

**AN ANALYSIS OF ISLAMIC
ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO MALAYSIA**

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Submitted to the University of Wales in fulfilment of the requirements of the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Wales, Lampeter

2004

Abstract

The general term 'environment' has a very wide connotations and concern for this issue has increased, particularly in the last three decades. The environmental crisis has become a widespread matter, the implications of which are global rather than merely international, national or local. Consequently, mankind is attempting to find solutions to this extensive problem and discussion of environmental ethics is expressed through a variety of backgrounds, such as, religious, political and economic ideologies etc.

Therefore, as the concern of environmental ethics has become one of the important contemporary topics, it is important for Muslims to contribute such ethical debates. What does Islam offer to solve environmental problems, particularly in Islamic states? To realise this objective, Malaysia has been cited in this research as one of the Islamic states, which is developing and thus dependent on its natural resources. Malaysia is facing a real challenge to strike the balance between the environment and development, particularly in the case study of the Bakun Hydro Electrical Project, Sarawak, Malaysia.

Acknowledgements

All praises be to Allah the Almighty who in His grace granted me this precious opportunity to embark upon this research, a task which could not have been accomplished without His help. My first and foremost thanks are for Him.

It is a privilege to express my gratitude to those whose valuable advice, support, and help made this study possible. Initially I am particularly indebted to Dr. Mawil Izzi Dien under whose supervision and guidance this work has been prepared. His interest and encouragement as well as his unfailing patience and his friendly attitude have been invaluable.

From the academic staff of the University of Wales, Lampeter, I would like to offer many thanks to Dr. Dawoud El-Alami for his constant help and generous assistance during all the stages of this study. Then special thanks go to Dr. Frances Knight, the Head of Department, and all the academic staff of the Department of Theology, Religious Studies and Islamic Studies, University of Wales, Lampeter, United Kingdom.

Then, from the non-academic staff of University of Wales, Lampeter, I would like to firstly to thank, Mrs Marlene Ablett, the secretary of the department, Ms Sam Latham, Mrs. Paula Yates, from the Department of Theology, Religious Studies and Islamic Studies. Thanks also go to all staff from the Postgraduate Office for their assistance. From the Academic Computer Service, UWL, thanks go to Mr. Steve, Mrs Gadula and all

the staff for all the facilities available for my use. Special thanks also go to Ms Kathy Miles from the inter-library loan section of the library, for getting me all my outside materials. All staff of the UWL library also deserve my thanks for their co-operation throughout my study.

In Lampeter, I would like also to take this opportunity to thank all my friends in the Department of Theology, Religious Studies and Islamic Studies, who made my college life here an enjoyable one.

My thanks are also due to Mr Fazlun Khalid for his interest in bringing me to study the environment. My special thanks go to Ms Pat Sinclair for her tireless efforts to check and correct my English.

In Malaysia, I must also thank both the Department of Public Service Malaysia, for granting the scholarship for this study and all the academic and administrative staff of the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), for their helping hand and for giving me the necessary leave of absence. Special thanks go both to Datuk Professor Mohd Zulkifli Tan Sri Mohd Ghazali, the Vice Chancellor, and to the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Development and Corporate), Professor Dr. Ismail Kailani (currently) and Professor Dr. Mohd Azraii Kassim (the former), who were responsible for my decision to study abroad. I am also indebted to the Director of Centre for Islamic Studies and Social Development, Professor Selamat Hashim (currently), and Associate Professor Ajmain Safar (the former). I am also indebted to Mr Azmi Shah Suratman, the Deputy Director, and

Associate Professor Dr. Osman Sabran, the Head of Department for their advice to study abroad. I am also indebted to Professor Dr. Zaini Ujang, Director of the Institute of Water and Waste Management; Associate Professor Dr. Mohd Ismid Mohd Said, Head Department of the Environmental Engineering Department, Faculty of Civil Engineering UTM and all his staff for their advice on my research. Last but not least, I thank my friends in Malaysia who always remember me and my family in their supplications.

I am also indebted to the Department of Environment, Putrajaya, Malaysia, especially to Mr Shamsuddin Abdul Latif, Deputy Director General; Mr Wan Aminordin Wan Kamaruddin, Environmental Control Officer and all the staff for their support and assistance.

My special thanks to the State Government of Sarawak which allowed me to conduct a research especially the State Planning Unit, State Secretary of Sarawak. I am also indebted to the personnel of the Sarawak Hydro Sdn. Bhd. For their tremendous invaluable assistance and support to carry out the study. They are Mr. Ir. Tan Chuan Ngan, General Manager; Mr. Ir. Sim See Sheng, Senior Resident Manager; Mr Ir. Wan Mohamad Su'ut Wan Moss, Resident Engineer; Mr Ismail Othman and all the staff who helped me during my research at the Bakun HEP, Sarawak, Malaysia

My unreserved thanks go to all my 'brothers' in the United Kingdom and Malaysia who contributed in one way or another to make this thesis a success. Their support and assistance helped to give me some drive in preparing this thesis.

The principal debt which must here be acknowledged is to my parents and family, both of them. Especially, both from my father's and mother's side. Their names are Haji Kadikon Dimon and Hajjah Ponirah Zainal, Haji Selamat Ahmad and Hajjah Pinah Selamat. Not to forget, special thanks to my beloved wife, Mrs Rosiah Selamat for her support, patience and endurance, and to our children, Nurul Amanina, Muhammad Irfan, Nurul °Aqilah and Nurul °Afifah who are my sources of inspiration. Their cries and smiles help to develop me as a student and a father. My thanks are also due to my family (my brothers and sisters) in Malaysia who always remember my family in their prayers.

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Notes on Transliteration

This work adopts the rules of transliteration used by the Encyclopaedia of Islam, with slight variations

Consonants

ء	(hamza)	’		ض	(ḍād)	ḍ
ب	(bā’)	B		ط	(ṭā’)	ṭ
ت	(tā’)	T		ظ	(ẓā’)	ẓ
ث	(thā’)	th		ع	(‘ayn)	c
ج	(jīm)	j		غ	(ghayn)	gh
ح	(ḥā’)	ḥ		ف	(fā’)	f
خ	(khā’)	kh		ق	(qāf)	q
د	(dāl)	d		ك	(kāf)	k
ذ	(dhāl)	dh		ل	(lām)	l
ر	(rā’)	r		م	(mīm)	m
ز	(zay)	z		ن	(nūn)	n
س	(sīn)	s		و	(wāw)	w
ش	(shīn)	sh		ه	(hā’)	h
ص	(ṣād)	ṣ		ي	(yā’)	y

Vowels

—	(<i>fathah</i>)	a		long <i>fathah</i>	ā
.	(<i>kasrah</i>)	i		long <i>kasrah</i>	ī
˘	(<i>ḍammah</i>)	u		long <i>ḍammah</i>	ū

Notes:

1. *Tanwīn* is represented by *an*, *in* and *un* respectively.
2. Transliteration will involve only Arabic words. Others will be written in *italics*.

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List of Abbreviations

ABB	Asea Brown Boveri
AC/DC	Alternating Current/Direct Current
a/k	anak
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
asl	above sea level
CFRD	Concrete Faced Rockfill Dam
CO ²	carbon dioxide
CTTC	Centre For Technology Transfer and Consultancy
cumecs	cubic metres per second
DC/AC	Direct Current/Alternating Current
DOE	Department of Environment
ECRD	Earth core rockfill dam
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
EPU	Economic Planning Unit
EQA	Environmental Quality Act
EQC	Environmental Quality Council
FoE	Friends of the Earth
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ha	hectare
HEP	Hydro Electrical Project
HVAC	High Voltage Alternating Current

HVDC	High Voltage Direct Current
IPP	Independent Power Producer
IRN	International Rivers Network
KEHMA-S	The European Committee for Human Rights in Malaysia and Singapore
km	kilometre
kV AC	kilo Voltan Alternating Current
kV DC	kilo Voltan Direct Current
KWh	Kilowatt-hour
LA 21	Local Agenda 21
GBP	Great Britain Pound
Gwh	Gigawatt-hour
MOSTE	Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment
mcm	million cubic metres
MDF	Mixed Dipterocarp
mg/L	miligram per litre
MHLG	Ministry of Housing and Local Government
ml	mile
MNS	Malaysian Nature Society
MW	Mega Watt
NCL	Native Customary Land
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NREB	Natural Resources and Environment Board
OSA	Official Secrets Act

PPA	Power Purchasing Agreements
RM	Ringgit Malaysia
SAM	Sahabat Alam Malaysia
SAMA	Joint venture of consultants include Lahmeyer International, Fichtner, Dorsch and Motor Columbus
SEB	Sabah Electricity Board
SESCO	Sarawak Electricity Supply Company
TNB	Tenaga Nasional Berhad
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNIMAS	Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
UTM	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

The discussion of environmental crisis has become a widespread issue. An attempt by the United Nations to tackle this issue from and through governments is evident in the proclamation of the declaration on human environment, made in Stockholm from 5 to 16 June 1972¹. To quote parts of these proclamations, ‘the natural resources of the earth, including the air, water, land, flora and fauna and especially representative samples of natural ecosystems, must be safeguarded for the benefit of present and future generations through careful planning or management, as appropriate’.² The issue of the environment was highlighted again in Agenda 21, Rio Summit at Rio De Janeiro, Brazil, from 3 to 14 June 1992.³ Entitled the Rio Declaration on the Environment and Development this contains 27 principles, while the main focus was, ‘working towards international agreements, which respect the interests of all and protect the integrity of the global environmental and development system’.⁴

¹ This was the United Nation’s first major conference on international environmental issues. The meeting agreed upon: a Declaration containing 26 principles, an Action Plan with 109 recommendations, and a Resolution on various institutional and financial arrangements.

² The United Nations on Stockholm 1972, Annex 1.

³ The main outcome of Rio Summit is Agenda 21. It is a 400-page document with 40 chapters aiming to provide a programme of action for sustainable development.

⁴ The United Nations on Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, 1992.

The issue of the environment was recently mentioned in the resolution of the United Nations Millennium Declaration from 6 to 8 September 2000. On the topic of protecting our common environment, 'We must spare no effort to free all of humanity, and above all our children and grandchildren, from the threat of living on a planet irredeemably spoilt by human activities, and whose resources would no longer be sufficient for their needs'.⁵

Another important concept concerning the environment is that of globalisation. Many scholars, such as, Owen Green, who used the term global environmental issues, have pinpointed this.⁶ However, there are several senses in which the environment can be said to have become a global issue. Firstly, some environmental problems are inherently global. For instance, chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) released into the atmosphere contribute to the global problem of stratospheric ozone depletion irrespective of where they are emitted, just as carbon dioxide emissions contribute to global climate change. Secondly, some problems relate to the exploitation of global commons. The resources shared by all members of the international community, such as the oceans, deep-sea bed, atmosphere and outer space. Thirdly, many environmental problems are intrinsically transnational, in that by their nature they cross state boundaries. For example, emissions of sulphur dioxide by one state will be carried by winds and deposited as acid rain on downwind countries. Fourthly, many processes of

⁵ The United Nations Millennium Declaration, 2000.

⁶ Greene, Owen, Environmental Issues in *The Globalization of World Politics An Introduction to International Relations*, second edition, John Baylis and Steve Smith (ed.) Oxford; Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 388.

over-exploitation or environmental degradation are relatively local or national in scale, and yet they are experienced in such a large number of localities around the world that they can be considered to be global problems. Examples include unsustainable agricultural practices, soil degradation and erosion, deforestation, river pollution, and the many environmental problems associated with urbanisation and industrial practices. And finally, the processes leading to over-exploitation and environmental degradation are intimately linked to broader political and socio-economic processes, which themselves are part of a global political economy.⁷

In Malaysia, the government announced the *Langkawi* Declaration on the Environment on 21 October 1989.⁸ The main objective of this declaration was to give full support to Agenda 21, Rio Summit in 1992. However, after eight years of this declaration, the environmental pollution is still to be seen clearly in Malaysia; a heavy haze occurred in 1997. According to the 1997 annual report on environment, the air quality worsened dramatically in several places in the country to such an extent that between 19-28 September 1997, a state of emergency had to be declared in Sarawak when the Air Pollutant Index (API) (the dominant pollutant is PM10) hovered above the 500 level. The air quality returned to normal in November coinciding with the monsoon season. Throughout 1997, the level of gaseous pollutants and lead in ambient air remained below the Recommended Malaysian Guidelines.⁹

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *The Langkawi Declaration*, Malaysia 1989.

⁹ *The Annual report of Malaysia Environmental Quality, 1997*. Malaysia: Department of Environment.

The prolonged drought and hot spell due to the *El-Nino* effect and the consequential significant low flow in most rivers also took its toll on the river water quality monitored at 908 stations along 117 rivers. The number of clean rivers decreased from 42 in 1996 to 24 rivers in 1997 and the number of polluted rivers increased from 13 in 1996 to 25 in 1997, in terms of water quality index classification based on biochemical oxygen demand, chemical oxygen demand, dissolved oxygen, ammonia cal nitrogen, suspended solids and pH.¹⁰

Consequently the year after, the main task of the Department of Environment in Malaysia was to keep the air quality good and healthy. Therefore, the authorities have launched a programme '*Ops Bakar*' to prevent open burning activities in April 1998. They also enforced a law under the Malaysia Environmental Quality Act, 1974. For example, up until 31 December 1998, a total of 495 cases of open burning were detected and investigated, and follow-up action was taken including imposition of fines and prosecution.¹¹

2.0 Statement of the problem

Solution of the environmental crisis has therefore become a vital issue. Scholars have addressed the environmental problems in a number of ways; conferences,

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *The Annual Report of Malaysia Environmental Quality*, 1998. Malaysia: Department of Environment.

seminars, researches, books and so on have explored various methodologies to overcome this crisis. For instance, some scholars have begun to look to sciences and technology as a way to solve this problem. Others scholars have looked back to the root of the ecological crisis to analyse the environmental problems. This research may be divided into ideological and religious perspectives.

Because of what is taking place in Islamic countries, Western scholars ask how Islam proposes to provide a methodology to solve the environmental problems. As a way of addressing this question, Martin Palmer, commenting that Islam probably has the best worked out system of environmental checks and balances of any faith, suggests drawing up an Islamic environment programme based on the *Shari'ah*.¹² This is because, as Jeffery Kaplan argues, "...Islam teaches an inherent respect for nature, while the *Qur'anic* imperative against the misuse of natural resources may provide the basis for legislation aimed at the protection of these resources on the one hand, and of nature for its own sake on the other".¹³

In my opinion, to understand the basics of the Islamic view on the care of the environment we need to look at a way forward from the spiritual and physical aspect. In other words, we need to look at the relationship between God, human beings and non-human beings. The researcher will therefore examine various perspectives of the

¹² Martin Palmer in his comment on Izzi Dien's book *The Environmental Dimensions in Islam*.

¹³ Jeffrey Kaplan in his comment on Izzi Dien's book *The Environmental Dimensions in Islam*.

Sharī'ah, which provides the practical methodology to tackle environmental problems, such as, the practice of *ḥimā*, *ḥarīm* and *ḥisbā* in the Islamic environmental programme.

As noted by Lloyd Timberlake in his article, the wealthy Muslim states have failed across the environment spectrum; from holding back the deserts, which many of their nations contain, to building functional and aesthetically pleasing modern buildings, whereby western patterns of development are simply overpowering the environment. He added that the leaders of many wealthy Muslim nations have become completely separated from both their religion and their roots in the land.¹⁴

3.0 Research objectives

To achieve and gain the purpose of this research, these are some of the research objectives;

- a. To explore the understanding of the concept of environmental ethics. This will identify the historical and fundamental principles of environmental ethics. In addition, the researcher will explain and identify various ideologies and religious aspects of environmental ethics. It will discuss the relevant definitions, principles, roles and methods of addressing the environmental crisis.

¹⁴ Timberlake, Lloyd, The Emergence of Environment Awareness in the West in *The Touch of Midas* ed. by Sardar, Ziauddin, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1988, p 130.

- b. Before the researcher defines and sets out the nature of environmental ethics in Islam, it is pertinent to discuss the 'world view' of the environment in Islam. This may distinguish between various ideologies and religious perspectives and the Islamic view on the environment. There will be discussion of several sub topics, such as the sources on environment, the concept of '*Khilāfah*' or stewardship and other notions within the Islamic perspective.
- c. The researcher will analyse environmental ethics from the Islamic perspective. To explain and investigate the three roles of *Tawhīd* (spiritual), *Sharī'ah* (Islamic Law) and *Akhlāq* in the environmental ethics of Islam. To achieve this objective, the researcher will examine the implementation and practice of the *Sharī'ah* methodology in addressing the environmental crisis. The practice of *harīm* (inviolable zone), *himā* (a reserved land) and *ḥisbā* (office of public inspection) are important in relation to how the *Sharī'ah* methodology can be applied in Islamic environmental ethics.
- d. To evaluate the role of Islamic environmental ethics, the researcher will analyse one case study as an example that is relevant to the environmental crisis. This study aims to highlight how the neglect of environmental ethics may affect environmental issues. This analysis of a case study is crucial, as it intends to go some way in the establishing of the standpoint of Islamic environmental ethics.

4.0 Scope and limitation

The scopes of this study are:

- a. The concept and practice of environmental ethics from the Islamic perspective.
- b. The manifestation of Islamic environmental ethics regarding the Bakun Hydro Electrical Project (HEP) in Sarawak, Malaysia.

5.0 Research Methodology

The researcher will mostly utilise secondary data gleaned from libraries. The main methodology is thus descriptive and analytical, citing historical facts related to the environment and linking them to the current issues pertinent to environmental problems. Also, the sources from the Qur'ān and *Sunna* are very useful to aid in the understanding of the environment from the Islamic perspective. The following material will be researched;

- a. books
- b. encyclopaedias
- c. theses and dissertations
- d. journals
- e. papers news and articles
- f. internet

g. other

Hence, the focus of this research will be on two aspects.

1. A study of the concept and theory of environmental ethics.
2. An analysis of the manifestation of Islamic environmental ethics.

The main approach to a study of environmental ethics is a philosophy based one that includes the theory, the concept, the principles and the fundamentals. As stated above, the study will attempt to relate environmental issues to the roles played by several of the main religious perspectives.

The collection of data through field work is also unavoidable, particularly when the present researcher is dealing with the current general understanding of environmental ethics from an Islamic perspective. The field work is associated with a case study of the Bakun Hydro Electrical Project (HEP) in Sarawak, Malaysia. The researcher will analyse the relevant aspects of *Shari'ah* and discuss the concepts of *himā*, *harīm* and *hisbā*, with a view to how each could be implemented in this case.

6.0 Literature Review

Undoubtedly, awareness of environmental issues has become important among scholars and researchers throughout the world. In my opinion, this may be classified into several categories. Firstly, Western scholars such as Lyn White Jr., Arnold

Toynbee and others; secondly, science and technology scholars who produce books on environmental engineering in various sub topics; and thirdly, from the religious perspective, an example of which is the statement by the representatives of the religious community in the United States of America, who gathered in June 1991 to deliberate and plan action in response to the environmental crisis.¹⁵ However, unfortunately the list of participants showed no Islamic representatives.

Other views are from a religious perspective, as stated by the Duke of Edinburgh on the World Wild Fund (WWF) 25th Anniversary in 29th September 1986 at the Religion and Nature Interfaith Ceremony held at Basilica St. Francesco Assisi, Italy, "...I am convinced that secular conservation has learnt to see the problems of the natural world from a different perspective, and I hope and believe, that the spiritual leaders have learnt that the natural world of creation cannot be saved without their active involvement. Neither can ever be quite the same again". He added, "These declarations, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim, are each designed to speak to the believers in the faith and call upon them to commit themselves to the common struggle for the conservation of nature".¹⁶

The discussion on the topic of the environment has become widespread and established upon several categories. Firstly, the discussion of environmental ethics as a

¹⁵ Gottlieb, Roger S., *This Sacred Earth Religion, Nature, Environment*. London: Routledge. 1996, p. 636.

¹⁶ *Religion and Nature Interfaith Ceremony*. Assisi, Italy: WWF 25th Anniversary, 1986, p. 42.