examination. Respect for sacred space therefore should not immediately be treated as evidence of conservation or as a community's conscious application of Nasr's philosophy.

This study aims to understand the meanings of Mount Arjuno rituals from practitioners' perspectives and to interpret their potential for environmental ethics through Nasr's thought. It asks two questions: how do practitioners interpret rituals and sacred space on Mount Arjuno, and to what extent can these meanings be read through the resacralization of nature without equating the two? The study's contribution lies in distinguishing practitioners' accounts, philosophical interpretation, and evidence of

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ecological action. This distinction allows an interpretation of local wisdom that remains open to its potential while acknowledging the limitations of the data.

B. Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach combining interpretive ethnography with a literature-based study. Its primary focus is on the meanings of ritual practices from practitioners' perspectives (*emic*), while Nasr's works provide a framework for the interpretive stage. This distinction is consistent with ethnography's attention to the relationship among field experience, informants' accounts, and researchers' analysis (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The main philosophical sources are *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (Nasr, 1990) and *Religion and the Order of Nature* (Nasr, 1996); *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Nasr, 1989) is used to clarify the concept of *scientia sacra*.

The research was conducted on the slopes of Mount Arjuno, East Java, focusing on Tambaksari Village and nearby sacred sites, including Gua Antaboga, the Eyang Semar and Eyang Sakri *petilasan*, and Candi Sepilar. Fieldwork was carried out over three months, from February 14 to May 8, 2026, by a research team of five people. Research permission was obtained from the UPT Taman Hutan Raya Raden Soerjo, and the team was accompanied in the field by the Tambaksari Village Pokdarwis.

Four key informants were selected purposively based on their knowledge of and involvement in ritual practices. They included a religious leader or village elder familiar with the relationship between the Kejawen tradition and Islamic prayer, a Pokdarwis facilitator, a *juru kunci* or customary leader responsible for the sacred sites, and an active ritual practitioner. This selection generated accounts from different roles but was not intended to represent the entire community in the Mount Arjuno area. The number of informants needs to be considered in light of the study's limited scope. Malterud et al. (2016) explain that sample adequacy in qualitative research relates to the study's focus, sample specificity, theoretical framework, quality of dialogue, and analytical strategy. This framework helps assess the study's limitations, but it is not used to claim that four informants ensured data saturation. The article does not claim statistical generalizability or representation of all groups of ritual practitioners.

Primary data were collected through participant observation, in-depth semistructured interviews, and documentation. Participant observation involved eight visits, including familiarization with the sites, informal conversations with practitioners, observation of the atmosphere at the *petilasan*, and limited participation in preparing ritual offerings and cleaning the sites. Because the fieldwork period did not coincide with the night of 1 Suro, the discussion of the *tirakatan* held that night draws on retrospective interviews with informants and documentation in their possession, rather than direct observation of the event. The historical descriptions of the sites and the neo-megalithic tradition draw on the literature, whereas interpretations of ritual meanings draw on the field data.

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The analysis was interpretive, involving interview transcription, open coding based on units of meaning, and the grouping of codes into themes. Four themes emerged: respect for the sacredness of the mountain and ancestors, self-purification, the maintenance of harmonious relations, and moral awareness in sacred space. The grouping of patterns of meaning can be explained through the principles of flexible thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This reference clarifies the logic of coding and theme development; the study retains its interpretive ethnographic design rather than adopting a different research design.

Theme development was discussed within the team and reviewed through member checking with two key informants: the religious leader and the Pokdarwis facilitator. Triangulation involved comparing interviews across informants, observation notes, and field documentation. Explaining the analytical stages and comparison of sources is important in enabling readers to assess the trustworthiness of the interpretation (Nowell et al., 2017). Nasr's framework was then used to consider possible points of convergence and differences in meaning, rather than to predetermine informants' responses. Oral consent was obtained before the interviews began. Quotations concerning ritual information considered sensitive were discussed again with the informants. To protect identities consistently, this article identifies informants by their roles when presenting the data. The interview quotations retain the content presented in the source manuscript. References to informants as the religious leader, Pokdarwis facilitator, site custodian, and ritual practitioner are not intended as a classification encompassing the entire local social structure.

C. Results and Discussion

The findings are presented by distinguishing three bases of the account: the literature for the historical context of the sites, interviews and observations for practitioners' experiences, and Nasr's works for the philosophical reading. This distinction is necessary because descriptions of ritual, spiritual meanings, and ecological assessments operate at different levels of analysis. In the interpretive section, the term ecological responsibility refers to a possible ethical orientation that can be interpreted from the data, rather than to measured environmental impacts.

1. Ritual Practices on Mount Arjuno

Mount Arjuno is a landscape that also holds religious significance for ritual practitioners. Historical scholarship describes neo-megalithic remains on the mountain's slopes, including relationships among mountain veneration, ancestors, and the development of religious traditions (Marsudi, 2015). Folklore research documents the diversity of narratives associated with several sites, including Gua Antaboga, the Eyang Sakri and Eyang Semar *petilasan*, and Sepilar (Sulistyo et al., 2023). This literature provides context for the present study; it does not prove that all contemporary ritual forms can be traced directly and without change to the Majapahit period.

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According to informants, ritual activities may take place individually or in groups. The *tirakatan* on the night of 1 Suro is associated with visits to sacred sites, bringing offerings such as *kembang setaman*, incense, and agricultural produce, and engaging in prayer and introspection. *Tapa brata* is described as a practice of seclusion at particular places, including Gua Antaboga or the Eyang Semar *petilasan*. Because fieldwork did not coincide with the night of 1 Suro, the account of this event draws on retrospective interviews and available documentation, rather than the researchers' direct observation of that night's ritual.

During the eight field visits, the researchers' involvement included familiarization with the sites, informal conversations, observation of the atmosphere at the *petilasan*, and limited participation in preparing offerings and cleaning the sites. These activities provided context for understanding the use of space and practitioners' conduct at the sites. However, participation in cleaning was insufficient to establish the existence of a ritual waste management system or sustained conservation outcomes. The study did not measure waste volumes, vegetation conditions, or changes in environmental quality.

Ritual practices relate to the belief that the mountain and the *petilasan* are spaces that should be respected. Beliefs in the presence of ancestors and supernatural powers form part of practitioners' explanations of the obligation to regulate their conduct. This account presents the religious context of their actions without turning those beliefs into the researchers' factual assertions about the existence of supernatural powers. In ritual studies, such attention helps interpret actions as social practices with their own logic and context (Bell, 2009).

2. Ritual Meanings from Practitioners' Perspectives

For the informants, ritual involves more than a sequence of actions or ceremonial objects. It is also a way of positioning oneself in relation to a space believed to be sacred. *Tirakatan*, *tapa brata*, and ritual offerings are associated with respect for ancestors, self-restraint, and the maintenance of relationships considered appropriate. These meanings are presented as interpretations of this study's informants' accounts, rather than as conclusions about all pilgrims visiting Mount Arjuno.

The religious leader explained that the elders maintained the Kejawen tradition while also invoking Allah and the Prophet in their prayers. His account includes a practitioner's historical narrative that was not verified as historical fact in this study:

> "The elders here continue to hold firmly to their Kejawen beliefs. Javanese customs here are deeply rooted and carefully maintained. These customs must be preserved, not destroyed, because the history of Java began with the guidance of Kanjeng Sunan Kalijaga and the Wali Songo. So they must not simply be abandoned, because Java has a spiritual history. However, in this tradition, when we recite prayers, we still invoke the name of Allah SWT and Kanjeng Nabi." (Religious leader, interview, April 4, 2026).

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This account indicates that practitioners do not necessarily understand the preservation of tradition as a rejection of Islamic prayer. In this informant's experience, both are present within the same practice. This finding needs to be read in the context of the individual informant; the study does not use it to establish the theological identity of the entire community. Nor is the relationship among the Kejawen tradition, ancestors, and Islamic prayer reduced to either complete compatibility or absolute opposition.

The first meaning is respect for the mountain and ancestors. The site custodian described the mountain as a place that "has a presence within it," requiring visitors to speak politely, avoid arbitrary or disrespectful actions, and regulate their conduct. Violations of these rules are believed to have consequences for those who commit them (site custodian, interview, April 4, 2026). Analytically, this respect indicates limits on action within sacred space. However, the data do not yet show whether these limits extend to all elements of nature or relate primarily to the presence of ancestors and guardians of the sites.

The second meaning is self-purification and seeking blessings. *Tapa brata* is understood as a practice of seclusion intended to purify the inner self and draw closer to the sacred. In their accounts of the *tirakatan* on the night of 1 Suro, informants associated collective prayer with introspection, petitions for safety, and the smooth course of life (ritual practitioner and site custodian, interview, April 4, 2026). At the individual level, ritual provides space for inner cultivation; at the communal level, shared activities offer opportunities to renew relationships among practitioners and sustain tradition.

The third meaning is the maintenance of harmonious relations through *sowan*, a spiritual visit understood as respectfully approaching the ancestors. Bringing offerings and visiting the *petilasan* form part of how practitioners position themselves in relation to previous generations and inherited space. This relational meaning is an interpretation of the research data, rather than a direct application of the concept of *khalifah* to informants' statements. Interpretation through Islamic ecology is undertaken only after these meanings have been explained within practitioners' experiences.

The fourth meaning is the regulation of conduct, or moral awareness, within sacred space. Practitioners emphasize courtesy, taboos, and the avoidance of arrogance. The four meanings are interrelated: respect for place and ancestors provides a reason for self-restraint; inner purification relates to seeking blessings; and collective activities maintain social and spiritual relations. These connections among themes do not imply that every informant expressed all four with equal emphasis. Rather, they indicate an interpretive pattern across the research materials as a whole.

The field data most clearly show the ethics of *unggah-ungguh*, taboos, and the use of prayer as an intermediary. Accounts of respect are not accompanied by sufficient evidence concerning the management of leftover offerings, protection of plants, or the effects of ritual on behavior beyond the sites. The following discussion therefore interprets the ethical potential of these meanings while maintaining a distinction between practitioners' language and the researcher's philosophical categories.

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3. Reinterpretation through Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Islamic Ecological Thought

The reading through Nasr begins with practitioners' refusal to treat the mountain as an empty space entirely subject to human will. Respect for place converges with Nasr's critique of the reduction of nature to a material object (Nasr, 1990, 1996). This convergence concerns limits on human domination, rather than shared origins of belief. The practitioners in this study did not state that they used Nasr's philosophy when performing rituals.

In this article, the resacralization of nature is understood as the recovery of an awareness that nature cannot be fully explained by its material utility. This reading is consistent with the literature on spiritual relationships, human responsibility, and environmental ethics in Nasr's thought (Setiadi & Humaidi, 2026; Santono et al., 2026). However, respect for the *petilasan* should not automatically be regarded as a rejection of all forms of exploitation. The data provide a basis only for interpreting how sacred meanings may limit actions within the context studied.

The first difference concerns the object of respect. In practitioners' accounts, ancestors and the guardian spirits of sacred space are important points of reference. In Nasr's thought, nature as theophany relates to the metaphysical basis of the relationship between divine reality and the cosmos (Nasr, 1989). These understandings are not identical. Equating them would disregard the particularities of local cosmology while simplifying Nasr's framework. The term resonance is more appropriate for indicating similarities in orientations of respect without asserting theological equivalence.

The second difference concerns the status of knowledge. The concept of *scientia sacra* belongs to a body of thought concerning traditional knowledge and metaphysical principles, rather than merely a set of behavioral rules (Widiyanto, 2017). The ethics of courtesy, taboos, and respect for ancestors therefore do not directly establish that practitioners share Nasr's epistemology. These data can inform a philosophical dialogue, but the conceptual relationship needs to be explained by the researcher and must not be attributed to informants as their own statements.

This distinction also matters in studies of the reception of ideas. Widiyanto (2016) examines the reception of Nasr's thought through Indonesian intellectual discourse. Findings about intellectual reception cannot be extended into a claim that ritual practitioners on Mount Arjuno are familiar with Nasr. This article uses his thought as the researcher's analytical framework, whereas the data provide no knowledge of a direct relationship between informants and Nasr's works.

The Pokdarwis facilitator's explanation indicates that prayer and courtesy are important elements of ritual meaning. In explaining the practice of prayer, he stated:

> "The prayers are as usual, still directed to the Almighty. This is only an intermediary. The Javanese term for prayer is 'ujub.' Here, whenever there is a kenduren or malam legi, there is always an ujub first. Above all, we must be polite here so that we do not disturb the guardian spirits." (Pokdarwis facilitator, interview, April 4, 2026).

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This quotation supports the account of prayer being directed to the Almighty and the obligation to behave politely at ritual sites. It does not establish the existence of specific conservation rules. Its ecological interpretation lies in the possibility of cultivating self-restraint, rather than in a claim that courtesy toward guardian spirits has produced ecosystem protection. By retaining this distinction, Nasr's framework serves to question human–nature relationships without displacing the meanings expressed by informants.

Research on sacred natural sites helps clarify these interpretive limits. Tatay and Merino (2023) show that sacred meanings are often narrowed to prohibitions and restrictions on resources, although their spiritual and social dimensions are more diverse. In the Arjuno case, prohibitions against impolite conduct first need to be understood as part of practitioners' religious relationship with place. Their value does not depend solely on the researcher's ability to translate them into quantifiable conservation benefits.

Comparison with other studies shows the importance of distinguishing forms of evidence. McKay et al. (2014) assess a faith-based approach through changes in concern, understanding, and intention to act in a program in West Sumatra. Yardlo et al. (2024) describe participatory ecotheology activities within a pesantren. The present study did not conduct a comparable intervention or evaluation. These sources are therefore used to indicate possible connections between teachings and actions, while also clarifying the additional evidence needed before making claims about the ecological impacts of Arjuno rituals.

Wahyuni et al.'s (2025) research in the Mentawai Islands provides another comparison concerning the relationship among religious cosmology, environmental practices, and social pressures. This comparison does not assume that Mentawai communities and Arjuno ritual practitioners share the same cosmology or institutions. What matters for the present study is the need to interpret spiritual–ecological relationships within their social contexts. Apparently similar forms of respect may have different reasons, rules, and consequences in each community.

Ecological responsibility in this article thus has the status of interpreted ethical potential. The four ritual meanings provide a basis for discussing respect, self-restraint, and attachment to place. However, the study has not shown that these orientations consistently extend into environmentally responsible behavior. This caution is consistent with critical readings of the application of Nasr's thought (Sayem, 2021) and with the review of the relationship between religious views and Muslim environmental actions (Koehrsen, 2021).

4. Implications of Ritual Meanings

The theoretical implication of this study is the need to distinguish analytical correspondence from shared belief. Nasr's thought enables the researcher to examine the value of space beyond its material utility, while the field data show that respect is understood through ancestors, prayers, taboos, and local social relationships. Their

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dialogue yields a more limited interpretation than the claim that ritual constitutes an application of Islamic ecology. This approach preserves the particularities of practitioners' experiences while opening an ethical discussion of their relationship with nature.

The practical implication is a direction for dialogue, rather than a tested program. Accounts of courtesy and respect for place may provide a starting point for discussion among ritual practitioners, Pokdarwis, and area managers about the care of the sites. Mangunjaya and McKay (2012) emphasize connections among community-based education, religious principles, and conservation traditions. Their relevance to Arjuno needs to be assessed through practitioners' willingness, the compatibility of local meanings, and observation of practices, rather than assumed simply because spiritual and ecological terms can be connected.

Community involvement is also needed to prevent nature conservation from separating sites from the cultural relationships that make them meaningful. The literature on sacred natural sites treats cultural and spiritual values and the interests of site custodians as part of conservation discussions (Verschuuren et al., 2010). However, ritual should not be maintained merely as an instrument for meeting external management objectives. Attention to the diversity of community practices and ethical foundations, as discussed by Gade (2019), helps avoid a single, uniform account of the relationship among Islam, local traditions, and the environment.

The presence of conservation and tourism areas constitutes a context requiring further research. The data in this article are insufficient to establish that conservation management causes desacralization or that tourism invariably undermines ritual meanings. Such claims require accounts from managers and tourism actors, alongside observation of changes over a longer period. The implication that can be maintained is the importance of including community meanings as one consideration in understanding the use of sacred space.

D. Conclusion

The informants in this study interpret Mount Arjuno rituals through four interrelated relationships: respect for the mountain and ancestors, self-purification, the maintenance of harmonious relations, and the regulation of conduct within sacred space. Practitioners' accounts most clearly reveal spiritual respect, prayer, taboos, and the obligation to behave politely. These findings describe experiences within the scope of the sites and informants studied, rather than the full diversity of ritual practices on Mount Arjuno.

Through Nasr's thought, these meanings can be interpreted as having potential for environmental ethics because they limit attitudes of human domination over place. However, respect for ancestors and guardian spirits is not identical to the concept of nature as theophany or to *scientia sacra*. Nor has this study established that ritual respect produces conservation outcomes or sustained changes in environmental behavior. Its contribution lies in a critical dialogue between practitioners' meanings and Nasr's

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philosophical framework, distinguishing ethical potential from demonstrated ecological action. Future research needs to examine this relationship through observation of practices and environmental conditions without disregarding the particularities of communities' religious meanings.

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