

# ENACTMENT OF RELIGIOUS VALUES IN PERMACULTURE INITIATIVES IN THE MUSLIM-MAJORITY ASIAN CONTEXT

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## ABSTRACT

The study of contemporary permaculture initiatives requires a short overview and analysis of the conceptual domains upon which are constituted. This paper seeks to understand the enactment of religious values through permaculture projects *in Muslim majority countries*. The commonalities between Islamic values and the resonance with the values upon which permaculture projects in the Muslim majority countries are founded will be identified through the experiences of the founders of three permaculture projects in Southeast Asia (Malaysia and Indonesia).

**Keywords:** Permaculture, Islamic environmentalism, sustainability, values, healing

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Whether we look at the rate of extraction of minerals, loss of biodiversity, ocean acidification, or the levels of compliance to United Nations agreements, it becomes increasingly clear that economic rationality and market-based logics do not seem to deliver the promise to “work for the environment” (WTO, 2018). As the limits of instrumental and prudential ways of engaging with the environment are increasingly recognized, the role played by moral values, and specifically spiritual and religious values, has become a more central interest (Plumwood, 2005; Marowich, 2017; Gade, 2019). This interest follows the social movements oriented to achieve a broader transformation in the ways humans relate to the world – e.g., more than becoming more efficient, preferring less harmful ways – such as permaculture and healing biotopes. This paper aims to contribute to a better grasp of the place of religious values in understanding and communicating our present environmental predicament and the initiatives taken to deal with it.

We focus specifically on contemporary permaculture initiatives founded in Muslim-majority South East Asian countries. Our specific goal is to examine the enactment of religious values and moral principles in Muslim environmental initiatives that aim at self- and environmental- transformation. Islamic environmentalism is fundamental to understanding where Islamic values today are most relevant to the daily lives and practices of contemporary Muslims. Due to the limited scope of this research, we endeavour to lay out a definition and summary of environmentalism, and some common themes in order to contextualize why Muslim communities in South East Asia are re-engaging with the natural environment through permaculture. We also aim to break down how eco-theology and Islamic environmentalism define core values for Muslims to use and follow today in their effort to build initiatives such as healing centres and eco-retreats. This will provide a wider context as to where permaculture projects led by Muslim founders in South East Asia – our interviewees – fit within the broader discourse on spiritual environmentalism. Many core values concerning the environment originate within Islamic environmentalism, however, there are others that don't feature in the discourse which Gade (2019) refers to as ‘Muslim environmentalisms’. These concepts include mortality, *tayyibat* (goodness/wholesome), the concept of trust, *amānah*, mercy- *ra ma*, amongst others.

All of the interviewees' explanations about why they had chosen permaculture specifically were linked to the theory of change that they were seeking to enable. Reconnecting with nature through permaculture fits within the Islamic transformational ecology paradigm and is also linked to some of the core values articulated in the discussion on Islam and the environment.

When analyzing the motivations and plans of the founders of projects in Southeast Asia, we connected many of the core Islamic values they mentioned directly to one of the three tenants of permaculture ethics: Earth care, people care, and fair share.

The paper is structured as follows: in the next section we outline the definitions and the perspectives within which this discussion takes place. Then we connect the Islamic values with each of the three core tenets of permaculture. Firstly, we will draw a connection between Earth Care and Stewardship, and how restoring the land can be tied to fulfilling the role of *khalīfa* (steward), along with Islamic environmental values such as *fitrah* (primordial nature), and *tawhid* (oneness). Secondly, the ethic of people care and how this relates to the enactment of building community through the *ummah* and ‘living Islam’ through one's lifestyle, and finally, the fair share ethic which can be connected to values such as *mizan* (balance) and *tayyib*, goodness/wholesome in Islam.

To conclude, we show that our interviewees enact their religious values through practicing permaculture, namely by identifying the connection between the Islamic environmental values that resonate with them and the corresponding foundational values of permaculture that they are applying through their work – earth care, people care and fair share.

## I. DEFINING PERMACULTURE AND ITS CORE VALUES

The rise in permaculture as a practice emerges out of a history of the development of environmentalism and environmentalist movements. Permaculture is a method that seeks to restore the Earth; it has also been referred to as ‘world repairing’ (Beaman and Stacey, 2021). Besides this healing aspect, there are also social aspects to it in terms of building and creating communities. The word permaculture, broken down to mean permanent agriculture, was first used by Bill Mollison to describe ‘an integrated, evolving system of perennial or self-perpetuating plant and animal species useful to man’ (Mollison, Holmgren 1978, p.2). This concept has been developed over the years and though a lot of it centres on developing a sustainable agricultural system, it also applies to people, organisations and places. There are three defining values in permaculture which guide the design process (Mollison, 1988):

- Care for the earth (husband soil, forests and water)
- Nurture people (take care of self, kin and community)
- Fair share (set limits to consumption and reproduction, and redistribute surplus)

Permaculture teachings and practices vary from place to place, as every ecosystem is different and the aim is to act with nature, as opposed to in competition with it. The Worldwide Permaculture Network works to spread permaculture design solutions through local changes which influence the surrounding societies by advancing organic agriculture, appropriate technology and intentional community design (Holmgren, 2002). Most people involved in permaculture get certified after taking a Permaculture Design Course, which is a 72-hour training course taken with the chance to do some practical application.

Permaculture relates to ecosystems through practices, and should be distinguished from other types of environmental action. Highlighting environmentalism as a discourse alone creates a gap, it is here that a differentiation between environmentalism and ecology must be outlined (Mollison, 1988).

## I. ECO THEOLOGY, ISLAMIC ECO-THEOLOGY & ENVIRONMENTAL ISLAMIC ACTION

Ecotheology is a form of constructive theology that focuses on the connection between religion and nature. Ecotheology transforms traditional religion, finding ignored material from traditional resources, and reinterpreting traditional sacred texts within an ecological context (Tucker, 2003, p. 36). Many contemporary eco-theological texts are drawn from the Qur'anic verses and hadith in order to infer the importance of ecology in Islam. One of the consequences of this has been the emergence of Islamic Environmentalism as a modern concept developed in response to the mainstream environmentalism. Whilst ecotheology conceptualizes the importance of the natural ecosystem in Islam, Islamic environmentalism is connected to actions that promote an ethical lifestyle, which factors in the effects of human behaviour on the natural environment.

It is within the discourse of mainstream environmentalism that contemporary perspectives on modern Islam and the environment sit. The selection of contemporary texts written by prominent Muslim scholars concerning the environment is limited, with Gade's (2019), Khalid's (1999, 2005, 2019), Ozdemir's (1997, 1998, 2017), Chittick's (1986), and Nasr's works (1992, 1997) are often referenced when key themes and arguments such as *'al ard'* (*The Earth*) being fundamental to Islam, to the Quran being 'a book of nature'. Chittick also importantly addresses how the spiritual world surrounds the physical world by stating there is a hierarchy – not only between man and God, but also between the physical and the spiritual. Özdemir regards nature as a 'book of the universe' (Özdemir, 1998). The term 'ayah' could

refer to a verse in the Quran and as well as a natural phenomenon or a wonder of nature. This can be interpreted to mean that the Quranic verses from God are a wonder, and that each wonder of nature is a verse from God (Özdemir, 1998).

Nasr (2017), deepens the discussion further by putting forth the argument that by no longer living in harmony with our surroundings, humans have destroyed their relationship between man and 'Him who Surrounds' (Nasr, 2017). Placing responsibility on the fall of man through a disconnection with God, he argues that this needs to be fixed to develop a better relationship with our surroundings. Modern environmentalism has its own history of relations with religion which must be acknowledged in order to understand the place of Muslim environmentalism. Gade differentiates between "Muslim environmentalisms" and "Islamic environmentalism" in the following way:

the named approach preferred here to a standard subfield of Islamic and religious studies called Islam and the environment. The latter typically produces an essentialized conception of Islam according to a process of keyword translation indicating what is "environment." This characterizes contemporary "Islam and [x]" approaches overall (hence the italics, as in "Islam and —" democracy, women, human rights, and so forth). (Gade, 2019, 14)

In some ways, our analysis reflect Gade's argument that the framing should be regarded instead as 'Muslim environmentalisms', due to the fact that though common Islamic values are mentioned, which originate within Islamic environmentalism, there are others mentioned by the interviewees that don't feature in this discourse. We connect these back to the permaculture values with which the interviewees draw parallels. These concepts include *mizan* (balance), *tayyibat* (goodness/wholesome), the concept of trust, *amānah*, and mercy- *rahma*, amongst others.

There have also been the creation of manuals for the modern Muslim such as Ibrahim Matin's *Green Deen* (2010), and Reza Shah-Kazemi's *Seeing God Everywhere* (2011): *Quranic Perspectives on the Sanctity of Virgin Nature* that break down these Islamic environmental values and how they correspond with every day actions in an accessible way. Contemporary writers (Khalid, 2019, Abdul Matin, 2010) who refer to the Quran and the Hadith literature when addressing the connection between Islam and the environment, draw attention to certain values that are recurrent. The commonly cited Islamic values are *tawhīd* (oneness),

*fitrah* (a return to our primordial disposition), the principles of *mizān* and ‘adl (balance and justice) in nature and finally, the principle of *khalīfa* (responsibility or guardianship) on Earth.

## II. PERMACULTURE INITIATIVES IN THE MUSLIM WORLD: FOCUSING ON VALUES THROUGH INTERVIEWS

The study is based on interviews conducted with founders of three permaculture projects – two in Indonesia and one project in Malaysia. The quotations are taken from a dissertation project that originally included ten interviews with Permaculturists across Muslim-majority countries<sup>1</sup>, the interview questions were open ended, the interviews were conducted between January 2021 and October 2021, and in English. The mean interview duration was about an hour and half. The interviewer – the first author – aimed to allow the storytelling to occur by giving respondents the chance to speak in their own voice and preventing interruption unless further probing was required. The interviews were divided into three main sections, the first focused on the background and history of their project, the second was centred around healing - its definitions, and finally, more general questions about contemporary Muslims and the relationship they have with the environment today. The goal was to identify the recurring values that came up and that formed the foundation of the permaculture initiatives.

The work that Muslims are doing in permaculture and sustainable agriculture can be linked to Islamic beliefs and practices overall, as well as those which connect to the context of Islamic environmentalism. For many of the interviewees, the links between their Islamic beliefs and work were very strong and clearly articulated. There is an interconnectedness between the dedication and discipline that they apply to the religion and practice of Islam and the lifestyle or way of life they are choosing to live. Some of the interviewees have drawn a direct connection between Islam and permaculture based on Islamic values, which prioritise working in harmony with and learning from the natural ecosystem. When discussing the use of permaculture, several values are mentioned by the participants, and three of these core values will be discussed below. The first of these is ‘*Tawhid*’, the unity principle. The next is ‘*Fitrah*’, the creation principle which is used in this exact terminology in Arabic. Lastly the ‘*Khilafah*’, the responsibility or stewardship principle (Khalid, 2019).

<sup>1</sup> The study is based on a larger corpus of ten interviews that included other Muslim countries, but these three interviewees were selected due to the regional significance of South East Asia. Please note the interviewees have been given pseudonyms.

### 2.1. EARTH CARE & TAWHID - ONENESS

Many interviewees expressed that they chose permaculture as a method to allow the opportunity for participants to contemplate nature or to run events and activities that allowed people to reconnect to nature, all of which are in line with Islamic values and teachings. This is what led to the approach they have taken in their work. In the experience of all the interviewees, the concept of ‘going back to the land’ and following the natural cycles and patterns in nature connects to the principle of *fitrah* - returning to our primordial disposition and thus always being connected to *tawhid* (the oneness of God). Employing the method of permaculture was beneficial to living these values and was articulated in different ways.

Muslim environmentalists draw on the concept of *tawhid* as the core reason for the affirmation of the unity of God (Foltz, 2006). As expressed in the profession of faith “There is no God but God”, everything comes from and therefore reflects the source. This includes the unity of nature, other living things, and man (Bagir & Martiam, 2017). In this, nature plays a pivotal role in contributing to the unity because it is regarded as interconnectedness par excellence, every detail in nature is created to be in perfect harmony with all the other parts of Creation, which is understood in ecology as the cycles of ecosystems.

‘We have to explore our Quranic teachings on how to... to find out the guidance from the Quran, and from God ...it is meaningful to know the life of the order of Creation because we are not, created alone. *God created us...and we are a part of nature*. And this kind of philosophical approach is very important to be explored how then we can find out the Muslim perspective on that and apply that to the aspect of Islamic practicalities in our community itself...’

- Nurul, Indonesia

Here, the interviewee clearly articulates being a part of nature as reflecting the ‘oneness’ of existence and God. The spiritual dimension of being in nature provides the chance to understand where humans fit amongst the rest of God’s creation. He encourages the opportunity to be in nature to allow people to come back to God by knowing their place and role in the cycle of creation. In this instance, the value of oneness is reflected in the unity in multiplicity and diversity of God’s creation. Here it is clear that Earth Care reminds individuals of their environment and ultimately, reminds them of God.

## 2.2 EARTH CARE & FITRAH- PRIMORDIAL DISPOSITION

The next main principle we want to touch upon is the Quranic notion of the primordial disposition (*Fitrah*) which can be understood as a being's original state or essence, or the natural pattern of creation (Abdel Haleem, 1998). This principle applies to animals and other beings as well as humans. Returning to the *fitrah*, refers to reverting back to our original state and many examples in nature are what we are given to compare ourselves to. Leaman (2008, p.40) goes as far to link *fitrah* to "the state of infinite goodness", building on the theological notion that everything has the potential to be good. *Fitrah* is also connected back to the state in which we are born, before becoming corrupted or negatively influenced by the world, emerging in a state which is close to God, a purity that is not only referred to with regards to other humans, but also all of Creation is described as having a '*fitrah*'. Here our interviewee mentions that by witnessing nature we can feel connected to God and thus in tune with ourselves.

Connect with nature, go outside, go camping for example with your children, and ask them to pray with jamaah outside you know. Yeah. In the end, is kind of healing to see that nature is, created for humans. And *we can feel connected to the pure creation of God*. And I think it is very important. We are also conscious that if we are going to nature, for example, we have to *connect to ourselves*.

- Nurul, Indonesia

This builds on the notion that the primordial disposition of mankind is a state that one requires to actively go back to, i.e., one ought to heal and transform one's murkier states to that cleared natural state that is internalized through the notion of *fitrah*. The practical argument for the modern subject is that urban life and technological advancements have taken them away from their original state, thus active steps must be taken to live in a way that is more befitting.

The issue is that people have *been living in the city and they don't take care of themselves*. Like what do you think is causing people to get so sick? *It's the lifestyle they live because they are staying in the city...*I can see when people come here, they realise and talk about the benefits of nature and then it makes them realize for example, how important organic food is.

- Haweya, Malaysia

This concept of returning to nature, to observe and benefit from its patterns is also mentioned by the interviewee. This is again a way to remedy one of the issues in society today – the impact of urban life and how this has led to a 'disconnection'. The interviewee emphasizes that there has to be an effort to reclaim our connection to the environment and to be healthy by going out into nature. To remedy the disconnection, putting people back into a natural environment reminds us of our place and our role in a bigger picture. Both interviewees highlight simply leaving the city and going out to a place with thriving biodiversity is directly linked to the individuals' understanding of whether they are connected to their *Fitrah* and their hearts or minds. As a tenet of the permaculture ethic of Earth care, even by spending time in a park, people are able to connect back to themselves. By connecting to this logic, using time working on the land is deepening for the human a connection with the primordial way of being.

## 2.3. EARTH CARE & KHALĪFA - VICEGERENCY

At the centre of the movement of re-sacralising the —created— cosmos is the reinstating of the notion of *khalīfa* (vicegerency) as the natural disposition of the human subject vis a vis the created order that makes out the environment. The principle of stewardship is a central component to all of the interviewees, matching its prominence within the field of Islamic environmentalism. In the words of Nasr (1993, p.134) "As khalifat Allah, he must be active in the world, sustaining cosmic harmony and disseminating the grace for which he is the channel as a result of his being the central creature in the terrestrial order." This is also reflected in the 'Care for the Earth' tenet of permaculture. Many interviewees draw on listening to nature and following its natural patterns, perhaps even imitating it on occasion- observation is one of the main values in permaculture. This Islamic value stems from the Qur'anic statement:

And when thy Lord said unto the angels: Lo! I am about to place a viceroy in the earth, they said: Wilt thou place therein one who will do harm therein and will shed blood, while we, we hymn Thy praise and sanctify Thee? He said: Surely I know that which ye know not. (al-Baqarah: 30, Quran)

The word *khalīfa* in Arabic has multiple translations, it can be interpreted as successor, guardian, vicegerent, or steward of the Earth (Idris, 1990). Vicegerent implies standing in for someone else for a certain period of time to guard something (Bewley, 1998), and this term has

thus been interpreted in multiple ways- for some, it applies using what “little power we have to make things better” (Abdel Haleem 1998, 7). There is a debate amongst contemporary writers who have interpreted the term *khalifa* as a representative, vicegerent, viceroy, or guardian and steward of the *ar* (earth) — many of them equate with the environment. There is almost universal agreement that the *khalifa* here means the vicegerent of God on earth (Ozdemir, 2008) and the steward of the environment. One can argue, as Adi Setia states, that stewardship is intertwined with the twin notion of trusteeship and this extends to safeguarding both the rights of man and by extension, the rights of “all inhabitants of the earth” (Setia, 2007, 138). Where there is historic and contemporary debate, however, is the type of responsibility that comes with being *khalifa*, whether this corresponds with ownership or more of a responsibility attuned to managing other creatures on Earth.

Ismail narrates that his journey into permaculture started because he recognized a detachment from nature. He ties the concept of stewardship into acting in line with the natural rhythm of nature, and how permaculture places humans within this natural rhythm.

Islam is, both separate and attached from your position in nature as a creature and your obligation are so much intertwined with nature. Because of your position as a *khalifah*, as a caretaker of this world.

So that’s, that’s how it started you know... I mean my journey has become very specific in the way. And it’s become very interesting because this is also the biggest problem of the ummah...it is how the ummah is actually, without really realizing it, they are *detaching themselves from nature*.

- Ismail, Indonesia

He identifies that by recognizing the disconnection, his own role as a caretaker was not being fulfilled by observing the natural patterns and flow of things, whilst simultaneously seeing it as an opportunity to fall in love with Creation again. Earth care allows us to observe the cycles of the season, and create a deep sense of peace and personal benefit for the individual.

This role is considered to be a sacred responsibility, if understood to be handed over to human beings, as opposed to any other part of Creation. This has been used repeatedly in Islamic environmentalism literature and even contemporary campaigns calling Muslims to take action around climate change (Al-Mizan, UNEP, 2021). Scholars such as Fazlun Khalid focus on the ethical dimensions of this responsibility to care for the Earth in “a way that

conforms to God’s purpose in Creation” (Khalid, 2019). This argument of ‘responsibility’ is taken further to not only be connected to Muslims’ position on the environment but a general moral compass that extends to issues such as wealth distribution and the law to ensure destruction is prevented.

Permaculture is also regarded as a method that places humans “as responsible ecosystem managers within, rather than separate from nature. They are expected to cohabit with all other beings with awareness, care and responsibility” (Centemeri, 2019). This can be directly linked to the principle of stewardship and guardianship mentioned in numerous theological traditions. This is one of the definitive distinctions between this system as opposed to other sustainable forms of agriculture, i.e., organic farming, biodynamic farming, etc. This distinguishes why it appeals to those who are inclined towards understanding spirituality in nature, or towards Islam – or other religions – recognising the importance of others in creation.

## II. PEOPLE CARE & BUILDING COMMUNITY AS ONE *UMMAH*

For the interviewees, permaculture provided an avenue for very practical action, fulfilling the act of taking care and building a wider and more connected community. They sought to create spaces and communities which allow for spirituality and diverse learning, and a way to connect with others that they knew. This is therefore transformative in that it radically opposes the status quo by creating alternative modes of living. The concept of ‘living Islam’ took multiple forms throughout the interviews and was talked about in a variety of ways. For some, permaculture seems like a way they could find a middle path, whilst others present a reasoning based on both their Islamic and permaculture understanding. Other interviewees report to have chosen permaculture as a system of living beyond capitalist values and power structures, which has allowed them to implement constructive action and self-transformation.

And this is where the quality of Islam depends more on the quality of our everyday lives. You know now that if our everyday life becomes corrupted by the *modern life of being a consumer and becoming dependent, we will more or less likely become enslaved with the product industry*. We have become very weak, not only physically but also psychologically, and also emotionally and, and if you are physically weak, you also

become psychologically and emotionally weak. The social structure will also crumble... and if this crumbles, then obviously your spirit will watch it and also crumble.

–Ismail, Indonesia

The interviewee uses the term ‘modern life of a consumer’ and ‘enslaved’ to describe the challenges that capitalism presents. This demonstrates that permaculture provides the opportunity to re-design living on a systematic level which has an impact on different aspects of society. This goes beyond the benefits of community gardens which provide fresh food and allow space for education, employment, and community building, which can be short-lived (Lawson, 2005). Therefore, it is evident that there is a strong degree of community building that is a fundamental part of permaculture, as it focuses on capacity building, building local knowledge and expertise. The values push for a social permaculture - the opportunity to network with local institutions and build trust between one another (Holmgren, 2002). One of the benefits of permaculture is it also relies on some of the core values of community-based models - focusing on the relationships, strengths and needs of the community and to truly empower local and indigenous communities (Grenfell-Lee, 2017).

There is a greater potential of community cohesion where there is a communion between people connecting their physical forms, the rest of the natural world, and in some ways, it heals the growing burden of loneliness. (Meacham, 2001). Permaculture, though having aspects of individual practice, cannot be done in isolation, and it can only be successful when practiced as a community. This is because it is holistic in its approach, as it is focused on applying and developing social systems to effectively transform the self, the land and society simultaneously (Grenfell-Lee, 2017). This is articulated by the interviewee in stating that if the individual is weak and disconnected, the social structure will crumble and this will consequentially affect the spiritual states of people, weakening the entire structure and thus weakening the connection. He expands on this by identifying the relationship between capitalist values such as competition and consumerism and the focus on the individual; the implications are that the individual becomes weaker as it depends on a system that is designed to cause fragmentation and disconnection, and ultimately attachment to products, creating competition. As this attachment becomes stronger, the individual’s capacity to choose and connect with nature is lowered/hindered, creating a spiritual weakening within, which undoubtedly creates a fragmentation of sorts in the community.

The creation of permaculture and healing projects in this context is simultaneously a

response to the needs not currently met by the system in place, and initiatives to transform that system. Community organizing and working with those around them is a crucial way to lead and govern autonomous structures that permaculture supports. Though not explicitly articulated, it has been interpreted that permaculture along with other movements is critical of the industrialization and standardization of needs that capitalism prioritizes. In this way, we are reminded of the philosophical parallels between community and permaculture farming and the way the values and principles can be applied so differently depending on the context. It is revolutionary in that land, aid, and community can be brought together to find solutions that meet the needs of humans and other members of the ecosystem.

### III. FAIR SHARE: ISLAMIC VALUES OF *MIZAN* (BALANCE) & *TAYYIB* (WHOLESOME)

The fair share ethic in permaculture is shaped around setting limits and redistribution of surplus. Focusing on what is appropriate for us to do and then finding a balance so that a fair share of food can be given to others. Many of the interviewees mentioned access to food-quality, nutritious and pure food, by restoring the quality of the soil as the reason why they chose permaculture as the way they wanted to restore the land. Their collective goal involves producing good quality food for a larger set of people.

Our interviewee from Indonesia also focused on the impact of food on the body and soul and how accessing natural resources has not only had ramifications on the land and the natural environment but simultaneously had very clear impacts on our bodies.

So, every single day, they act in their life on the *mechanism of the food that they take as an intake*, I mean... to be aware of the problem of how we have actually become so *unethical from nature* and the way we’ve taken from other humans, how *we produce things, how might we exploit*. And in the last 100 years we took all those things that are being kept safe under the earth, and we you know we spread it again in the air we spread it in the ocean we spread it in the land. We spread it everywhere, *including our own body*.

– Ismail, Indonesia

Here the interviewee makes clear that resources and exploitation of the Earth cannot

be separated from our bodies, the fair share principle. As we pollute the air, sea and land, we eventually end up polluting our own bodies as well. The debate around food-growing and sourcing organic food has been ongoing within the sustainable agriculture and permaculture movement for years. Many argue that it is central to human existence that the key is to reclaim our broken relationship with food. It plays a significant role in the health of societies – on the individual and ecosystem level (Grenfell-Lee, 2017). Permaculture is argued to reorient food to the limits of what an ecosystem can do, thus taking into consideration the needs of the land, ecosystems and human beings. This includes the ‘no-dig’ approach and doing the opposite of what is often regarded as one of the causes of the food crisis - preventing the use of chemical fertilisers that maximise crop yield.

#### 4.1. FAIR SHARE & MIZAN- BALANCE

The Islamic value that can be connected to the fair share principle in permaculture is the notion of balance-*mizān*. The concept of balance is often mentioned with regards to a balance which has been set up in the world. There are multiple verses in the Quran which are referenced to highlight the significance Islam places on the concept of balance, “He set a measure for everything” (65:03, Surah Talaq) and “the earth We have spread out (like a carpet); set thereon mountains firm and immovable; and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance” (15:19, Surah Al-Hijr) (Abdel-Haleem, 2008). This is tightly interlinked with the concept of justice (*adl*), namely the weighing up of human deeds, both good and bad. There is also an understanding that the balance has been created by God and thus the power over it also lies with Him. Surah al-Rahman in the Quran is often quoted to demonstrate the importance attributed to balance, and this principle’s association with nature is such that it has recently been used to title a covenant for the Earth (Al-Mizan, 2021) by contemporary Muslims through the UN Environment Programme. Confronting the challenge of excessiveness with practicing and embodying the Islamic value balance, the founder of one of the initiatives Ismail noted:

‘So, you know, excessiveness - now we are being forced to live in the world through a sort of lifestyle of being excessive. That’s become almost an accepted condition that everybody has to be inclined to, you know... being able to realize this is one of the *most important things that we need to have in life is balance*, and we have to also need to inform friends or fellows in Islam of this, because, you know, denying that [excessiveness] is actually like surrendering yourself.’

‘...And this is where also for me permaculture becomes a kind of solution to try to put your perspective, and your acts and relationship with nature - because permaculture is not a new, a new knowledge, it is just an old wisdom that is being repackaged into our sort of life now in the modern time. It’s like, in the past, obviously people are being guided by their culture, *not to become excessive or not to intake into the culture everything...*’

–Ismail, Indonesia

Ismail’s choice to adopt permaculture was an effort to oppose the status quo and create balance. This can also be connected to the Gaia hypothesis which highlighted the Earth as a single large organism with many independent systems that all feed into one another and thus maintain an equilibrium (Lovelock, 1987). This means to urge humans to take lessons and learn from the natural world with the understanding that one cannot survive in a world of perpetual exploitation and growth. This interdependence is very clear when it comes to food production- from the seeds we sow to what eventually goes into our mouths, the value of interdependence cannot be ignored. Food sources and the way they are attained is a fundamental part of permanent agriculture and the underlying philosophy behind permaculture. In essence, a large part of the literature produced in the 1970s by Mollison and others concerns low input farming and attempting to design living systems that create harmony with their surroundings, making them resilient and adaptable, dependent on the plot of land individuals are working with. A crucial part of this is “are perennial agricultural systems which capture water, and the growth of a diversity of species as an overall food source.” (Rhodes 2012, 7.)

The interviewees seek to come back to, or be reminded of *mizan*, the natural balance through engaging with the permaculture practices. It takes them away from the negative value of excessiveness which is one of the challenges of modernity that they identify with.

*There is a measurement of everything* that God created so it’s not that you are not allowed to take things from nature but there is a measurement that clearly identifies what belongs to you, you know and you should actually become sensitive, either through intuition or through your contemplation or thinking rationally about how much actually belongs to you.

–Haweya, Malaysia

Here, the notion of ‘measurement’ is used instead of balance, but there is a clear reference



to the fair share principle. Humans are supposed to not just take from nature and consume, but have to be accountable in how much we take and how much belongs to fellow creatures or needs to be given back to the land.

#### 4.2. FAIR SHARE & TAYYIB- WHOLESOME

Some interviews mentioned permaculture in the context of creating a re-equilibrium in society. They see this methodology as a way to re-orient society, especially Muslims about applying the fair share ethic in permaculture to their communities. The audience they want to reach vary, some are focused on re-educating imams and the ulamah about the environment, others focused on re-training farmers and locals who were taught within the culture of mono-cropping or other forms of farming criticized for being labour intensive. In this regard, Ismail argued that Muslims and mainstream Islam have become trapped within the confines of modernity and capitalism. He placed responsibility with re-educating the leaders of the Muslim community in Indonesia, to be able to lead the next generation in a different way. He stressed the importance of re-education on our use of natural resources and the way humans treat their environment. He also mentioned the permissibility of food is in Islam, arguing that we need to go beyond our current understanding of *halal* (see also Rhamis, 2012). This can be connected to the principle of *tayyib*, which can mean pure, ethical or wholesome. This principle is discussed in contemporary Muslim activist discourse, in the realm of individual action (WIN, 2021).

And for me, one of the, one of the problems let's say mainstream Islam, which is very much in a way is losing the attractiveness towards being able to become a solution to this crisis, you know, because the hypocrisy is very strong because people are being trapped into a lifestyle that so consumeristic, and everything they do on the mechanism on the food that they intake *when it comes to tayyib and the relationship with the meaning of tayyib*, which actually a lot of young people and some of them are non-Muslim are very aware of the problem on how we have become so unethical.

–Ismail, Indonesia

Ismail's project receives the next generation of students from madrasahs across Indonesia as he believes change must start with the scholars of this generation. Along with the value of *tayyib*, there are also legal rulings that command humanity to act moderately and to limit

waste, connecting to the ethic of a fair share in permaculture design. For instance, verse 7:31 - "*O children of Ādam! Beautify yourselves for every act of worship, and eat and drink [freely], but do not waste: verily, He does not love the wasteful!*" amongst a number of other verses" (Asad, 2003). These verses command humans to act moderately and avoid wastefulness as it is not loved by God. (Cebeci, 2020).

Many of the values mentioned above can be directly linked with the core tenets of Permaculture: Earth Care, People Care, and Fair Share (Mollison, 2002). Mollison points to the challenges of modernity and how, with industrialization, people lost the link and associated wisdom that permits them to think about whether or not they should take from the natural ecosystem around them to meet their needs. The fair share foundation of permaculture is discussed in a variety of ways – for some, it is reflected in re-educating their communities to create change. They believe the shift starts with farmers and capacity building, whereas for others it starts with either the next generation fixing their relationship with food and the ecosystem or even the reformation within the Islamic education structure in their respective country. What they all have in common, however, is the belief that permaculture allows them to live the Islamic values they have been taught and allows them to create the future they want to see in their Muslim communities.

## CONCLUSION

Permaculture is a fast-growing movement and is gaining traction everywhere, including Muslim communities. Through a selection of interviews with Permaculturists across Muslim-majority countries, this paper demonstrates the core values and principles that govern permaculture initiatives in Muslim-majority contexts. In the interviews, the participants reference key values from the Qur'an, hadith, and through lived experience. For the purpose of this paper, only three interviewees' experiences have been discussed to illustrate the similarities between permaculture and Islamic values.

Permaculture appeals to contemporary Muslims for several reasons. Firstly, a large part of what constitutes Earth care in permaculture – the observation of the complexity of natural balance – fits within the vision many interviewees have of enacting and embodying Islamic environmentalism. Their interview responses are framed around the following core values: and the fundamental belief and enactment of witnessing oneness – *tawhid*,

connecting to the primordial state of being – *fitrah*, and fulfilling the role of stewardship – *khalīfa*.

Secondly, the enactment of the principle of people care in permaculture is articulated through the aspect of community building. The interviewees see themselves as fulfilling their rights as Muslims of belonging to and playing a role in creating one spiritual community (the concept of *ummah*) and fulfilling the practice and function of acting in the congregation (*jamaa'ah*). The state of the individual is intrinsically linked to the state of society and this is why people care matters and is enacted through community permaculture.

Finally, the discourse surrounding fair share ethic in permaculture is shaped around setting limits and redistribution of surplus. This was articulated in the interviews through mention of Islamic values such as balance – *mizan*, and the concept of wholesome, *tayyib*. Permaculture provides a framework to equate this balance and fair share between the land, soil and people through its foundational principles.

Additional values were also mentioned by the founders of projects in relation to why they chose to set up permaculture initiatives. These included not being wasteful and the trust we have been afforded by God both with the Earth, other living organisms and even our own bodies. Though contemporary texts do not refer to some of the values articulated in the interviews, such as not corrupting the earth, *fasād*, the notion of goodness, *tayyibat*, trust, *amānah* (Gade, 2019), and how this can be actualized in day to day life are what contemporary Muslims in South East Asia collectively relate to and reference when identifying why they have chosen permaculture as a way of life. Permaculture provides an ethical model that reflects the participants' beliefs and can be applied on a community level to heal those around them and the Earth at large. Interviewees expressed that it presents a real, tangible alternative to the current practices and lifestyle that have been influenced by global capitalism.

In focusing solely on Qur'anic translations, Islam and environmentalism is criticized at being at risk of falling into the same struggles of a secular Western approach (which has its own history and complexity) to environmentalism (Gade, 2018) viewing the environment as firmly outside us, as opposed to another part of creation and an ecosystem we are a part of. The founders of permaculture initiatives have articulated that they are able to enact their religious values through practicing and developing their respective projects. They identified the connection between the Islamic environmental values that resonate with the corresponding foundational values of permaculture that they apply through their work – earth care, people care, and fair share.

It is also important to acknowledge some recent criticisms originating outside of the field of traditional environmentalism and Islamic environmentalism. Certain religious values such as vicegerency can be critiqued as a sort of anthropocentrism- the very opposite of the ecocentrism that has been alluded to in many of the interviewee's experiences. Further to this, allusions to nature as a green, tidy, beautiful space or having a particular green quality associated with it, can also be subject to a similar critique as traditional western environmentalism or present a gap in the metaphysical and philosophical understanding of nature as a concept in Islam. This study does not seek to explore these nuances or even the ideological understanding of the interviewees, but instead the application of commonly understood values in Islam and how they are enacted.

This study identified that, despite the origins of Islamic environmental principles, values hold currency in contemporary Muslim environmentalism. The enactment of values in daily life and discourse takes a central role in the creation of permaculture projects, and more broadly in the way in which modern Muslims are actively responding to global environmental challenges such as the climate crisis.

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