


Gawai and *Shemittah*: The sacred relationship between human, land and God

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This study examines the relationship between *Shemittah* in the Jewish tradition and Gawai in the Dayak culture as expressions of eco-theology that affirm the sacred relationship between humans, land and God. *Shemittah* emphasises resting the land every seven years as a form of respect for creation and ecological balance. At the same time, Gawai is a harvest celebration that reflects respect for the agricultural cycle and the sustainability of nature. However, modernisation has shifted the ecological values in both practices, turning them into an arena for excessive consumption and exploitation of resources. By rereading Gawai in the light of *Shemittah*, this study offers a reconstruction of contextual eco-theology that integrates local wisdom with the principles of Christian ecological theology. This model can be applied in churches in West Kalimantan as a strategy to strengthen ecological awareness rooted in Christianspirituality.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This study includes ecological theology, cultural anthropology and environmental ethics. This approach opens space for a sustainability model based on local spiritual and cultural values to mitigate the global ecological crisis.

Keywords: *Shemittah*; Gawai; eco-theology; land; ecology; conservation; spirituality; sustainability.

Introduction

Indonesia has a diverse array of cultures, tribes and traditions that embody noble values in maintaining the balance of nature and fostering harmonious human relations with their environment. One of the cultural heritages still preserved in West Kalimantan is Gawai. This celebration marks the harvest cycle and serves as a spiritual expression of the community's respect for the land as a gift from God (Hasiholan, Sitanggang & Usmanij 2023:383). In the context of Christian theology, this practice has profound relevance to the concept of the Land Sabbath in the Old Testament (Lv 25:1–7), which teaches that land is not just a resource to be exploited but an entity that has the right to rest and be restored for the sake of life's sustainability. However, the theological elaboration of the Land Sabbath in the modern context remains minimal. Although some scholars have addressed this topic—such as Walter Brueggemann, in his book, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, which interprets the Sabbath as a form of resistance against consumerism and structural injustice in modern society—these reflections tend to remain general and have not been widely contextualised within specific local cultural practices (Brueggemann 2014:71). Discussions on the Land Sabbath as a living and grounded paradigm of ecotheology are still rarely linked to local traditions such as Gawai within Christian communities in West Kalimantan. However, such contextualisation could open new possibilities for a theology that is not only normatively biblical but also socially and ecologically transformative within local contexts.

The Principle of the Land Sabbath, also known as *Shemittah* [שְׁמִטָּה], which is regulated in the Torah, emphasises that the land must be allowed to rest every 7th year to maintain ecological balance and affirm human dependence on God's care. This term comes from the Hebrew *shamat* [שָׁמַט], meaning 'to let go' or 'to cease', and refers to the practice of leaving the land fallow every seventh year. This principle is first mentioned in Exodus 23:10–11 and is further explained in Leviticus 25:2–7. According to Dana M. Pike, the concept of the Land Sabbath in the Old Testament has a strong basis in ancient Israelite theology. It is closely related to the principle of rest and restoration. The Land Sabbath was part of the seven-year cycle of the Mosaic law, which emphasised that the land should be allowed to rest every seventh year. In addition to the ecological aspect, the Land Sabbath also had a social dimension. During this Sabbath year, all debts were forgiven,

and enslaved people who had worked for 6 years were freed, as mentioned in Deuteronomy 15:1–11. Thus, the Land Sabbath functioned as a social justice mechanism, ensuring that no individual or group was permanently oppressed in Israelite society (Pike 2023:25–37). However, in modern reality, implementing this principle is often neglected, replaced by the paradigm of aggressive resource exploitation.

Out of a total population of 5 598 190 in West Kalimantan, there are 655 654 Protestants and 1 236 714 Catholics, making Christians one of the significant religious groups in the province. However, West Kalimantan is currently experiencing severe environmental degradation because of deforestation, large-scale land conversion into oil palm plantations and mining activities that damage the ecosystem's carrying capacity. According to Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia (WALHI) West Kalimantan, between 2015 and 2016 alone, massive deforestation occurred across 124 956 ha—an area twice the size of Jakarta. The consequences of this destruction can be observed in ecological disasters, such as the frequent floods that occur in this region, indicating an ecological imbalance resulting from uncontrolled exploitation (Mufarida 2021).

This ecological crisis underscores the need to broaden our understanding of the Land Sabbath, so that it is not only perceived as a ritualistic rule in the Old Testament but also as an ecological and ethical framework that can shape human awareness and inspire more responsible action towards nature. Gawai, as an expression of local culture, can serve as a bridge between local wisdom and ecotheological principles in the Land Sabbath. Gawai is a harvest ceremony and a spiritual celebration where people show respect for the land by giving nature time to recover before the next planting cycle (Syafrita & Murdiono 2020:155–157). This reflects the basic principle of the Land Sabbath, which teaches that land should not be continuously exploited without a break, because, from a theological perspective, land also has sacred value as part of God's creation.

The Gawai Dayak tradition, widely celebrated in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, is part of a broader transnational heritage of the Dayak people, whose communities are spread across Borneo, encompassing Indonesia, Malaysia (Sarawak and Sabah) and Brunei Darussalam. Therefore, Gawai should be understood not as a practice limited to a single nation-state, but as a cultural and spiritual expression rooted in a shared island identity. This cross-border cultural context forms a rich foundation for analysing Gawai not only as a local tradition but also as part of a regional, interconnected worldview.

Although the *Shemittah* has generally not been integrated into Christian theological discourse worldwide, its absence in the theological reflections of churches in West Kalimantan is particularly noteworthy given the local context that emphasises biblical social ethics and maintains a close connection to agrarian traditions.

Many congregations interpret the mandate of Genesis 1:28 ('fill the earth and subdue it') in an exploitative manner, treating nature as an object of consumption without regard for its principles. This theology of domination has been criticised in numerous ecotheological studies because it contradicts the spirit of the Land Sabbath, which requires humans to be responsible stewards of the natural world (Althouse 2014:117).

Therefore, this study emphasises that Gawai can serve as a medium for the church and Christian society in West Kalimantan to reflect on the teachings of the Land Sabbath, ensuring that this concept is not only theoretical but also applied in church policies and social practices.

The integration of Gawai and Land Sabbath can serve as a prototype of a contextual eco-theology model, one that is based not only on biblical texts but also on the social realities of the local community. This intersectional context – where local indigenous practice intersects with biblical-theological reflection – adds depth to the ecotheological framework of this study. By examining the resonance between Gawai and *Shemittah*, this article seeks to explore how agrarian spirituality, environmental ethics and social justice can converge through both local wisdom and scriptural traditions. Rather than treating Gawai and *Shemittah* as isolated phenomena, the study proposes a dialogical approach that enriches contemporary ecotheology through cross-cultural theological imagination.

This concept can inspire church policies to support sustainable agricultural practices, encourage congregations to be more aware of the ecological impacts of economic activities and educate the younger generation about their moral responsibility towards the environment. Thus, Christian theology is not only a tool for spiritual meaning but also functions as an ethical guide in facing ecological challenges in the era of globalisation.

Therefore, this study argues that Gawai can play a role as a cultural practice representing the principle of Land Sabbath in West Kalimantan society. This is relevant in theological aspects and has broader social implications, including efforts to mitigate environmental crises. Christian communities can rediscover their calling as responsible environmental stewards by re-elevating the understanding of the Land Sabbath through the lens of local culture. This approach underscores that the *Shemittah* is not merely an ancient commandment but a living theological resource with significant implications for contemporary environmental conservation.

The methodology employed in this study is an inductive, qualitative approach, utilising literature reviews and interviews with indigenous people from various regions in West Kalimantan. The literature study examines theological, ecological and cultural sources related to Gawai and *Shemittah*, while interviews explore community perceptions

regarding environmental conservation within Gawai culture. The study was conducted online and offline from June 2024 to February 2025. Data validation was conducted through a credibility test by extending the research period to ensure data consistency across three surveys and in-depth interviews.

Confirmability was ensured by sharing the survey results and interview findings with the local community to validate the accuracy of data interpretation.

Dialoguing *Shemittah* and Gawai: Ecotheological resonances and tensions

While the resonance between *Shemittah* and Gawai is evident in their mutual concern for land, rest and gratitude, this study seeks to go beyond surface-level parallels. Rather than merely affirming that Gawai honours the land like *Shemittah*, it is crucial to interrogate the boundaries, tensions and contextual differences between the two. What are the theological assumptions embedded in each? Can indigenous spirituality, grounded in animistic reverence, align seamlessly with biblical land theology rooted in the monotheistic Sabbath? Moreover, in what ways might the reappropriation of Gawai into a Christian ecotheology risk distorting either tradition? These questions guide the analysis towards a more critical and constructive ecotheological model, avoiding romanticisation and deepening the dialogical encounter between text and tradition.

The concept of *Shemittah* in the Jewish tradition is not only an agricultural regulation but also a profound reflection on the relationship between humans, the land and God. In Jewish tradition, it is essential to distinguish between the *Shemittah Year* [Sabbath Year] and the *Yovel Year* [Jubilee Year], as both serve distinct but interconnected purposes within the theological and socioeconomic framework of ancient Israel.

Shemittah, or the land Sabbath, occurs every seventh year (Ex 23:10–11; Lv 25:1–7) and primarily mandates agricultural rest and debt forgiveness. Fields are to lie fallow, agricultural labour is halted and the land is allowed to regenerate naturally. Any produce that grows spontaneously during this time is to be shared among the entire community, including those experiencing poverty, as well as animals. Economically, *Shemittah* functions as a periodic reset, offering relief to debtors and disrupting cycles of accumulation and exploitation.

Yovel, or the jubilee year, occurs after seven cycles of *Shemittah* – every 49th year (Lv 25:8–55) – and introduces a more expansive socioeconomic restoration. In addition to land rest and debt cancellation, *Yovel* commands the return of land to its original family ownership, thereby preventing permanent dispossession. Furthermore, all indentured servants or enslaved people are to be set free, symbolising liberation and economic reset on a broader structural level. Whereas *Shemittah* reflects economic mercy and ecological Sabbath, *Yovel* adds a dimension of restorative justice, ensuring that inequality does not become entrenched across generations.

The key differences lie in both scope and frequency: *Shemittah* is a recurring seven-year cycle that emphasises an ecological and economic pause, while *Yovel* is a rarer, generational event focused on structural justice and property redistribution. As Brueggemann argues in *Sabbath as Resistance*, both rhythms act as counter-narratives to exploitative systems, reminding communities that land, labour and life ultimately belong to God, not to an Empire or Capital.

In the context of this study, recognising the distinction between *Shemittah* and *Yovel* is crucial (Brueggemann 2014:15,47). While the primary theological dialogue is established between *Shemittah* or *Shmita* and the Dayak Gawai tradition—both of which emphasise rest, land and agrarian rhythms—the biblical material, particularly in Leviticus 1–7, reflects a more pragmatic sacrificial framework rather than a strict agrarian spirituality.

Nevertheless, the Jubilee vision later articulated in Leviticus 25 embodies themes of liberation, social equity and communal restoration that resonate with the agrarian sensibilities found in Gawai. This layered biblical paradigm enriches the potential of contextual ecotheology, especially when ancient structures, such as the Jubilee, are read alongside indigenous wisdom traditions such as Gawai, which foster reverence for the land, social cohesion and periodic renewal.

In Leviticus 25:1–7, God commands that the land be allowed to rest every seventh year as a form of respect for His creation. This command is not merely to rest the agricultural land but also signifies that the land is not merely an object of human exploitation (Krantz 2016:1–9). The *Shemittah* principle asserts that humans are managers, not absolute owners of land. That ecological stability is part of a divine command that must be obeyed (Kramer, Greenspan & Yoreh 2024:100). By allowing the land to rest, the Jewish agricultural system established a sustainable rhythm that not only maintained the fertility of the soil but also emphasised the people's dependence on God, who provided for all their needs.

The *Shemittah* not only reflects the agricultural practices of the seven-year land cycle outlined in Leviticus 25:1–7 but also reflects the principle of *tikkun olam* [תיקון עולם], the social restoration of ancient Israelite society. The *Shemittah* year involves *shemitat kesafim* [שְׁמִיטַת כֶּסֶפִּים], the remission of debts, which functions as a structural mechanism to prevent the exploitative concentration of wealth. In the same spirit, it is associated with the release of enslaved persons [*shichrur avadim*, שְׁחִרְרֵי עֲבָדִים], expressing a form of social justice that insists economic relationships be governed by the principles of generosity and equality prescribed by the Torah (Lave 2015:1). Thus, the *Shemittah* is not merely a pause in land exploitation but also a divinely mandated reordering of the socioeconomic system to maintain balance, embodying the value of *tzedakah* – distributive justice that transcends mere individual charity.

Moreover, the ecological and social dimensions of *Shemittah* demonstrate that this law is not merely a ritual regulation

but rather part of *Torat Chayim* [תּוֹרַת חַיִּים], the law of life, which seeks to balance the interests of humans, the community and the environment. By allowing the land to rest through *Shabbat ha'aretz* [land Sabbath], this law not only signifies respect for creation but also rejects the exploitative logic that dominates the economic system based on capital accumulation. From a theological perspective, *Shemittah* represents a manifestation of *Yovel*, a broader year of liberation that affirms that all things, including land and labour, belong to God (Lv 25:23) (Krantz 2016:100). Thus, *Shemittah* is not simply an agrarian or social system but a theological paradigm that affirms that justice and ecology must go hand in hand in a holistic divine design for sustainability.

When understood in a broader context, *Shemittah* can be seen as an ecological model that opposes patterns of limitless exploitation. In the modern world, where capitalism has transformed how humans treat nature as a resource to be continuously exploited, *Shemittah* offers an alternative that emphasises the regeneration of nature and respect for ecological balance (Gerstenfeld 1999:123). If this principle were applied in current environmental policies, it would give nature a break to recover from the negative impacts of industrial activity and intensive agriculture. By giving the soil time to rest, we reduce ecosystem degradation and create healthier conditions for future generations. In this sense, *Shemittah* is not just a religious practice limited to the Jewish community, but a universal concept relevant to the environmental challenges facing the world today.

Suppose *Shemittah* teaches the resting of the land as a form of respect for the ecosystem. In that case, the Gawai tradition in the Dayak community has similar values with respect for the land and the agricultural cycle. As a celebration of the harvest, Gawai is a form of gratitude for the earth's produce and a moment for the community to reflect on their relationship with nature. In practice, before the land is cultivated again, some rituals and prayers mark the sacred relationship between humans and the land (Hasegawa 2018:17–19).

However, just as *Shemittah* has become less common in its original form in the modern era, Gawai has also seen a shift in meaning. Modernisation and an exploitative economy have transformed the festival from an ecological reflection into a consumption event that is increasingly far removed from its agrarian values.

The changes in the meaning and practice of Gawai are inextricably linked to shifts in the economy and environmental policies in West Kalimantan. While Gawai was once part of a sustainable agricultural cycle that respected the rhythms of nature, many communities are now increasingly dependent on an economic system that over-exploits the land. Massive deforestation for oil palm plantations and mining exploitation has led to the loss of biodiversity and increased ecological disasters such as floods and landslides. In this context, rereading Gawai in light of *Shemittah* becomes increasingly relevant for revitalising the ecological values embedded in

Dayak culture, especially given that both traditions have been reshaped by the forces of modernisation, which have often weakened their original ecological orientations. Suppose Gawai can be repositioned as an opportunity to reaffirm the relationship between humans and the land, as well as the natural cycles that govern it. This practice can be crucial in rebuilding ecological awareness in communities that are increasingly driven by the logic of capitalism.

By understanding the relationship between *Shemittah* and Gawai, we can find a more contextual ecotheological model. The principles in *Shemittah* explain that maintaining ecological balance is an ecological necessity and a moral and spiritual command. In the Dayak tradition, Gawai shares similar values, but these values have begun to erode under the influence of economic pressures and social change. A collaborative engagement between the church and indigenous communities in drawing on *Shemittah* principles to renew the ecological values in Gawai could offer a meaningful contribution to addressing the growing environmental challenges in West Kalimantan.

Gawai as a manifestation of *Shemittah* values: Traces of the land Sabbath in Dayak tradition

This study has explained that Gawai in Dayak society is not just a harvest celebration but also a manifestation of ecological spirituality that connects humans, the land and the Creator. This tradition represents a form of respect for the land, acknowledging human dependence on nature and the agrarian cycle that sustains life (Peterianus & Mastiah 2020:40–42). Indeed, nowadays, the culture of Gawai is dissipating among the younger generation. Gawai is considered unimportant because the goodness of nature can be engineered by technology (Rivasintha & Juniardi 2017:3–5). In the Gawai ritual, the Dayak people celebrate the harvest joyfully, providing space for ecological and social reflection. According to Simeon Hatta, since ancient times, Gawai has understood that land is not just an object of exploitation but an entity that has the right to be restored before being cultivated again (Hatta 2016:3–5). This awareness has been collectively embedded in their cultural practices, whereby the land that has produced a harvest can 'breathe' for a while before the agricultural cycle begins again. This practice is a form of respect for the balance of nature, similar to the principles of *Shemittah* in the Jewish tradition.

In *Shemittah*, the land must be allowed to rest every seven years as a form of respect for God and an effort to maintain a sustainable ecosystem. Similar values are found in Gawai, where people do not exploit the land continuously without a break but recognise that the land needs time to recover before being used again (König 2016:131–133). Suppose *Shemittah* teaches that land is part of God's creation and should not be exploited excessively. In that case, Gawai also instills the awareness that harvest is not merely the result of human hard work but also a gift from nature that must be respected correctly. Therefore, without needing to understand Biblical

theology, the Dayak people have traditionally practiced ecotheological principles that align with the mandate of faith in *Shemittah*.

The ritual in Gawai also emphasises that the relationship between humans and the land is multifaceted, encompassing economic, spiritual and social aspects. Before the land is cultivated again, a ceremony of respect involves prayers, traditional songs and offerings that signify gratitude to the Creator. In Dayak society, *Penompo* or *Jubata* is regarded as the ruler of nature, who must be respected (Rivasintha & Juniardi 2017:6). This concept is similar to the divine concept in *Shemittah*, which asserts that Yahweh is the absolute owner of the land and humans are merely its stewards. Therefore, there is an element of theological recognition in Gawai, where humans are positioned as creatures responsible for maintaining harmony with nature and its Creator. When practices such as this are maintained, Gawai becomes a harvest ceremony and a symbol of collective adherence to the values of ecological balance that their ancestors have passed down.

In addition to having a strong spiritual dimension, Gawai reflects a social awareness emphasising the importance of cooperation and shared prosperity. Just as in *Shemittah*, which emphasises the redistribution of harvests and the cancellation of debts as a form of social justice, Gawai also has a powerful aspect of cooperation. In organising Gawai, people share the earth's produce and work together in various collective activities, creating a social system that is not only oriented towards individuals but also towards shared prosperity. This shows that the values in Gawai are not only limited to respect for the land but also how humans relate to each other in a spirit of equality and togetherness, as taught in the principles of *Shemittah*.

However, just as *Shemittah* has historically experienced a decline in practice because of economic and cultural shifts, Gawai has also undergone a transformation that has degraded its ecological values. Modernisation and capitalism have changed how Dayak people understand and celebrate Gawai in recent decades. While Gawai once served as a reminder of the harmonious relationship between humans and the land, in some communities, the celebration has shifted to become an event marked by massive consumption, losing its ecological significance. This change is in line with the phenomenon that has occurred in the practice of *Shemittah*, where an economic system more oriented towards growth and resource exploitation has made the concept of land rest increasingly rare. This shift shows that both *Shemittah* and Gawai face the same challenge in maintaining their relevance amidst the pressures of globalisation and the market economy.

By rereading Gawai from a *Shemittah* perspective, we can see that the principles of ecological conservation inherited by the ancestors of the Dayak people have very relevant values in addressing the current environmental crisis. If Gawai can be revitalised by restoring awareness of its ecological value, this practice can serve as an effective local strategy for promoting

environmental sustainability. The church and indigenous communities play a crucial role in ensuring that Gawai remains a celebration that affirms the human relationship with the land and with one another, rather than just a cultural ritual that has lost its meaning. By re-teaching that the land is part of God's creation that must be respected and cared for, Gawai can serve as a space for deeper spiritual reflection, where people give thanks for the harvest and reflect on their ecological responsibilities.

However, it is important to recognise that Gawai, in its contemporary form, has undergone significant transformation. While it retains symbolic elements of agrarian gratitude and ecological awareness, many of its practices have been shaped by commercialisation, tourism and political spectacle. In some communities, the ecological ethos once embedded in Gawai has given way to consumption-oriented rituals, commodified performances and gendered roles that often reinforce patriarchal control over ritual spaces. The Gawai Dayak festival, originally imbued with agrarian and eco-spiritual significance as an expression of gratitude for the harvest and reverence for the land, has undergone a shift toward consumption-oriented rituals, characterised by excessive consumption, commercialisation and the commodification of cultural performances for tourism purposes. This transformation undermines the values of simplicity, gratitude and social solidarity that resonate with the principles of *Shemittah* while contributing to ecological degradation (through resource exploitation), the loss of spiritual context and social inequality that benefits local elites. Such critiques of the consumptive orientation highlight the urgency of restoring Gawai to its original ethos. This raises critical theological and ethical questions: To what extent does Gawai today reflect eco-spiritual values compatible with *Shemittah*? Is it still a site of ecological consciousness, or has it become a nostalgic celebration detached from its environmental roots? Moreover, the strong role of male elders in ritual leadership – while culturally significant – may obscure communal and inclusive interpretations of stewardship found in the biblical land sabbath. Therefore, a contextual ecotheology must not only affirm Gawai's ecological potentials but also interrogate its complicities with socio-economic and gender structures that could contradict the liberative spirit of *Shemittah*.

Reconstructing Gawai and Shemittah in the Church: A contextual ecotheological model

The importance of reconstructing the meaning of Gawai in light of *Shemittah* is to preserve and transform it into a contextual ecotheological instrument relevant to the Christian church and society, which comprises nearly 40% of West Kalimantan's population. Most churches in West Kalimantan, including Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal ones, view culture as a suitable entity, but it needs to be transformed so that syncretism does not occur. Therefore, the church has great potential to bridge the gap between customary values that have long been part of people's lives and the Bible's teachings on environmental preservation. Building ecological

awareness based on theology is a pressing need in a world that continues to change because of globalisation and the increasingly massive exploitation of natural resources. The strategy presented in this reconstruction aims to preserve Gawai as a cultural identity and revive its ecological dimension in light of broader Christian teachings. The tension between preserving cultural identity and transforming certain practices can be addressed through critical contextualisation, honoring the historical and spiritual significance of traditions while discerning and reforming elements that perpetuate ecological harm, social inequity or commodification. Such transformation reinterprets and revitalises cultural identity, staying true to core values such as communal solidarity, respect for the land and gratitude while adapting to contemporary ethical, ecological and theological challenges.

Ecotheological education in sermons and catechesis

One of the most strategic steps the church can take is to incorporate the concept of *Shemittah* into ecotheological education across various aspects of church ministry. A theological understanding of *Shemittah* and its principles can be incorporated into weekly church sermons, catechesis and theological discussions. The primary focus is to instill awareness that environmental preservation is not just part of cultural responsibility or government policy but is a mandate of faith taught in the Bible. Thus, the congregation not only sees Gawai as a traditional celebration passed down from generation to generation but also as a form of worship to God in preserving His creation.

In practice, the church can develop an ecotheological curriculum based on biblical texts that emphasise the role of humans as stewards of the natural world. For example, Psalm 24:1 emphasises that 'the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it', emphasising that humans are not absolute owners but managers responsible for preserving nature. Other verses, such as Genesis 2:15, which states that God placed humans in the Garden of Eden 'to till it and keep it', can serve as a basis for building ecological awareness in Gawai, which has long been an expression of reverence for the land and its crops. By designing a structured ecotheological education programme, the church can ensure that these values are deeply embedded in the congregation's spiritual life.

Revitalising Gawai as an ecological celebration

The next step in the proposed reconstruction is to make Gawai a momentum for ecological reflection that is more assertive in its implementation. Modernisation has brought about a shift in meaning in Gawai, where consumer and commercial elements have begun to replace the spiritual and ecological values at the core of this celebration. Therefore, the church can play a role in revitalising Gawai by re-emphasising practices that support the sustainability of nature. One way this can be implemented is by incorporating elements of environmental conservation into the Gawai celebration,

such as replanting forests, preserving water sources and campaigns to reduce plastic waste.

In some communities, a practice exists where each participating family in Gawai brings tree seedlings to be planted as part of the celebration ritual. This tradition aligns with the concept of *Shemittah*, which emphasises that the land must be given time to rest and recover. The church can adapt this model by organising reforestation activities as part of the ecological liturgy during the Gawai celebration, ensuring that the ecological dimension is not merely symbolic but has a genuine impact on environmental sustainability. In addition, this ecological approach can be strengthened by encouraging the use of natural and environmentally friendly materials in implementing the Gawai ceremony, reducing dependence on disposable items that pollute the environment.

Building collective awareness of environmental ethics

The church can also instill collective awareness of environmental ethics by teaching that human well-being cannot be separated from ecological balance. In several communities in West Kalimantan, the excessive exploitation of natural resources has led to increasingly severe environmental degradation. Massive land clearing for palm oil plantations and illegal logging pose a significant threat to the ecological balance in this region. In Christian teachings, the relationship between humans and nature should be mutual protection, not mutual destruction (Pantan 2025:3-5). Therefore, the church can play a role in encouraging a paradigm shift among the congregation by teaching that uncontrolled exploitation violates God's mandate to protect His creation.

This ecological awareness can be strengthened through church programmes focusing on environmental campaigns, such as sustainable agriculture training, community-based waste management and environmental policy advocacy. The church can also collaborate with indigenous communities and environmental organisations to strengthen the forest and river conservation movement, which has long been a source of life for the Dayak people. In this way, the church serves as a place of worship and a center for social transformation, contributing to the development of a healthier and more sustainable ecology. Gawai has an impact on raising awareness and promoting sensitivity to protect the environment. This is because the ceremony places a high value on respect for the natural world. All the incantations conveyed by the traditional leader aim to give thanks for the excellent nature bestowed upon us by God. Regarding the impact on the environment, researchers distributed questionnaires to 50 respondents, including young people and parents, as well as churches, and results are depicted in Figure 1.

It is evident from Figure 1 that the people of West Kalimantan highly value their tribal customs and traditions. The strong participation in various performances during the annual Gawai celebration has a positive influence on environmental

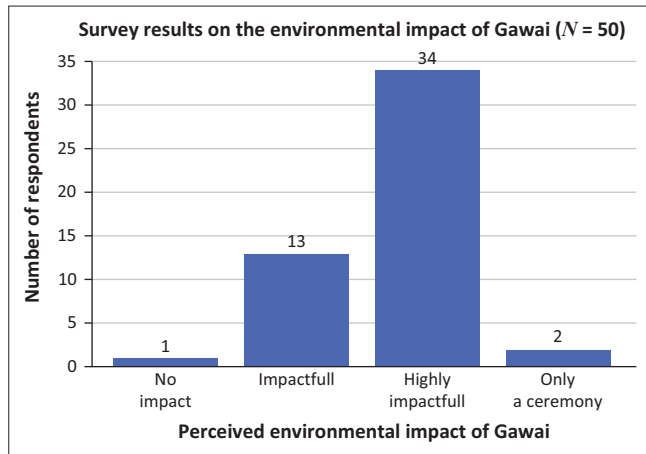


FIGURE 1: Understanding of the Gawai ceremony.

protection. This form of local wisdom could serve as an example or inspiration for other regions to consider in fostering similar practices. The role is constructive for the state of the environment in Indonesia (Althouse 2014:117). The era of modernisation is not a limit for the people of West Kalimantan to observe this magnificent Gawai celebration. An in-depth study was conducted to determine whether this Gawai fosters solidarity among the people of Kalimantan, based on the solidarity that has been fostered through Gawai's local wisdom. Several respondents noted that the Gawai celebration enabled them to make new friends, as many people from outside the village attended this event (Syafrita & Murdiono 2020:155–157). In addition, after the celebration, not only did the committee set an example by cleaning up, but the attendees also worked together to leave the area in its original pristine condition.

Forming the young generation as agents of ecotheology

One of the biggest challenges in maintaining ecological values in Gawai is passing them on to the younger generation. As acknowledged by many traditional leaders, this tradition is increasingly complex to maintain because of changes in the mindset of the younger generation, who are more influenced by modernisation. Therefore, the church needs to take an active role in involving the younger generation in Gawai-based eco-theological practices. One way is to develop an ecotheology education curriculum for young people, which teaches the relationship between Christian faith, local culture and ecological responsibility.

This approach can be implemented in creative and relevant ways, such as producing a documentary about the importance of environmental protection in the context of Gawai, involving them in conservation projects and establishing an eco-theology leadership programme that enables them to become environmental ambassadors in their respective communities. The church can also collaborate with Christian schools to integrate ecological education into the curriculum, ensuring that understanding the role of humans in maintaining the balance of nature becomes a part of the church's activities and the broader educational system.

Conclusion

Integrating *Shemittah* and Gawai reveals the profound theological and cultural potential of local traditions in cultivating sustainable ecological awareness. Conceptually, this study contributes to the development of contextual ecotheology by constructing a dialogical framework between biblical land ethics and indigenous agrarian spirituality. Rather than treating *Shemittah* and Gawai as parallel rituals, this model critically examines their convergences and tensions – particularly around themes of land rest, distributive justice and ecological reverence – as theological tools for resisting exploitative systems shaped by modernisation and capitalist expansion.

This contextual ecotheological model not only revitalises Gawai as a spiritual celebration of land stewardship but also positions it as an educational and policy resource for churches and local communities. The integration of Gawai with the values of *Shemittah* enables a strategic reframing of contemporary misinterpretations as theological instruments in confronting ecological crises. Furthermore, this approach can be replicated in other indigenous contexts across Indonesia, such as Ngaben in Bali, Wamena rituals in Papua, or *Reba* in Nusa Tenggara, which also embody cyclical and ecological cosmologies. The theological bridge established here opens a methodological space for inter-contextual eco-spiritual reflection across Southeast Asia, especially in communities where land, cosmology and religious identity intersect deeply.

However, this study also acknowledges certain limitations. The theological interpretation of Gawai remains vulnerable to romanticisation if not accompanied by critical engagement with internal challenges such as commercialisation, gender hierarchy and cultural distortion. Empirical data from field research – though indicative – must be expanded with deeper ethnographic immersion to account for diverse local interpretations of Gawai in different Dayak subcultures. Future research should also examine how theological institutions and church policies practically integrate contextual eco-spirituality into liturgy, curriculum and environmental action plans. Moreover, comparative studies with other indigenous-Christian encounters would further test the flexibility and depth of the *Shemittah*-Gawai ecotheological paradigm. Ultimately, this study asserts that when local cultural wisdom is not merely preserved but theologically reinterpreted, it can become a transformative force. The intersection of *Shemittah* and Gawai offers a living theology of land – one that resists domination, embraces rhythm and honors creation as sacred. Through this model, the church is invited to become a prophetic agent in the era of ecological crisis – not by abandoning tradition but also by grounding theology more deeply in the soil of local life.

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CRedit authorship contribution

Gernaída K.R. Pakpahan: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing - original draft, Visualisation, Project Administration, Validation, Data Curation, Resources, Writing - review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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