



## **Myths and Fortification of Environmental Sustainability in the Tradition of the Cerekang Indigenous Peoples**

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**Abstract:** The Cerekang Indigenous People have a completely modern day-to-day life. However, their belief in myths has proven to be a fortification of environmental sustainability. Myths gives a clear boundaries for every member of the community and the outsiders about what is allowed and what is forbidden. Using a descriptive qualitative method with a participatory approach, this research will answer two things: First, how do the myths in the Cerekang Indigenous people work to preserve the forest? Second, how does this myth survive the changing times? This study states that myths can be used to solve environmental problems in this modern era, because environmental problems are not only physical problems but also social and cultural problems. Myths work in the form of mystical narratives that are believed by local communities to protect forest areas from internal and external disturbances, which if violated will have unimaginable consequences. This myth is still alive and is believed from generation to generation as something sacred in society. Although it must be acknowledged that this cultural and ecological heritage remains vulnerable to social change in the future.

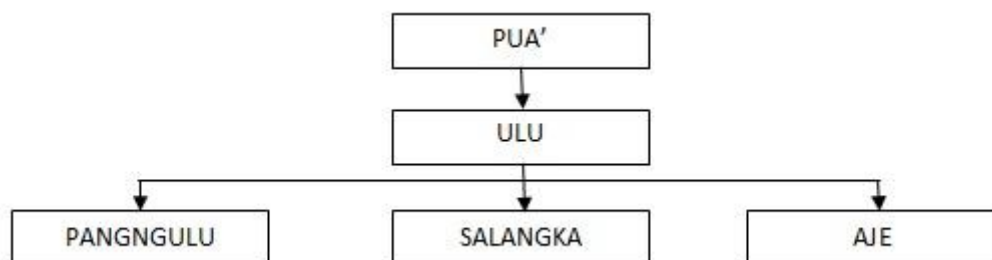
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### **1. Introduction**

Administratively, the Cerekang Indigenous Peoples are located in Manurung Village, Maili District, East Luwu Regency, province of south sulawesi, indonesia. This area is 550 Km from Makassar city which can be reached by road for 9 hours. The present location of Manurung Village was established in the 1930s when the Dutch colonial government built a highway through Luwu between Palopo and Malili. Prior to the 1930s the Manurung village was located further downstream of the cerekang river, in the vicinity of the Poloe site with evidence of seventeenth to nineteenth century settlement (Bulbeck and Caldwell 2000:41). Meanwhile, the Cerekang sacred sites are located on the left and right sides of the axis road and also on the left and right sides of the Cerekang river. The dominant professions of the Cerekang indigenous people today are fishing and farmers. At first glance, there is no difference between the lifestyle of the Cerekang Indigenous people and other village communities. The Cerekang Indigenous People have a completely modern day to day life like other communities, they hang out

with outsiders, spending amount of time in front of the television, youtube, or social media, also sending their children to college. But the big difference will be seen if we look at the environment, the Cerekang Indigenous people have a forests that are maintained to this day. There is an amazing awareness of environmental ethics. Great stories about sacred places and the land of the gods are always imprinted in everyday life. Cerekang's special place in the memory of the early days of the Luwu Kingdom is a reinforcer of mystical myths in the oral tradition of the community. This great story of the past is continuously told as a bedtime tale for the younger generation of Cerekang until now.

Humans are a creatures who like to tell stories and build their lives based on the stories they believe in (Sobur, 2014). Through stories, we produce an orderliness from a seemingly chaotic world. From the story, we are tying a meaning to the environment around us. How great the influence of a stories on our thoughts, feelings, and behavior that we are willing to go to war with anyone who tells a story we don't accept. Likewise with the Cerekang indigenous people, they pass down stories from generation to generation about the importance of preserving the environment. The Cerekang Indigenous People consider the forest as an inseparable part of survival. Myths in folklore build a strong awareness of the importance of the environment (Alexander, Cangara, 2018), that destroying forests will lead to a disaster. This awareness continues to be maintained through mystical stories. Creswell referred to this as *committee*, a group of people who build a culture, values, beliefs, and assumptions together (Creswell, John W, 1997). Groups like this in the Cerekang Indigenous People are called indigenous stakeholders whose function is to maintain ancestral messages about the importance of preserving forests, as shown in the following picture:



**Figure 1.** Structure of the Cerekang Traditional Stakeholders

*Pua* is the highest authority in the customary system of the Cerekang Indigenous Peoples, *Pua* consists of a man and a woman (not a married couple) who are selected based on an idea in the form of a dream. *Pua* will act to lead the entire traditional procession that will be held. Now that *Pua* has died, the position has been vacant for approximately 20 years, and so far no local residents have claimed to have received a dream as the successor to leadership. Not ordinary people is gifted with a dream, and if anyone dares to lie claiming that he or she have received a dream, he or she will be cursed, said Irwan Jafar, Head of Manurung Village. It is believed that *Pua* is chosen by the gods (Iriani, 2019), in fact, *Pua* Cerekang who rarely leaves the house is considered structurally equal to *Datu Luwu*. There is a proverb, both in Cerekang and in Palopo,

that: When Datu Luwu enters Cerekang he is not Datu anymore. It means, when he enters Cerekang he enters the territory of the rulers with the same status as him (David Bulbeck, 2013).

Indigenous stakeholders in the Cerekang Indigenous People are the first parties to continuously preserve the continuity of the myth, so that *Empire of Signs* created. A mystical system like this successfully fulfills its function and that way, we can see how a mystical system can function as a *sign-vehicle* for public trust. Myths are linking and repeating the stories by transforming the various elements that make up the story superficially. In the Cerekang Indigenous Peoples, sacred myths of various historical sites play an important role in shaping the narratives and practices of the daily life. Nine sites in the table below (figure 2) are “restricted areas” referred as hidden areas (David Bulbeck, Ian Caldwell, 2000). Cerekang is considered to be the first location where the legend of Sawerigading and his ancestors set foot on Earth (Ian Caldwell, 1999). This sacred area is continuously narrated related to this legendary figures who firmly bind the lives of local people.

| Myth Object | Function/Meaning   |
|-------------|--|
| Pensimoni   | <i>Ponsemoni</i> is a hilly forest covering an area of 500 hectares which is very important for the Cerekang Indigenous People who are on the side of Manurung Village, East Luwu Regency. This forest cannot be accessed without the permission of the Indigenous stakeholders accompanied by certain rituals. Pensimoni is believed to be the place where Batara Guru descended, the first human in the book <i>I La Galigo</i> (David Bulbeck, 2013). |
| Ujung Tanae | An area at the upstream of the Cerekang river as a ritual place related to natural disasters, especially floods (Maria, Hadijah Azis K, Taskur, 2020). Ecologically this site functions as a water absorption area or a shore to prevent the overflow water into the residents villages (Usman interview, 2021).   |
| Tomba       | A stretch of rice fields that is often used as a ritual place related to agriculture or plantations. It is said that it was on this site that the goddess of rice Sangiang Seri was the granddaughter of Batara Guru turned into a rice plant where she was buried after her death seven days after she was born (David Bulbeck, 2013).  |
| Kasoso      | An old burial area that became a place of traditional rituals to increase knowledge and intelligence   |
| Birue       | The Birue site is on the western bend of the Cerekang river. This place is a forest area along the Cerekang river which is often a ritual place to seek for a courage. It is said that in this place the war leader Sawerigading is buried (David Bulbeck, 2013). But researchers also heard another version of this site as an entrance to the underworld.  |
| Mangkulili  | A hilly area surrounded by ponds and near by this area is the old village of Mangkulili, which is believed by local people to be the place where the Wallenrang tree grows, a tree that Sawerigading used to make his boats.   |

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| Lengkong               | A location at the mouth of the Cerekang river which is surrounded by palm and mangrove forests. This place is a place where people often hold seafood rituals.   |
| Annungnge              | Annungnge is a sago swamp and buffer zone near the eastern bank of the Cerekang River just south of the Palopo-Malili highway. For the Cerekang indigenous people, Annungnge is known as the first garden, where Luwu peoples two staple food crops were first planted, which is rice and sago. Currently, all garden planting activities stop there, and now planting in any form is prohibited. The Annungnge site is currently only used as a place for rituals related to rice fields (David Bulbeck, 2013). |
| Aggattung'ngeng Ance'e | A ritual location asks for permission before performing a traditional ritual event at Lengkong.  |

**Figure 2** : List of sacred areas of the Cerekang Indigenous People

Cerekang's reputation as the abode of the gods and Sawerigading performing his legendary acts extends not only in Luwu but also to the entire Bugis lands of South Sulawesi (Andaya 1981:17). In fact, the heritage significance of the Cerekang sacred places has been recognized by the historical conservation authority of South Sulawesi, thus the South Sulawesi Historical and Archaeological Heritage Sanctuary, has appointed one of a Cerekang resident to act as the official custodian of these places (David Bulbeck, 2013). But what's interesting here is that there are no buildings, artifacts, or ancient texts that are preserved, but only sacred sites like a picture above. The detailed claim on this was first introduced from the perspective of western scholars is only that of that abundant oral tradition (DF Van Braam Morris, 1889). One thing that certain is that there is a folklore, usually ancient story that deals with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serves as a fundamental type in the technique of telling a myth.

## 2. Myths and a fortification of Environmental Sustainability

There are so many myths in a traditional communities in Indonesia that are related to the environmental management. People views that related to the environment are usually related to the believed myths by the community which are followed by certain rituals. This will lead to specific behaviors related to environmental wisdom and the future existence of an area. This study states that myths can be used to solve environmental problems in today's modern era, how myths are become the cornerstone for developing ethics towards the environment, because environmental problems are not merely physical problems but also social and cultural issues. The social approach used in this research makes an in-depth interpretation and analysis of various myths and their ethical functions in each different context of traditional society. It must be understood that the myth here is diverse from various interpretations in other areas. Myth is not a synonym for *untrue*, *fake*, or *illusion*, but rather the way an object is narrated so that it gains trust and structures peoples behavior (Tony Thwaites, Lloyd

Davis, Warwick Muler, 2002). Or how a sign lives and works in society (Cobley & Jansz, 1999)

Myth is a type of speech, said Roland Barthes. Barthes asserts that the discussion of myths is not a random conversation. The object of myth according to its substance is a misleading thing, because myth is a speech, everything can become a myth as long as it is conveyed through discourse. Myth is not defined by the object of the message but by the way that message is expressed (Barthes, 2017). Myths as the cornerstone for the development of environmental ethics are not only found in Indonesia, but also in various parts of the world, even since 1997 this topic has become the main discussion at UNESCO in a workshop themed *The Importance of Sacred Natural Sites for Biodiversity Conservation*. Not only that, even UNESCO has created a program *Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) Projects* in various countries (Sartini, Effendhy, 2012)

For the Cerekang Indigenous Peoples, *Pensimoni* is a very important stretch of forest. *Pensimoni* is not just about a forest with millions of large logs in it, but about the values that provide ecological, social, and cultural ties to communities around the forest (Acosta & Curt, 2019; Matualage, et al., 2019). Until now, the sustainability of *Pensimoni* is always maintained even though the surrounding forest has been looted and converted into plantation land. Of all the sacred sites that exist, *Pensimoni* is the the greatest mystical object of the Cerekang Indigenous Peoples and is believed to have played an important role in Luwu's early history, and what that role was, is uncertain due to the extreme sacredness surrounding the hill. This situation is unfortunate from a research point of view (David Bulbeck, 2013). Of the five Cerekang people who were interviewed separately in this study, the results were the same, they firmly refused to tell further about their sacred site. For example, why *Pensimoni* should not be entered, even for just to look around. "It is a forbidden area" was the answer without any further explanation. Once, the youth of Cerekang village collaborated with the NGO Wallacea Palopo to map the forest, they were only allowed to walk around *Pensimoni* from the outer line of the sacred area. However, it is vaguely seen that there are two patterns used by the Cerekang Indigenous people to preserve the forest, that is traditional way and a modern way.

### **2.1 Traditional Protection**

*'Jagai pangala'mu, na saba ke mujamai pangala'mu, makkasolang ri banuammu'* ( Take care of your forest, because if you touch your forest, it will destroy your house too ), said the head of the Cerekang traditional institution, Usman, saying one of the ancestral messages about the importance of protecting forest areas. It is unknown who and when the word was first discovered, but with full confidence Usman believed the words was very strong and still relevant to the conditions of the times. *In all my life in Cerekang, I have never seen a river with cloudy water, let alone a flood, never before,*" (Usman, 2021). That is how Usman gave reinforcement to the ancestral message above. The myth of all the sacred sites in the area of the Cerekang Indigenous people leaves all the complexities of how humans maintain their environment in a sustainable manner. Myth gives simple action and removes all dialectics, organizes and manages all interests into common conventions among community members. With myth people do not have

a relationship based on truth but on its use (Bartes, 2007). The sacred myth that is very strong in the sacred Cerekang site actually serves to protect the site from exploitation. The Cerekang Indigenous People, the majority of whom work as capture fishermen, even swear that they will never exploit sacred sites even though they have to live in poverty.;*We Cerekang people cant be rich, but we also make sure that no Cerekang people will go hungry* (Usman, 2021).

One of the legendary stories that is often repeated by the people of Tana Luwu is when Sawerigading cut down a giant tree *walenrenge* for making a boat to sail to pick up his future wife, We Cudai in China. Tree *Walenrenge* it collapsed causing ecological chaos: split the land and causing a flood. The tree is believed to grow in the center of the ground (*Positana*) around Cerekang (David Bulbeck, 2013). Factual Evidence of this *Walenrenge tree* mythological story is referred to *Bulu Poloe'* (broken mountain) on the north side of Malili due to this giant tree falling. However, the Cerekang people dont know or recognize this *Walenrenge* tree anymore. Myth locks itself in, making the story untraceable, remaining obscure from the evidence. Ancient narratives like this successfully fulfill their function, spread mystery, satisfy religious needs, moral desires, social obedience, and provide warnings and consequences that may arise from each violation (Mircea Eliade, 2011).

## **2.2 Modern Protection**

Because there are many outsiders who want to have contact with the Cerekang Indigenous People, both those who only want to research and those who intend to plunder the area *Pensimoni* , in 2015 the local community formed an indigenous institution, an institution that mostly consists of youths who are equipped with regional monitoring and mapping skills. There are two functions of this traditional institution, *First* , create a monitoring schedule for all sacred sites. Usually supervision is carried out twice a month. *Second* , as a mouthpiece between the traditional stakeholders and the outsiders. This customary institution prevents outsiders from directly accessing all sacred sites and Pua'. For example, researchers cannot directly conduct interviews with Pua before going through the interrogative process of this Customary Institution. Once a private TV station with the Mancing Mania program wanted to fish in Lengkong, a sacred area at the mouth of the Cerekang river, the indigenous institution gave permission but with strict supervision, telling in detail which points were allowed and not allowed to be fished. In addition, the Cerekang Customary Institution is also active in regional and national forums discussing a traditional forests, so that in 2019 they received recognition from the East Luwu regional government through the Regents Decree on Recognition and Protection of Local Wisdom of the To Cerekang Indigenous Law Community (East Luwu Regional Government 2019). The Manurung village government also budgeted village funds to help protect customary forests by installing information boards around customary forests. It aims to provide information to outsiders about prohibited boundaries. The use of modern methods to protect the sacred sites of the Cerekang Indigenous people indicates that myths are slowly losing their magic. In the future, this belief may be eroded by the complexity of changes within the Cerekang Indigenous people, and outsiders.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The most difficult part of this research is that the Cerekang Indigenous Peoples lack of transparency in providing information to outsiders, including researchers. They believe there are things that they should not reveal, and that is non-negotiable. There have been many researchers who came before and were constrained by this problem. According to them, researchers questions always went too deep and can get into the core of the matter, and that is unacceptable. Too many things that are difficult to validate because of the extreme sacredness that surrounds the sacred site. This situation is unfortunate from a research point of view. Even though the spiritual leader of Cerekang died 20 years ago, respect for all sacred sites remains as strict as ever. The advantage of this situation is that the sacred site in Cerekang is maintained. Although it must be acknowledged that this cultural and ecological heritage remains vulnerable to social change in the future.

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### 5. Conflicts of Interest

The researchers involved are confirmed to have no conflict of interest.

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