



ADDIN

<https://journal.iainkudus.ac.id/index.php/Addin>

ISSN: 0854-0594; E-ISSN: 2476-9479

Volume 20, Number 2, December 2026: 389-415

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21043/addin.v20i2.38784>

Religious Language as Ecological Discourse: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Ecotheological Narratives in Indonesian Islamic Boarding Schools

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Abstract

This study examines how three religious leaders, *kyai* (Islamic religious figures) and *ustadz* (Islamic teachers), in Indonesian *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) linguistically construct ecotheological narratives that frame environmental care as a religious duty rather than a civic option. Using ecolinguistics and critical discourse analysis, it analyzes semi-structured interview transcripts coded for lexical choice, metaphor, legitimation strategy, intertextuality, moral framing, and identity

construction. All three informants legitimize ecological stewardship through scriptural authorization, mythopoetic narrative, and rationalization, reframing it as *ibadah ghairu mahdhah* (non-ritual worship). They converge on a shared *khalifah*-centered (vicegerency) lexicon while diverging in secular vocabularies—sustainability, organic economy, media literacy—each weaving into that lexicon through distinct intertextual chains. The study argues that Islamic ecotheology in these *pesantren* functions not only as doctrine but as a discourse genre with recognizable linguistic signatures, in which metaphor and narrative carry as much persuasive weight as scriptural citation.

Keywords: ecotheology, ecolinguistics, critical discourse analysis, *pesantren*, religious legitimation.

A. Introduction

Environmental degradation in Indonesia is rarely discussed purely as a technical or policy failure; increasingly, it is narrated as a moral and spiritual crisis, and *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school), the country's oldest and most socially embedded institutions of Islamic learning, have become unlikely but consequential sites where that narration is produced.¹ *Kyai* (Islamic religious figures) and *ustadz* (Islamic teachers) do not merely transmit doctrine; they actively translate a centuries-old textual tradition, built on *tafsir* (exegesis), *hadith*, and *kitab kuning* (Islamic classic texts), into a register capable of addressing waste management, deforestation, and organic agriculture. This translation work is fundamentally a linguistic achievement,

¹Nurul Ilmiyah Al Makrufah and Sirojuddin Abror, "Eco-Pesantren Program Shaping Islamic Character and Environmental Awareness," *Indonesian Journal of Innovation Studies* 27, no. 1 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.21070/ijins.v27i1.1889>.

not only a doctrinal one, and it is this linguistic dimension — the choice of words, the metaphors reached for, the authorities invoked, the texts stitched together, the moral frames deployed, and the identities claimed — that the present study foregrounds.

Most existing scholarship on *eco-pesantren* approaches the topic through environmental education, institutional program design, or policy implementation, leaving the language through which religious authorities build ecological meaning comparatively unexamined.² Even recent ecolinguistic work on Indonesian religious media — a corpus-based study of how a major Islamic organization's online outlet frames environmental issues lexically, for instance — has begun to map this territory for written religious media, but oral, face-to-face religious authority remains largely untouched by this kind of close linguistic scrutiny.³ That gap matters, because *pesantren* discourse is not simply theology applied to an environmental problem; it is produced, utterance by utterance, through specific rhetorical choices that a purely doctrinal or policy-oriented reading cannot make visible.

The specific object of analysis is the discourse of three religious authorities: ZA from Pondok Pesantren Al Hidayah in Plumbon; AS, *pesantren* leader of Pondok Pesantren Al Fadhlul in Tombo, Bandar, Batang Regency; and *ustadzah* (female Islamic teacher) AR, a teacher at Pondok Pesantren Rubat Kembanglangit in Blado, Batang Regency. Each leads a

²Fitriatul Masitoh and Mufti Rasyid, "Eco-Education in Pesantren: Analyzing Green Discourses through Ecolinguistic Approach," *At-Turats* 15, no. 2 (2021): 81–88, <https://doi.org/10.24260/at-turats.v15i2.2158>.

³Muhamad Saiful Mukminin, "Quantifying Environment in NU Online Media: Corpus-Based Ecolinguistic Discourse Analysis Perspective," *NAHNU: Journal of Nahdlatul Ulama and Contemporary Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2025): 537–554.

pesantren with a distinct ecological profile — one oriented toward organic coffee cultivation and water-source conservation, one toward waste segregation and tree-planting partnerships with civil-society organizations, and one toward a fully integrated organic farming and animal-husbandry curriculum — yet all three converge on a shared theological vocabulary even as their institutional practices diverge. This convergence-in-divergence is precisely what a discourse-analytic lens can make visible in ways that a purely doctrinal or policy-oriented reading cannot.

The article asks three interrelated questions. First, what lexical, metaphorical, and rhetorical resources do these religious authorities draw upon to construct environmental care as a religious rather than merely civic concern? Second, through which legitimation strategies and intertextual chains is this construction accomplished — that is, whose authority is invoked, and which texts, classical and contemporary, are woven together? Third, how does this ecotheological discourse simultaneously construct the speaker's own identity as a religious authority and model a prospective identity for the *santri* (*pesantren*'s students) as future *agen pelestari lingkungan* (agents of environmental preservation) in the wider society? Answering these questions contributes to a still-thin body of sociolinguistic scholarship on Indonesian eco-*pesantren*, which has so far been dominated by environmental-education and policy studies rather than close linguistic analysis of the discourse itself.⁴

⁴Fitriatul Masitoh and Mufti Rasyid, "Eco-Education in Pesantren: Analyzing Green Discourses through Ecolinguistic Approach," *At-Turats* 15, no. 2 (2021): 81–88, <https://doi.org/10.24260/at-turats.v15i2.2158>.

B. Theoretical Framework: Ecotheology and Ecolinguistic Discourse Analysis

Two bodies of theory frame the analysis. The first is Islamic ecotheology, understood not as a single doctrine but as a family of interpretive moves that read *khilafah* (vicegerency), *amanah* (trust), *mizan* (balance), and *Maqashid al-Shari'ah* (the objectives of Islamic law) as environmental principles.⁵ Recent scholarship has extended this reading to encompass *hifz al-bi'ah* (protection of environment) as a candidate of sixth objective alongside the classical five, and has traced how *khalifah* (vicegerent), *mizan* (balance), and *maslahah* (social benefit) operate together as a normative triad capable of responding to the ecological crisis.⁶ In the Indonesian context specifically, ecotheology has been documented as a discursive resource that Muslim religious actors deploy in response to the climate crisis, often blending scriptural exegesis with contemporary scientific vocabulary.⁷ This ecotheological literature supplies the article's substantive vocabulary — what the informants are, in effect, arguing for — but it does not by itself explain how that argument is linguistically built. For that, the article turns to ecolinguistics and critical discourse analysis (CDA).

⁵Aditya Rakhmat, "Islamic Ecotheology: Understanding the Concept of Khalifah and the Ethical Responsibility of the Environment," *Academic Journal of Islamic Principles and Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2022): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.22515/ajipp.v3i1.5104>.

⁶Muhammad Bahrul Rahmat, Masruchin, and Fauzan, "The Idea of Islamic Ecotheology in Responding to the Global Environmental Crisis: An Analysis of the Concepts of Khalifah, Mizan, and Maslahah," *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Theology and Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2025): 93–110, <https://doi.org/10.24042/ijitp.v7i1.27596>.

⁷Muhammad Hidayat, "Islamic Eco-Theology: Religious Narratives in the Climate Crisis in Indonesia," *Bulletin of Indonesian Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2023): 123–140, <https://journal.kurasinstitute.com/index.php/biis/article/download/678/543>.

Ecolinguistics, as developed by Stibbe, treats discourse as carrying implicit "stories we live by": cognitive structures — including framings, metaphors, evaluations, and identities — that predispose audiences toward particular ecological behaviors, and it asks the analyst to judge such stories against an explicit ecological philosophy rather than to describe them neutrally.⁸ Applied to Indonesian *pesantren*, ecolinguistic analysis has already shown that green discourse operates across ideological, social, and biological dimensions simultaneously, so that a change in the language used about nature is treated as evidence of a change in ecological orientation itself.⁹ The present study borrows this premise but narrows the analytic lens to six categories that are especially productive for elite religious discourse: lexical choice, metaphor, legitimation, intertextuality, moral framing, and identity construction.

Lexical choice and metaphor are treated jointly through the lens of critical metaphor analysis, which holds that recurring figurative vocabulary — trees that "pray," fish that "wait" for knowledge, plants turning "bitter" — is never merely decorative but encodes an implicit moral and cognitive model of the relationship being described.¹⁰ Legitimation is analyzed through van Leeuwen's four-part typology — authorization (appeal to tradition, law, or vested authority), moral evaluation, rationalization, and *mythopoesis* (legitimation through narratives whose outcomes reward or punish) — which has proven directly transferable to religious discourse because scripture,

⁸Arran Stibbe, *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

⁹Fitriatul Masitoh and Mufti Rasyid, "Eco-Education in Pesantren," 84–86.

¹⁰Jonathan Charteris-Black, *Corpus Approaches to Critical Metaphor Analysis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230000612>.

exemplary narrative, and moral evaluation are its native currency.¹¹ Intertextuality follows Fairclough's understanding of texts as inherently composed of traces of other texts and voices, such that a single utterance by a *kyai* may simultaneously echo Qur'anic verse, hadith, *kitab kuning* (Islamic classic texts) commentary, and secular sustainability discourse without any of these sources being flagged as separate.¹² Moral framing draws on the broader CDA literature on religious oratory, which shows how preachers routinely convert every day or civic problems into matters of obedience, gratitude, or *akhlak* (ethics).¹³ Finally, identity construction follows Bucholtz and Hall's sociocultural-linguistic model, in which identity is not a fixed attribute but an emergent, relational effect of discursive positioning — achieved partly through adequation (claiming likeness to a valued category, such as global sustainability actors) and partly through distinction (marking difference from a rejected category, such as purely secular environmentalism).¹⁴ Together, these tools allow the ecotheological content documented in the Islamic studies literature to be examined as a linguistic accomplishment rather than assumed as a doctrinal given.

¹¹Theo van Leeuwen, "Legitimation in Discourse and Communication," *Discourse & Communication* 1, no. 1 (2007): 91–112, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481307071986>.

¹²Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 101–136.

¹³John Neil Solas and Jerlyn Balones, "Magnifying Religious Ideologies: A Critical Discourse Analysis on Christian Sermons," *Psychology and Education: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 42, no. 8 (2025): 1089–1105, <https://doi.org/10.70838/pemj.420802>.

¹⁴Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, "Identity and Interaction: A Sociocultural Linguistic Approach," *Discourse Studies* 7, no. 4–5 (2005): 585–614, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445605054407>.

C. Method

This study adopts a qualitative, discourse-analytic design situated at the intersection of sociolinguistics and religious studies. Data consist of semi-structured interview transcripts with three informants, purposively selected as religious authorities directly responsible for articulating and modeling environmental values within their respective *pesantren*: ZA (a teacher, Pondok Pesantren Al Hidayah, Plumbon, teaching since 2018); AS (a leader, Pondok Pesantren Al Fadhlu, Tombo, Bandar, Batang Regency); and AR (a teacher/*ustadzah*, Pondok Pesantren Rubat Kembanglangit, Blado, Batang Regency). It should be noted that the two *kyai* hold senior positions as *pesantren* leaders with recognized authority in fatwa and institutional leadership, whereas *ustadzah* AR serves as a teacher; this difference in institutional standing is treated below as a possible contributing factor to the more juristic register of the two *kyai* versus the more programmatic register of *ustadzah* AR, rather than as a confound to be controlled away. The interviews followed a common protocol spanning cognitive (knowledge of ecotheology, scriptural grounding, curricular integration), affective (attitudes toward environmental problems, the perceived importance of *pesantren* cleanliness), and psychomotor (concrete programs, rules, and role-modeling) domains, which allowed comparable discursive material to be elicited across the three sites despite their differing ecological programs.

The study's scope is important to state precisely. The corpus analyzed here is elite religious discourse—the language of *pesantren* leader and *pengajar* (teacher)—rather than a full triangulation of *pesantren* ecological culture. The study does not include *santri* focus-group data or ethnographic observation of *pengajian* (Islamic study

session), ceremonial practice, or daily routine, and it therefore makes no claim about whether or how *santri* reproduce, resist, or reinterpret the discourse analyzed. This is a deliberate delimitation rather than an oversight, and it is revisited explicitly in the concluding section.

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the three transcripts were read holistically to identify recurring thematic domains (scriptural grounding, *khalifah*, cleanliness, curricular integration, exemplary conduct, program implementation). Second, each domain was re-read specifically for the six linguistic categories set out in Section 2—lexical choice, metaphor, legitimation strategy, intertextual reference, moral frame, and identity claim—marking instances and comparing them across the three informants. Third, convergent and divergent patterns were synthesized to produce the cross-case discussion in Section 5. Original Indonesian and Arabic terms are retained in italics where their semantic range is theologically or analytically significant, followed by a working English gloss; this is a standard convention in sociolinguistic work on religious register and is not intended to imply a single fixed translation.

C. Findings and Discussion

1. Lexical Choice: The Vocabulary of Stewardship

The three informants share a strikingly stable core lexicon despite never having been interviewed together: *khalifah* (vicegerent), *amanah* (trust), *hifzh al-bi'ah* (protection of environment), and *israf* (wasteful excess). ZA explicitly nominates *hifzh al-bi'ah* as deserving a place within *Maqashid al-Syariah* (objectives of Islamic law), the classical taxonomy of Islamic law's higher objectives — a

lexical move that does more work than it appears to, since inserting a modern environmental term into a centuries-old juridical category simultaneously legitimizes the term and expands the category.¹⁵

AS performs a comparable operation with the binary *ibadah mahdhah* / *ibadah ghairu mahdhah* (ritual worship versus non-ritual worship), placing environmental care firmly in the second category.¹⁶ This is a lexical choice with real doctrinal stakes. By naming environmental action as a kind of *ibadah* (worship) rather than *mu'amalah* (social transaction) or *akhlak* (ethics) alone, he raises its perceived spiritual weight closer to prayer or fasting, even while conceding it lacks their ritual form. *Ustadzah* AR, by contrast, reaches less for juristic terminology and more for the everyday moral vocabulary of *adab* (proper comportment) — "*adab kepada alam*" (comportment toward nature) — extending a term ordinarily reserved for human relationships (*adab* toward Allah, toward parents, toward teachers) into the non-human domain.¹⁷ Where ZA's lexicon is juridical and AS's is theological-devotional, AR's is ethical-relational; the shared destination — environmental care as religiously mandatory — is reached by three distinct lexical routes.

¹⁵ K.H. Zaimudin Ahya, interview by author, Pondok Pesantren Al Hidayah, Plumbon, 2026.

¹⁶ K.H. Abdus Syakur, interview by author, Pondok Pesantren Al Fadhlu, Tombo, Bandar, Batang Regency, March 27, 2026.

¹⁷ Aimatur Rohmat, interview by author, Pondok Pesantren Rubat Kembanglangit, Blado, Batang Regency, March 28, 2026.

2. Metaphor: Nature as Kin, Debtor, and Moral Witness

Metaphor is where the interviews are most linguistically vivid, and where the ecotheological argument becomes affectively rather than merely propositionally persuasive. ZA's most striking figure is drawn from *Bidayatul Hidayah*: scholars who study for Allah's sake are prayed for even by fish in the sea, because the fish "wait for the knowledge of the learned so that society becomes aware and does not destroy nature."¹⁸ This is a personification metaphor that assigns fish an almost pedagogical stake in human religious learning, collapsing the distance between the non-human and the human into a single circuit of mutual dependency and, notably, converting an aquatic creature into a kind of moral witness to human conduct.

AS's central metaphor works in the opposite direction, animating vegetation rather than fauna: a tree, once planted, " *seakan-akan mendoakan* " (seems to pray for) the person who planted it, because of the oxygen, shade, water retention, and slope stabilization it provides across time and to beneficiaries the planter will never meet.¹⁹ The metaphor reframes an ecological process — carbon fixation, root-mediated soil stability — as a devotional relationship of reciprocal blessing, which is precisely the kind of figurative work Charteris-Black identifies as carrying implicit moral evaluation: the tree is not simply useful, it is grateful, and gratitude is a morally

¹⁸ Zaimudin Ahya, interview by author.

¹⁹ Abdus Syakur, interview by author.

loaded frame that ordinary utility language would not carry.²⁰

The most narratively elaborate metaphor in the corpus, however, is AS's retelling of the story of Adam's sons. After the first murder on earth, he recounts, "nature seemed to feel the impact," and bitter or poisonous plants began to appear where previously all vegetation had been wholly beneficial to humankind.²¹ Whatever its exegetical provenance, this is functioning discursively as *mythopoesis* in van Leeuwen's precise sense — a narrative whose outcome (moral corruption produces ecological corruption) retroactively legitimizes the informant's present-day claim that human moral failure and environmental degradation are causally, not merely coincidentally, linked. This narrative is treated here strictly as the informant's oral, homiletic rhetoric, deployed to build moral awareness among *santri*, and not as an established or canonical *tafsir* claim.²² Ustadzah AR's figurative language is comparatively restrained, favoring the more juridical metaphor of nature as *amanah* (trust) that must be returned intact rather than consumed — a legal-financial image rather than a kinship or narrative one, consistent with her generally more programmatic, less homiletic register.²³

²⁰Charteris-Black, *Corpus Approaches to Critical Metaphor Analysis*, 21–29.

²¹ Abdus Syakur, interview by author.

²²Van Leeuwen, "Legitimation in Discourse and Communication," 105–106.

²³ Aimatur Rohmat, interview by author.

3. Legitimation Strategies: Scripture, Exemplarity, and Rationalization

All three informants rely heavily on authorization — van Leeuwen's category of legitimation through reference to tradition, text, and vested authority — but they authorize differently. ZA cites Qur'an 7:56 (against corruption on earth after its rectification) and Qur'an 13:11 (on self-transformation preceding societal change), supplemented by Fakhruddin Ar-Razi's tafsir, which he uses to widen "corruption on earth" beyond the physical to include social and moral corruption, and by a compiled hadith collection explicitly branded *40 green hadith* — itself a hybrid artifact that repackages classical hadith scholarship in the idiom of contemporary environmentalism.²⁴ AS authorizes through Qur'an 36:34–35 (on gardens and springs as divine provision) and a hadith enjoining mercy toward "those on earth," which he explicitly extends beyond human recipients to encompass plants and the broader environment — an interpretive move that is itself a small act of legitimation, since the semantic widening of *man fi al-ard* (those on earth) is not self-evident in the source text but is argued into place.²⁵ Ustadzah AR authorizes through Qur'an 2:195 (against self-destruction) and Qur'an 2:168 (on consuming what is lawful and good), building her entire organic-agriculture program on an expanded reading of *thayyib* (good, wholesome) as encompassing not only the product but its method of production.²⁶

²⁴ Zaimudin Ahya, interview by author.

²⁵ Abdus Syakur, interview by author.

²⁶ Aimatur Rohmat, interview by author.

Alongside authorization, all three deploy rationalization — legitimation through appeal to consequence and institutionalized social knowledge — most visibly when ZA glosses the classical Islamic principle of balanced resource use as "what is now known as sustainable development," explicitly borrowing a contemporary policy term to validate a claim he has just made on scriptural grounds, and thereby running authorization and rationalization in tandem rather than in sequence.²⁷ Exemplary or role-model authority, a subtype of authorization, is the legitimation strategy most consistently tied to identity work: both ZA and AR describe personally picking up litter they did not create,²⁸ and AS describes physically joining tree-planting and river-cleaning activities rather than merely directing them.²⁹ In each case, the legitimacy of the message is grounded not in argument alone but in the speaker's own embodied conduct — a pattern consistent with findings elsewhere that religious authority in *pesantren* discourse is asserted less through propositional claims than through demonstrated exemplarity.³⁰

4. Intertextuality: Weaving Scripture, *Kitab Kuning*, and Secular Ecology

The most theoretically interesting finding concerns intertextuality, understood as the way each utterance carries traces of other texts and discourses without

²⁷ Zaimudin Ahya, interview by author.

²⁸ Zaimudin Ahya, interview by author.

²⁹ Abdus Syakur, interview by author.

³⁰ Herdis Herdiansyah, Hadid Sukmana, and Ratih Lestarini, "Eco-Pesantren as A Basic Forming of Environmental Moral and Theology," *Kalam* 12, no. 2 (2018): 303–326, <https://doi.org/10.24042/klm.v12i2.2834>.

marking them as quotations.³¹ None of the three informants treats Islamic and secular-environmental discourse as separate registers to be kept apart; instead, each blends them into a single seamless argumentative chain. ZA moves within a single response from Qur'anic verse, to a named classical *tafsir* (exegesis), to a modern thematic hadith compilation, to the English loan-phrase "sustainable development," without any discursive signal that he has crossed from a fourteen-hundred-year-old genre into a late-twentieth-century policy vocabulary. AS's intertextual range is broader still, incorporating not only scripture and hadith but a contemporary Indonesian documentary film, *Pesta Babi*, which he and his *santri* watched together and then discussed — a striking instance of popular visual media being absorbed directly into the *pesantren's* ecotheological curriculum alongside *kitab kuning* (Islamic classic texts).³² AR's intertextual chain runs through Qur'anic dietary ethics into the technical vocabulary of organic agronomy, imported in part through a training partnership with alumni of Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB), whose expertise is folded into the *pesantren's* religious framing of *halalan thayyiban* (permissible and wholesome) rather than kept separate from it.³³

This intertextual weave draws on a stable canon of *kitab kuning* that recurs across the curriculum of Indonesian *pesantren* generally, including at the three institutions studied here. Al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* provides, through its treatment of *tazkiyat al-nafs*

³¹Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*, 117–123.

³² Abdus Syakur, interview by author.

³³ Aimatur Rohmat, interview by author.

(purification of the soul), a widely taught prohibition against greed and environmental destruction paired with an ethic of moderation and gratitude for one's surroundings.³⁴ Al-Bukhari's *Al-Adab al-Mufrad*, a hadith compilation taught throughout the *pesantren* system, is conventionally read for its tradition treating tree-planting as a form of *sedekah jariyah* (enduring charity) for as long as its fruit benefits any person or animal. This image that maps closely onto AS's account, discussed above, of a tree that "seems to pray for" the one who planted it.³⁵ Al-Nawawi's philosophically inflected *Sharh Sahih Muslim* is standardly invoked to elaborate hadith prohibiting damage to the ecosystem. At the same time, his more elementary *Al-Arba'in al-Nawawiyah* is conventionally linked to the fiqh maxim against causing *darar* (harm) or *mafsadah* (corruption) on earth — the same maxim implicit in ZA's citation, noted above, of Qur'an 7:56 against corruption after the earth's rectification.³⁶ Alongside this classical stratum, contemporary Nusantara scholarship functions as the standard bridge through which *pesantren* translate these texts into an explicitly ecological register: Ali Yafie's *Merintis Fiqih Lingkungan Hidup*, which proposed *hifz al-bi'ah* as a sixth *Maqashid al-Shari'ah*, and Agus Hermanto's *Fikih Ekologi* are both widely used as secondary references in Indonesian

³⁴ Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1998), esp. the Rub' al-Muhlikat on tazkiyat al-nafs.

³⁵ Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari, *Al-Adab al-Mufrad: The Book of Muslim Morals and Manners*, trans. Yusuf Talal DeLorenzo (Alexandria, VA: Al-Saadawi Publications, 1997).

³⁶ Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi, *Sharh Sahih Muslim* [al-Minhaj]; and idem, *Al-Arba'in al-Nawawiyah*, both widely printed and taught in Indonesia in bilingual Arabic-Indonesian *pesantren* editions.

Islamic environmental education.³⁷ Read against this backdrop, the three informants' shared *khalifah*-, *amanah*-, and *hifz al-bi'ah*-centered vocabulary looks less like three separate borrowings than like three local articulations of a canonical reservoir already available to the wider *pesantren* system.

This pattern — scripture, classical commentary, and secular or scientific vocabulary co-occurring within a single uninterrupted utterance — suggests that the ecotheological discourse of these *pesantren* is not simply Islam being applied to a pre-existing environmental problem, but a genuinely hybrid discourse in which the categories "religious" and "secular-environmental" are discursively dissolved into one another. This corroborates ecolinguistic findings elsewhere that eco-*pesantren* discourse operates simultaneously across ideological, social, and even biological registers, rather than treating environmentalism as an ideological overlay upon an otherwise unchanged religious core.³⁸

5. Moral Framing: From Civic Duty to Religious Obligation

Each informant performs a consistent framing operation: environmental behavior that could be described in a purely civic or hygienic register (do not litter, sort your waste, plant trees) is instead framed in an explicitly moral-religious register (this is *akhlak*; this is *ibadah*; this is part of being a good Muslim). AS is the most explicit about this reframing, stating that people

³⁷ Ali Yafie, *Merintis Fiqih Lingkungan Hidup* (Jakarta: Yayasan Amanah-Ufuk Press, 2006); Agus Hermanto, *Fikih Ekologi* (Malang: Literasi Nusantara Abadi, 2021).

³⁸ Masitoh and Rasyid, "Eco-Education in Pesantren," 85.

often understand worship as limited to *salat* (praying), fasting, and hajj, and positioning his entire discursive project as correcting that narrowness.³⁹ ZA performs a related but distinct move by framing *pesantren* cleanliness not as an aesthetic or administrative matter but as a shared moral and religious responsibility — his own words — precisely because uncleanness harms both the health of fellow residents and the surrounding community, folding a public-health rationale into a moral-religious one rather than presenting them as alternatives.⁴⁰

Punitive framing is notably absent, and this absence is itself analytically significant. When asked how he responds to a *santri* caught littering, AS states directly that he avoids harsh punishment because his goal is to build awareness, not to administer sanctions, and that he repeats the point during subsequent *pengajian* sessions so that all *santri* receive the same lesson rather than only the offender.⁴¹ ZA similarly frames his response as pedagogical correction rather than discipline, and in cases where the offender is unknown he simply picks up the litter himself, converting a moment that could have been framed punitively into one framed exemplarily.⁴² The consistent choice across all three informants to frame lapses as opportunities for *kesadaran* (consciousness-raising) rather than infractions to be sanctioned suggests a broader moral architecture in which environmental virtue is treated as a matter of cultivated disposition —

³⁹ Abdus Syakur, interview by author.

⁴⁰ Zaimudin Ahya, interview by author.

⁴¹ Abdus Syakur, interview by author.

⁴² Zaimudin Ahya, interview by author.

closer to the Islamic educational concept of gradual character formation — than of rule enforcement.

6. Identity Construction: The *Kyai* as Ecological Vicegerent and Pedagogical Model

Following Bucholtz and Hall, identity here is treated as an emergent effect of discursive positioning rather than a pre-given attribute, produced partly through adequation (claiming likeness) and partly through distinction (claiming difference).⁴³ All three informants construct a self-identity as ecological *khalifah* (vicegerent) — steward rather than owner, manager rather than exploiter — and this self-positioning is consistently modest in scale even as it is authoritative in kind: ZA describes his own environmental practice as "still limited,"⁴⁴ AR frames *pesantren* leadership as an ongoing process of self-improvement rather than a completed achievement ("we too must continue to learn"),⁴⁵ and AS frames his role as one of accompaniment ("reminding," "inviting") rather than command.⁴⁶ This modest self-positioning functions rhetorically as a form of adequation with the *santri* themselves — the *kyai* is a fellow learner and fellow steward, not a figure exempt from the discipline he asks of others — which arguably increases rather than diminishes his authority, since it forecloses the charge of hypocrisy that a purely command-based identity would invite.

⁴³Bucholtz and Hall, "Identity and Interaction," 592–599.

⁴⁴ Zaimudin Ahya, interview by author.

⁴⁵ Aimatur Rohmat, interview by author.

⁴⁶ Abdus Syakur, interview by author.

At the same time, each informant constructs a prospective identity for the *santri* that extends well beyond the *pesantren* gates: AS explicitly names *santri* as future *agen pelestari lingkungan* (agents of environmental preservation) who will carry *pesantren*-formed ecological values into the wider community as religious teachers,⁴⁷ and ZA frames environmental education as preparation for *santri* to "provide solutions" to society rather than only to avoid personal sin.⁴⁸ This is a distinctive identity claim: it positions the *santri* not as passive recipients of environmental doctrine but as future authoritative transmitters of it, extending the *kyai*'s own discursive role forward in time and outward in social space. Distinction operates more subtly, chiefly through the implicit contrast each informant draws between an *ibadah-centered* environmentalism, rooted in obligation to God, and an unnamed but implied secular environmentalism rooted in obligation to nature or society alone — a contrast none of the three states baldly, but one that is discursively present every time environmental action is relexicalized as worship rather than left as civic virtue.

7. Cross-Case Synthesis

To facilitate cross-case comparison, Table 1 synthesizes each *pesantren*'s dominant discursive orientation and the distinctive external resource absorbed into its ecotheological discourse. Although the three cases share a broadly convergent theological lexicon—particularly *khalifah* (vicegerent), *amanah*

⁴⁷ Abdus Syakur, interview by author.

⁴⁸ Zaimudin Ahya, interview by author.

(trust), and *hifz al-bi'ah* (protection of environment)—they differ in the discursive resources through which these concepts are articulated and institutionalized. The table therefore highlights both the common theological grammar underlying the three cases and the distinctive forms of juridical, narrative-mediatic, and technical-economic integration through which that grammar is locally instantiated.

Table 1
Cross-Case Synthesis of Ecotheological Discursive Orientations and Intertextual Resources

<i>Pesantren</i>	Informant / Institutional role	Dominant discursive orientation	Distinctive resource absorbed
Al Hidayah (Plumbon)	ZA, Kyai/Leader	Juridical systematization	Planned <i>fiqh lingkungan</i> curriculum (Ma'had Aly)
Al Fadhlul (Batang)	AS, Kyai/Leader	Homiletic narrative and contemporary media	Mythopoesis (Adam narrative), documentary film Pesta Babi
Rubat Kembanglangit (Blado)	AR, teacher/ <i>Ustadzah</i>	Technical-economic integration	Agronomic training (ITB partnership), <i>halalan thayyiban</i> framing

Read together, the three transcripts reveal a discourse that is remarkably convergent at the level of theological lexicon — *khalifah*, *amanah*, and some version of *hifz al-bi'ah* recur in all three — and remarkably

divergent at the level of the secular discourses each intertextually absorbs into that lexicon. Al Hidayah's discourse is oriented toward juridical systematization, visible in ZA's aspiration to develop a dedicated *fiqh lingkungan* (environmental jurisprudence) curriculum through a planned Ma'had Aly. Al Fadhlul's discourse is oriented toward homiletic narrative and contemporary media, visible in AS's use of *mythopoesis* (the Adam narrative) and popular film. Rubat Kembanglangit's discourse is oriented toward technical-economic integration, visible in AR's absorption of agronomic training and market vocabulary into the frame of *halalan thayyiban*. None of these orientations contradicts the others; rather, they appear to be complementary specializations of a single underlying ecotheological grammar, each *pesantren* instantiating the shared vocabulary through the institutional resources and pedagogical style locally available to it.

This pattern is consistent with — and extends — recent Indonesian scholarship documenting eco-*pesantren* as sites where Islamic moderation and socio-ecological praxis are jointly enacted rather than treated as separate projects.⁴⁹ What the present discourse-analytic reading adds to that literature is evidence that the joint enactment is accomplished at the level of the sentence and the metaphor, not only at the level of institutional program: it is in the fish that waits for knowledge, the tree that seems to pray, and the earth that seems to remember Cain's crime, that theology and ecology are actually fused,

⁴⁹Ahmad Zaenal Muttaqin, "Islamic Moderation and Eco-Pesantren in Indonesia: A Theological and Socio-Ecological Praxis," *Journal of Islamic Studies and Society* 4, no. 2 (2025): 297–322, <https://doi.org/10.30631/7kp32987>.

well before any curriculum document or conservation program is drafted.

D. Conclusion

This article has shown that the ecotheological discourse of three Indonesian *kyai* and *ustadz* is built through six identifiable and mutually reinforcing linguistic operations: a shared but variably inflected lexicon of stewardship; metaphors that animate non-human nature as kin, debtor, or moral witness; legitimation strategies that blend scriptural authorization with rationalization and exemplary conduct; intertextual chains that dissolve the boundary between classical religious genres and secular environmental vocabulary; moral framing that relocates environmental behavior from the civic to the devotional register; and identity construction that positions the *kyai* as a modest fellow-steward and the *santri* as a future-facing ecological authority in his own right. None of these operations is unique to any single informant; all three appear in varying degrees across all three *pesantren*, suggesting a shared discursive repertoire available to Indonesian religious authorities more broadly rather than an idiosyncratic feature of these three individuals.

Theoretically, the study suggests that Islamic ecotheology, at least as practiced in these *pesantren*, should be understood not only as a set of propositions about *khalifah* and *amanah*, but as a discourse genre with recognizable linguistic signatures — a genre in which *mythopoesis* and metaphor do at least as much persuasive work as doctrinal citation. This has a modest practical implication as well: efforts to strengthen environmental education in *pesantren*, such as the *fiqh lingkungan*

curriculum ZA describes as still in development, might usefully attend to and deliberately cultivate this existing figurative and narrative repertoire, rather than treating environmental content as a purely propositional addition to the curriculum.

The central limitation of this study is also its central methodological commitment: the corpus is restricted to the discourse of religious authorities, and it deliberately makes no claim about *santri* reception, resistance, or reproduction of that discourse, nor about how the analyzed narratives manifest in unscripted daily practice, *pengajian* delivery, or informal *santri* talk. This is a genuine gap rather than a minor caveat, since a central premise of sociolinguistic discourse analysis is that meaning is not fully determined by production but is co-constructed in reception and circulation. The present findings should therefore be read as an analysis of the *input* discourse available to *santri*, not as an analysis of its uptake.

Future research should address this gap directly through two complementary methods: focus group discussions with *santri* across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions comparable to those used with the *kyai* in this study, designed specifically to test whether *santri* reproduce the metaphors, legitimation strategies, and identity claims documented here or reformulate them in their own idiom; and structured observation of *pengajian*, ceremonial speech, and everyday *pesantren* routines (*piket kebersihan* (cleaning shifts), organic farming sessions, waste-sorting practice) to determine whether the moral framing identified in interview discourse is stable across more spontaneous, less reflective genres of *pesantren* talk. Comparative work across a larger and more regionally diverse sample of *pesantren* would further help distinguish

which features of the ecotheological discourse documented here are broadly characteristic of Indonesian Islamic education and which are local to Batang Regency's particular institutional and ecological context.

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