


# Promoting the equality of the earth and humans using *Keramat*

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*Keramat* refers to local popular concepts and practices in Indonesia that are applied to the earth and prevent people from freely exploiting the world. This article aimed to determine the values of *Keramat* concepts and practices that contribute to the understanding about humans and the earth for Christians by using a qualitative method. The results showed that two important values of the *Keramat* concepts and practices would transform and enhance the perspective of Christians about humans and the earth, with anthropocentrism being very strong. These values included humans and the earth, which were principally interdependent and interconnected to each other. From this article, it could be observed that the interaction patterns of these elements directly impacted the natives' lives. This indicated that humans were positively influenced when living according to the effective taboos in *Keramat* concepts and practices. In this case, the control of needs was very necessary because of the existence of limitations in the usage of the earth's resources. Besides, humans and the earth were also forms of life from the perspective of *Keramat*. This proved that the earth was not considered as a tool, medium or object capable of meeting the needs of all humans. However, based on the challenges of national development, the natives were powerless in protecting their *Keramat* areas, indicating that the local churches needed to be supportive in maintaining and sustaining the concepts and practices.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This research could contribute to enhance echo-theological discourse in accordance with cultural anthropology.

**Keywords:** earth; eco-theology; *Keramat*; sacred; sustainability.

## Introduction

Climate change, air pollution, environmental damages and diminished water are examples of ecological problems in Indonesia, apart from the limited plantation land available to the natives. This explains that the exploitation of the earth can trigger environmental disasters and problems in humans' lives, causing scholars to emphasise the ecological issues regarding all creation. From this context, the environmental challenges posed for Christians have been a persistent issue since the early 1980s, when the World Council of Churches (WCC) prioritised Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation during the Vancouver assembly in 1983 (Niles 2002). Ironically, the intensive theological discussions do not greatly impact the protection of the earth, specifically in shaping humans' understanding regarding their relationship with the earth. This reflects the fact that all concepts should be supported by practical strategies, although theological ideas are also needed.

These ecological problems have attracted the attention of many scholars from various disciplines, including the theological fields, where several relevant perspectives are observed for resolving the issues. However, biblical experts reportedly prioritise the reinterpretation of texts, which tend to persuade humans' domination of the earth and other creatures. At an international level, Stephen Bede Scharper and Hilary Cunningham, the authors of *The Green Bible* (Scharper & Cunningham 2002), are among various scholars attempting to read the holy book in a way that supports the earth.

Richard Bauckham also instructed readers to evaluate the biblical ideas encouraging human beings to exploit nature. In the book entitled *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Bauckham 2010), Bauckham subsequently argued that Christians should criticise the notion of stewardship, with this argument being slightly similar to that of Ernst Conradie's work in *Christianity and Ecological Theology: At Home on Earth?* (Conradie 2005). In this case, the theological notion of anthropocentrism and stewardship was also criticised. These critical points are understandable since humans have been considered to be at the centre of all creation, justifying

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the exploitation of the earth. However, notions of anthropocentrism and stewardship are not the only reasons causing the exploitation of the earth and the subsequent ecological damages. For this article, the perspective of the earth as an object and humans as independent from it and all other creations is another critical problem leading to this damage.

In Indonesia, some biblical scholars have reportedly attempted to reread the Bible from a native perspective to enrich ecological theology. This included three Moluccan-Indonesian scholars, namely Monike Hukubun, Margaretha Apituley and Juliana Tuasela. In her dissertation *Nuhu-Mette*, Monike Hukubun emphasised the cosmology of local people in the Kei region, which was implemented yearly on *sasi* every October. The *sasi* emphasises the sustainability of all creatures (Hukubun 2018). Margaretha Apituley also prioritised *Teologi Laut* (Ocean Theology) based on the worldview of local people in the Central Moluccan (Apituley 2019). Meanwhile, Juliana Tuasela explored biblical concepts on the 'Voice of the Earth' (Tuasella 2022). These three recent theological explorations did not explicitly focus on *Keramat* (sacred) concepts and practices, which are popular in Indonesia regarding the protection of the earth.

Based on the existence of *Keramat* concepts and practices, many forests are preserved in very remote areas within the country. In this context, the natives do not take up farming or make use of animal labour in these sacred areas. However, some *keramat* forests are presently endangered because of the presence of activities involving national development. This condition has attracted the attention of many people, such as Sandra Patty, who emphasised *Save Yapiopatai* [earth] (Patty 2019). Based on their study, the local church was challenged to perform religious advocacy, to prevent forest destruction because of the mining activities. In an article published in *Gema Teologika*, Hendrik Jondri Paays, Steve Gaspersz and Henky Hetharia note the patterns based on which the *Maneo* people in Ceram Island presently understood their existence as humans, indicating inseparability from the occupied land (Paays, Gaspersz & Hetharia 2022). Advensia Kakisina also focused on the impact of the environmental disaster as a result of the factory at Sabuay, the Moluccas, Indonesia, using sufficiently available current data (Kaksinia 2023). These reports challenged theological studies to determine the knowledge patterns of *Keramat* natives about the earth and humans contributing to environmental care and protection.

This article emphasises the notion of *Keramat* regarding the sacred nature of the earth. Based on this sacredness, some taboos are used by natives to linearly shape their relationships with it. This leads to the following research question: what are the contributions of *Keramat* concepts and practices towards Christians concepts on humans and the earth? This article indicates that the perspective of Christians regarding the relationship between humans and the earth should be transformed from independence to interdependence and interconnection, as well as from subject-object to subject-

subject existence. This article is challenging because Christians, specifically in Indonesia, have long been opposed to local cultural practices and concepts because they are perceived as pagan. A qualitative method was considered and implemented to obtain field data on *Keramat*. Library analysis was also carried out to derive a broader perspective of the country, with primary data obtained from the field for subsequent accomplishment. Regarding the resulting presentation, *Keramat* concepts and practices on the earth and the life of supporters are initially described briefly. This is accompanied by a theological analysis of the interdependence and interconnection between the earth and humans in accordance with values of *Keramat*. Additionally, the 'subject' reputation of the earth was also emphasised, accompanied by the presentation of the conclusion.

## **Keramat concepts and practices**

*Keramat* is a popular Indonesian word indicating sacred, which includes the spirit having magical and phycological effects on people (Suharso & Dra. Ana Retnoningsih 2018). It also includes taboos involving the prohibition and rules shaping the life of natives regarding the elements perceived as *Keramat*.

Based on studying the local habits in Seram Island, Moluccas, Eastern Indonesia, Valeri (2000) stated that:

[T]aboo was a prohibitive expression emphasizing moral rules. This indicated that danger motivated taboo with people feeling ashamed when actions were not carried out accordingly. From this context, fear and shame prioritized the consequence of not following the taboos, with the fright of punishment being the main reason for committing the actions. (p. 46)

Furthermore, an element is often considered *Keramat* because of its supernatural power, which can cause injury or threat to humans with deviant behaviours. This explains that taboos can prohibit natives from damaging the earth, consisting of the forests, land and water springs. The natives also have clear rules about harmony with the earth. The following taboos are considered prohibitions:

- Non-allowance to farm or rear animals in *Keramat* forests,
- When entering *Keramat* forests, speaking loudly and uttering rough words are prohibited,
- Dumping of garbage at *Keramat* forests is not allowed, and permissions need to be sought from the inhabitants before carrying out any activity.

These taboos greatly and positively impacted the sustainability of the earth. Based on a previous study (Wenno, Puttileihalat & Latupapua 2021):

[T]he local community was not allowed to carry out any activities within a sacred location, specifically land clearing or hunting. The members of the community were also prohibited from acquiring forest products in the location. (pp. 107–115)

Furthermore, several scholars have attempted to inform society about the positive impact of *Keramat* on environmental care. Quoting Elfemi, Asraf Wenno et al. state that '*Keramat*

and/or taboos positively affected environmental preservation to help maintain the sustainability of forest resources for the future. Based on the existence of rules limiting the adoption and harvest of existing resources, benefits were provided to the community and the next generation. This was because the balance and availability of the resources were sustainably implemented' (Wenno et al. 2021). Therefore, according to a scientific report, *Keramat* concepts and practices contributed to environmental protection and sustainability.

In Indonesia, some *Keramat* locations were observed, such as Merapi Mountain, Yogyakarta Palace and South Sea, including forests, land and water springs in the Moluccas province. This article discovered several reasons, which led to the consideration of specific elements as *Keramat*. Firstly, the presence and activities of the ancestors were observed in the sacred locations. This indicated that the people of Buru Island, at the Moluccas, perceived Rana Lake and Date Mount as *Keramat* areas because of the traditions of their ancestors. These people perceived Rana Lake as a woman who birthed through the womb, with Mount Date being a man protecting the vicinity. In this case, foreigners were unable to visit these sacred locations that accommodated only the natives (Grimes 2006). In another part of the Moluccas province, Seram Island, the inhabitants of Maneo had the same perspective for their forest, as follows (Paayes et al. 2022):

For Maneo people, forests were friends, relatives, homes, kitchens, and living quarters. From this context, the people were unable to live without forests, which served as tree habitats and food sources. The people also considered land and forest as gifts from *Lahatalah* (The Almighty) to their ancestors, indicating a very close and inseparable bond. In this case, the land and forest were their identity as Maneo people. Therefore, these phenomena were considered *Keramat*, a holy area where *Lahatala* (The Almighty) and their ancestors resided. (pp. 1–18)

According to the Maneo, who are natives, the lands and forests were their lives, indicating their willingness to protect them until death. Dieter Bartels, an American anthropologist also emphasised the patterns by which Maneo-people understood their lives by exploring the connection between the earth and the natives in Seram Island (Bartels 2017).

In addition, an important event was observed in specific locations, which was presently influenced by their existence. This indicated that a *Keramat* location was greatly significant to the lives of its followers. In Sepa Village, located on Seram Island in the Moluccas, several of these locations were observed, including *Samasuru* (table stone). Regarding its sacredness, no activity such as the cutting down of trees was permissible. Besides this, the location was also not accessible to anyone except traditional leaders. Women were prohibited from entering the sacred location. 'When a woman entered the site intentionally or otherwise, her hair was found to fall off by itself. This was the initial site of deliberation by the ancestors to determine the name of the village and comply with the government decree' (Wenno et al. 2021). The natives also perceived *Samasuru* as *Keramat*, because of the naming of the village by their ancestors.

Thirdly, a heritage well was observed on a hill in Banda Island, the Moluccas province. This was considered as *Keramat* and located on a hill approximately 300 m above sea level, with a depth of about 4 m. According to the natives, the location of this well was an unlikely site for a water source. Since the well continuously provided abundant water, it was considered a miraculous phenomenon. Moreover, the well had not dried up or experienced a decrease in water levels, even during the dry season. Any reduction in the water supply was believed to be a consequence of someone violating the established regulations (Darman 2016). Since the well was considered a gift from the Almighty, a special rite known as *Rofaer War* was performed for cleaning every 8–10 years. This rite was used by *Lontor* villagers to massively clean the village well to meet customary demands. The ritual was also the largest traditional ceremony in the Banda Island (Darman 2016). In addition, an important part of the *Rofaer War* was *karaso*, which was the gift or offerings containing areca nut, *gambir*, lime, tobacco and betel leaf. Each of these materials symbolised humans' existence, with the areca nut, gambir, lime, tobacco and betel leaf representing meat, blood, bones, hair and skin, respectively. Based on these descriptions, all the materials were considered a single entity or the entire humans' soul. This indicated the demise of humans' lives when a part of these materials did not exist (Darman 2016).

To maintain their relationship with the existing *Keramat* areas, the natives regularly performed special relevant rituals, which were conducted by the traditional leaders (*kepala adat*). These rituals were carried out to remind the new generation of previous historical events while maintaining close relationships with their ancestors. Besides the periodical ritual performed in *Keramat* locations, the natives also organised a special rite when several problems were observed in the community, such as illness, accident or farm harvest failing. These were often considered the consequences of breaking taboos. In this context, ritual practices were also the implementation of the local belief system. According to Fahham, belief systems are the thoughts, ideas and convictions held by the Nuaulu tribe (Moluccas ethnicity), which included conceptions about supernatural powers beyond nature, ancestral spirits, *Keramat* places, moral values and teachings of decency capable of regulating behaviour. The rite system was also the embodiment of Nuaulu tribal worship and communication towards a supernatural power, namely ancestral spirits. Since the religious system was still presently adhered by the tribe (Fahham 2016), *Keramat* concepts and practices were considered integral parts of their beliefs. Based on these descriptions, the Nuaulu people believed that a supernatural power capable of overwhelming them beyond nature was in existence. This power was known by several names, including *Upuku Anahatana*, *Anahatana*, *Upu Kuanahatan*, *Upu Ama* and *Upu Lanite* (Fahham 2016). The natives practicing *Keramat* were also the believers who believed in the Almighty known by many different names. Although many had converted to Christianity, they were still living by the rules of *Keramat* concepts and practices in terms

of protecting the earth. This indicated that the belief system was the basic principle of their attitudes and behaviours to protect the earth, including forests, land, mountain and water springs.

From these descriptions, *Keramat* was also applied to vital natural resources, such as forests, mountains, land and water springs, specifically for the natives. In short, *Keramat* greatly and positively impacted environmental protection and the earth's sustainability in the Indonesian communities studied earlier.

In the Indonesian perspective and practices, *keramat* or sacred places protected the earth, reflecting the belief that a distinction should be made between the sacred and profane. This was the reason behind the sociological understanding of the sacred and the profane in the dichotomy notion proposed by Emile Durkheim (Durkheim 2018). However, Mircea Eliade attempted to make a connection between the two concepts. According to Eliade, the ability to experience the sacred was an essential quality of human beings (Eliade 1959). This article is consistent with that of Eliade with a theological argument that in a religious ritual, God, the Holy One, meets believers who are profane (Iwamony 2022). The theological concept is evident in the Bible, for example, in the New Testament, specifically in the gospel of John 1:29, 34; the writer developed the tradition of the Old Testament (Exodus 12) about the sacred lamb. In these verses, John the Baptist pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God or the sacrificial Lamb (Porter 2016). The Lord is not only the *transcendent* Almighty, through Jesus, God becomes the *immanent* Emmanuel. Therefore, the holy and sacred encounters human beings, who are the profane. In Colossians 1:20, Pauline developed the theological concept that Jesus Christ accomplished the Work of Atonement through his Blood on the Cross (Col 1:20). According to Monike Hukubun, the role of Jesus Christ as an agent of cosmic reconciliation in verse 20b was expressed explicitly through the phrase 'He made atonement through His blood on the cross'. This reconciliation occurred through an active and real act, namely the event of the cross carried out by Christ. In this event, the shed blood of Christ (1:20), and the death of his physical body (Col 1:22), are the dimensions of atonement (Hukubun 2023). Quoting MacDonald, Hukubun wrote that the phrase in this hymn reminds its readers of the historical and physical experience in the suffering and death of Christ. This was fundamental to the reconciliation and salvation of the entire Cosmos (Hukubun 2023). In Colossians 1:20, the death of Jesus Christ on the cross reconciled cosmic factors. Therefore, Jesus Christ, the Lord and Holy, sacrificed himself to offer salvation to all creatures, including the profane. In Christianity, there is a strong connection between the sacred and the profane. Christianity offers an alternative to understand the sacred and the profane, with emphasis on interconnectedness. The impact of *Keramat* was to protect the earth, showing its importance for maintaining cosmic reconciliation.

## Interdependence and interconnection of the earth and humans

Strong values of interdependence and interconnection were observed between humans and the earth in *Keramat* concepts and practices. These values were categorised into two basic principles of *Keramat* through which the natives understood their existence regarding the relationship with the earth. This showed that their behavioural patterns towards the earth directly affected their daily life. The welfare of these people also depended on their life performance patterns regarding the earth. Therefore, the earth needs to be honoured and protected by humans. Based on the implementation of the protection measures, farming and hunting were prohibited in *Keramat* areas. The natives also understood the existence of earth as an integral part of humans' life and vice versa. In this case, the Rana Lake and Date Mountain were observed as a woman and a man, respectively. For the Maneo people on Seram Island, the forest and land were also observed as their relatives. Meanwhile, the Moluccans considered Seram Island a *Nusa Ina* (Mother Island), with the interpretation of humans found on the earth and vice versa.

This thinking pattern does not contradict Christians' perspective on humans' beings and the earth, as described in Genesis 1. God created Adam from the dust of the earth and provided him with the authority to cultivate and care for the land. Therefore, Adam belonged to the earth and the natural order of birthed creatures (Gn 2:7-15) (Oliver 2018). This indicated that Adam did not emphasise a specific person, although he was the representative of all human beings.

Humans originated from the dust of the earth, and their existence was intrinsically linked to the planet. This was in line with Genesis 1, where the integration of both elements was underscored. From this context, the existence of humans was not possible without the earth, although the planet was capable of existing without any life force. This indicated that the destruction of the earth was tantamount to harming the lives of people, with its protection resulting in safeguarding the existence of all life forms. Despite the argument that God could create humans through other materials, dust was still intentionally indicated. This reflected God's will for people to live in interdependence and connection with the earth. In contrast, based on the modern perspective of Christians, which emphasises anthropocentrism, all existing creatures were expected to serve humans, who conducted explorations without limitations to meet their various needs. From these descriptions, people were free to explore and exploit the earth until the emergence of many problems, such as air pollution, environmental damage, diminished water and climate change, attracted global attention. Ironically, forests and land explorations are still presently carried out, leading to the endangerment of sacred locations in Indonesia.

In the modern world, humans had become increasingly detached and independent from the earth. This led to the capacity to develop various elements to support their lives, causing no direct connection to the earth. For example, modern world societies produced air conditioners to regulate hot temperatures. However, this product was unable to supply the healthy oxygen needed for the body. Humans still required oxygen produced by trees as their connection with the earth could not be ignored. This showed that the local Christians were capable of teaching local communities about the importance of plants and trees around their residential areas. Nevertheless, the religion did not exhibit the strategy needed to protect the existing trees, including forests. The natives understood the patterns of protecting their lands, forests and water springs through *Keramat* concepts and practices. This showed that the development of local concepts and practices for earth's protection, such as *Keramat*, was not against the faith of Christians.

Although several people argued that designating conservation areas was a strategy to protect the earth, others have emphasised its impact on the development of various crucial problems. Firstly, conservation areas strengthened the authority and power of humans towards the planet to express domination during management processes. Secondly, conservation areas did not teach about the limitation of humans to explore the earth. This proved that the main motive of the strategy was sidelined when economic benefit became the main consideration. Thirdly, the rights of the natives were dismissed by the government, which had the authority to decide the areas to be included for conservation. In this case, the natives had no rights to the lands, forests and water springs symbolising their lives. From these descriptions, conservation areas neglected the existence of indigenous people or the natives for whom their lands and forests were an inseparable part. This led to the marginalisation and extinction of the natives because of national development. Meanwhile, *Keramat* areas were an acknowledgment of the authority of the earth, with the sacredness limiting humans' domination. In this case, humans' activities on the earth were limited because of the concepts and practices followed in *Keramat* areas.

The earth could implement self-protection because of its supernatural power and spirit. This led to the critical questions raised by Christians about the spirituality of *Keramat* areas. In the *Keramat* concepts, supernatural power was beyond humans' capacity, with the natives indicating that the spirit of each sacred area did not symbolise inanimate objects. This proved that *Keramat* areas were alive and the acknowledgment of their supernatural powers and spirits did not emphasise the rejection of the existence of the Almighty, which was known as *Upuku Anahatana*, *Anahatana*, *Upu Kuanahatan*, *Upu Ama* and *Upu Lanite Upu Lanite* or *Upler*. However, the Almighty was transcendent, with the supernatural power of humans prioritising their ancestors and *keramat* locations. This confirmed that the supernatural power of the sacred areas did not replace the authority of the Almighty. From these descriptions, the lives of people were

more directly influenced by the nearest supernatural power, specifically those of the ancestors and *keramat* locations. This perspective was understandable because of the native's perspective that the world was based around hierarchical structures.

For example, in the Moluccan cosmological understanding, a hierarchy of supernatural powers was observed, with the Almighty being very high, unseen and untouchable. This was accompanied by the authority of the ancestors, which taught the natives about the behavioural patterns towards the Almighty, fellow humans and the earth. For the Moluccans, the culture and customs bequeathed to them by their ancestors were adopted and practiced despite them not being the Almighty. In this case, the ancestors taught them about living patterns as human beings regarding the exhibition of respect and care towards each other and the environment. This emphasised the difficulty for the local church to preach about the immanent God to the Moluccan Christians society because of these hierarchical concepts. However, preaching about the immanent God, Immanuel, was possible when the church considered Jesus Christ as the Prime Moluccan Ancestor. In this perspective, Jesus Christ was considered the source of life, because of his self-sacrifice to protect the existence of all creatures.

As the source of life, Jesus Christ loved and protected everyone, even those breaking socio-cultural rules or taboos. By preaching about Jesus as their Prime Ancestor, the natives did not perceive illness, accident and natural disaster as the punishment by the supernatural power, because of the wrongdoing committed by an individual. This indicated that each of these problems was perceived as a direct consequence of breaking taboos. However, Jesus Christ had taught against the violation of socio-cultural rules as the patterns of carrying out daily activities. These taboos were the rules helping the natives to manage their behaviours and protect the earth. From this context, living in line with socio-cultural rules was an expression of self-commitment to protect existence.

The awareness of belonging to a community was also a very basic consciousness of the natives. This was because the community often prioritised the existence of humans and the earth, including the lands, forests, mountains and water springs. Each local community had a previous historical structure often connected to the earth. This showed that the community did not specifically envision life without an earth connection. These descriptions were in line with the story of each *Keramat* location. Furthermore, the interrelation, interconnection and integration of natives with the earth was not merely a previous consciousness, as the local community presently symbolised their land, forest and water springs. This emphasised the struggle to reclaim their rights towards the interconnection with the earth. This included for instance, the efforts of the *Maneo* people to reclaim the rights to their lands and forests (Paays et al. 2022). This was because the damages incurred to the earth's resources represented the destruction of their lives. Therefore, the government was implicitly responsible for the death of the natives regarding

the provision of legal permission to a factory for land and forest exploitations at Seram Island, the Moluccas, Indonesia.

*Keramat* concepts also implied a strong connection to the earth and shaped a great local community requiring unification. This indicated that the community was vulnerable to major problems because of the wrongdoings or errors committed by an individual. For example, when a person violated the set rules, the negative consequence was generally encountered by the entire community. This indicated the reasons that shame and fear were strongly emphasised in society. In this case, the entire community was instructed to perform a ritual, with the violator attending appropriate confession sessions for general healing. The confession of inappropriate conduct or behaviour was an expression of repentance and commitment towards the non-performance of future violations. At this stage, the social responsibility of an individual was considered very strong in the community, with every conducted activity emphasising the interest of the entire society. Therefore, each community member should not think and act based on personal interests. Therefore, the local community had a great function to educate each community member towards being a good person. This was understandable because the development of good people depended on the responsibilities of the parents and community. Besides, a community was the very basic supporting and controlling system around the life of each person. This was because of understanding the patterns by which each member behaved towards humans and earth connections.

According to *Keramat* concepts, ritual practices were considered the healing of life, where the confession and commitment of an individual towards the non-performance of future violations were prioritised. This indicated that the practices commonly emphasised pain, joy and togetherness. In this case, pain was often observed because of the betrayal of the earth by a person acting against the set taboo. The feeling was also expressed because of the shameful and fearful emotions that followed the act of confessing wrongdoing. Furthermore, joy was experienced as confession implied a feeling of healing process for the community. In this case, people lived without shame and fear, and also ensured the non-performance of similar wrongdoings. This proved that ritual practices were patterns for healing and renewing existence purposes. For example, the cleaning of the well in the *Rofaer War* rite was a process of life renewal. Rituals also emphasised a return to an initial unity point, requiring the collective participation of the entire community. This was because the practices were communal responsibilities, with communities commonly found to be jointly prosperous. In this case, ritual practices were not considered private affairs. The revitalisation of the local community existence was also an effort to reconnect with each other, the earth, ancestors and the Almighty.

Based on the ritual practices, one might think that *Keramat* concepts had a notion similar to pantheism, a principle

emphasising the presence of God in every existence. This principle indicated that people believed in the cosmos as God without identifying a distinct personality (Takamizawa 2003). It is closer to panentheism. According to Joseph Bracken, panentheism was a metaphor for the God–world relationship, emphasising the world existing within the space or ‘roominess’ of God (Bracken 2014). *Keramat* concepts did not also perceive the earth and its resources as the Almighty, despite containing supernatural powers and spirit. From this context, *Keramat* areas only connected the local people with the Almighty.

According to *Keramat*, the natives developed their cosmology, which was implemented as the guidelines for living standards. This indicated that the natives prioritised the rules developed based on their daily experiences with the earth. These rules were established to promote harmonious coexistence with the planet, without resorting to exploitation and exploration. Besides living in harmony, peace and politeness with each other, the natives also maintained a positive coexistence with the earth. In this case, the act of speaking loudly was one of the set taboos when entering a *Keramat* area. This was because the act was considered an intimidating expression from one person to another. As a taboo, speaking loudly was considered disrespectful towards other humans and the earth. This was because the natural character of the earth emphasised quietness, silence and calmness, indicating the essentiality of respecting these qualities. From this context, the show of respect by refraining from speaking loudly was crucial when entering *keramat* areas. Furthermore, the acknowledgment of the earth’s natural characteristics was necessary, as the livelihoods of the natives depended on their relationship with the planet. The interconnectedness between humans and the earth was also crucial, with any disruption capable of jeopardising the future of humanity. In this case, the habits of many residents in the remote areas of Indonesia were shaped by their environment because of adequate interconnectedness and integration, compared to mere proximity.

The natives lead their daily lives according to the implemented customs, which formed socio-cultural ethics. These ethics essentially governed the patterns by which the people related with fellow humans, ancestors, the earth and the Almighty. The phenomenon also comprised the rules dictating their conduct and behaviours, leading to the formulation of social ethics emphasising real-life experiences and intuitions. According to Thagrad and Finn (2011), ‘conscience was the internal moral goodness or badness of private and public conduct. This feature prioritised moral intuitions, which were the feelings encompassing the rights and wrongs of various actions’. Therefore, the lens of the local community needs to be understood when attempting to comprehend its socio-cultural rules in this contemporary world. This indicated that no direct connection was observed between socio-cultural behaviour and the water debit of the well. From this context, a logical question was observed, namely ‘How did the social conduct impact the water debit of the well?’. Based on the local community perspective, the

conduct of human beings directly affected the earth. In this case, the water debit of the well decreased with the violation of the socio-cultural rule. This was because of the *Keramat* nature of the well, indicating its supernatural power and spirit. Regarding the perspective of the modern world and local community, this occurrence was senseless and factual, respectively. This was because the community believed in the sacred observations and shaped their conduct towards the well and fellow humans. These observations were in line with Thagrad and Finn, who noted that conscience produced moral intuition. The local community understands the reality based on their conscience; it is their intuition. Moreover, the local community developed several rules to provide direction in their daily lives. For example, water was a fundamental human need whose rule violation resulted in severe consequences, leading to the general protection of the set policy. From a Christians' theological perspective, conscience was the God-given ability to discern between the right and wrong (Thagrad & Finn 2011). This explained that God had been working in the lives of the local community for several centuries before their conversion to Christians. For the Protestant Church in the Moluccas or *Gereja Protestan Maluku (GPM)* in Indonesia, Jesus Christ had also been working in the lives of their ancestors before they became Christians. According to the GPM, the Moluccan ancestors developed the cultural customs of their tribe, which shaped the relationship with their Muslim brothers. This relationship was strengthened by the belief that God had anointed them with the Holy Spirit (*Gereja Protestan Maluku* 2016). Similarly, *Keramat* concepts and practices were shaped by these ancestors.

The belief in Jesus Christ did not mean that Christians should live only according to logical considerations and reject all unscientific thinking. Meanwhile, the religious practitioners need to live according to the gospel, which emphasised good news to the world. This involved protecting life, promoting justice, embracing the marginalised and excluded, as well as empowering the weak. From this context, Christians should learn from other people, including the natives who developed the concepts and practices for protecting the earth before the emergence of Christianity. Although their connection between socio-cultural rules violation and the consequences were unscientific, it was still meaningful and worthy of consideration. This prioritised the maintenance of intimacy between humans and the earth. As the role model and spiritual guide for Christians, Jesus Christ also facilitated the understanding of his believers towards all mysterious existences. He subsequently promoted them to learn from the people prioritising the protection of the earth and marginalised individuals. By broadening Christians' perspective, the religious practitioners jointly determined the miracle of God in the existence of humans and all creatures.

Another important value of *Keramat* was shame (*malu*), which was an internal feeling used to remind people about the existence of others. In this context, a shame to an individual because of taboo violation led to negative consequences for

the entire community, such as illness, a bad accident, water shortage or a farm harvest failure. For the natives, an individual act in breaking rules always had several social impacts. Shame was also an emotion expression that had been studied by various approaches and disciplines. However, theological disciplines rarely explored this emotion in comparison to guilt. This was because guilt closely emphasised sin, a theological notion seeking repentance. According to Pattison, coping with guilt was easier than shame, because it had several resolution methods, including confession and atonement. In this case, shame did not possess any problem-solving remedy, leading to a difficult analysis (Pattison 2013; Pattison 2000).

Based on these descriptions, *Keramat* proved that humans and the earth had a very bright future when interdependence and interconnection were maintained. Since these phenomena were not static, their existence needs to be acknowledged by all human beings.

## The earth and humans as subject of life

At the surface stage, *Keramat* concepts and practices allowed the earth to dictate and control the life of humans. Based on the anthropocentrism theological perspective, these concepts were contradicted to the essence of creation, with humans' being at the center of every development. Since only human beings were created in the image of God, other creations needed to serve them. This explained that the earth was an object explored to meet humans' needs. Meanwhile, the essence of humans being at the centre of creation was questioned by some scholars, including Vainio (2018), who wrote:

God likely had some other reasons to create the universe, whose existence was not only applicable and accessible to humans. From this context, the existence of every creature was considered an end, compared to being an instrument instrument. (p. 97)

This challenged the theological scholars, to rethink and redefine Christians understanding on humans' existence as *Imago Dei*. The redefinition should also be conducted in a more open form, to embrace other creations, with *Keramat* concepts and practices being major contributors.

*Keramat* concepts and practices emphasised different notions, with humans and the earth being the subject of life in the universe. This indicated that humans were ranked above the earth and the other creation. Since all creations were similar before God, several roles and functions were possessed in the universe, which were good in the eyes of God (Gn 1). This showed that the low perspective and treatment of a creation was an act of humiliating God. Since all creations were interconnected and integrated with one another, a subject–subject relationship was observed between humans, the earth and other creatures. This was contradictor to the perspective of Christians and the modern world, where the earth was perceived as a life support object for humans. From this context, a subject–object relationship was observed between

humans and the earth. This indicated that the earth had been explored and exploited to support humans' lives, leading to environmental damage. These conditions were not in line with *Keramat* concepts, where the earth was a subject, because of being a spiritual living existence capable of exhibiting expression and movement.

Based on the perspective of Christians, humans were the only creation of God developed in his image (*imago Dei*). This led to their treatment as the central beings of the universe, according to the theological perspective. In this case, the argumentation about humans being the only creation with souls, spirits and rational thoughts was emphasised. From this context, the other creatures were not created in the image of God because of being soulless and spiritless. This classic theological notion needs to be openly and critically understood, to avoid the exclusion of other creations before God. In this contemporary discourse, different understandings were observed on the *Imago Dei*, with some scholars providing critical opinions, such as David S. Cunningham, Wessel Bentley and Olli-Pekka Vainio. According to Cunningham (2009):

[T]he silence of the Bible regarding the attribution of the *imago Dei* to non-humans' elements of the created order was unable to serve as an argument for a strong distinction between humans and other creature creation. (p. 289)

This led to the presentation of several biblical texts, such as Colossians 1:15, John 1:18, 14:8–9, 2 Corinthians 4:4 and Hebrews 1:3, to support the arguments that *imago Dei* was obtained from the New Testament. In this case, Jesus Christ was merely considered the true Image of God indicating that the phenomenon (*imago Dei*) did not generally emphasise humans (Cunningham). Based on the criticism of the notion, Bentley published an article entitled 'Are We Special? A Critique of *Imago Dei*' (Bentley 2017).

According to Vainio (2018):

[T]he identification of *imago Dei* with humans' intellectual and cognitive capacities was customary in Western theology. However, some contemporary theologians provided several critical perspectives due to the potential truncated opinion of humanity. (p. 143)

Vainio also challenged Christians to reinterpret their understanding on *imago Dei*.

Based on these descriptions, various scholars appreciated the notion, with some considering its expansion towards embracing all creatures, such as Alexei Nestruck. This scholar related the understanding of *Imago Dei* to the incarnation of Jesus Christ (Nestruck 2022). Nestruck prioritised the Deep Incarnation of God in Christ, regarding the exploration on the *Imago Dei*. This indicated the association of *imago Dei* with the Incarnation before carrying out the expansion capable of embracing the universe.

Broader perceptions were analysed after exploring various theological perspectives on *Imago Dei*. This indicated that humans as *Imago Dei* were not a given; it was provided

because of its relationship and interconnection to other creatures. Furthermore, the existence of all creations as *imago Dei* was an active state requiring practical application. This involved appropriate participation in the work of God and caring for all his creations. *Imago Dei* also specifically emphasised the existence of God and the goodness of all his creations, which was reflected in the beauty of the sky and heaven (Ps 19:1–2). In *Keramat*, the natives showed an exemplary care for the earth, including the land, forests, mountains and water springs. Despite their non-familiarity with the concepts of *imago Dei*, they still embodied the spirit. Therefore, the dismissal and judgement of *Keramat* practices as pagan was inappropriate for Christians.

Based on these descriptions, several arguments indicated that humans had no power before the earth, regarding *Keramat*. This proved that power should not be expressed as a form of domination. Although the power of humans emphasised awareness, they still need to understand that domination was impossible at a specific stage. This was in line with the perspective of the local community, where the people acknowledged their powerlessness in freely exploring the earth. In this case, the performance of activities was impossible in *Keramat* areas, indicating the limitation of humans.

According to the powerlessness or limited power of humans, the willingness to explore the earth was controlled. This emphasised the existence of taboos to control their needs and willingness from exploring *Keramat* areas. These perspectives did not contradict the humans' freedom prioritising the essence of dignity. From this context, the power of the earth to control the behaviours of the natives did not symbolise the loss of dignity. This indicated that the dignity of the natives was expressed by respecting the existence of other creations, specifically the earth. It was also expressed in the notion that humans need to be controlled with respect to the awareness and maintenance of limitations. Since the acknowledgment of limitations was difficult, strong humility was required in the usage of the earth.

Based on *Keramat*, the patterns by which the natives understood the universe was emphasised. This was accompanied by the modes of shaping their daily lives in connection to the earth and its resources, including forests, land, mountain and water springs. Regarding simple understanding, these people did not perceive humans as being higher than other creations. In this case, humans were considered equivalent to all the creatures in the universe, indicating the subject–subject perspective. From these perspectives, the natives confirmed that authority was not only owned by humans; other creatures have their authority in the universe.

Promoting the Indonesian perspective and practices about *Keramat* in Christian theological discourse should be recognised as a contextualisation, indigenisation and inculturation effort. The theological principle behind this effort was to communicate to Christian faiths to resonate with individual on a profound



level. In order to effectively communicate, Christianity must use a language that is deeply understood by individuals in the specific contextual daily life. However, some recognised this effort as a syncretism, which was theologically rejected by Protestant church than Roman Catholic (Leopold & Jensen 2014). Eric Maroney, in the book titled *Religious Syncretism*, understood syncretism as the phenomenon of an individual religion borrowing elements from another. This phenomenon has long been recognised as nearly universal (Maroney 2006). According to David Frankfurter, syncretism proposed two (or more) discrete religious systems, namely Christianity and heathenism, Judaism and Hellenism, or Persia and Greece (Frankfurter 2021). Maroney generally viewed positively the syncretism within a religious life as a global phenomenon. Frankfurter understood narrowly the syncretism focusing on the combination of two distinct religious elements in the discussions. However, both affirmed the existence of this phenomenon in religious life as an undeniable fact.

In a religious life, including Christianity, it is challenging to find a pure religion untouched by the influence of another culture. There were no pure Christian faiths; for example, the tradition to celebrate Christmas on December 25th each year originally was a celebration of the Sun god (Whiteley 2008). This shows that Christianity learnt and embraced the date from another religious or belief system, and then developed it to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the Lord. Therefore, from my perspective, syncretism is learning and accepting other beliefs and practices that could enrich the understanding of Christianity's faith and practices. It is also a way to negotiate the existence of Christianity in a specific circumstance, an essentialising act portrayed in the book of Syncretism in Religion, where individuals associate with a concept as they would with a particular group (Leopold & Jensen). Therefore, syncretism is not negative in a religious life because it does not deny the credo, an essential element of a religion. It is an expression of humbleness of Christians to learn from the real contextual life. In this article, *Keramat* assisted Christians to preach and talk about protecting the earth as an implementation of believing in Jesus Christ who reconciles whole cosmos. *Keramat* also showed the strategy or practices to protect the earth. In many cases, Christianity has no strategy, except abstract concepts.

## Conclusion

According to the exploration of *Keramat* concepts and practices, the sacredness observed was capable of contributing to the understanding of Christians, regarding humans and the earth. This indicated that the religious practitioners transformed and enhanced their perceptions of both elements, accompanied by the prioritisation of very strong anthropocentrism. In this context, other creations were less worthy than humans in the universe. Based on *Keramat*, humans and the earth were principally interdependent and interconnected to one another. This proved that the interactive patterns between both elements directly impacted the essence of life. When humans live according to the taboos of *Keramat* concepts and practices, a positive effect was observed. In this

case, human needs should be compulsorily controlled, regarding the awareness of limitation in the usage of the earth's resources. Besides, the earth and human beings were also the subject of life in the thinking frame of *Keramat*. This indicated that the earth was spiritual and not a tool, mode, and object to meet the regular needs of humans. However, the natives had no power to protect their *Keramat* areas against national development.

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