

# The Spiritual Role of Lake Across Legends in Indonesia: Nature as (More Than) the Divine Retributor

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## Abstract

Across many legends in Indonesia, nature takes the role of the divine retribution, the ultimate punishment against evil and wrongdoings. This depiction of nature may at first glance seem negligible; however, this depiction may also be seen as describing the relationship that spiritual ecology holds between human and nature. This paper compares the role of the lake-creation in four written legends across Indonesia: the Legend of Danau Toba from North Sumatra, the Legend of Rawa Pening from Central Java, the Legend of Danau Tondano from North Sulawesi, and the Legend of Danau Kelimutu from East Nusa Tenggara. In these legends, the apparent role of divine retribution nature has over the character highlights humans as a part of nature, and not as its master. It reflects how the people owning these legends see themselves in relation to the environment where they live, a view that is certainly applicable to modern life. The view that nature executes divine retribution towards human's malevolence serves as a reminder that nature will always be the bigger picture of human life despite its seemingly confined place in a man-centered society.

**Keywords:** divine retribution, Indonesian legends, lake-creation legends, spiritual ecology

## INTRODUCTION

Legends narrating the creation of lake, hereafter referred to as lake-creation legends, often depict lake as a result of retribution towards the people previously inhabiting the region of the lake. This retribution is implicitly divine, with nature shown to be the spiritual source of the retribution. It implies that the lake is a physical form of divine retribution acted by nature upon the people. Divine retribution, simply speaking, is punishment by God. It can also be understood as spiritual punishment, acted by deity upon person or people as a recompense for their wrongdoings. This is true with many lake-creation legends, e.g. legend of Toba lake or Rawa Pening, where the transgression of a person (in the former) or the

wrongdoings of a people (in the latter) are recompensed with nature's disastrous punishment resulting in the creation of a lake. In this way, such legends spread and pass down the knowledge of how the lake came to be, as well as the moral teachings of the community that owns them.

Danandjaja (1992), following Brunvand (1968), categorizes legends together with myth and fairytale as a form of verbal folklore called 'folk prose'. As such, legends possess the characteristics of folklore in general: oral literature with anonymous creator that belongs collectively to a community, passed on for generations within said community, exhibits different versions and variations, and serves as a medium of teaching, solace, social protest, as well as projecting one's

desire. What distinguishes legends from other forms of folklore are its secular characteristic (concerns worldly/mundane matters), not-so-distant-past time frame, and locations familiar with the current people. Brunvand, cited by Danandjaja, classifies legends into four categories: religious legends, supernatural legends, personal legends, and local legends. Legends narrating the origin of topographical features are classified as local legends.

Nowadays, lake-creation legends are used mainly to teach moral lessons, including when they are spread in the written form. The notion that wrongdoings will receive punishment is a popular theme across such legends in today's society. However, this generic idea seems to obscure another aspect of the legends, namely that they reflect the perspective/way of thinking of the community who owns it. Danandjaja states that one reason for folklore research is that "folklore reveals to us consciously or unconsciously how its folk think"<sup>1</sup> (1992, p. 17). Being a form of folklore, legends thereby also possess the view, the thinking of their community. Said view may concern human behavior within the community as an individual and/or as a society, relationship with other human beings, and also relationship with nature and supernatural matter. Lake-creation legends, then, not only serve as media to transmit moral values, but also as a reflection of its community's way of thinking.

With the idea that legends reveal the thinking of a community, it can be assumed that the roles of characters and events in lake-creation legends reflect the view of the people owning the legends in regards to said roles. Such legends typically elaborate more on the characters and their behavior, which may indicate the human-centered view of the community that produces these legends. As a result, the role of nature in these legends can be overlooked. However, with closer examination and change in perspective, even the seemingly narrow role of nature can reveal how people view nature and their relationship with it.

Spiritual ecology is a discipline which focuses on the relationship between human and

nature from a religious/spiritual perspective. Sponsel (2020, p. 2262) states that it is a major shift from religions that ignore nature into the sense of human participation in nature, realizing and feeling that humans are a part of nature. He identifies spiritual ecology as a diverse, complex, and dynamic arena of intellectual and practical activities where religions and spiritualities meet ecologies, environments, and environmentalisms (2012, p. 25). Merchant (2005, p. 118) defines it as "a product of a profound sense of crisis in the ways that twentieth-century humans relate to the environment..., focuses on the transformation of consciousness, especially religious and spiritual consciousness." Spiritual ecology promotes the notion of human participation as a part of nature not just physically but also spiritually, encouraging the transformation of consciousness from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric viewpoint.

Spiritual ecology emerges to answer ecological crises from a spiritual (not only religious) perspective. Supporters of spiritual ecology view this crisis as a result of human alienation from nature combined with the disenchantment, objectification, and commodification of nature (Sponsel, 2012, p. 29). It aims to raise a transformation of values that will lead to action to heal the planet (Merchant, 2005, p. 118). Furthermore, Sponsel (2012) entitles indigenous people as the 'original spiritual ecologists', affirming the kinship embedment of human and nonhuman beings in nature with symbols, myths, and rituals (p. 64). This affirmation may also apply to folklore in general and legends in particular, as they embody the wealth of culture and wisdom indigenous people possess.

Spiritual ecology has often been used to study folklore in terms of its contribution towards a spiritually ecocentric perspective of human-nature relationship. Sartini (2010) found that the mythological belief connected to Wonosadi forest exhibits ecological wisdom that helps sustain the forest. Similar idea is also highlighted by Sultoni A. et al. (2023) which, although uses ecocritical perspective, argues for contribution of folklore in

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<sup>1</sup> English translation provided by the author.

preserving ecological wisdom. Yet another contribution of folklore in this regard is with the co-cultivation of mushroom in China, as shown by Zhu G. et al, (2022) in their interdisciplinary study utilizing spiritual ecology, where the maintenance of spiritual belief leads to the mushroom co-cultivation system in Qingyuan Forest in China. Last but not least, a comparative study of symbols in four folklore across Indonesia narrating disaster by Kusumaningtyas (2013) shows that folklore can be used to promote partnership ethic through symbol interpretation. These studies portray how folklore exhibits and reflects ecological wisdom of the people owning it, and how it contributes to an ecocentric way of life that benefits both human and nature.

This study will look into the role of lake, and by extension nature, in four lake-creation legends across Indonesia: the Legend of Danau Toba from North Sumatra, the Legend of Rawa Pening from Central Java, the Legend of Danau Tondano from North Sulawesi, and the Legend of Danau Kelimutu from East Nusa Tenggara. It will compare each role to uncover the relationship between human and nature depicted in the legends. Applying spiritual ecology, this research discusses the position of nature and humans within the lake-creation legends and its implication regarding indigenous perspective of nature, as well as its contribution in promoting a better human-nature relationship in the current society.

## **METHODS**

This study is descriptive qualitative. Moleong (2014, p. 6) stated that qualitative research intends to understand phenomena about what the subject experiences, such as behavior, perception, motivation, action, etc. holistically in a descriptive manner, in a natural, specific context and utilizing various naturalistic methods. Kumar (2011) identifies descriptive study as the attempt to systematically describe a situation, problem, phenomenon, service or programme, or to provide information about e.g. the living conditions of a community, or to describe attitudes towards an issue. This study aims to describe the spiritual role of lake and nature within four legends across

Indonesia in order to identify the relationship between human and nature. In turn, this descriptive study should offer an insight into the human-nature relationship that will benefit both parties, physically and spiritually.

The study is conducted as follows. For each legend, a minimum of two texts is collected from online sources. This is to map the general characteristics and patterns of each legend. The data collected is the events relating to the creation of the lake in said legend, in particular the cause and the manner of creation. Using close reading, the lake-creation event in the legends is then analyzed so as to discern the aspect of divine retribution and in extension the human-nature relationship. Afterwards, this relationship is inspected with the perspective of spiritual ecology.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Creation of the Lake**

In the legend of Danau Toba (hereafter abbreviated as DTB), the creation of the lake happens right after one of the characters, the wife of the main protagonist Toba, gets to know from Samosir, the antagonist, that Toba has broken his promise with her not to uncover her true identity which is a magical fish. In most versions, the ground on which she stepped spouts out a large amount of water—some say she disappears with Samosir after he tells her what Toba said, some others say she runs with Samosir. Another version mentions a heavy downpour after Samosir tells her. All versions uniformly say the water floods the region and creates the lake. The main cause of the lake-creation, the disavowal of promise, is in turn caused by the anger Toba wreaks upon Samosir. Toba becomes mad at Samosir because Samosir eats up all but a very small portion of Toba's lunch. Many versions explicitly mention that this anger is the peak of his patience; Samosir has for many times misbehaved towards his parents, and the hungry and tired Toba cannot hold his indignation any longer. Both Toba and Samosir can be considered the subject which causes the creation of lake narrated in DTB.

In the legend of Rawa Pening (hereafter abbreviated as RPN), creation of the lake happens

when the young protagonist, Baru Klinting, plucks out a *lidi* stick he previously stuck onto the ground in the village he visits. The poked hole spits out torrential water which then starts to drown the village. This is not without cause. Baru Klinting sticks the *lidi* to the ground as an object of wager with the villagers. He challenges the villagers to pluck out the *lidi*; a seemingly effortless task to do, but turns out to be impossible for the villagers since it would not get plucked at all. This challenge is performed because Baru Klinting wishes to recompense the ugly treatment he receives from the villagers when he visits the village. The villagers dislike his poor physical condition, having foul-smelling scars over his body, and drive him out of the village as he asks for help. Here, it is Baru Klinting and the villagers who cause the creation of lake.

The legend of Danau Tondano (hereafter abbreviated as DTN) narrates the creation of the lake as being resulted from the disavowal of promise. In this legend, the main protagonist, a young woman named Marimbow, breaks her promise to her father, a chief of their village. In her younger age, Marimbow promised to his father to not marry until she inherits her father's title and lead the village; a promise urged by her father since she is his only successor. In addition to the promise, Marimbow is also trained to fight and dressed like a man would, concealing her identity. Her identity is then revealed when she fights the son of the neighboring village chief. The son, Maharimbow, fell in love with her, and not long after, Marimbow fell in love with him. They decide to get married, and despite the refusal of Marimbow's father, do it anyway in secrecy. Their marriage is followed by an earthquake and an eruption, leading to the formation of the lake.

As the legend of Danau Kelimutu (hereafter abbreviated as DKM) narrates it, the lake cluster at the Kelimutu crater is believed to have appeared from the burial of four characters at the exact spot where the three lakes exist. Ata Bupu, the kind-hearted old [shaman], has his burial place turned into the afterlife place for the spirits of old people. Ata Polo, the ill-hearted old [shaman] has his burial place turned into the afterlife place for the spirits of bad and evil people. The twin Ana Kalo

has their burial place turned to be the afterlife place for the spirits of those who died at a young age. All of them are swallowed by the earth (other accounts mention they are simply buried) as Ata Polo goes after Ata Bupu who runs into the earth's belly with the twin Ana Kalo to protect them. Ata Polo insists on eating the twin because Ata Bupu has made a promise to let him eat them when they have grown up. Ata Bupu simply refuses this idea and thereby breaks his promise by escaping with the twin.

The following table summarizes the events related to the creation of lake in each legend. Cause for lake-creation in each legend is arranged first, followed by the process whereby the lake is created.

**Table 1.** Creation of Lake: Cause and Process

	DTB	RPN	DTN	DKM
Cause	Disavowal of promise (Toba to his wife) in response to anger towards bad behavior (Samosir to Toba)	Recompense of unfair treatment (rejection and expulsion) (villagers to Baru Klinting)	Disavowal of promise (Marimbow to his father) in response of love (Marimbow to Maharim-bow)	[Disavowal of promise (Ata Bupu to Ata Polo) in response of protecting the orphans from Ata Polo]
Process	Water spouts from the footprints of the wife (some source also say it is due to a heavy rain)	Water spouts from the prick of the <i>lidi</i> stick stuck by Baru Klinting to the ground	Lake appears after an eruption and earthquake	Lakes appear from the place where the characters are buried

### Aspects of Divine Retribution

Comparing the lake-creation events this way, it can be seen clearly that for DTB, RPN, and DTN the aspect of divine retribution is clear. Each of these legends portrays nature as the divine retributor, punishing wrongdoings committed by the character in the legends; in DTB and DTN, it is disavowal of promise, while in RPN, it is unfair treatment towards the character. Also, the process of lake-creation in these legends is explicitly disastrous: each of them narrates a natural disaster striking the region where the legend is set in, severely impacting the characters and the people in the legend. This is fitting with the concept of divine

retribution, which has disastrous events as a way for the supreme being to punish the characters that perform wrongdoings. DTB, RPN, and DTN clearly show nature as the executor of punishment towards wrongdoings, suggesting that these legends posit nature as the divine retributor.

The same notion cannot easily be applied to DKM. DKM indeed narrates ill-hearted character and wrongdoing committed as well as events experienced by the characters leading to the creation of the lake, but DKM depicts those in a superficially unrelated manner. The characters being buried, or rather swallowed by the earth, does not immediately indicate an effect of wrongdoing. Even if the disavowal of the promise Ata Bupu made and the evil intention of Ata Polo is to be considered the cause, the twin Ana Kalo are not mentioned to have committed wrongdoing or bear ill-hearted intention to be punished by the exact same retribution. Nature still appears to punish evil desire and disavowal of promise, but its ultimate status as a divine retributor is much more murky in DKM. Judging from the final fate they receive being equal, i.e. buried and their grave becoming the lake where spirits live for eternity no matter what action they have done, the aspect of divine retribution can be considered to be less apparent in DKM.

### **Role of Lake and Nature in the Legends**

**Table 2.** Role of Lake & Nature

	<b>Lake</b>	<b>Nature</b>
DTB, DTN	Proof of retribution towards disavowal of promise	The overseer of the promise, delivers retribution for disavowal
RPN	Proof of retribution towards unfair treatment	The provider of justice and retribution for the character
DKM	'Grave' of the characters; each lake symbolize the traits of the characters	Retributor of every act and home for afterlife

Table 2 summarizes the role of lake and nature in each legend. Despite the difference of portrayal between DTB, RPN, and DTN with DKM, all legends agree that nature plays a significant role in recompensing human's wrongdoing. Lake-creation event in these legends serves as the method that nature uses to punish said

wrongdoing. The lake in each legend, therefore, becomes the physical evidence of nature's retributive action. It is essentially a physical proof of what has happened in the past in the region. DTB and DTN posit a punishment towards disavowal as the event that the lake stands as an evidence of. RPN posits a punishment towards unfair treatment that leads to the creation of the lake. DKM posits that the lake is the grave of the characters. The lake invokes warning to the community that possesses the lake-creation legend, a warning about what a transgression and wrongdoing can bring onto the person committing it.

Whereas the lake serves as a physical evidence of past disaster, which invokes warning of transgression and wrongdoing, nature serves as the actor delivering the disaster as a form of retribution. However, there is more to uncover from this notion. DTB and DTN say that the retribution nature gives is to recompense the disavowal of promise made by the character. This implies that the character(s), when making a promise, relies on nature to deliver a retribution in case the promise is disavowed. In doing so, the character(s) puts nature as a third party which is strong and reliable enough to be a warning for the character(s) not to break the promise. Put it differently, nature oversees the character(s) and their promise, retribution them with appropriate punishment should they disavow the promise.

Similar to DTB and DTN, RPN appears to posit nature as a strong and reliable party separate from the characters. Yet rather than disavowal, what nature retributes in RPN is an unfair treatment of the characters. In RPN, nature is not merely overseeing what humans made, but what humans did. What nature punishes here is not merely a breaking of a promise, but a flaw in behavior. Moreover, the way the characters in RPN engage with nature is slightly different from what is seen in DTB and DTN. Retribution in DTB and DTN is delivered by nature itself, while retribution in RPN is delivered partly by the character. The main character actively acts in opposition to the villagers, namely by challenging them to do a task he offers, aiming to retribute their awful treatment. But the retribution itself does not

come actively from the main character; it comes from the third party, nature. In other words, the main character relies on nature to deliver the ultimate retribution as he attempts to recompense the villagers. Nature provides the justice and retribution for the wrongdoing committed in the legend.

The role of nature appears to be even more integral in DKM. It agrees with the three legends regarding the retributive role of nature. However, whereas DTB, DTN, and RPN all assign nature with the role of divine retributor exclusively (in the sense of punishment-giver for transgression and wrongdoing), DKM expands the role further by including retribution for the characters which do not necessarily commit transgression. Nature recompenses their act by burying them and their characteristic by turning their graves into lakes that fit each of their characteristics. Adding to this the belief that the lakes become the spiritual afterlife place, the role of nature in DKM is more than just a divine retributor. Here, nature is the retributor of every act and the home of not only physical but also spiritual life. To summarize, while all legends portray nature as the retributor, nature in DTB, RPN, and DTN also acts the overseer of human actions and behaviors as well as a source of greater power, whereas nature in DKM also acts as the home for humans, physically and spiritually.

### **Human-Nature Relationships**

Three of the legends in this study—DTB, RPN, and DTN—show that nature is the source of greater power, a power that extends beyond human capability. In particular, this power is delivered as a form of divine retribution towards wrongdoings that happened in the legends. Nature can express this power directly, as shown in DTB and DTN, or through an individual/event, as shown in RPN. In positing nature as the source of greater power, these legends acknowledge the authority of nature. They believe nature will take part in protecting the vows, the promises humans made to other humans (DTB, DTN), as well as the justice and rights humans deserve (RPN).

The authority of nature over humans depicted in these legends echoes the spiritual view towards nature as stated by Chief Oren Lyons in

Vaughan-Lee (2013, pp. 7-11). As an authoritative force, nature has laws that humans must understand and get-along with. These absolute laws will benefit humans when they work with them, and humans will suffer when they go against them. Within this perspective, divine retribution delivered by nature in the legends implies the suffering resulted from transgression of nature's laws by the characters. Nature appears to be protecting the morals of humans, keeping them from wrongdoings, and in doing so punishes the transgressions of humans. This can be understood as a form of authoritative rule nature has over humans, one that ensures the sustainability of human life by keeping humans away from harmful behavior. As Chief Oren Lyon puts it, "What happens to you and what happens to the earth happens to us as well, so we have common interests" (Vaughan-Lee, 2013, p. 7).

The creation of lake in DKM highlights another aspect of nature that transcends its role as divine retributor. While agreeing with DTB, RPN, and DTN in regards to the retributive aspect nature, DKM also shows retribution towards even the seemingly good and pure behavior. Instead of directly portraying nature as an authoritative force that punishes wrongdoings, DKM depicts nature as the retributor for all actions as well as the home for not only the physical body, but also the spirit of humans. Thomas Berry in Vaughan-Lee (2013) stated that people of the past view the world beyond what is seen as a world that enfolded humans in some profound manner. It is "the source from which humans were born, nourished, protected, guided, and the destiny to which we returned" (2013, p. 15). This way, more insight can be found from comparing the four legends: nature is, indeed, the supreme force that oversees human and human action. But more than that, nature is the home of humans, physically and spiritually; the origin and the destination of humans.

### **Human as Part of Nature**

DTB, RPN, DTN, and DKM agree that nature is the "supreme manifestation of the sacred" (Vaughan-Lee, 2013, p. 22). All of the legends portray nature as the divine retributor that recompense wrongdoings and also any actions.

Additional depiction from DKM also suggests an interpretation of nature being the home, the ultimate dwelling of humans. Together, these legends signify the role of nature as the greater force within which humans abide, get along, and live with it. In other words, the legends imply humans as a part of nature.

These legends reflect communities that put forward the notion of nature that oversees humans and provides them with their needs. Much like how Sartini (2010) and Zhu G. et al. (2022) find, myths and beliefs of a community significantly help the community to live harmoniously with nature. In the former, beliefs regarding Wonosadi forest encourage the community to do activities that will sustain the forest. In the latter, beliefs and customs inherited by the community and manifested as practice among its people has turned into a valuable resource that guides them to carefully make use of the natural resources they have. These studies show the importance of folklore and folk practice in sustaining human-nature relationships that benefits both parties.

Yet more than just physical and economical needs, as the two studies point out, folklores, myths, and legends can also facilitate moral and spiritual needs. Kusumaningtyas (2013) highlights how myths and legends across Indonesia reinforce ethics which are held by the communities possessing them, a matter that should also be utilized in transferring ethics to younger generations. The study specifically introduces a new interpretation of the myths and legends from an ecofeminist spirituality perspective, where partnership ethic between human and nature can be transferred to alter patriarchal domination in society. In much the same manner, new interpretation of lake-creation in the legends of this study unfolds the importance of nature and what nature can provide to humans. The communities who hold the legends, as these legends show, consider nature as the supreme and inseparable part of human life, the force that enfolds humans as its part.

## CONCLUSION

The legends of Danau Toba, Rawa Pening, Danau Tondano, and Danau Kelimutu portray the supreme and sacred role of nature, within which humans take part. This removes the egocentric and anthropocentric view of nature, where nature is seen as a source of human needs in order to survive. This portrayal in legends implies the perspective of earlier, indigenous people that attempt to live with nature, not just from it. This exact notion is what is disappearing as human society progresses with time, and what is being reinforced in modern day by spiritual ecology.

With this interpretation of the spiritual role of lakes and nature, it is expected that this study will contribute to the transformation of perspective in viewing human-nature relationships. Even within a seemingly confined space in the legends, nature plays the bigger picture in it. Widespread transfer of this knowledge will certainly reinforce an ecocentric point of view to the society: increased awareness of human dependence on nature should gradually reshape human perspective away from anthropocentric attitude and towards (spiritually) ecocentric attitude.

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