



From Myth to *Maṣlahah*: Customary Prohibitions, Islamic Legal Principles, and Ecological Sustainability in Minangkabau

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Abstract: This research examines how customary prohibitions (*larangan adat*) embedded in the Minangkabau indigenous tradition function as an ecological governance mechanism rooted in both myth and the Islamic principle of *maṣlahah* (public benefit). Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in selected *nagari* (traditional villages) in West Sumatra, this research investigates the ontological and normative significance of tabooed spaces, sacred species, and ritualized ecological restrictions as tools for preserving environmental balance. Through in-depth interviews with customary leaders (*ninik mamak*), religious scholars (*alim ulama*), and community members, the research reveals that mythic narratives serve to sacralize ecological zones, while the invocation of *maṣlahah* gives these taboos normative legitimacy within the broader Islamic ethical system. This research argues that customary prohibitions operate as localized ecological jurisprudence, establishing a framework for human–nature relations based not on state law but on a syncretic system of belief that is collectively enforced and symbolically charged. Rather than dismissing these prohibitions as archaic superstition, this research reinterprets them as part of an enduring epistemology that integrates myth, religious values, and environmental pragmatism. This research contributes to the growing body of scholarship on indigenous environmental governance by offering a nuanced reading of adat–myth relations in the context of sustainability. It demonstrates how the Minangkabau adat system far from being static continues to adapt, negotiate, and assert relevance amid ecological crises and modern legal frameworks. Ultimately, this research affirms that myth, when interwoven with religious rationality, can serve as a powerful force for ecological resilience and cultural continuity.

Keywords: Myth, *Maṣlahah*, Customary prohibitions, Ecological sustainability, Minangkabau indigenous tradition

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana larangan adat yang tertanam dalam tradisi masyarakat adat Minangkabau berfungsi sebagai mekanisme tata kelola ekologis yang berakar pada mitos dan *maṣlahah*. Dengan menggunakan penelitian etnografi lapangan yang dilakukan di beberapa nagari (desa tradisional) di Sumatera Barat, penelitian ini menyelidiki signifikansi ontologis dan normatif dari ruang-ruang terlarang, spesies suci, dan pembatasan ekologis yang diwujudkan dalam ritual sebagai alat untuk menjaga keseimbangan lingkungan. Melalui wawancara mendalam dengan para pemimpin adat (ninik mamak), ulama, dan anggota masyarakat, penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa narasi mitos berfungsi untuk mensucikan zona ekologis, sementara seruan *maṣlahah* memberikan legitimasi normatif pada larangan-larangan ini dalam sistem etika Islam yang lebih luas. Penelitian ini berpendapat bahwa larangan adat beroperasi sebagai yurisprudensi ekologis lokal, membangun kerangka kerja untuk hubungan manusia-alam yang tidak didasarkan pada hukum negara tetapi pada sistem kepercayaan sinkretis yang ditegakkan secara kolektif dan sarat dengan simbolisme. Alih-alih menganggap larangan-larangan ini sebagai takhayul kuno, penelitian ini menafsirkannya kembali sebagai bagian dari epistemologi abadi yang mengintegrasikan mitos, nilai-nilai agama, dan pragmatisme lingkungan. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada semakin banyaknya kajian tentang tata kelola lingkungan masyarakat adat dengan menawarkan pembacaan yang lebih bernuansa tentang hubungan adat-mitos dalam konteks keberlanjutan. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bagaimana sistem adat Minangkabau, jauh dari bersifat statis, terus beradaptasi, bernegosiasi, dan menegaskan relevansinya di tengah krisis ekologi dan kerangka hukum modern.

Kata Kunci: Mitos, *Maṣlahah*, Larangan adat, Keberlanjutan ekologi, Tradisi Adat Minangkabau

Introduction

The ecological crisis of the 21st century is growing increasingly severe.¹ It is characterized by the loss of biodiversity, climate change, deforestation, the degradation of vital ecosystems, and other forms of environmental damage.² Various efforts have been made to address this crisis, such as modern environmental legislation and multilateral agreements.³ However, these legal frameworks often fail to address the local dimensions of ecological governance.

¹ William J Ripple et al., "The 2023 State of the Climate Report: Entering Uncharted Territory," *BioScience* 73, no. 12 (December 29, 2023), p. 841–50.

² Lukoye Atwoli et al., "Call for Emergency Action to Limit Global Temperature Increases, Restore Biodiversity, and Protect Health," *The Lancet* 398, no. 10304 (September 2021), p. 939–41.

³ Hidayatullah et al., "Analysis of Groundwater Conservation Policy in Provincial Regulation of South Kalimantan Number 5 of 2018 on Groundwater Management Reviewed From Ecological Fiqh," *Syariah: Jurnal Hukum Dan Pemikiran* 22, no. 1 (2022), p. 1–27.

In many cases, state-led conservation policies are hindered by top-down approaches, legal formalism, and a lack of cultural resonance with the communities most closely connected to the threatened environment.⁴ This gap between formal law and local socio-cultural realities often results in limited compliance and, at times, active resistance from indigenous peoples.⁵ Furthermore, the growing environmental management challenges in Indonesia which are increasingly leading to an ecological crisis, are not only caused by an anthropocentric management paradigm⁶ but also stem from inequalities in access to and distribution of resources and capital.⁷ The limitations of the modern legal regime underscore the urgent need to re-examine culturally embedded and socially enforceable non-state ecological governance mechanisms.⁸ Indigenous communities, with their historically rooted ecological knowledge systems⁹, offer adaptive, resilient governance models that are deeply attuned to local ecological rhythms.¹⁰ One such community, the Minangkabau in West Sumatra, Indonesia, presents a particularly compelling case for examining the intersection of customary law, myth, and environmental management.

Within the Minangkabau socio-legal framework, customary prohibitions serve as the foundation of environmental regulation, existing in parallel with and often independent of formal state law. These prohibitions include restrictions on access to specific forest areas¹¹, the harvesting of sacred species (forbidden fish/ikan larangan)¹², or the destruction of ecologically sensitive sites. Although they may be framed in ritual or mythical language, these rules function as binding

⁴ Elinor Ostrom, "Polycentric Systems for Coping with Collective Action and Global Environmental Change," in *Global Justice* (Routledge, 2017), p. 423–30.

⁵ Imamulhadi et al., "Customary Environmental Law and Its Transformation Models in Indonesia," *Cogent Social Sciences* 11, no. 1 (2025).

⁶ Aftab Haider et al., "From Stewardship to Sustainability: A Comparative Analysis of Islamic Ecological Jurisprudence and Western Anthropocentric Regimes," *Juris: Jurnal Ilmiah Syariah* 25, no. 1 (2026), p. 41–60.

⁷ Lailiy Muthmainnah, Rizal Mustansyir, and Sindung Tjahyadi, "Kapitalisme, Krisis Ekologi, Dan Keadilan Inter-Generasi : Analisis Kritis Atas Problem Pengelolaan Lingkungan Hidup Di Indonesia," *Mozaik Humaniora* 20, no. 1 (2020), p. 57.

⁸ Deborah McGregor, Steven Whitaker, and Mahisha Sritharan, "Indigenous Environmental Justice and Sustainability," *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 43 (2020), p. 35–40.

⁹ Melissa K Nelson and Daniel Shilling, *Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Learning from Indigenous Practices for Environmental Sustainability* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Douglas Nakashima et al., "Weathering Uncertainty: Traditional Knowledge for Climate Change Adaptation (2012)" (Canada, 2012).

¹¹ Rika Febriani and Siti Murtiningsih, "Kosmologi Masyarakat Minangkabau Melalui Kearifan Lokal Rimbo Larangan Untuk Konservasi Lingkungan," *Multikultura* 1, no. 4 (2022), p. 698–704.

¹² Misbahul Janatti, "History of Local Wisdom of Ikan Larangan Lubuak Landua as Environmental Conservation," in *Proceedings of the Annual Civic Education Conference (ACEC 2018)* (Paris, France: Atlantis Press, 2018).

norms enforced through collective consensus and customary authority. Unlike statutory regulations, which rely on external enforcement mechanisms, customary prohibitions are maintained through social sanctions, moral obligations, and symbolic legitimacy. This makes them highly effective in fostering long-term ecological compliance, as they are deeply embedded in the community's worldview and value system. Furthermore, in Minangkabau society, these ecological restrictions are not arbitrary; they are grounded in a coherent epistemology that integrates cosmological beliefs with pragmatic environmental management.¹³ These positions customary prohibitions not as archaic remnants of a pre-modern past, but as a living and adaptive governance instrument capable of addressing contemporary ecological challenges.¹⁴

A distinctive feature of Minangkabau ecological governance lies in the dual normative framework underpinning customary prohibitions. On one hand, myths and sacred narratives function as cosmological anchors, sanctifying specific spaces and species, and endowing them with a protective status that transcends mere utilitarian value. On the other hand, the Islamic concept of *maṣlahah* (public interest) provides a rational-ethical justification for these prohibitions, situating them within a broader moral universe recognized by religious scholars and the public. This interaction between the mythical and the normative creates a hybrid legitimacy: myths ensure emotional and cultural attachment, while *maṣlahah* offers a theological and ethical foundation. Together, they produce a system of governance that is both effective and rational, symbolic and instrumental. This duality challenges the common dichotomy in environmental governance studies, which often positions myths as the antithesis of rational policymaking. Instead, it illustrates how belief systems can function as powerful moral technologies for maintaining ecological balance.

This study examines how customary prohibitions function as a form of ecological governance rooted in myths and the common good. Numerous studies on indigenous environmental governance have been conducted, such as that by Girma Defere et al., which highlights the declining role of indigenous institutions in managing environmental resources due to a lack of recognition and exploitation by state authorities.¹⁵ Arsyad Aldyan et al. argue in their research for the need to integrate indigenous knowledge into the formulation of environmental policies in

¹³ Sonia Fitri Wadani, Yerri Satria Putra, and Muchlis Awwali, "Mitos Dan Kepercayaan Rakyat Masyarakat Maritim Pesisir Selatan," *Wacana Etnik* 11, no. 1 (2022), p. 32–41.

¹⁴ Ariell Ahearn, Martin Oelz, and R Kumar Dhir, "Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change Emerging Research on Traditional Knowledge and Livelihoods," *International Labour Organization*, 2019.

¹⁵ Girma Defere, Messay Mulugeta, and Teferi Tolera, "Roles of Formal and Customary Institutions in Environmental Resource Governance and Sustainability along Ethiopia-Kenya Borderlands: Do They Complement or Compete Each Other?" *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 60, no. 2 (2025), p. 717–35.

Indonesia¹⁶, as also proposed by Puji Hastuti et al.¹⁷ Several studies also highlight the role of local knowledge and local communities in environmental sustainability, such as those by Neil M. Dawson et al.¹⁸, Pradipta et al.¹⁹, and the collective actions of indigenous women in addressing climate change.²⁰ Although research on indigenous environmental governance continues to evolve, there remains a significant gap in studies that integrate the cosmological dimensions of myths with the normative principles of Islam in the analysis of ecological prohibitions. Existing studies tend to treat myths and religion as separate frameworks²¹, overlooking how the two can mutually reinforce each other within specific socio-ecological contexts. Furthermore, research on Minangkabau environmental governance largely focuses on land tenure²², agricultural systems, or customary dispute resolution²³, with little attention given to the specific role of customary prohibitions in regulating ecological relationships.²⁴ By highlighting the intersection between myths, public interest, and customary ecological prohibitions, this paper seeks to offer a nuanced explanation of how customary governance systems remain relevant, adaptive, and normatively robust in the face of contemporary environmental crises. Thus, this study contributes to the broader

¹⁶ Arsyad Aldyan et al., “Local Wisdom-Based Environmental Management Policy in Indonesia: Challenges and Implementation,” *Journal of Law, Environmental and Justice* 2, no. 3 (December 30, 2024), p. 332–54.

¹⁷ Puji Hastuti and Afdil Hafidh, “Mata Tahun: Bridging Indigenous Knowledge and Policy for Ecosystem Sustainability in the Mului Community, East Kalimantan, amidst Climate Change,” ed. D. Buchori et al., *BIO Web of Conferences* 175 (2025), p. 05008.

¹⁸ Neil M. Dawson et al., “Is It Just Conservation? A Typology of Indigenous Peoples’ and Local Communities’ Roles in Conserving Biodiversity,” *One Earth* 7, no. 6 (June 2024), p. 1007–21.

¹⁹ I.G.NG.G.A Pradipta and L.G. Saraswati Putri, “Sustainable Water Governance Based on the Local Wisdom of Tri Hita Karana and Sad Kertih Values: Impact for Environmental Sustainability,” *International Journal of Environmental Impacts* 7, no. 2 (2024), p. 181–90.

²⁰ Kyle Powys Whyte, “Indigenous Women, Climate Change Impacts, and Collective Action,” *Hypatia* 29, no. 3 (2014), p. 599–616.

²¹ Khairil Anwar et al., “Traditional Minangkabau Disaster Mitigation in the Semangko Fault in West Sumatra Based on Ecological Site Myths,” ed. A. Hakam et al., *E3S Web of Conferences* 604 (2025), p. 02010.

²² Fauzi Iswari, I Gusti Ayu Ketut Rachmi Handayani, and Lego Karjoko, “Portrait of Ulayat Land Conflicts in Minangkabau Customary Law Community: Alternative Resolutions Under Islamic Law,” *Al-Istinbath: Jurnal Hukum Islam* 10, no. 1 (2025), p. 219–50.

²³ Eti Siska Putri and Maria Montessori, “Mapping and Resolution of Conflicts Pagang-Gadai Land Ulayat in Minangkabau Case Study: Clan Customary Land Conflict in Jorong Kajai, Nagari Ladang Panjang, Tigo Nagari District, Pasaman Regency, West Sumatra,” in *International Conference On Social Studies, Globalisation And Technology (ICSSGT 2019)*, vol. 458, 2020, 83–91.

²⁴ Suratni Afrianti, “Rimbo Larangan Kearifan Lokal Masyarakat Minang Kabau Untuk Menjaga Kelestarian Sumber Daya Alam Dan Lingkungan,” *Agroprimatech* 3, no. 2 (2020), p. 74–78.

debate on pluralistic environmental governance and the role of culturally embedded legality in achieving ecological sustainability.

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach grounded in the tradition of legal ethnography, which is particularly well-suited for examining the tangible interrelationships between law, culture, and ecology within the context of indigenous communities.²⁵ By situating customary prohibitions within the socio-cultural reality of Minangkabau society, this approach enables the documentation and interpretation of ecological governance as a dynamic process shaped by cosmological narratives and Islamic normative frameworks. The interpretive stance adopted in this study is grounded in the belief that meaning is co-constructed between the researcher and participants, requiring sustained engagement, reflexivity, and sensitivity to local epistemologies. Field research was conducted in several selected Nagari in Agam and Tanah Datar Regencies, West Sumatra—areas chosen for their strong retention of customary institutions and ecological prohibitions. These Nagari represent diverse ecological zones, ranging from highland forest areas to riverine and agricultural landscapes, thus offering a broad spectrum of customary prohibition practices. Site selection was also influenced by the presence of active Nagari Customary Councils, respected religious scholars, and customary leaders who serve as guardians of customary law and Islamic law.²⁶ In-depth observation of these communities facilitated the observation of ritual events, customary ceremonies, and ecological practices that might otherwise be inaccessible to outside researchers. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with customary leaders (nirik mamak), religious scholars (alim ulama), and other traditional leaders to gain their understanding of customary prohibitions, their origins, and their current relevance. These interviews also explored how myths and the principle of *maṣlahah* are articulated to legitimize ecological restrictions. The analysis process employs a thematic approach informed by hermeneutic interpretations of customary law and the theoretical lens of legal pluralism.²⁷ Hermeneutic interpretations of customary law are used to unpack the symbolic and narrative dimensions of customary prohibitions, with particular attention to the interaction between mystical motifs and Islamic ethical reasoning.

The Sacred Logic of Prohibition: Myth, Fear, and Social Control

In the Minangkabau traditional worldview, ecological taboos are not merely regulatory instruments. These taboos are embedded in a cosmology in

²⁵ Susan Bibler Coutin and Véronique Fortin, “Legal Ethnographies and Ethnographic Law,” in *The Handbook of Law and Society* (Wiley, 2015), 71–84.

²⁶ Otong Sulaeman et al., “Negotiating Gender Justice in Minangkabau Marital Disputes: Between Adat, Islamic, and State Law,” *Juris: Jurnal Ilmiah Syariah* 24, no. 1 (2025), p. 39–49.

²⁷ Irawan et al., “Negotiating Legal Pluralism: Syncretism of Islamic Law and Balinese Adat in Pegayaman Village,” *El-Mashlahah* 15, no. 1 (2025), p. 149–64.

which nature is imbued with spiritual, moral, and ancestral presences. The sacred logic of these prohibitions manifests in various customary prohibitions (*larangan adat*), which are often communicated through mythical narratives involving spirits, the wrath of ancestors, or divine retribution. These prohibitions govern interactions with sacred forests (*rimbo larangan*), rivers, and certain animal species, particularly in liminal or transitional spaces.

Rimbo Larangan, or what is often called the forbidden forest, is a form of customary law rich in mythological content and ancestral beliefs. This area is governed by a strict set of customary prohibitions designed to protect the ecosystem while ensuring the sustainability of resources for the village community.²⁸ According to A. KM, there are several primary prohibitions in effect within the Rimbo Larangan.²⁹ This aligns with Febriani's findings.³⁰ First, it is forbidden to cut down trees within the area, except for dead trees and those used for public facilities such as bridge construction, mosques, watch posts, or other public infrastructure. Second, it is forbidden to burn anything in the Rimbo Larangan area, whether to clear land or for any other purpose. Third, it is prohibited to reallocate land for any other purpose, as this is believed to have a detrimental impact on the sustainability of community income and well-being. Fourth, it is prohibited to sell forest products whether in the form of timber, fruit, or other resources without going through a collective consultation process.

Violations of these provisions are considered acts of destruction, such as timber theft or illegal logging, and are subject to customary sanctions. These sanctions take the form of fines in the form of livestock, such as cows or goats, or cash fines, the amount of which is adjusted according to the level of damage caused.³¹ Enforcement of these rules is carried out by customary institutions represented by the *datuk dubalang*, a figure who actively monitors the condition and security of the Rimbo Larangan. For the community, the existence of Rimbo Larangan provides tangible benefits felt directly. This area serves as a source of clean water from well-preserved springs, provides firewood for household needs, and yields fruits, fish, and medicinal plants that can be utilized for both consumption and traditional medicine.³²

Beyond its ecological and economic value, *rimbo larangan* also possesses a mythological dimension that reinforces the community's adherence to customary rules. There is a belief that anyone who dares to damage Rimbo

²⁸ Ihyani Malik et al., "Gender Analysis in the Islamic Law-Based Ecofeminism Movement for Ecosystem Protection," *El-Mashlahah* 15, no. 1 (2025), p. 101–24.

²⁹ Interview with A. KM, Traditional leader, Lasi, 2025

³⁰ Febriani and Murtiningsih, "Kosmologi Masyarakat Minangkabau Melalui Kearifan Lokal Rimbo Larangan Untuk Konservasi Lingkungan."

³¹ Interview with D. TT, Traditional leader, Lasi, 2025

³² Afrianti, "Rimbo Larangan Kearifan Lokal Masyarakat Minang Kabau Untuk Menjaga Kelestarian Sumber Daya Alam dan Lingkungan."

Larangan will suffer misfortune or misfortune in their life, whether in the form of prolonged illness, business failure, or other social problems. This belief functions as a social control mechanism that complements the role of formal customary sanctions, ensuring that the preservation of the protected forest remains intact from generation to generation.³³

In addition to rimbo larangan, the Minangkabau people also recognize the lubuk larangan, which are river areas designated under customary law as off-limits for entry or unrestricted use. These restrictions include strict rules against fishing in designated areas, as well as limitations on other activities that could potentially damage the river ecosystem. This practice serves not merely as a customary rule but as an effective ecological instrument to protect fish populations, maintain the balance of aquatic ecosystems, and ensure water quality remains preserved.³⁴ From an economic perspective, the lubuk larangan provides tangible benefits to the surrounding community, as during the fish harvest season (typically opened once a year), the catch can be sold or shared, and local tourism activities around the lubuk larangan help drive the economy, such as through the establishment of kiosks or stalls selling food and beverages to visitors.³⁵

From the perspective of Islamic law, the lubuk larangan can be understood within the framework of *fiqh al-milkiyyah* (property law) and *fiqh al-bi'ah* (environmental law).³⁶ The lubuk larangan is considered collective property of the community protected under the principle of *maslahah mursalah*, so its management aims for the common good, not individual interests.³⁷ Efforts to protect the river from pollution, preserve fish populations to prevent extinction, and maintain social bonds among residents are tangible manifestations of applying *fiqh* principles in natural resource management.³⁸ An example can be seen in Batu Busuk, where the lubuk larangan has strengthened social ties among residents while supporting local ecological resilience.

The lubuk larangan are also steeped in a layer of myth that reinforces community compliance. In some villages, it is believed that the fish in these lubuk

³³ Interview with F. DS, Traditional leader, Lima Kaum, 2025

³⁴ Interview with E. DH, Traditional leader, Lima Kaum, 2025

³⁵ Irfan S. Berutu and Asep Ahmad Hidayat, "Nilai Ekologi Dalam Kearifan Lokal Masyarakat Muslim Minangkabau: Tinjauan Atas Legenda Bujang Sembilan Dan Tradisi Lubuk Larangan," *Bulletin of Indonesian Islamic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2023), p. 169–96.

³⁶ Mohammed Saeed A. Alamri et al., "Text, Context and Natural Conservation: An Analysis of Muhammadiyah's and Nahdlatul Ulama's Islamic Legal Thought on Fiqh of Environment," *Nurani: Jurnal Kajian Syari'ah Dan Masyarakat* 25, no. 2 (2025), p. 690–715.

³⁷ Khoiril Anam et al., "Coastal Conservation in Fishing Communities of Malang: Transforming Qur'anic Ecological Values through a Cultural Anthropology Perspective," *El-Ussrah* 8, no. 1 (2025), p. 118–40.

³⁸ Roki Ananda and Zainuddin, "Integrasi Fikih, Sosial, Dan Pelestarian Lingkungan (Studi Tentang Kepemilikan Lubuk Larangan Koto Baru Solok)," *JISRAH: Jurnal Integrasi Ilmu Syariah* 4, no. 2 (2023), p. 185–95.

larangan are “sacred fish” guarded by supernatural beings or the spirits of ancestors. There is a belief that anyone who violates the prohibition, such as catching fish before the designated time or polluting the river, will face misfortune ranging from mysterious illnesses, loss of property, to crop failure.³⁹ These myths function as a social control mechanism that reinforces customary sanctions. Furthermore, some communities believe that the forbidden fish (ikan larangan) will not die unless with collective permission, and if forced, its flesh will taste bland or smell rotten as a sign of nature’s “rejection.”⁴⁰ Thus, the lubuk larangan is not merely a system of water resource management rooted in local wisdom, but also a space where customary norms, religious values, ecology, and myths converge into a mutually reinforcing unity. Its existence reflects how the Minangkabau people balance economic needs, environmental sustainability, and social harmony, while preserving a cultural identity passed down across generations.

In the Mount Marapi region and along the Bukit Barisan range, there is a widespread belief among the community regarding the presence of a guardian tiger known as Inyiak. In the context of customary law and local beliefs, Inyiak is not merely a wild animal, but a supernatural entity or the incarnation of ancestral spirits tasked with maintaining the balance of nature and protecting the region from actions that harm the environment.⁴¹ Based on this belief, the community is prohibited from engaging in certain activities during times considered sacred or risky, such as hunting, cutting down trees, or encroaching on the forest. Violations of these prohibitions are believed to invite the disturbance or wrath of Inyiak, which can manifest as getting lost in the forest, suffering an accident, or even falling ill with conditions that cannot be medically explained.⁴²

In addition to Inyiak, the community also believes in the existence of another supernatural being called the urang bunian a mystical species believed to inhabit specific areas in the forest, on mountain slopes, or in remote valleys. Urang bunian are described as beings living in a parallel world, difficult to see with the naked eye, yet capable of interacting with humans especially those who violate customary norms or commit acts that harm the environment.⁴³ According to local beliefs, items or game taken greedily from areas inhabited by urang

³⁹ Interview with F, A community member from Panampuang, 2025

⁴⁰ Janatti, “History of Local Wisdom of Ikan Larangan Lubuak Landua as Environmental Conservation.”

⁴¹ Ninawati Syahrul, Sastri Sunarti, and Atisah Atisah, “The Myth of The Tiger in The Minang Community: Flora and Fauna Conservation Efforts,” *International Journal of Science and Applied Science: Conference Series* 6, no. 2 (2022), p. 198.

⁴² Interview with M, Traditional leader, Bukik Batabuah, 2025

⁴³ Interview with AF, A community member from Lasi, 2025

bunian may “disappear” mysteriously, or the offender may become lost in the forest for days on end.⁴⁴

Belief in Inyiak and the urang bunian serves a dual purpose: on one hand, it reinforces social control over human behavior in ecologically sensitive areas; on the other, it ensures the sustainability of natural resources. By restricting human activities to specific times and spaces, the forest and wildlife are given the opportunity to recover, while the community maintains a harmonious relationship with nature. From an environmental anthropology perspective, these myths function as customary mechanisms that internalize conservation ethics, where the emphasized sanctions are not merely social punishments but also threats of supernatural disturbances believed to possess tangible power in the daily lives of the Minangkabau people in the mountainous region.

These mythical structures serve multiple functions. On one hand, they provide an ontological foundation that binds nature and society in a reciprocal responsibility. On the other hand, they act as mechanisms of social control. Violating taboos is viewed not only as an environmental transgression but also as a moral violation that disrupts communal harmony. The use of fear particularly through mythical narratives should not be interpreted as irrational or manipulative. Rather, it constitutes a culturally embedded form of environmental pedagogy. In other words, taboos are not merely prohibitions; they are symbolic boundaries that protect the social order by separating the dangerous from the sacred. In the Minangkabau context, fear of supernatural punishment reinforces respect for the ecological world, instilling deeply rooted ethics of self-restraint and responsibility. Forests, rivers, and mountains are not resources to be extracted, but territories to be respected.

The effectiveness of these prohibitions lies not only in the belief system but also in communal enforcement structures. Unlike formal legal regimes that rely on external sanctions, Minangkabau ecological taboos are maintained through internalized social norms. The fear of shame, curses, or disgrace acts as a moral technology ensuring compliance. Violators are not only considered to endanger themselves but also to bring disaster upon their clan. The logic of these sacred prohibitions rooted in myth, reinforced by fear, and enforced through communal memory presents a model of ecological governance that operates outside the parameters of modern law. This demonstrates that sustainable environmental management does not always require formal institutions or rational law enforcement, but can emerge from deeply rooted cultural logic that sanctifies nature and socializes ecological ethics.

The Minangkabau case illustrates how mythical prohibitions are not relics of a primitive past, but an active framework for environmental control.

⁴⁴ Ira Nurmadiah, “A Comparison of Supernatural Folklore Si Bunian Gunung Lalo West Sumatra with Orang Bunian Riau,” *Journal of Philology and Manuscript* 1, no. 2 (2024), p. 1–8.

These prohibitions generate an affective ecology where emotions such as fear, respect, and awe are mobilized to preserve biodiversity and regulate behavior. This sacred ecology challenges the dominant paradigm that separates religion, law, and ecology, and instead offers a holistic system in which cosmology becomes conservation and belief becomes law.

From Myth to Mashlahah: The Normativization of Custom in Islamic Rationality

The Minangkabau customary system does not operate separately from Islam, but is closely intertwined with Islamic epistemology⁴⁵, particularly through the normative principle of *maṣlahah* the pursuit of the public good in Islamic law.⁴⁶ This theme explores how mythical prohibitions within adat are gradually rationalized, legitimized, and integrated into Islamic ethical reasoning, thereby strengthening their authority not only through belief and fear but also through theological justification. The local proverb “adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah” (custom is based on Islamic law, and Islamic law is based on the Qur’an)⁴⁷ encapsulates this dual process of legitimization.

A religious scholar in one of the villages explained that many ecological taboos which were originally rooted in mythical narratives are increasingly articulated using the language of sharia.⁴⁸ For example, the prohibition against cutting down trees near sacred springs is no longer explained solely out of fear of ancestral spirits, but is framed as a way to preserve clean water as part of *hifz al-bi’ah* (environmental protection)⁴⁹ within the framework of *maqāṣid al-sharī’ah*.⁵⁰ By linking this practice to the objectives of preserving life (*hifz al-naḥs*) and resources (*hifz al-māl*), the taboo becomes a moral imperative grounded in Islamic jurisprudence.

⁴⁵ Ahmad Wira et al., “Legal Study of Dzurri Waqf and Its Implementation towards Strengthening High Heritage Assets in Minangkabau, West Sumatra, Indonesia,” *JURIS (Jurnal Ilmiah Syariah)* 22, no. 2 (2023), p. 329–41.

⁴⁶ Eficandra Eficandra, “The Reconstruction of High-Inherited Wealth in Minangkabau through Cash Waqf Movement,” *JURIS (Jurnal Ilmiah Syariah)* 21, no. 1 (2022), p. 121–33.

⁴⁷ Ramayulis, “Traktat Marapalam ‘Adat Basandi Syara- Syara Basandi Kitabullah’ (Diktum Karamat Konsensus Pemuka Adat Dengan Pemuka Agama Dalam Memadukan Adat Dan Islam Di Minangkabau – Sumatera Barat)”. [‘Custom Based on Sharia – Sharia Based on the Qur’an’ (The Sacred),” *Teologia* 5, no. 1 (2011).

⁴⁸ Interview with R, Religious scholar, Lasi, 2025

⁴⁹ Nur Chanifah et al., “Ecological Wisdom of The Bajo Tribe in The Perspective of Fiqh Al-Bi’ah and Green Constitution,” *AL-IHKAM: Jurnal Hukum & Pranata Sosial* 19, no. 2 (2024), p. 470–95.

⁵⁰ M. Khusnul Khuluq and Asmuni Asmuni, “Hifz Al-Bi’ah as Part of Maqashid Al-Shari’ah and Its Relevance in the Context of Global Climate Change,” *Indonesian Journal of Interdisciplinary Islamic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2024), p. 161–78

This normative reinterpretation does not negate the original myth. Rather, it builds upon it to create a layered authority that harmonizes with both custom and Sharia.⁵¹ In some cases, local imams use Friday sermons to explain customary prohibitions in relation to environmental fiqh, citing Quranic verses such as “do not spread corruption on earth after it has been set right” [Quran, 7:56] to reinforce existing prohibitions. These sermons serve as interpretive bridges, making adat more accessible and acceptable to the younger generation educated in Islam.⁵²

The convergence between adat and Islamic ethics demonstrates the fluidity and adaptive capacity of Minangkabau legal pluralism.⁵³ Rather than experiencing conflict between customary norms and religion, the community tends to harmonize them through the principle of *tenggang rasa* (mutual respect) and dialogic negotiation.⁵⁴ As expressed by one of the religious scholar (ulama) from Lima Kaum: “Prohibitions in our customs are not merely out of fear of ghosts, but also because we know that damaging nature is tantamount to defying God’s sharia.”⁵⁵ This statement reflects a cognitive shift from cosmological rationality to moral-legal rationality, demonstrating how *mashlahat* serves as the interpretive framework through which prohibitions are upheld and modernized. However, this process is not merely theological—it is strategic. In the face of external threats such as mining concessions, deforestation, or state encroachment, communities begin to mobilize fiqh-based justifications for their prohibitions to gain greater legitimacy in negotiations with state or religious authorities. This instrumentalization of Islamic reasoning demonstrates how *mashlahat* serves as both a theological and political resource. Legal anthropologist John Bowen argues that in pluralistic Muslim societies, actors often “navigate among various moral registers” custom, sharia, and state law to assert authority.⁵⁶ The Minangkabau case exemplifies this dynamic.

⁵¹ Arifki Budia Warman et al., “Strengthening Family Resilience Through Local Wisdom: Pulang Ka Bako Type of Marriage in Minangkabau,” *Al-Istinbath: Jurnal Hukum Islam* 8, no. 1 (2023), p. 253–68.

⁵² Wahyu Abdul Jafar et al., “Philosophical Foundations and Human Rights in the Bajapuk Tradition: Bridging Local Wisdom and Islamic Law in Minangkabau Marriage Practices,” *De Jure: Jurnal Hukum Dan Syar’iah* 16, no. 1 (June 2024), p. 212–33.

⁵³ Elfia et al., “Patterns for Settlement of Puhah Inheritance Disputes In the Community of Nagari Salareh Aia from the Perspective of Islamic Law,” *Al-Ihkam: Jurnal Hukum Dan Pranata Sosial* 17, no. 2 (2022), p. 480–505.

⁵⁴ Sidik Tono et al., “The Harmonious Relationship between Minangkabau Custom and Islam in the Distribution of Inheritance,” *Al-Shajarah* 2019, no. Special Issue Sharia hand Law (2019), p. 39–55.

⁵⁵ Interview with MAR, Religious scholar, Lima Kaum, 2025

⁵⁶ John R Bowen, *Islam, Law, and Equality in Indonesia: An Anthropology of Public Reasoning* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

The use of *maṣlahah* also reflects a shift toward ethical universalism. Although customs are specific to particular places and communities, the language of Islamic ethics allows customary prohibitions to enter a broader discourse on justice and environmental sustainability. For instance, a ban on hunting endangered wildlife in a single village has been reinterpreted as *maṣlahah al-‘āmmah* (the public interest), echoing broader Islamic ecological concerns articulated by thinkers such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr⁵⁷ and Indonesian scholars promoting “Green Islam.”⁵⁸ In this context, *maṣlahah* functions as a translator bridging sacred narratives and ethical strategies, cosmology and codification, belief and rationality. This allows customary prohibitions to be reframed as something that is not only spiritually motivated but also ethically defensible within both Islamic and modern environmental discourses. This dual authority provides resilience and flexibility for these prohibitions in the face of social and ecological change.

Nevertheless, this integration is not without tension. Among more reformist circles, some scholars question the legitimacy of custom-based taboos, labeling them as *khurafat* (superstition) or *bid’ah* (religious innovation). In response, traditional leaders often emphasize that their practices align with the *maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah*, rather than contradicting it.⁵⁹ This controversy reflects a broader debate regarding the boundaries between *urf* (custom) and sharia, particularly in postcolonial Indonesia where Islamic authority has become increasingly centralized.⁶⁰ Despite these tensions, the normalization of mythical prohibitions through *maṣlahah* reveals a resilient form of ecological reasoning, rooted in tradition and responsive to contemporary ethical frameworks. This underscores that *adat* is not merely custom it is interpretive, strategic, and alive. In the Minangkabau context, *mashlahat* does not replace myth; it elevates it,

⁵⁷ Md. Abu Sayem, *Religion and Ecological Crisis: Christian and Muslim Perspectives from John B. Cobb and Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (London: Routledge, 2022).

⁵⁸ M. Wildan Humaidi, Hariyanto Hariyanto, and Mabarroh Azizah, “Green Philanthropy: Islamic Activism on Indonesia’s Environmental Democracy,” *Ijtihad: Jurnal Wacana Hukum Islam Dan Kemanusiaan* 24, no. 2 (December 28, 2024), p. 167–91; Liza Diniarizky Putri et al., “Developing Ecological Piety in Pesantren: The Kyai’s Cognition and the Practice of Living Fiqh Al-Bī’ah in Banten,” *Ijtihad: Jurnal Wacana Hukum Islam Dan Kemanusiaan* 23, no. 2 (2024), p. 235–59.

⁵⁹ Firman Muntaqo et al., “The Transformation of Land Law in Indonesia: From Commodification to Maqāṣid and Social Justice,” *Al-Ahkam* 35, no. 2 (October 1, 2025), p. 287–312; Nina Nurani, Apriwandi Apriwandi, and Hafied Noor Bagja, “Intellectual Property Rights Law Reform Based on Maqāṣid Al-Sharī‘ah as a Model for Green Business-Based Creative Industry Protection to Support Sustainable Development,” *De Jure: Jurnal Hukum Dan Syar’iah* 18, no. 1 (February 27, 2026), p. 1–32.

⁶⁰ Evra Willyya, Muh Idris, and Abdul Wahid, “The Debate Between Religious and Minangkabau Traditional Figures About Pagang Gadai (Pawn) Land in Agam Regency, West Sumatra, Indonesia,” *AHKAM: Jurnal Ilmu Syariah* 24, no. 1 (June 30, 2024), p. 67–82.

granting sacred prohibitions a second life as moral obligations within the Islamic ecological imagination.

Customary Prohibitions as Indigenous Ecological Jurisprudence

Customary prohibitions in Minangkabau society can be understood not merely as cultural expressions or mystical traditions, but as a form of customary jurisprudence a normative system that governs the relationship between humans and nature through a coherent and locally recognized legal framework. This ecological jurisprudence is not codified in state law,⁶¹ Yet it operates with remarkable consistency and authority, particularly in managing natural resources, establishing territorial boundaries, and regulating access to sacred or sensitive ecological zones.

The customary system governs through a complex matrix of customary deliberation, oral transmission, kinship obligations, and sacred narratives. Within this system, prohibitions play a central role as binding norms. What distinguishes it from modern environmental law is not only its source but also its embeddedness within the community's moral, cosmological, and social order. Field interviews reveal that many traditional elders and community leaders view these prohibitions as customary laws carrying the same weight as formal state regulations, albeit enforced through different mechanisms. For example, a violation of a forest taboo may not result in a fine or arrest, but it can trigger communal sanctions such as public reprimands or, in serious cases, social ostracism. These non-state enforcement tools, often referred to as customary sanctions, serve to uphold ecological balance by fostering a deep sense of communal responsibility.⁶²

Customary jurisprudence possesses distinctive characteristics that set it apart from formal legal systems in general.⁶³ First, its approach is restorative, not merely focused on punishment. Violations are not viewed as issues to be punished directly, but rather as disruptions to the balance that unites humans, nature, and the spiritual order. Therefore, restoring harmony is the primary goal, typically achieved through symbolic acts such as planting replacement trees, performing purification rituals, or providing restitution in accordance with prevailing traditions. Furthermore, customary jurisprudence is closely intertwined with the cosmology and worldview of the indigenous community itself. Legal authority does not stem from written rules, but from the belief that the law is in harmony with the natural order and the will of the ancestors. Many prohibitions are based

⁶¹ Alessandro Pelizzon, *Ecological Jurisprudence*, Contemporary Environmental Law and Policy (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2025).

⁶² Ahmad Subakir et al., "Synergy of Samin Culture With Environmental Fiqh in Central Java," *Syariah: Jurnal Hukum Dan Pemikiran* 24, no. 1 (2024), p. 224–40.

⁶³ Sukarni Sukarni, "Gambut Muslim Community and Their Environmental Conservation; Intertwin among Fiqh, Economy, and Policy Factors," *AL-IHKAM: Jurnal Hukum & Pranata Sosial* 19, no. 2 (January 25, 2025), p. 546–73.

on the assumption that nature possesses a moral structure that must be respected, and violations of it will result in serious ecological and social consequences.

Furthermore, the customary legal system is contextual and adaptive.⁶⁴ It is not rigid like standardized formal law, but rather capable of adapting to changes in the surrounding social and ecological conditions. For example, when new pressures arise, such as the encroachment of oil palm plantations, some village councils take action by enacting new prohibitions or reviving previously inactive ones. This demonstrates that customary jurisprudence can respond to environmental dynamics with a high degree of flexibility. Decisions in customary jurisprudence are also mediated by collective authority, not the result of unilateral decisions. Decisions regarding environmental restrictions and management are typically reached through customary deliberations involving key figures such as customary leaders (*ninik mamak*), religious scholars (*alim ulama*), and local intellectuals (*cadiak pandai*).⁶⁵ This governance model reflects a decentralized and participatory system, where the legitimacy of policies is collectively established through consensus within the indigenous community.

These prohibitions are not peripheral or symbolic legal mechanisms, but rather substantive ones with enforceable authority. Furthermore, customary prohibitions operate through what might be called a relational legal ontology, an ontology in which legal obligations arise not from abstract rights but from concrete relationships between people, ancestors, and ecosystems. Interestingly, this indigenous ecological jurisprudence can coexist with, and at times challenge, formal state law. For instance, in areas where state forestry permits conflict with the boundaries of customary forests, local communities often invoke customary law to assert their environmental sovereignty. Although these claims are not always recognized in formal courts, they serve as tools of resistance and moral arguments in public advocacy.

The Minangkabau case offers a compelling example of how adat can function as ecological jurisprudence: rooted in myth, legitimized by religious ethics, and enforced through communal institutions.⁶⁶ This case demonstrates that sustainable environmental governance need not be imposed from above, but can emerge from within through systems that have long governed the moral and

⁶⁴ Zelfeni Wimra et al., “An Interlegality-Based Ethnography Of Living Fiqh In Minangkabau Marriage Practices,” *Akademika* 30, no. 2 (2025), p. 175–86.

⁶⁵ Arifki Budia Warman et al., “From Communal to Individual: Shifting Authorities of Family Dispute Resolution in Minangkabau Society,” *Ijtihad : Jurnal Wacana Hukum Islam Dan Kemanusiaan* 23, no. 2 (2023), p. 161–84.

⁶⁶ Hamda Sulfinadia et al., “Negotiating Islamic Inheritance and Customary Law: Functional Legal Pluralism and Matrilineal Pusako Randah in Minangkabau,” *Journal of Islamic Law* 7, no. 1 (February 14, 2026), p. 1–30.

material relationships between humans and the earth.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, in the context of contemporary ecology, Minangkabau adat (customary law) faces a dynamic process of contestation and reconfiguration.⁶⁸ The logic of traditional prohibitions rooted in myths, oral transmission, and collective ritual memory is increasingly challenged by external pressures such as extractive industries, bureaucratic environmental regulations, Islamic reformism, and capitalist commodification of nature. These competing forces present both threats and opportunities for customary-based ecological governance. Customary negotiations occur within a complex discursive realm involving contestations across multiple axes: state versus local, religion versus myth, and capitalism versus custom. In some cases, the state plays an ambivalent role—simultaneously undermining custom through bureaucratic land regulations while attempting to co-opt it for conservation purposes.

In the Minangkabau context, the revitalization of tradition through the moral framework of Islam and ecological science exemplifies a way of life that is neither static nor regressive, but actively negotiates its place within modernity. Nevertheless, these negotiations are not without internal tensions. Traditional negotiations in the context of the modern ecological crisis reveal a dynamic process of cultural adaptation, marked by contestation and continuity. Rather than a simple narrative of decline, what emerges is a complex story of strategic survival. Custom in the Minangkabau world continues to function as a moral ecology drawing strength from its roots in local cosmology, yet also capable of engaging with broader discourses on environmental justice, Islamic ethics, and scientific rationality. It is precisely through these plural and dynamic negotiations that custom remains ecologically relevant and socially vital.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Minangkabau customary prohibitions, which are often shrouded in myth and ritual symbolism, are far more than mere cultural remnants of a pre-modern worldview. These prohibitions represent a sophisticated and resilient form of indigenous environmental governance that harmonizes customary authority, mythical consciousness, and Islamic ethical reasoning. By tracing the epistemological relationship between myth and *maṣlahah*, the research has shown how these prohibitions function not only as spiritual protection but also as ecological filters curbing exploitative behavior, demarcating sacred zones, and reinforcing collective responsibility toward nature.

⁶⁷ Rusydi Sulaiman et al., “The Symbol of Acculturation and Islamic Unity in Nganggung Tradition of Bangka: An Integration of Maqāṣid Asy-Syarī’ah with Local Wisdom,” *AL-IHKAM: Jurnal Hukum & Pranata Sosial* 19, no. 2 (October 18, 2024), p. 356–83.

⁶⁸ Elimartati et al., “From Custodians to Bystanders: Tigo Tungku Sajarangan ’s Responses to Unregistered Marriages Practices in Minangkabau,” *Al-Ahwal: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Islam* 18, no. 1 (2025), p. 47–64.

These findings reveal four critical dynamics. First, myths are not static relics but adaptive narrative mechanisms that embed ecological ethics into communal consciousness. Second, the logic of *maṣlahah* provides a theological framework that legitimizes customary prohibitions, enabling their negotiation within Islamic discourse and contemporary ecological rationality. Third, state-based legal systems, though often detached from local wisdom, increasingly intersect with customary practices through processes of reinterpretation, bureaucratization, and commodification. Fourth, the contestation and sustainability of customary law reflect ongoing negotiations of authority among customary leaders, religious scholars, and state officials revealing both the vulnerability and vitality of indigenous environmental jurisprudence in the face of the climate crisis, extractive capitalism, and legal formalism. By situating the Minangkabau customary prohibition within a broader landscape of environmental governance, this article offers a critical intervention in the debates surrounding legal pluralism, customary sovereignty, and ecological sustainability. It invites further comparative research on how other indigenous communities operationalize myths, sacred law, and moral economies to navigate the intersection between spiritual cosmology and environmental management. Ultimately, the Minangkabau case underscores that the survival of ecological systems may hinge critically on our willingness to take the legal wisdom embedded in customary law seriously, and to reframe myths not as superstition, but as the grammar of environmental ethics.

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Interviews

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- Interview with AF, A community member from Lasi, 2025
- Interview with D. TT, Traditional leader, Lasi, 2025
- Interview with F, A community member from Panampuang, 2025
- Interview with F. DS, Traditional leader, Lima Kaum, 2025
- Interview with M, Traditional leader, Bukik Batabuah, 2025
- Interview with MAR, Religious scholar, Lima Kaum, 2025
- Interview with R, Religious scholar, Lasi, 2025