

The Ecological Epistemology of Leuit in Sundanese Indigenous Communities: Local Wisdom in Environmental Law

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Abstract

The global ecological crisis requires environmental law that is not only technocratic but also contextual and participatory. This study reconstructs the Leuit ecological epistemology of the Sundanese indigenous community as a foundation for integrating local wisdom into Indonesian environmental law. In this study, which used a qualitative, critical ethnographic approach, data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and legal-customary document analysis. Findings show that Leuit functions not merely as food storage but also as an ecological knowledge system that regulates spiritual, social, and environmental relations. Values such as murah-mawur, rewang, and customary prohibitions form a living legal system shaped by ritual and social consensus. As traditional leaders stated, "If the forest is destroyed, Leuit will be empty," while a full Leuit symbolizes preserved nature. The reconstruction highlights the integration of indigenous principles, empowerment of customary institutions, and ecologically grounded sanctions, proposing decolonization of environmental law to recognize local knowledge within national legal pluralism.

Keywords

Environmental Law; Ecological Epistemology; Leuit; Local Wisdom; Sundanese Indigenous Peoples

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ecological crisis globally is no longer characterized by physical damage to the natural environment, but rather by the failure of legal and environmental policy systems in integrating local knowledge into natural resource management plans (Adeolu Adedibu & Adedibu, 2023; Li, 2023). The legal-formal, top-down approach is considered incapable of addressing socio-ecological concerns in communities, especially in indigenous territories (Armansyah & Fadjar, 2024). In Indonesia, the presence of indigenous groups that traditionally manage the environment based on spiritual, ecological, and social values offers significant potential for environmental conservation. (Komariah, 2016; Rusdiansyah, 2022)



The Sundanese indigenous people are among the groups still living in harmony with nature through a local knowledge system (Iskandar et al., 2023; Yuliantoro & Antonio, 2022). One of the key symbols of the system is Leuit, a cultural rice storage barn that serves not only an economic function but also has spiritual, cultural, and ecological significance (Tresnasih et al., 2023). Leuit belongs to the customary ecological landscape of indigenous communities such as Kasepuhan Ciptagelar and Kampung Adat Sirnaresmi, which embrace an integrative principle between mountains, forest, ricefields, and leuit in the spatial management and planning of resources (Purnama et al., 2020; Supriatin, 2012). This looks back on the ecological practices that harmonize with nature and ensure sustainability.

However, the environmental values embedded in Leuit practices are not fully incorporated into the national legal system. Although Law No. 32 of 2009 recognizes the principle of local wisdom for environmental management and protection, its role is symbolic and limited (Sinaga, 2021; Thomas & Tiopan, 2023). The disparity between state policies and indigenous norms threatens to erode local values, such as those depicted in Leuit, due to modernization and industrialization projects (Armansyah, 2023; Jaman, 2023). Formal legal systems frequently disregard legal pluralism and marginalize customary law in public policy discourse.

Leuit, in the indigenous knowledge system, automatically has epistemological authority to advise a new paradigm for ecological law. An ecological epistemological worldview positions cultural practice as living and dynamic knowledge rather than as tradition transmitted (Fitri, 2023; Menzies, 2006; Moorcroft, 2016). In this worldview, Leuit is not only a cultural artifact but an epistemic one that reflects the values of prudence, modesty (*murah-mawur*), and responsibility towards generations and nature (Mulyanie & Efendi, 2023; Tresnasih et al., 2023). This is in accord with progressive legal thinking that recognizes the imperative of legal decolonization and the legitimacy of local knowledge as a source of law. (Arifiani et al., 2019; Cotterrell, 2017; de Sousa Santos, 2007; Tamanaha, 2017)

Indonesian environmental law has significantly evolved since Law No. 32 of 2009 introduced local wisdom as a guiding principle for ecosystem sustainability. This principle reflects state recognition of community-based environmental values and practices (Berkes, 2017; Ostrom, 1990; Rist et al., 2007; Sinaga, 2021), yet its application often remains normative and difficult to implement across policy levels (Thomas & Tiopan, 2023). Centralized, top-down legal approaches often marginalize traditional value systems in environmental governance. (Armansyah & Fadjar, 2024; Jaman, 2023)

Ecological epistemology views knowledge as a cultural and spiritual relationship between humans and nature (Ahmed et al., 2022; Rutkowska et al., 2021), positioning indigenous understanding as a valid epistemic source rather than merely practical experience (Fitri, 2023). This perspective challenges Western anthropocentric narratives that reduce nature to economic resources and opens space for

decolonial approaches in which local knowledge, including the Leuit tradition, contributes to more contextually grounded development of environmental law (Arifiani et al., 2019). Legal pluralism studies further emphasize the need for state law to recognize customary practices as legitimate legal orders. (Armansyah, 2023)

Leuit functions not only as a rice storage structure but also as a cultural symbol reflecting ecological balance, communal responsibility, and Sundanese cosmology in communities such as Sirnaresmi and Ciptagelar (Purnama et al., 2020; Tresnasih et al., 2023). Research highlights its values of simplicity, reciprocity, and spiritual identity embedded in ecological practices (Supriatin, 2012; Tresnasih et al., 2023). Studies on Kampung Naga, Baduy, and Ciptagelar communities demonstrate how local wisdom sustains conservation through communal ethics and holistic resource management, although most research still frames it ethnographically rather than as a legal epistemology, which becomes the central focus of this study. (Jasmine & Abdulkadir, 2023; Komariah, 2016; Mulyanie & Efendi, 2023; Suparmini et al., 2013)

Previous work has discussed native people's local knowledge in environmental terms, such as the Kampung Naga people's farm ethics (Mulyanie & Efendi, 2023), the conservation practices of the Baduy people (Jasmine & Abdulkadir, 2023; Suparmini et al., 2013), and environmental governance in Ciptagelar (Komariah, 2016). None has specifically named Leuit as an epistemological entity that can be utilized as the basis for the development of an environmental legal system.

There is, therefore, a need to build the ecological meaning of Leuit in national environmental law and policy reflectively and systematically. In this context, this study critically analyzes the ecological epistemology of Leuit among the Sundanese indigenous people and examines its possible position in environmental law in Indonesia. Based on critical ethnography and policy analysis, this study demonstrates that Leuit is not only a cultural symbol but also an ecologically enlightened source of values and knowledge relevant to the construction of participatory, context-sensitive, and ecologically just environmental law.

The introduction should briefly place the study in a broad context and highlight why it is important. It should define the purpose of the work and its significance. The current state of the research field should be reviewed carefully, and key publications cited. Please highlight controversial and diverging hypotheses when necessary. Finally, briefly mention the main aim of the work and highlight the principal conclusions. As far as possible, please keep the introduction comprehensible to scientists outside your particular field of research. References should be cited as (Kamba, 2022) or (Marchlewska et al., 2018) or (Cichocka et al., 2016; Hidayat & Khalika, 2019; Ikhwan, 2019; Majid, 2002) or (Miller & Josephs, 2009) or (Rakhmat, D, 1989). See the end of the document for further details on references.

Technical terms should be defined. Symbols, abbreviations, and acronyms should be defined the first time they are used. All tables and figures should be cited in numerical order.

2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a critical ethnographic design, centered on an interpretive examination of the Sundanese indigenous values, meanings, and ecological practices of the Leuit system. This approach allows exploration of the cultural, religious, and ecological dimensions embedded in the daily lives of indigenous communities, particularly their relationships with nature. It opens space to challenge dominant legal systems that tend to ignore local epistemologies. Ontologically, this research is based on a sociological-juridical paradigm, in which law is not only a product of the state but also a reflection of society's values and practices. In this regard, Leuit is positioned as a local knowledge system that can be reconstituted as a more participatory and contextually grounded alternative environmental legal order.

This research was conducted among Sundanese indigenous communities, which still actively maintain the form and structure of Leuit, i.e., among traditional villages in Sirnaresmi and Kasepuhan Ciptagelar, Sukabumi, West Java, which were selected because they own ecological heritage and a living customary system and are exemplary local wisdom in naturally managing natural resources sustainably. (Komariah, 2016; Purnama et al., 2020)

Informants for this study were selected purposively based on criteria such as complete enculturation to local cultural values, active involvement in activities linked to Leuit and nature conservation, willingness to participate in interviews and observations, and being available. A non-analytical method was used; i.e., they described events as they actually happened without scientific explanation. Informants included traditional leaders, Leuit custodians, locals, government officials, and practitioners interested in legal and environmental issues.

Data in this study were mainly collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and reflective dialogue, with field observations conducted for a minimum of 2 weeks at the field site and systematic field notes on rituals, activities, and symbols of Leuit. Informal interviews were conducted in narrative mode, allowing informants to explain their experiences and provide information freely. Meanwhile, secondary data were gathered from legal documents, cultural archives, customary documents, and scientific publications on environmental law, indigenous peoples, and local knowledge. All the data collected were recorded, transcribed, and scrutinized in depth.

Data analyses in this study were done in steps in accordance with embracing Spradley's method, which comprises four primary steps: domain analysis for general categories of meaning purpose derived from interviews and observations; taxonomic analysis in order to construct hierarchical and

structural relationships among discovered categories; component analysis in order to clarify the inner characteristics of the Leuit knowledge system, such as spiritual values, sanction mechanism mechanisms through tradition, and ecological practices; and theme analysis in order to construct the primary ideas that display the interrelationship among Leuit, cultural values, and environmental law principles. The entire analysis process is supported by data triangulation, which involves cross-checking interview results, field observations, and legal document analyses to verify and confirm research outcomes.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Leuit as an Ecological Knowledge System

Leuit, as a Sundanese indigenous cultural icon and ecological infrastructure, is not just to be translated into a simple rice storage house, but rather as part of a living ecosystem of knowledge transmitted through values, ritual, and community-based resource management practices. In local epistemology, Leuit stands for the mutually nourishing relationship among human beings, nature, and the spiritual world.

The Leuit system operates within the indigenous socio-ecological community through the principle of *Tri Tangtu di Bumi*, where functional areas are separated into *leuweung larangan* (protection forests), *leuweung tutupan* (reserve forests), and *leuweung garapan* (cultivation land), all of which exhibit mutually supportive ecological relationships based on sacredness. In reality, Leuit is not only a warehouse but also represents an achievement in maintaining ecological balance between man, the forest, and the rice fields in an integrated ecological system (Purnama et al., 2020; Tresnasih et al., 2023), as emphasized by one of the traditional leaders in an interview.

"Leuit means not only a place to store rice, but also a place to store the blessings of nature that the entire village has preserved. If the forest is damaged, the leuit will be empty. A full leuit is a sign that nature is being preserved."

This statement defines Leuit as an ecological marker of the state of nature conservation—its existence symbolizes the achievement of water and forest conservation, whereas its absence indicates socio-ecological failure. The inhabitants of Ciptagelar, Sirnaresmi, and other traditional villages intentionally equate the condition of Leuit with environmental conservation practices, to the extent that natural resource overexploitation is not only conceived of as environmental degradation but also as a violation of social and spiritual principles.

In the indigenous social system, the Leuit is also the center for the community rituals, such as *Seren Taun* (harvest ceremony that occurs once every year), which serves as a way of thanking nature and the ancestors, reiterates social bonding, reinforces the principle of sustainability, and instructs on

intergenerational values on the requirement to sustain ecological balance. Murah-mawur (taking only what is sufficient), rewang (cooperation), and pamali (taboos in the environment) are the principles that guide all stages of resource use, as outlined by one of the Leuit community's leaders.

“When taking from nature, do not take excessively. We learn from our ancestors to live without many desires. The rice stored in the granary is enough for one harvest season; it does not have to be sold all at once.”

This statement refers to the dominance of preventive and long-term ecological ethics, in which traditional values serve as efficient social controls in the absence of state intervention, as local societies already possess their own monitoring mechanisms built on collective and customary foundations. Field surveys also reveal that Leuit is one of the essential elements in the non-formal ecological education system for children, wherein children are involved in the process of harvesting, drying, and preserving rice, and learn ecological values of respect for nature, cooperation, and that food is the result of ecological order and not human efforts.

Leuit is both pedagogically and ideologically committed to upholding cultural continuity and environmental learning. This is consistent with the study of (Tresnasih et al., 2023), which identifies that Leuit is a manifestation of the Sundanese people's local wisdom in safeguarding the environment since it embodies values of prudence, control over consumption, and co-responsibility (Tresnasih et al., 2023), and is supported by Supriatin's (Supriatin, 2012) study, which affirms that Leuit in Sirnaresmi is not merely a tradition but one of the components of an unwritten legal system respected by all. (Supriatin, 2012)

Considered in terms of the religious, pedagogical, natural, and social factors of the Leuit system, Leuit is an ecological epistemology that is indigenous to Sundanese people wherein their culture was not only declared but also operated as a knowledge system and practices of sustainable living with material legal significance, and succeeded in contributing concretely to the objectives of modern environmental law, i.e., ecosystem equilibrium, resource sustainability, and intergenerational justice.

3.2 Ecological Epistemology and Critique of the Legal-Formal Paradigm

Ecological epistemology is an approach in which knowledge is imagined as something greater than scientific and rational results, but rather as a product of spiritual, social, and ecological interactions between human beings and nature. For the Sundanese indigenous people, the Leuit system involves not just technical knowledge of food storage but also epistemological principles that embody a unique conception of the interrelationship between human beings and nature.

This knowledge is not transmitted through formal organizations but is transmitted through oral, symbolic, and experiential means across generations. The values embodied in Leuit are situational, spiritual, and environmental, and the indigenous community does not use resources without restraint

but rather in accordance with nature's cycles and sustainability principles, as one of the informants from the indigenous people explained.

"We do not own nature; we are part of nature. So if we destroy the forest, it means we are destroying ourselves."

This statement proves that the Sundanese indigenous people's environmental knowledge is grounded in the non-dualistic principle between human beings and nature, which, in essence, is the opposite of today's legal framework that distinguishes legal subjects (human entities) from objects (nature), often rationalizing exploitation for the sake of economic development. In official environmental law, the dominance of anthropocentric and legalistic paradigms has led to rigid, central-level legislation that has little regard for local values. Although Law No. 32 of 2009 includes local wisdom among its basic principles, in practice, its implementation is highly limited, as a local government official noted in an interview.

"We at the agency are aware of local wisdom, but there are no binding technical guidelines. Without local regulations or decrees, it can sometimes be difficult to accommodate traditional practices such as Leuit."

This statement refers to the fact that although local wisdom has been normatively recognized, there is no such space for local epistemologies, such as the Leuit system, within the national legal order. They are often left out of infrastructure development plans, mining permits, and industrialization that do not account for local ecological systems. The classical, top-down approach to law has created a chasm between the state and indigenous peoples, relegating locally developed knowledge to "tradition" and rendering it legally invalid. However, systems like Leuit have their own internal social mechanisms for regulation, sanctions, and institutional support, as an indigenous leader underscored.

"We are used to governing ourselves. If anyone breaks the rules, there are penalties. However, city laws often consider our rules invalid, even though they have been in place for hundreds of years."

Epistemological imbalance is one of the main challenges to harmonizing local knowledge into the national legal system, in which state law offers little equal footing with local wisdom and provides only symbolic space. To this end, the ecological epistemology model poses a serious challenge to the dominant legal system and offers an alternative for crafting more inclusive, context-sensitive environmental policy.

Other studies support this position, such as Armansyah (Armansyah & Fadjar, 2024), who reports that CSR and environmental law approaches often overlook the root causes of environmental problems because they fail to meaningfully involve local socio-cultural systems (Armansyah, 2023; Armansyah & Fadjar, 2024), as well as Supriatin (Supriatin, 2012) and Tresnasih et al. (Tresnasih et al., 2023) research that affirms traditional systems like Leuit are not just ecologically effective but also substantive legal principles that are preventive and restorative in nature. (Supriatin, 2012; Tresnasih et al., 2023)

Therefore, the ecological epistemology inherent in the Leuit system must be placed on an equal footing with formal law, not as an addition, but as a genuine alternative legal source to the creation of ecologically just environmental law. From this viewpoint, legal decolonization is an important step toward the termination of state legal knowledge hegemony and the creation of space for pluralism in environmental governance systems.

3.3 Integrating Challenges into the National Law

While Law No. 32 of 2009 on Environmental Protection and Management acknowledges the principle of local wisdom, in practice, there remains a gap between the normative acknowledgment and reality on the ground. One of the main challenges in integrating local knowledge systems such as Leuit into national law is the epistemological gap between state law, which is based on legal-formal rationality, and local knowledge, which is holistic, narrative, and conveyed by cross-generational practice (Iskandar et al., 2023; Rusdiansyah & Sarikuswati, 2023). A customary leader also expressed criticism of formal legalism for ignoring cultural context in an interview.

"Sometimes officials explain environmental laws to us, but they do not relate to our lives. The laws from Jakarta have many articles, but we do not know which ones refer to protected forests."

This story indicates the lack of communication between policymakers and native peoples, in which the state imposes technocratic regulations that fail to account for native peoples' logic, language, and way of life, resulting in ineffective rules in the local context. Additionally, legal duality poses a serious impediment, as on the one hand customary law remains in force and is followed by native inhabitants, while on the other hand state law tends to negate or even nullify its effectiveness.

This is evident in various cases of intersection between forest lands and land-use permits granted to corporations, which impact the sustainability of Leuit practice based on a perpetual forest ecosystem. Policies on mining, industrial plantation expansion, or infrastructure development without consultation risk disrupting the ecological systems supporting Leuit, according to a local government practitioner.

"We are often caught in the middle. Indigenous peoples have rules and rituals, but there is no formal legal basis in the licensing system that binds them. If there is no local regulation or decree from the mayor, it is difficult for us to take action."

This means that there are no legal instruments that can effectively link customary law and the state administration system. Therefore, indigenous peoples' ecological practices do not have a stable place in law, although, in practice, they have long sustained sustainable environmental management before the state existed. Forcible modernization is another underlying issue. Village expansion, agro-green, and market-led economic development tend to induce indigenous people to abandon indigenous practices such as Leuit, which they perceive as inefficient or uneconomical. Murah-mawur (leading humble lives)

is not consistent with national economic development directions. A study by Jasmine et al. (Jasmine & Abdulkadir, 2023) finds that spiritual values and the ecological ethics of the Baduy people are generally neglected in development planning because they conflict with the rationality of investment and commercialization. (Jasmine & Abdulkadir, 2023)

In addition, a lack of verification and documentation systems for customary law means that policies lack a sufficient empirical foundation to incorporate local wisdom. Many practices, such as restrictions on cutting certain trees, harvest cycles according to lunar phase, or sacred sanctions for damaging the environment, exist only in collective memory and ritual with no formal codification or recognition.

This disparity warrants censure of the superiority of state law, as Suparmini et al. (Suparmini et al., 2013) affirm, that national law will take precedence and ignore the environmental logic of indigenous peoples, which is indeed more adaptive and contextual (Suparmini et al., 2013). However, a decolonial approach demands a recognition of the diversity of knowledge systems and active involvement of indigenous peoples in determining their ecological fate.

Thus, Leuit cannot be incorporated into national law through a technocratic endeavor. Environmental law needs to be reconstructed dialogically, not only honoring but also providing institutional space and protection for the local ecological systems. In the absence of this endeavor, national law will continue not to address the socio-cultural dimension of the ongoing ecological crisis.

3.4 Reconstruction of an Environmental Law Model based on Leuit

Based on fieldwork and a review of the literature, this research concludes that the Leuit system possesses a body of ecological values, norms, and practices with epistemological quality that can be reconstructed as the starting point for building an alternative, participatory, and ecologically just model of environmental law. This reconstruction attempts to bridge the gap between the legalistic, formal state law and the living, community-based local knowledge system.

The Leuit-based model of environmental law comprises three major components, namely: (1) local ecological norms, (2) subsidization of customary institutions, and (3) value-oriented ecological system of sanctions—all the three of which have been invariably practiced by indigenous people, though they have yet to be formally sanctioned within the paradigm of state policies.

Local Ecological Principles

Principles like *murah-mawur* (only consume what is necessary), *rewang* (mutual assistance), and *pamali* (environmental taboos) underpin the Sundanese indigenous community's way of life and inform resource management. These principles promote control of consumption, equitable sharing, and reinforcement of spiritual bonding with nature (An et al., 2023; Lestari, 2019). A traditional leader has

stated:

"If everyone used Leuit as a measure of prosperity, there would be no fighting over land or destruction of forests. A full Leuit does not mean abundance, but sufficiency."

This principle is philosophically opposed to the paradigm of unlimited economic growth and aligns with the principles of sustainability and intergenerational justice on which modern environmental law is founded.

Strengthening Customary Institutions

The Leuit-based model of environmental law centers on the imperative to empower and recognize customary institutions as legitimate legal entities. Customary institutions have deliberative mechanisms, social control systems, and strong moral authority within communities that are far more effective at the local level than are formal bureaucratic systems. A customary community member stated:

"In the village, we do not need the police to protect the forest, just our neighbors and customary rules. If someone breaks the rules, we discuss it together."

Accordingly, it is noteworthy that the state not only recognizes the existence of customary institutions but also incorporates them into the legal and environmental administrative frameworks, for example, by recognizing customary area management rights and delegating authority through customary-based local licensing.

Value-Based Ecological Sanction Schemes

In the Leuit system, breaches of ecological value are met with sanctions that are educational, moral, and social. For example, in other societies, there is the concept of pangawakan fines for those who cut down forests, cut down trees without permission, or desecrate planting rituals. These sanctions not only consist of material measures, but also the restoration of social and spiritual ties. This was testified by one of the informants:

"If someone causes damage, we do not immediately punish them, but invite them to meet with the elders and resolve the issue. The sanction is to restore harmony, not just a punishment."

This model presents an alternative to the mechanical retributive model of state law and, instead, offers a values- and culture-based restorative model that is especially relevant to the building of full ecological justice.

Recommendations for Transformation

Based on the above findings, rebuilding Leuit-based environmental law can be guided by the following three transformation strategies:

- a. Decolonization of environmental law through the recognition of legal pluralism and the making of space for customary law systems in the national legal system.
- b. Elaboration of interlegal policies, i.e., the drafting of integrative mechanisms between state law and contextual customary law, e.g., in the management of customary lands, the drafting of local regulations pursuant to local norms, or indigenous peoples' participation in the preparation of environmental impact assessments.
- c. Locally-based law education to expose young people to legal values through locally-generated wisdom like the Leuit system, so that law is not only seen as a product of the state but also as being part of culture and communal ecological responsibility.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Leuit represents the indigenous Sundanese people's ecological system of knowledge, with legal, social, and religious values, for sustainable environmental management. Leuit is more than a food barn because it embodies principles that govern human relationships with nature, grounded in balance, sustainability, and co-responsibility.

The environmental epistemology embedded in Leuit customs is rituals, societal values, and traditional sanctions that impose an intrinsic order for living. It has proved adaptive and efficient in maintaining indigenous ecosystems. This system of knowledge, however, has not yet received due recognition or protection in the national legal system, although local wisdom principles have been officially recognized in legislation.

Leuit's reconstruction of an environmental model offers a context-sensitive, participatory, and inclusive approach via the incorporation of local values, empowerment of customary institutions, and ecologically based sanction mechanisms. Therefore, the Indonesian transformation of environmental law should be achieved by recognizing legal pluralism and by actively involving indigenous communities as legitimate legal subjects in environmental management.

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