

Female Preachers as Eco-Islamic Communication Agents: Reconfiguring Da'wah through Environmental Praxis in Aceh

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Abstract

This paper examines at how female Islamic preachers in Langsa, Aceh who use da'wah to spread Islamic ideals and raise public awareness of environmental issues. This study uses Saba Mahmood's notion of pious agency to examine women's preaching behaviors within socio-religious framework of Aceh and Anna M. Gade's idea of Muslim environmentalism to explain ecological concern as a crucial part of religious practice. Observation, documentation, and in-depth interviews with seven informants—five female preachers and two members of different Islamic study circles (*pengajian*)—were used to collect data using an ethnographic approach. The results show three main patterns of environmental da'wah carried out by female preachers: the adoption of adaptive preaching techniques, the framing of environmental concern within religious values, and the transition of preaching from oral discourse (*bi al-lisan*) to action-oriented praxis (*bi al-hal*). This study shows that environmental awareness in Aceh is expressed and carried out through regular ecological activities rather than stopping at the normative level. And by emphasizing the agency of Acehnese female preachers in establishing Islamic principles as the cornerstone of ecological stewardship, this study broadens the body of knowledge on *da'wah bi al-hal*. Finally by emphasizing the agency of Acehnese female preachers in establishing Islamic principles as the cornerstone of ecological stewardship, this study broadens the body of knowledge on *da'wah bi al-hal*.

Keywords

Da'wah, Ecological awareness, Female preachers, Muslim environmentalism, Pious agency, Aceh

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, environmental concerns have become one of the world's most urgent problems. In addition to endangering environmental sustainability, pollution, deforestation, climate change, and an increase in ecological disasters also significantly disrupt the social, economic, cultural, and spiritual facets of human well-being (Chaplin, 2016; Hitzhusen & Tucker, 2013; Jenkins, Berry, & Kreider, 2018). Recurrent floods, landslides, river contamination, and forest degradation, all triggered by unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, are ongoing manifestations of this ecological disaster in Indonesia. Aceh represents one of the regions most acutely impacted by these ecological crises.



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According to the Forest, Nature, and Environment of Aceh Foundation (HaKA), the province lost 9,383 hectares of forest cover in 2022 alone (Surry, 2023). This extensive deforestation and unchecked land exploitation have resulted in catastrophic floods that have a detrimental impact on local livelihoods (Lubis, Linkie, & Lee, 2024). Consequently, environmental degradation in Aceh extends beyond a purely ecological concern and is deeply intertwined with the sociocultural and religious fabric of the community.

In Acehnese society, Islamic principles have historically guided social ethics and communal responsibility. As Idami et al. (2022) state, Islamic teachings provide an enduring cultural vocabulary in which keeping surroundings clean, curbing waste, and protecting natural resources are understood not merely as civic courtesies but as core religious duties. This mirrors Gade's (2019) insight that environmental responsibility in the Muslim world gains its deepest traction when cultivated through everyday religious devotions and shared communal values. Koehrsen (2021) similarly demonstrates that ecological awareness flourishes when faith leaders actively translate abstract theology into actionable habits. Begum (2021) highlights how spiritual convictions serve as potent intrinsic drivers for pro-environmental behavior.

From the standpoint of Islamic communication, da'wah offers a natural vehicle for bridging religious conscience and public social action (Siregar, 2013). Addressing modern structural dilemmas — poverty, public health, marginalization, and environmental decay — requires moving away from static, top-down sermonizing toward contextual, participatory, and transformative models (Choirin, Mardhiah, Bahri, Hadiyan, & Yumna, 2025; Siregar, 2021). It is here that environmental da'wah gains critical urgency, grounding environmental ethics within religious discourse. In practice, this approach aligns with da'wah bil hal—an action-oriented methodology that prioritizes direct community engagement, practical problem-solving, and grassroots empowerment (Rochmah & Nurhalizah, 2024).

Nevertheless, despite growing scholarly interest in religion and ecology, much of the literature remains anchored in theoretical or theological discussions of nature in Islamic cosmology (Foltz, 2003; Gade, 2019; Nasr, 1968). Parallel research on female Islamic leadership in Indonesia frequently centers on Majelis Taklim networks (Rizha & Mustafa, 2020), media uptake (Muslem, 2021), pious subject formation (Srimulyani, 2013, 2016), traditional authority structures (Kloos, 2016), or strategic negotiation within patriarchal settings (Aprina & Siregar, 2026). While scholars such as Bano and Kalmbach (2012) and Rinaldo (2013) have thoroughly documented Muslim women's socioreligious agency, the intersection where female da'wah, environmental activism, and Islamic communication meet has received surprisingly little sustained empirical attention. This article addresses that gap by investigating the vital, often unrecognized role of Acehnese female preachers as eco-Islamic communicators.

To analyze these field dynamics, we weave together Gade's (2019) framework of Muslim environmentalism with Mahmood's (2005) seminal theory of pious agency. Where Gade illuminates the ethical and theological foundations of Muslim ecological care, Mahmood provides the analytical nuance needed to understand how religious women exercise agency: not by rebelling against orthodoxy, but by mastering, inhabiting, and reshaping religious norms from within. Drawing on both perspectives, we argue that female preachers in Langsa construct an impactful mode of environmental da'wah by synthesizing Islamic moral tenets, hands-on ecological practices, and adaptive community-based communication. Da'wah thus emerges not merely as a pulpit for doctrinal instruction, but as a lived arena for transformative ecological stewardship.

2. METHODS

This study was based on seven months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Langsa, Aceh, between April and October 2023. Direct immersion in the field provided an intimate vantage point for examining the nuanced cultural meanings and day-to-day practices surrounding local da'wah initiatives (Creswell, 2014). We worked closely with seven primary informants: five female preachers (ustadzah) actively involved in environmental advocacy and two regular attendees from different local study circles. Participants were purposively selected for their sustained engagement in community outreach, environmental activities, and study groups. Field inquiries continued until thematic saturation was reached, at which point subsequent interviews yielded recurring patterns rather than novel conceptual categories (Creswell, 2014). To safeguard participant privacy and ethical confidentiality, all informants are identified throughout this study by codes (P1-P7).

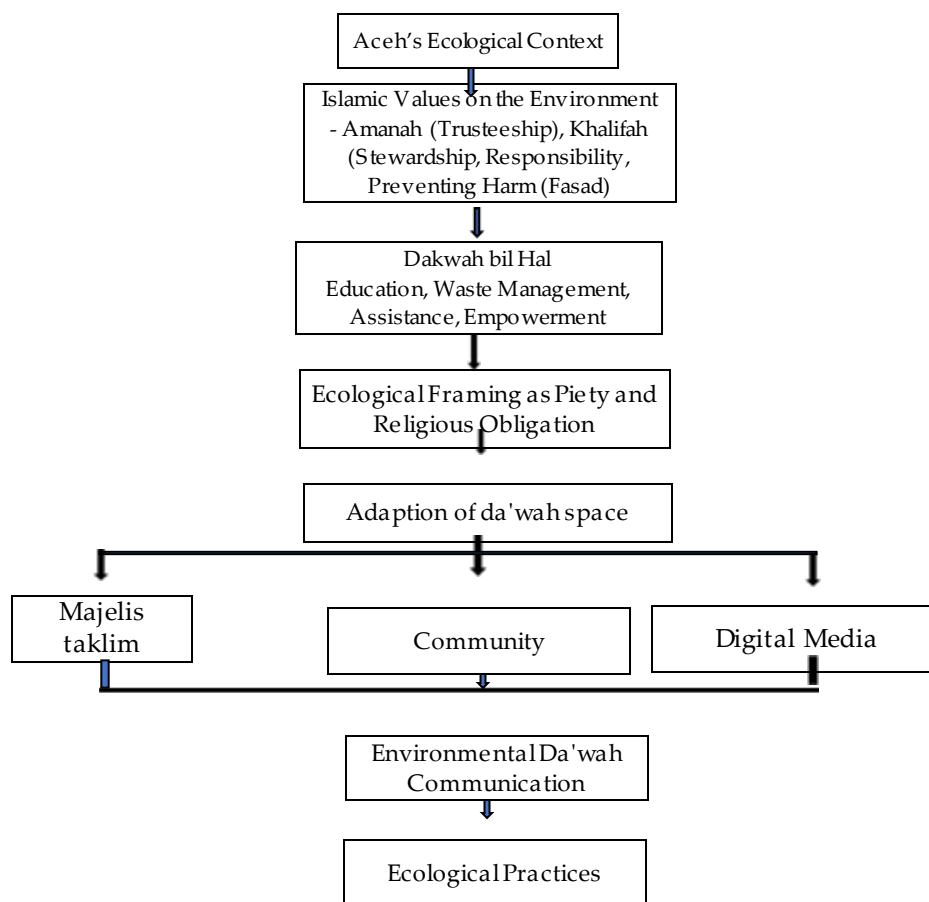
Data generation relied on three complementary qualitative techniques: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation review. Participant observation involved attending study circles, community clean-up sessions, and informal mentoring meetings, as well as observing digital interactions. In-depth interviews focused on how preachers formulate their messages, interpret ecological challenges through scripture, and adapt their outreach across different social spaces. Document analysis—including institutional reports, sermon notes, curriculum guidelines, and media archives—served to corroborate and contextualize observational data.

Our thematic analysis followed a systematic procedure of data transcription, iterative close reading, open coding, and conceptual clustering (Creswell, 2014). The analysis crystallized around three core themes: the shift from verbal lecturing to tangible praxis, the religious framing of conservation as a pious duty, and strategic communication within a Sharia-governed public sphere. Triangulation across interviews, observational field notes, and documentary records ensured analytical rigor and trustworthiness (Moleong, 2013).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The ethnographic findings reveal how female preachers in Langsa translate Islamic ecological ethics into vibrant grassroots initiatives. Across the fieldwork, three dominant communicative patterns emerged: first, shifting from oral admonition to hands-on intervention (da'wah bil hal); second, explicitly reframing environmental stewardship as an act of personal piety and religious obligation; and third, deploying adaptive, community-grounded outreach across domestic halaqahs, Meunasahs, and digital channels. These strategies demonstrate that Muslim environmentalism in Aceh is far from an abstract theological ideal—it is an active, everyday discipline of care.

Figure 1. Structural Dynamics of Female Eco-Islamic Da'wah in Langsa



The empirical process of environmental da'wah identified in this study originates from Aceh's ecological challenges. Female preachers subsequently contextualize these issues through foundational Islamic values, such as amanah (divine trust), the duty of khilafah (stewardship of the earth), and the responsibility to preserve environmental sustainability. These principles are materialized through da'wah bil-hal (action-oriented preaching), encompassing environmental education, waste management, community mentoring, and social empowerment. Such ecological consciousness is framed within the da'wah mission as both an integral religious obligation and a manifestation of piety. Female preachers communicate these imperatives to their congregations through majelis taklim (religious study assemblies), grassroots communities, and digital media platforms. Overall, this process demonstrates the operationalization of female agency in negotiating Aceh's socio-religious structures, which are strictly governed by religious and gender norms. From Mahmood's (2005) perspective, female preachers in Langsa embody a creative, norm-compliant agency in carrying out environmental da'wah. Consequently, environmental da'wah communication represents the translation of Islamic values into socio-ecological practices realized through the mutual engagement between preachers and the

3.1 From Da'wah bil Lisan to Tangible Ecological Action

Faced with recurring ecological crises in Langsa, several female preachers realized that traditional pulpit sermons (da'wah bil lisan) had reached clear limits. Preaching about cleanliness in the abstract did little to alter systemic waste habits or alleviate community vulnerabilities. Consequently, they deliberately shifted toward action-oriented da'wah (da'wah bil hal), entering marginalized public spaces to work alongside local residents. P1, an experienced religious counselor, recounted how she redirected her outreach toward female waste-pickers at the local landfill:

"After years of delivering standard public lectures, I realized something was missing. I wanted a tangible approach, so I began spending time with female scavengers. We meet weekly at the local mosque right after Asr prayer." (P1)

This move from podiums to mushalla floors illustrates a profound change in perspective: audience members (mad'u) are no longer treated as passive listeners, but as active partners capable of meaningful self-determination. P1 recognized the immediate overlap between spiritual needs and socioeconomic hardship. Rather than seeking an easier audience, her focus on scavengers represents a deliberate synthesis of religious mentorship and socioeconomic solidarity.

Her commitment is further highlighted by her frequent visits to the landfill (TPA). Carrying clean prayer garments and clothing donations, she engages the women on equal footing. Environmental communication in this setting relies on profound empathy rather than moral superiority:

"Most of the women I work with face acute financial hardship. They sort through trash out of necessity, with minimal schooling and no capital. I do not lecture them about environmental theory. I visit them to offer encouragement, listen to their struggles, remind them to safeguard their prayers, and reframe their daily labor as a noble act of worship." (P1)

Through such compassionate engagement, P1 restores dignity to marginalized workers. Scavenging is elevated from a stigmatized survival tactic into an essential civic service that preserves urban health and ecological balance. When workers see their labor as valuable in the eyes of God, ecological practice becomes deeply internalized. This encapsulates the essence of da'wah bil hal: embedding daily labor with spiritual meaning, as Koehrsen (2021) notes.

A complementary model of da'wah bil hal is exemplified by P5, an elementary school educator and preacher in Langsa. She incorporates environmental literacy directly into her fifth-grade classes, instilling the 3R principles (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) through practical habit-building:

"I chose a different path from preachers who strictly give sermons. My focus is on instilling practical waste-sorting habits in children. Environmental awareness has to be nurtured from an early age, which is why I embed it right into our classroom routines." (P5)

Environmental preaching (da'wah) cannot rely solely on verbal rhetoric; it requires active modeling, habituation, and direct exemplification to translate Islamic ecological values into concrete social practices. This operationalization is embraced by P5, which leverages the education sector as a medium to instill environmental awareness among students through proper waste-disposal habits. Targeting students for ecological da'wah highlights that da'wah bil-hal (action-oriented proselytization) extends beyond mere knowledge dissemination to the systematic cultivation of sustainable ecological habits from an early age. Consequently, da'wah bil-hal transcends theoretical environmental instruction by operationalizing religious tenets into concrete pedagogical practices.

Overall, contemporary environmental da'wah has evolved beyond conventional sermon-based models traditionally delivered in mosques and religious study assemblies (majlis ta'lim). It actively engages broader social spheres through ecological education and the socioeconomic empowerment of

waste-picker communities. Reconceptualizing da'wah as a form of social communication positions female preachers not merely as disseminators of religious teachings but as communication agents and social actors who foster ecological piety through everyday practices (Haq dkk 2020). Furthermore, these female preachers demonstrate how da'wah serves as a transformative vehicle for community empowerment (Yuwafik & Nurhikmah, 2025).

3.2. Reframing Ecology as an Obligation of Faith and Piety

In the worldview of these preachers, environmental decline is not simply a technical failure—it is a moral and spiritual trial concerning humanity's accountability before the Creator. This insight aligns closely with Mahmood's (2005) concept of pious agency, where ethical subjectivities are forged through disciplined adherence to religious norms.

Preachers frequently use reflective Quranic contemplation (tadabbur) to explore verses that highlight stewardship (khalifah), the prohibition against causing corruption on earth (fasad fi al-ard), and cosmic harmony (mizan). P3, for example, conducts weekly halaqahs in local prayer halls, leading textual analysis tied directly to household routines:



Figure 2. Quranic contemplation guided by a preacher in musholla

P3 addresses environmental concerns through an Islamic spiritual perspective via small study circles (halaqah) that focus on the reflective reading of Quranic verses (tadabbur). The preacher points out that caring for the environment is not simply about keeping healthy and clean, but it is a fundamental duty that believers owe to God.

"In my talks, I explain that cleanliness is an integral part of faith. When I connect waste management to Islamic teachings, the women see it not as a chore, but as an act of worship ('ibadah)." (P3)

Here, da'wah serves not just as a channel for religious instruction but also as a space where congregants develop eco-spiritual awareness. P3 illustrates this through verse-by-verse reflection. When the preacher links environmental care to faith and worship, congregants feel compelled to act, knowing these deeds carry spiritual reward (pahala). This sense of reward actively motivates them to look after their surroundings, as P6, a 49-year-old congregant, shared.

"I have been going to pengajian at this musalla for a long time. Once a month, we read verses about the importance of cleanliness. The ustadhah reminds us not to litter because cleanliness is part of faith. She even mentioned that clearing trash from the road earns us rewards. That is something I try to put into practice." (P6)

The eco-da'wah led by these female preachers does not stop at expanding congregants' knowledge; it translates directly into daily ecological habits. Congregants no longer view cleanliness simply as an environmental duty, but as a religious act that earns divine reward. This approach shows that environmental consciousness—as highlighted by Begum (2021) and Koehrsen (2021)—can take root

by internalizing spiritual values that link humanity, nature, and God within a moral and religious framework. When female preachers routinely teach Quranic verses on the environment and translate them into tangible actions, they demonstrate what Mahmood (2005) terms pious agency: an agency that works through existing norms rather than against them.

A similar sentiment was expressed by P7, a 52-year-old homemaker from another group. She finds her regular *pengajian* deeply rewarding because it moves beyond conventional fiqh rulings on halal and haram to address a Muslim's duty toward the environment:

"I am grateful I can still attend this pengajian. I learn what is permissible and what is forbidden, but I am especially glad when the ustadhah talks about our responsibility to protect the environment. That rarely comes up in regular study groups, so it gives me a fresh perspective and makes me more mindful of caring for our surroundings." (P7)

Broadening da'wah topics from traditional normative rules to environmental issues offers fresh insights for congregants. This shift not only widens their perspective but also nurtures a genuine commitment to environmental care. Such ecological awareness takes firmer root when framed through religious messages. P4 takes a similar approach in her preaching, emphasizing that environmental stewardship is a shared responsibility.

"I always tell the congregation that caring for the environment is everyone's duty. Whatever your job—whether you are a doctor, technician, carpenter, furniture maker, washer, or presser—we all share the responsibility to look after the earth for the common good. We cannot go against God's rules." (P4)

By rooting their religious communication in Islamic values, female preachers frame environmental preservation as a collective, universal obligation. P4 dismantles social boundaries by linking this duty directly to divine command, giving environmental stewardship stronger moral legitimacy. These teachings move beyond simple civic advice; they become acts of devotion to God. In this way, eco-da'wah operates within a framework in which nature is seen not merely as a physical resource but as an essential part of a person's spiritual relationship with the Divine. Caring for the environment thus becomes both a form of worship and an everyday expression of Muslim piety.

Female preachers also encourage women to start small within their own households. As P5 noted, she focuses on practical steps like keeping the home clean, cutting down on plastic, sorting waste, and planting trees around the yard:

"When I teach the women to cut down on plastic and sort their waste, I am not just teaching them about the environment. I am teaching them that this is part of their duty as Muslims." (P5)

Infusing daily green habits—such as reducing plastic use and sorting trash—with religious meaning is a deliberate pedagogical strategy to bridge environmental knowledge with Islamic values. It shows how da'wah translates ecological concern into the language of religious duty. Through this work, female preachers actively produce Islamic knowledge that responds to pressing environmental concerns. Rather than remaining passive, they engage meaningfully through eco-da'wah, successfully negotiating their public roles within a society closely guided by Sharia and traditional gender norms. These findings offer an alternative to Roviana's (2016) view of Acehnese women as overly constrained by Sharia, while expanding on Kloos (2014, 2016), who showed how female religious figures in Aceh have historically navigated public religious spaces dominated by male authority.

Taken together, framing environmental issues through religious values across domestic settings, small halaqah, educational spaces, and women's prayer circles highlights how female preachers foster everyday piety. Keeping a clean home, cutting back on plastic, and sorting garbage are practiced not just for hygiene, but as reward-bearing deeds woven into daily life. These findings align

with Haq et al. (2020), who emphasize women's central role in shaping family and community eco-cultures. They also enrich Mahmood's (2005) concept of pious agency by showing that, for Acehese women, piety involves not only personal ethical cultivation but also the active generation of ecological knowledge through community study groups.

3.3. Adapting Da'wah within Sharia-Regulated Public Spaces

Because their environmental preaching takes place in public spaces shaped by Sharia norms, female preachers use adaptation as a deliberate strategy. This allows them to respect local social codes while still getting their ecological message across. Their approach includes choosing bounded physical spaces, using digital media, and strengthening women's community networks. P3 exemplifies this by deliberately choosing smaller, semi-private venues for her preaching. Her sessions are often held in private homes, on mosque verandas, or within majelis taklim groups. On one Saturday afternoon following Zuhur prayer, on a veranda of the Langsa Grand Mosque partitioned by a simple green curtain, P3 addressed a gathering of women. She opened her talk by citing Surah Ar-Rum, verse 41, to explain human-induced environmental damage and to link it to women's vital role in conservation. Afterward, P3 explained why she deliberately chooses bounded venues.

"To make sure my da'wah can continue smoothly without crossing social boundaries, I choose to speak to specific, familiar groups. I set up a women's taklim board at the village meunasah and also run focused study sessions for female university students on campus." (P3)



Figure 3. A Female Preacher Delivering Da'wah on the Veranda of the Grand Mosque, Langsa

Choosing bounded spaces does not stem from feelings of marginalization or restraint. Instead, it reflects an intentional awareness of local modesty norms regarding women in public. Within religious settings guided by Sharia, spaces like the musalla, private homes, and majelis taklim offer a comfortable, welcoming environment where female preachers can connect closely with their listeners. As P3 noted, this choice ensures her preaching remains sustainable while upholding propriety. Choosing semi-private spaces is part of an active strategy: preachers make the most of local social settings to build credibility and foster open, meaningful religious connections with their community.

P2 took a different approach to navigating space by turning to digital media alongside gatherings at the musalla, mosque, and majelis taklim.

"Seeing that many women in Langsa still seek religious knowledge, I chose a medium that feels comfortable and fits our local customs in Aceh. That is why I hold online sessions through Zoom and WhatsApp groups." (P2)

Using digital media is an adaptive strategy that aligns preaching activities with community

learning needs and Acehese social norms. Choosing Zoom and WhatsApp is not just a practical workaround; it is an intentional way to broaden reach while ensuring participants feel comfortable and respected. P2's experience reflects how online platforms help meet women's desire for religious learning. This pattern is common among female preachers across Aceh, who use digital tools to carve out a broader public voice within gender-conscious, Sharia-guided settings (Lestari, 2022; Maulina, Abdullah, Sushartami, & Rahmawati, 2025, 2026; Sari, Sikumbang, & Rubino, 2025).

Digital platforms offer an alternative space where women can remain actively involved in preaching without facing the pressures of wider, open public arenas (Hsb, Gunawan, Kartika, & Anggraeni, 2025). In Langsa, female preachers use WhatsApp, Zoom, and Facebook to connect with diverse groups of women. These findings build on Muslem (2021), who noted that digital tools help preachers reach wider audiences, making media literacy increasingly essential for religious educators today.

Overall, the way female preachers adapt their communication is a thoughtful response to social and religious expectations shaped by Sharia rules and gender norms. Rather than acting as a barrier, this environment has become a dynamic space where women creatively exercise their agency through flexible, adaptive roles. This embodies what Mahmood (2005) describes as pious agency—an agency realized within social expectations rather than in opposition to them.

4. CONCLUSION

Female preachers apply three main approaches to environmental da'wah: shifting from purely oral lectures (*bil lisan*) to action-oriented practice (*bil hal*), framing ecological concerns through religious values, and adopting flexible preaching methods. Together, these strategies mark a move from rigid, normative instruction toward more contextual and participatory engagement. Through these three paths, female preachers steadily nurture ecological awareness among their congregants. Da'wah is no longer seen simply as delivering sermons, but as a living social practice that weaves together Islamic spirituality, community empowerment, and environmental action.

These findings build on the work of Nasr (1968), Koehrsen (2021), and Gade (2019), who highlight the links among the spiritual, ethical, and practical dimensions of eco-Islam. Where Nasr highlights the spiritual foundation of environmental care, Foltz frames it as an Islamic ethical responsibility, and Gade shows how religious practices translate into environmental protection. At the same time, this study enriches Mahmood's (2005) framework by showing that female preachers' action-based *da'wah bil hal* goes beyond personal piety and ethical self-discipline—it serves as a creative way to generate and share knowledge within contemporary Acehese Muslim communities.

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses on five female preachers in Langsa City; thus, the findings cannot be generalized across the whole of Aceh, with its varied sociocultural settings. Second, data collection took place during a specific timeframe (2023), which does not capture longer-term shifts in preaching strategies. Future research should expand to more field sites, engage participants from broader backgrounds, and use longitudinal approaches to track how environmental da'wah develops over time.

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