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LORD'S LAND GOD'S LAND: A MESSIANISM-BASED SOCIAL MOVEMENT IN THE DUTCH EAST INDIES THROUGH A HISTORICAL ECOLOGICAL VIEW

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the configuration of messianic social movements in the Dutch East Indies through a historical ecological lens. Using historical methodology combined with ecological analysis, the study examines how environmental degradation and restricted access to land and water contributed to the emergence of resistance movements such as the Samin Movement, the Ratu Pelabuhan Rebellion, and the Gedangan Incident. These movements are interpreted not merely as political defiance, but as ecological responses to exploitative colonial policies. Figures like Samin Surosentiko, Rachman, and Kiai Hasan functioned as spiritual leaders whose legitimacy was rooted in local cosmologies and ecological justice. This research addresses ontological issues concerning the human-nature relationship, epistemological challenges in rereading colonial archives, and axiological commitments to the rights of indigenous communities. The study contributes to historical scholarship by offering a novel perspective that emphasizes environmental and spiritual dimensions of resistance, suggesting that messianic movements in the colony were deeply grounded in local ecological worldviews.
Keywords: Social Movement, Messianism, Historical Ecology

INTRODUCTION

This study discusses the resistance against colonial rule that occurred in the Dutch East Indies at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The resistance that occurred during this period was often associated with messianic and millenarian movements. On that basis, messianic and millenarian-based social movements were also constructed as treasonous attempts by the local community against the colonial government. Therefore, movements classified as part of messianism and millenarianism were often viewed and attributed to political inequality. Thus, this study attempts to attribute the social movements that occurred through an ecological perspective as part of historical reconstruction. In general, archival sources and newspapers reporting on related resistance will be discussed at length. Therefore, our efforts to uncover the past regarding social movements through other perspectives are expected to become a treasure trove in historical and ecological research. Primarily, this concerns the reciprocal relationship between humans and their environment, which is intertwined with one another.

Messianic movements can be understood as a form of social movement characterized by the emergence of a savior figure who acts as the main leader.[1] These movements grow from religious beliefs that promise the arrival of a savior who will bring hope of liberation from a situation of crisis or oppression. This phenomenon is widespread in various religions and belief systems around the world, including in Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and Hindu traditions.[2] In this context, the messianic figure holds a central position as the guiding figure and determinant of the direction of the movement of his followers. Therefore, it is not uncommon for these movements to cease when the central figure who acts as the highest authority is arrested or killed.[3] Thus, it was not difficult for the Dutch East Indies colonial authorities to suppress similar movements because the formation of ideals and the direction of the movement could be read as common patterns in messianic movements.

In Indonesia, particularly in Javanese and Sundanese traditions, the concept of the Messiah is known as Ratu Adil and Ratu Sunda.[4] Leaders of such movements often claim to be Ratu Adil, believed to be able to lead the people to independence and prosperity. Historically, the myth of Ratu Adil has existed since the Hindu era in Java, mainly through the figure of the god Vishnu as a source of legitimacy, and became increasingly well-known through the prophecies of Jayabaya.[5] Usually, the emergence

[1] Joseph L. Angel, 'Messianism/Messianic Movements', *Brill* (Leiden, The Netherlands), published online 2019, doi:10.1163/2589-7993_EECO_SIM_041888.

[2] Nissim Dana, *The Druze in the Middle East: Their Faith, Leadership, Identity and Status* (Sussex Academic Press, 2008).

[3] S. Kartodirdjo, *Ratu Adil* (Grafiti, 1992).

[4] *Sejarah Nasional Indonesia IV: Kemunculan Penjajahan di Indonesia*, ed. by M.D. Poesponegoro and N. Notosusanto (Balai Pustaka, 2010).

[5] A.P.E. Korver, *Sarekat Islam Gerakan Ratu Adil?*, trans. by Grafitipers (Grafitipers, 1985).

of Ratu Adil correlates with socio-economic instability, where structural pressures drive people to seek a way out through movements based on spiritual beliefs.[6] This shows that social crises often trigger the emergence of messianic leaders in the context of local culture. In addition, the connection between social crises is at the core of the problem, attracting various aspects of life into messianic and millenarian movements.

The central figure often associated with religious figures is part of a global phenomenon, although it has its own characteristics in some regions. In Java, these charismatic Islamic religious leaders (kiai) can also influence the attitudes of their students and followers, thus having direct political value through their ability to mobilize the masses.[7] Furthermore, this is also closely related to Sufism and Thariqat, which have developed rapidly in Java and other islands in the Indonesian archipelago, serving as the foundation for speech and behavior in living as a Muslim. Furthermore, the development of both is inseparable, as Thariqat and Sufism are integral to the teaching and institutionalization of structured Islamic education.[8] Uniquely, Sufism or Thariqat typically maintains an apolitical stance, but this is not always the case if the kiai perceives massive injustice.[9] The spread of Sufism (and Sufi orders) in the Indonesian archipelago has had a significant impact on the socio-cultural life in Indonesia since the early days of Islam until now.

The Dutch East Indies colonial government essentially refused to regulate the religious life of its colonists. In this context, the Dutch East Indies government recognized itself as a major enemy of its leadership due to its label of infidels, and therefore avoided direct intervention in these matters.[10] Thus, a connection existed between colonial anxieties and their cautious approach to religious issues in the colonies, resulting in a focus on fanaticism, messianism, and millennialism[11]. Furthermore, this view fostered a repressive stance on the part of the colonial government, as they often considered Islamic movements intertwined with politics to be part of terrorism and even coups.

Messianic and millenarian movements in the Dutch East Indies occurred repeatedly and exhibited similar narrative patterns, despite varying backgrounds. The Cilegon movement of 1888, led by Kiai Wasjid, was triggered by restrictions on religious activities and vaccination policies by the colonial government, which were

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[6] *Ratu Adil, Kuasa & Pemberontakan di Nusantara*, ed. by D.R. Herliany and others (Ombak, 2015).

[7] Endang Turmudi, 'The Kiai in the Context of Socio-Political Change', in *Struggling for the Umma*, Changing Leadership Roles of Kiai in Jombang, East Java (ANU Press, 2006), pp. 149–74, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jbk2d.14> [accessed 2 October 2025].

[8] Sahri, 'The Role of Tharîqat in Strengthening Nationalism in Indonesia', *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10.1 (2024), p. 2347010, doi:10.1080/23311886.2024.2347010.

[9] Mark Woodward and others, 'Salafi Violence and Sufi Tolerance? Rethinking Conventional Wisdom', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 7.6 (2013), pp. 58–78, JSTOR.

[10] M.C. Ricklefs, *Islamisation and Its Opponents in Java: A Political, Social, Cultural and Religious History, c. 1930 to Present* (NUS Press, 2012), doi:10.2307/j.ctv1qv3fh.

[11] Heather S. Gregg, 'Defining and Distinguishing Secular and Religious Terrorism', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 8.2 (2014), pp. 36–51, JSTOR.

then framed within a messianic revelation as the *Ratu Adil*.[12] Meanwhile, the Samin Movement in Blora, led by Samin Surosentiko, adopted a form of non-violent resistance against taxation policies and the exploitation of natural resources.[13] These two movements show that behind the religious symbolism, there was a political and material dimension that was the main driver of resistance against colonialism.[14] Ultimately, in the context of the Dutch East Indies, messianic and millenarian configurations were manifestations of the conflict between local communities' dissent and the colonial government.

A number of studies have attempted to examine the dynamics of these social movements. Sartono Kartodirdjo has conducted an in-depth analysis of the 1888 Banten rebellion within a socio-religious framework, describing it as a millenarian expression of structural crisis.[15] Abritama emphasizes the cultural dimension of the Samin Movement as a resistance against state hegemony and the exploitation of teak forests.[16] Meanwhile, Illahi has examined the Gedangan Incident as a protest against agrarian injustice and water policy.[17] In addition, research by Ridhoi[18] and Yakub[19] shows the importance of ecological and spiritual approaches in understanding local communities' resistance to the exploitation of natural resources. However, these studies generally still discuss political, cultural, and religious aspects, without placing the ecological dimension at the core of historical readings. Thus, this study attempts to fill the void in the narrative of messianic movements in the colonial context through a historical ecological perspective. In fact, these social movements were not only triggered by political and religious pressures but also by environmental degradation, competition for access to water, and land privatization that disrupted the local cosmology of agrarian communities. Therefore, this paper offers an alternative reading of the history of social movements in the Dutch East Indies through an interdisciplinary historical ecological approach that places humans, land, and spirituality as a unity.

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[12] S. Kartodirdjo, 'The Peasants Revolt of Banten in 1888: Its Condition, Course and Sequel' (unpublished Dissertation, Yale University & Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1966).

[13] P. Abritama, 'Gerakan Samin: Konflik Hutan, Ratu Adil, dan Perlawanan Kultural Petani Blora', *Heuristik: Jurnal Pendidikan Sejarah*, 3.2 (2023), pp. 55–62.

[14] HARRY J. BENDA and LANCE CASTLES, 'THE SAMIN MOVEMENT', *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde*, 125.2 (1969), pp. 207–40, JSTOR.

[15] Sartono Kartodirdjo, *Pemberontakan Petani Banten 1888* (Komunitas Bambu, 2015).

[16] Abritama, 'Gerakan Samin: Konflik Hutan, Ratu Adil, dan Perlawanan Kultural Petani Blora'.

[17] Nanda Pramudya Fadli Illahi, 'PERAN INLANDS BESTUUR SIDOARDJO DALAM MENANGANI PERISTIWA GEDANGAN TAHUN 1904', *Sejarah Dan Budaya : Jurnal Sejarah, Budaya, Dan Pengajarannya*, 15.2 (2021), p. 227, doi:10.17977/um020v15i22021p227-238.

[18] Ronal Ridhoi, 'Menggaungkan Pendekatan Ekologis Dalam Historiografi Perkotaan Di Indonesia Pasca Reformasi', *Jurnal Sejarah Indonesia*, 6.1 (2023), pp. 74–90, doi:10.62924/jsi.v6i1.32606.

[19] Muhammad Yakub, Okta Firmansyah, and Ahmad Muhajir, 'Exploring Islamic Spiritual Ecology in Indonesia: Perspectives from Nahdlatul Ulama's Progressive Intellectuals', *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 13.2 (2023), pp. 180–98, doi:10.1080/20440243.2023.2238203.

This study examines how diverging conceptions of water between colonial authorities and agrarian communities in the Dutch East Indies generated the conditions for a messianic social movement. While the colonial state framed water as a hydraulic resource to be engineered for plantation economies, local communities understood it as a moral-ecological lifeline embedded in cosmology, subsistence practices, and communal autonomy. By reinterpreting colonial archives from an environmental perspective and foregrounding indigenous ecological knowledge, this research demonstrates that the disruption, enclosure, and bureaucratization of water access under colonial rule catalyzed a messianic response rooted in both ecological grievance and symbolic redemption. The contribution of this research lies in its attempt to broaden the horizons of Indonesian historiography by integrating a historical ecological approach into the study of colonial social resistance. Theoretically, this research adds a new variation to the reading of messianic movements that is no longer confined to purely political and religious interpretations. Practically, this article is expected to strengthen cultural and historically based ecological awareness in agrarian policy-making, as well as enrich interdisciplinary understanding in the fields of history, anthropology, and environmental science.

METHOD

In this paper, we use the historical method as the main guideline for conducting research. The historical method is a process of critically examining and analyzing records and relics from the past.[20] The stages of the historical method are generally divided into heuristics, criticism (verification), interpretation, and historiography.[21] The heuristic stage is the historian's attempt to find sources relevant to the research.[22] The criticism stage is the historian's attempt to assess the accuracy of sources in terms of their credibility and authenticity.[23] The interpretation stage is the most important part because it uses the historian's interpretive power to interpret events using various approaches and specific theories.[24] Finally, historiography or historical writing is an effort to explain and present the results of research to the general public.[25] Historical interpretation and writing are based on the assumptions and imagination of historians as part of the creation of new meanings based on the sources that have been

[20] L. Gottschalk, *Mengerti Sejarah* (Penerbit Universitas Indonesia (UI-Press), 2006).

[21] Ismaun, M. Winarti, and W. Darmawan, *Pengantar Ilmu Sejarah* (Asosiasi Pendidik dan Peniliti Sejarah (APPS), 2016).

[22] G.J. Renier, *Metode Dan Manfaat Ilmu Sejarah* (Pustaka Pelajar, 1997).

[23] N.H. Lubis, *Metode Sejarah* (Satya Historika, 2020).

[24] F. Ankersmit, *Refleksi Tentang Sejarah: Pendapat-Pendapat Modern Tentang Filsafat Sejarah* (Gramedia, 2018).

[25] H. Sjamsuddin, *Metodologi Sejarah* (Ombak, 2016).

collected.[26] Thus, the existence of historical methods as the main guideline is expected to produce the best and maximum results from this research.

Fundamentally, this study will employ the historical ecology approach as its primary tool and perspective to investigate social movements that transpired in the Dutch East Indies. While historical ecology itself isn't a standalone discipline, it can be conceptualized as an interdisciplinary approach that emerged in the 20th century.[27] Historical ecology focuses on identifying patterns within various events to unravel the past, enabling us to comprehend it as an integral part of social dynamics.[28] The primary objective of studying through the historical ecology paradigm is to explore the temporal and spatial relationships between humans and their environment in the past, as part of a dialectic, and its impact on various aspects of human life.[29] In essence, historical ecology seeks to observe and contextualize small-scale social phenomena within larger trends by identifying specific patterns.

In addition, the historical ecological approach is a combination of two disciplines aimed at revealing the roots or origins of human perceptions of nature. The fusion of ecology and history provides a deeper understanding of the representation of human social life based on its interaction with nature in the past.[30] The view to fuse the two is based on the idea that ecological practices must be understood fundamentally from a historical perspective.[31] Within certain limits, the relationship between history and ecology can be promoted as a revelation of the dynamics of human demography in relation to its origins and nature.[32] Thus, the historical ecological approach opens up the possibility of contradictions and even conflicts because it takes into account the dynamics that occurred in the past between humans and nature.

Following Stoler's concept of reading "along" and "against" the archival grain, this study treats colonial archives not as transparent records but as artifacts shaped by bureaucratic anxieties, racial hierarchies, and extractive economic interests[33]. Administrative reports on Samin, Rachman, and the Gedangan affair are therefore analyzed by identifying their silences, exaggerations, and classificatory practices. Especially in how officials framed ecological grievances as political deviance or

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[26] John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 0 edn (Routledge, 2015), doi:10.4324/9781315728131.

[27] William L. Balée, *Advances in Historical Ecology* (Columbia University Press, 1998).

[28] Péter Szabó, 'Historical Ecology: Past, Present and Future', *Biological Reviews*, 90.4 (2015), pp. 997–1014, doi:10.1111/brv.12141.

[29] William Balée, 'The Research Program of Historical Ecology', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 35.1 (2006), pp. 75–98, doi:10.1146/annurev.anthro.35.081705.123231.

[30] *Social, Ecological and Environmental Theories of Crime*, ed. by Jeffery T. Walker, The Library of Essays in Theoretical Criminology (Routledge, 2016), doi:10.4324/9781315087863.

[31] Mark Q. Sutton and E. N. Anderson, *Introduction to Cultural Ecology*, 1st edn (Routledge, 2020), doi:10.4324/9781003135456.

[32] Kim Hill and A. Magdalena Hurtado, *Ache Life History: The Ecology and Demography of a Foraging People*, 1st edn (Routledge, 2017), doi:10.4324/9781351329248.

[33] A.L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Thinking Through Colonial Ontologies* (Princeton Press, 2009).

religious fanaticism. This archival critique enables a reinterpretation that re-centers indigenous ecological knowledge and exposes the colonial state's attempts to obscure environmental injustice.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This article will focus on two main points in an effort to uncover the past. The first is the correlation between messianic or millenarian events and the local community's response to nature. The second is how the colonial government responded to the Dutch East Indies landscape as an object of exploitation for profit, which was an important part of colonialism.

The New Master: Expansion, Exploration, and Exploitation

Land and water ownership rights in pre-colonial Indonesia were generally managed on a collective basis or based on joint ownership in the name of the king.[34] It should also be remembered that customary law and feudal law coexisted in the land system of pre-colonial Indonesia, resulting in a dualistic grip on society.[35] In simple terms, both position the cultivators or the community as objects who serve their community and the ruler (the king).[36] However, the arrival of colonialism brought a new land ownership system that influenced the use and cultivation of existing resources.

The views and patterns of colonialism in the Dutch East Indies cannot be generalized, as they underwent different phases and tendencies in each era. This indicates that the practical, strategic, and effective steps of colonialism practices were the core of the success of colonization in the colonies. Expansion into new lands as an effort to expand the region and its various resources was part of the oldest colonial practice with a mercantilist perspective. In the context of colonization in Indonesia, the Dutch trading company, the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC), had ambitions of territorial expansion in the East Indies with the principle of prudence due to considerations of financial stability.[37] The VOC preferred to establish company relations with local rulers as part of expanding its influence and trading territory.[38] This

[34] M. Sofyan Pulungan, 'Menelaah Masa Lalu, Menata Masa Depan: Sejarah Hukum Tanah Ulayat dan Model Penanganan Konflik Sosialnya', *Undang*, 6.1 (2023), pp. 235–67; C Van Vollenhoven, *Het Adatrecht van Nederlandsch-Indië* (Brill, 1931).

[35] Muhammad Khaidir Kahfi Natsir and others, *Hukum Pertanahan: Teori, Regulasi dan Praktik di Indonesia* (Gita Lentera, 2025).

[36] Adjeng Vierlyana, 'ANALISIS SISTEM AGRARIA FEODALISME DAN HAK-HAK YANG DIPEROLEH MASYARAKAT INDONESIA', *COURT REVIEW: Jurnal Penelitian Hukum (e-ISSN: 2776-1916)*, 3.01 (2023), pp. 22–27, doi:10.69957/cr.v3i01.687.

[37] Alexander Claver, 'PRELUDE TO RAPID EXPANSION (1800–1884)', in *Dutch Commerce and Chinese Merchants in Java*, Colonial Relationships in Trade and Finance, 1800-1942 (Brill, 2014), pp. 13–72, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctt1w8h115.10> [accessed 2 May 2025].

[38] Ulbe Bosma, 'Was There Really a Dutch Colonial Empire?', *NWIG: New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, 97.1/2 (2023), pp. 83–89, JSTOR; Hans Hägerdal,

at least lasted long enough until the collapse of the VOC at the end of the 18th century, and the East Indies were handed over to the Kingdom of the Netherlands. During the Dutch East Indies era, the management of the colonial state tended towards state capitalism, with the view that increasing the colony's production would be in line with the interests of the mother country.[39] Thus, the primary objective of Dutch colonialism in the Dutch East Indies was to ensure the welfare of the mother country, supported by the colonies, making the calculation of expansion crucial.

The colonial expansion of the Dutch East Indies during this phase was still carried out with great caution. Expansion was inherently costly, as much of it had to be achieved through warfare to conquer the region, thus strengthening and securing full control of the Dutch East Indies. However, this expansion was also hindered by the interests of other colonial powers in the region, such as the British, who were a powerful and expanding presence along the East Coast of Sumatra.[40] This did not make the Dutch give up and abandon their vision of expansion in the Indies. Expansion was carried out by seeking other territories while closely observing British movements in the Indies. Expansion through military and political intervention by the Dutch on other islands in the Indies proved highly successful, as territorialization occurred rapidly throughout the 19th century.[41] The success of this expansion was also made possible by the Dutch being able to effectively build, organize, and manage inter-island shipping routes in the Indies.[42] Therefore, the colonial government's expansion to control the seas and coastal areas was the right step because it would gradually control the interior.

The expansion of the Dutch East Indies colony as a result of this expansion gave rise to a new need for the colonial government to understand the newly conquered territories. As a result, many projects by the Dutch East Indies colonial government to research flora, fauna, and indigenous tribes, including their languages and cultures, were usually configured with descriptions and classifications.[43] However, this cannot be fully understood as part of scientific research, especially since the colonial government often included the results of these projects in its large archives. According

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'Diplomacy in the Villages', *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde*, 180.4 (2024), pp. 319–50, JSTOR.

[39] Jan Breman, 'From Trading Company to State Enterprise', in *Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market*, Profits from an Unfree Work Regime in Colonial Java (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), pp. 95–128, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt197055k.6> [accessed 2 May 2025].

[40] Jan Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast: Plantation Society and The Colonial Order in Southeast Asia* (Oxford University Press, 1989).

[41] Andrew McWilliam, 'Historical Reflections on Customary Land Rights in Indonesia', *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 7.1 (2006), pp. 45–64, doi:10.1080/14442210600551859.

[42] Claver, 'PRELUDE TO RAPID EXPANSION (1800–1884)'.

[43] Henk J. van Rinsum, 'EXPERIMENTATION & EXPLOITATION (c. 1850-1950)', in *Utrecht University and Colonial Knowledge*, Exploration, Exploitation and the Civilising Mission since 1636 (Amsterdam University Press, 2025), pp. 99–192, JSTOR, doi:10.2307/jj.25737955.7.

to Stoler, the colonial interest in writing archives can be understood as a form of controlling colonial anxiety due to the inability to understand the colony holistically.[44] Therefore, research and writing archives are closely related to the colonial way of constructing knowledge about various aspects of the colony. Thus, the colonial gaze encompassed various basic aspects of the life of the population of the Dutch East Indies, so that the colonial government seemed to have complete control over its colony.

The colonial anxiety described by Stoler can essentially be understood as colonial knowledge of their colonies that must be aligned with the colonial order. To some extent, the colonial order that was attempted to be established influenced how colonialists viewed their colonies, for example, in mapping the landscape of a particular region. According to Bellone, mapping (cartography) generally represents the perspective of colonial powers and their desire to control, objectify, manipulate, and exploit the environment of colonized societies.[45] Ultimately, colonial rule aimed to generate as much profit as possible while neglecting the interests of local communities.[46] Thus, the basis of the colonial perspective on their colonies was as objects of exploitation, both of their people and their natural resources.

The exploitative perspective of this colonial system was also clearly manifested in the policies of the Dutch East Indies government from time to time. A concrete example is the cultivation system (*cultuurstelsel*), initiated and implemented during the reign of J. van den Bosch as a response to the empty state coffers of the Dutch Kingdom.[47] This cultivation system forced residents to cultivate government land by only growing crops that were popular at the time. This system was arranged as if it would not directly harm the population, but in practice, the interests of the community had to be ignored because it was not in line with the vision of this cultivation system. The discipline and coercion of this cultivation system generated fantastic profits so that the treasury and development of the mother country were carried out smoothly.[48] Furthermore, this success cannot be separated from the government's role in promoting export expansion, which was strictly controlled from the lowest level until the goods were loaded and shipped to consumers.[49]

However, this cultivation system also received criticism and other pressures, resulting in the creation of the *Agrarisch Wet* (Agrarian Law) and *Suiker Wet* (Sugar

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[44] Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Thinking Through Colonial Ontologies*.

[45] Tamara Bellone and others, 'Mapping as Tacit Representations of the Colonial Gaze', in *Mapping Crisis*, ed. by Doug Specht, Participation, Datafication and Humanitarianism in the Age of Digital Mapping (University of London Press, 2020), pp. 17–38, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv14rms6g.9> [accessed 2 May 2025].

[46] Breman, 'From Trading Company to State Enterprise'.

[47] *Sejarah Nasional Indonesia IV: Kemunculan Penjajahan di Indonesia*.

[48] van Rinsum, 'EXPERIMENTATION & EXPLOITATION (c. 1850-1950)'.

[49] G. ROGER KNIGHT, 'Descrying the Bourgeoisie: Sugar, Capital and State in the Netherlands Indies, circa 1840-1884', *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde*, 163.1 (2007), pp. 34–66, JSTOR.

Law) of 1870 as a response to expand land and ownership.[50] The *Agrarisch Wet* and *Suiker Wet* found their place in the Dutch East Indies as milestones for major reforms in the colonial land exploitation system. This was mainly evident in the privatization of government land so that it could be managed by capital owners. Of course, this step was a good one when the government was too busy with various colonial affairs, so that some land with high economic potential could not be cultivated by others. Furthermore, this change in the economic system also opened up opportunities for private parties or capital owners not only to open companies in the Indies, but also to participate in export activities.[51] Therefore, the presence of the private sector led to a progressive system of cooperation between capital owners and the government.

Thus, during the nineteenth century, two reforms were implemented regarding the Dutch East Indies' colonial policy on land management. The Agrarian Law not only served as a legal basis for managing the colony, but also served as an instrument of colonial capitalism in the Dutch East Indies. This change was significant because it marked a shift from state capitalism to capitalist capitalism, resulting in the emergence of private companies leasing land in the Dutch East Indies.[52] The colonial state became stronger towards the end of the nineteenth century and was able to guarantee land, labor, and property security for private investors.[53] Capitalism in the Indies, which was growing increasingly fertile, was also supported by transportation facilities and infrastructure, especially with the completion of the Post Road and the massive construction of lines and a solid railway network.[54] This progress is also often understood as the initial milestone in the modernization of the Dutch East Indies colonies, which began to firmly implement a liberal economic system and capitalism.

Private land began to transform into private ownership, spreading rapidly after the establishment of *Agrarisch Wet* and *Suiker Wet*. Private land can be traced back to the VOC era in the East Indies. VOC officials granted private land to Europeans and Chinese to manage and administer.[55] This collaboration gave the landlords full authority to manage the land and regulate the farming community as agricultural laborers there.[56] This created problems because landlords often found arbitrariness in setting minimum limits for harvest yields, excise duties, taxes, and working hours in

[50] M.C. Ricklefs, *A Modern History of Indonesia since c. 1200*, 3rd edn (Palgrave, 2001).

[51] Roger Knight, 'Rescued from the Myths of Time: Toward a Reappraisal of European Mercantile Houses in Mid-Nineteenth Century Java,c. 1830-1870', *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde*, 170.2/3 (2014), pp. 313–41, JSTOR.

[52] S. Kartodirdjo, *Pengantar Sejarah Indonesia Baru: 1500–1900 Dari Emporium Sampai Imperium*, II, 2 vols (Ombak, 2017), I.

[53] Claver, 'PRELUDE TO RAPID EXPANSION (1800–1884)'.

[54] Aloysius Gunadi BRATA, 'THE INFLUENCE OF COLONIAL RAILWAYS ON JAVA ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY', *Theoretical and Empirical Researches in Urban Management*, 16.2 (2021), pp. 39–54, JSTOR.

[55] I. Imadudin, 'Perlawanan Petani di Tanah Partikelir Tandjoeng Oost Batavia Tahun 1916', *Patanjala: Jurnal Penelitian Sejarah dan Budaya*, 7.1 (2015), pp. 33–48.

[56] I. Imadudin, K. Sofianto, and M. Falah, 'Gerakan Sosial di Tanah Partikelir Pamanukan dan Ciasem 1913', *Patanjala: Jurnal Penelitian Sejarah dan Budaya*, 4.3 (2012), pp. 433–45.

the cultivation of private land. Therefore, the emergence of messianic resistance was often found on private land due to the excessive workload.

God's Land: Local Communities and Conflict with the Colonials

The massive land reforms in the Dutch East Indies undoubtedly impacted the lives of the local population, the majority of whom were farmers. This situation provides us with an understanding of how the pressure and burdens imposed by landlords and the colonial government influenced various protest movements. Colonial government investigations consistently identified protest movements as being fueled by the perceived political and economic instability. Therefore, narratives about social movements in the Dutch East Indies were dominated by political and economic paradigms. Furthermore, narratives of fanaticism served as the basis for the community's drive to participate in the messiah movement.

The Samin Movement in Blora, Central Java, had strong elements that demonstrated tension and disagreement between the community and the Dutch East Indies colonial government. In general, the Samin Movement was triggered by the Blora community's disapproval of teak plantations. The Samin Movement had demands against the Dutch East Indies colonial government, including the rejection of taxes, ethical policies, forced labor, and other state regulations.[57] The Samin Movement submitted its demands peacefully and silently without violence.[58] However, the Samin Movement was considered by the colonial authorities as a threat because it disrupted political and social stability in the Indies. Colonial reports depicted the Saminists as irrational tax resisters, yet these documents consistently silenced ecological motives. Particularly, the dispossession of teak forests and restrictions on communal land access. This omission reflects a colonial framing that naturalized resource extraction while pathologizing indigenous ecological ethics.

The Samin movement was a lawsuit that can be seen as an ecological conflict in the Indies stemming from disagreements over environmental management. The colonial authorities considered the Blora landscape a natural resource to be exploited for teak trees. However, the Blora community opposed such exploitation, as it would damage the environment and restrict access to the land that was their source of livelihood. Ultimately, Samin became a charismatic figure who rose to prominence by formulating a silent movement as a form of resistance. This also aligns with Javanese teachings, which are driven by spiritual strengthening rather than seeking glory.

Rachman also led the Ratu Pelabuhan Rebellion Movement in Karangtengah, Sukabumi, which was a resistance against the Dutch East Indies Colonial Government in West Java. The Ratu Pelabuhan Rebellion Movement ended when Rachman and his troops were arrested, so the resistance lasted only one day. This resistance actually began when the Wedana Ciheulang arrested Rachman and several members of his group, which angered other followers. Rachman's movement was part of a religious

[57] A. Widyarsono, 'Gerakan Samin: Perlawanan Rakyat Tanpa Kekerasan', *Unisia*, 1998, pp. 81–95.

[58] Abritama, 'Gerakan Samin: Konflik Hutan, Ratu Adil, dan Perlawanan Kultural Petani Blora'.

fanaticism that wanted to expel Europeans and Chinese from the land in Sukabumi.[59] However, the judge and prosecutor in the trial were suspicious because there was no religious figure with the title of Haji, who is usually the main driver in cases of messianic movements. Archival narratives emphasized religious fanaticism while minimizing evidence of irrigation sabotage and unequal water allocation. This selective emphasis reveals the colonial anxiety surrounding water control as a strategic resource.

Initially, the defendants continued to argue that their movement was a manifestation of Rachman's greatness as a savior who would reestablish the Sunda Kingdom. The defendants finally claimed that water injustice was the seed of the Bapa Rachman Rebellion because their previous complaints had always been ignored by the district chief (wedana).[60] The results of the investigation confirmed that there had been water sabotage by a group of officials, which also gave a deeper impression that there had been no attempt to overthrow the Dutch East Indies colonial government.[61] Large pipes were also specially made to be channeled to the factory, which further reduced the water supply. The construction of these pipes also blocked the water supply to the rice fields of the residents of Bojong Kawung, further worsening the irrigation conditions there.[62] Ultimately, the district chief of Ciheulang was dismissed for negligence and for alleged water sabotage initiated by him.

The Ratu Pelabuhan Rebellion movement led by Rachman in Karangtengah, Sukabumi, illustrates a form of resistance against ecological injustice ignored by the Dutch East Indies colonial government. This rebellion is rooted in concrete issues related to access to natural resources, particularly water, which are wrapped in a narrative of religious fanaticism and messianic hopes. The sabotage of irrigation by local officials, the construction of pipelines for industrial purposes at the expense of residents' agricultural needs, and the neglect of community complaints demonstrate how ecological inequality is maintained through colonial power and local bureaucracy. The exploitation of nature often creates tensions and forms social movements, but these conflicts are also exacerbated by the government's bias towards corporate interests.[63] Thus, this rebellion cannot be separated from the context of the deprivation of people's ecological rights as part of a broader structural injustice.

The Kiai Hasan Moekmin rebellion in Sidoarjo, also known as the Gedangan Incident, was a messianic movement in East Java. Kiai Hasan Mukmin was a religious leader with an Islamic educational background in Sufism of the Qadariyah wa Naqsbandiyah order who was later involved in the resistance movement against the

[59] G.A.F.J. Oosthout, 'Rapport van de Resident van Priangan (G.A.F.J. Oosthout) aan de Gouverneur-Generaal van Nederlands-Indië (J.B. van Heutz)', Mailrapporten, Preanger, 14 January 1907, Arsip Nasional Indonesia.

[60] Anonim, 'POGING TOT "OMVERWERPING" VAN HET GEZAG', section 20, *Bataviasche Nieuwsblad* (Batavia), 16 July 1907, p. 1, Delpher.nl.

[61] Anonim, 'POGING TOT "OMVERWERPING" VAN HET GEZAG', section 11, *Bataviasche Nieuwsblad* (Batavia), 29 June 1907, pp. 1–2, Delpher.nl.

[62] Anonim, 'POGING TOT "OMVERWERPING" VAN HET GEZAG', section 19, *Bataviasche Nieuwsblad* (Batavia), 15 July 1907, p. 1, Delpher.nl.

[63] Anonim, 'POGING TOT "OMVERWERPING" VAN HET GEZAG', 16 July 1907.

colonial government of the Indies.[64] This movement was triggered by a conflict between the community and the Sidoarjo regional government over land disputes and water pipeline issues.[65] The land dispute conflict was mainly due to the local government forcing the collection of land taxes to pressure the community to sell their land and fish ponds (milkfish and shrimp) to private parties.[66] This rebellion was led by Kiai Hasan Moekmin, a religious leader, with his followers, the majority of whom were farmers. Reports from the Sidoarjo administration framed Kiai Hasan's movement as subversive agitation but neglected to address the structural impact of forced land sales and industrial water pipelines, exposing the archive's bias toward protecting private interests.

Kiai Hasan's movement exposed ecological injustice in colonial areas. Kiai Hasan's movement revealed propaganda about water tapping by poisoning tin pipes that flowed to residents' homes, and this narrative also pointed to covert European Christianization.[67] The allegations of poisoning and Christianization through the lead pipes that carried water to residents' homes symbolized the community's concerns about an unfair and discriminatory natural resource management system. Water, a basic necessity, was politicized and used as a tool of control by those in power, while the community's access to it became increasingly threatened. Agrarian communities are highly dependent on the availability and sustainability of water, so the need to build water channels as part of natural resource management is fundamental.[68] These acts or allegations of sabotage can be interpreted as a response to inequalities in water use, where economic interests and colonial power are prioritized over ecological welfare and the right to life of local communities.

The configuration of messianic resistance does not always have to be associated with political tension or economic instability as the basis for its resistance. In fact, these political and economic aspects are the broadest aspects that require further examination. Land is a gift from God to be used wisely and properly to meet the needs of the surrounding community. Therefore, land and all the resources it contains are the most vital element for agrarian communities as a place to depend on for their

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[64] Himmatin Adhimah, Ahmad Rizqi Syaifullah, and Wahyu Adi Wibowo, 'The Role of KH. Mukmin in the Spread of Islam in Gedangan, Sidoarjo in 1904', *The Role of KH. Mukmin in the Spread of Islam in Gedangan, Sidoarjo in 1904*, 3 (2025), pp. 837–44 <https://proceedings.uinsa.ac.id/index.php/iconfahum/article/view/3246/2143>.

[65] Illahi, 'PERAN INLANDS BESTUUR SIDOARDJO DALAM MENANGANI PERISTIWA GEDANGAN TAHUN 1904'.

[66] U.A. Umroh, 'KYAI HASAN MUKMIN (Studi Tentang Perannya Memimpin Perlawanan Petani Pada Pemerintah Kolonial Belanda di Gedangan 1904)' (unpublished Skripsi diterbitkan, UIN Sunan Ampel, 2017).

[67] L.A. Arends, 'Resident van Soerabaja (L.A. Arends) aan de Gouverneur-Generaal van Nederlands-Indië (W. Rooseboom)', Mailrapporten, Soerabaja, 10 June 1904, Arsip Nasional Indonesia.

[68] Krisnanda Theo Primaditya, 'Modernisasi Kota: Saluran Air Bersih Perpipaan Di Jawa Masa Kolonial', *Lembaran Sejarah*, 17.2 (2022), p. 171, doi:10.22146/lembaran-sejarah.73174.

livelihoods.[69] From this, we can understand that the spiritual aspect is at the heart of the problem because the cosmic order of local communities is disturbed. At this stage, the main conflict is not limited to economic and political issues, but rather the exploitative nature of colonialism that has disrupted the ecological balance that local communities consider essential.

The use of land or water from the perspective of local communities and the colonial government was indeed different, often causing cultural clashes. Land and water management for local communities was usually managed collectively and openly, with concessions without harming one another.[70] Local communities view nature as the eternal law of God, which must be respected in its management.[71] However, the colonial government considers that the colonized land and everything in it is the right of the colony to be fully utilized for the welfare of the state and the nation of origin.[72] This clear difference in the use and management of land and other natural resources is one of the reasons for the emergence of messianic-based agrarian conflicts.

The tension between local communities and the colonial government within the configuration of messianic-based movements is a link to ecological issues. Through this ecological perspective, messianic movement patterns become a kind of major vehicle for mobilizing against the colonial power. This relates to colonial exploitation of colonized lands without considering the interests of local communities as part of the ecosystem. Resistance in the name of the messiah as the core of the movement can also be read as ecological resistance because it rejects the new system that alienates them from their environment.

CONCLUSION

For us, the messianic movement can be further examined as the failure of the colonial government to provide local communities with access to their land and natural resources. The colonial government viewed the colonized land as a machine for generating money, but the local communities did not see it that way. Land cultivators, whether farmers or farm workers, saw the land as a source of livelihood. Therefore, local communities would not accept their access to land and water as a source of livelihood being treated in an exploitative manner. For local communities, the colonial government was absurd, while for the colonists, the locals were superstitious. Thus, it

[69] Mohammad Dwi Febriyanto and Wahyu Prawesthi, 'Sengketa Hak Milik Tanah Sawah Akibat Kegiatan Jual Beli Yang Tidak Sah', *Jurnal Ilmiah Wahana Pendidikan*, 10.4 (2024), pp. 461–73, doi:https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10521672.

[70] M.A. Marfai, *Pengantar Etika Lingkungan dan Kearifan Lokal* (Gadjah Mada University Press, 2012).

[71] Rini Fidiyani and Ubaidillah Kamal, 'PENJABARAN HUKUM ALAM MENURUT PIKIRAN ORANG JAWA BERDASARKAN PRANATA MANGSA', *Jurnal Dinamika Hukum*, 12.3 (2012), doi:10.20884/1.jdh.2012.12.3.117.

[72] Justin Alinafe Mangulama, 'Water Resource Grabbing: A Focus on Rural Malawi', *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10.1 (2024), p. 2423857, doi:10.1080/23311886.2024.2423857.

was only natural that these various protest movements could not be resolved properly. The difference in perspective between the community and the colonial government led to a misunderstanding between the two, preventing them from finding common ground as a solution to the crisis.

While previous scholarship often treats these movements as discrete religious or political episodes, this research approaches them comparatively to examine how ecological tensions intersected with other structural forces. The Samin Movement, the Gedangan Affair, and the Rachman Movement each responded to different configurations of land dispossession, irrigation control, and water-based economic changes. By acknowledging their multifactorial nature and avoiding a monolithic explanation, this study positions ecological grievances as a critical yet differentiated dimension within the broader landscape of messianic mobilization.

Thus, this research is expected to contribute to the development of Indonesian historiography through an interdisciplinary approach between history and ecology. Scientifically, this approach opens up new space for environmental-based social history studies. In terms of policy, this research can be a basis for formulating agrarian and environmental policies rooted in local values and ecological spirituality. For the community, these findings reaffirm the importance of maintaining a just relationship with nature as a living cosmological heritage. In the academic world, this research encourages the need for further studies that bring together the dimensions of local spirituality, colonial history, and the ecological crisis in a more systematic and interdisciplinary manner.

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