

Article

Postcolonial Typology: A Pedagogical Note on the Field of Ecotheology

Abel K. Aruan 

Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Villanova University, Villanova, PA 19085, USA;
aaruan@villanova.edu

Abstract: In the burgeoning field of ecotheology, scholars have been compelled to propose typologies to introduce and categorize existing but diffuse ecotheological insights. Taking ecotheology as a particular epistemic theology, I argue for an alternative way of typologizing that entails meticulously examining the extent to which ecotheologians engage with competing epistemes, namely “postcolonial typology”. To illustrate, I will examine a range of ecotheological works from a postcolonial nation, Indonesia. I present three groups of ecotheologies: the “expansionist”, the “tribalist”, and the “essentialist” approaches (or strategies). The expansionist group extends or expands the systematic theology formerly introduced by European missionaries during the colonial period as a way to ecologize their theology. The tribalist approach prioritizes retrieving and incorporating local or tribal wisdom. Finally, the essentialist group focuses on identifying categorical frameworks that may signify “Indonesianness”, which involves a “strategic” choice of essentialism that yields to a national or transtribal theological cohesion. In the end, I will also note one pedagogical implication of employing postcolonial typology.

Keywords: postcolonial critique; ecotheology; postcolonial typology; Indonesia; expansionist; tribalist; strategic essentialism; Robert P. Borrong



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1. Introduction

Typology matters. It offers helpful tools for pedagogical purposes, especially in terms of dismantling the colonial matrix. In the burgeoning field of ecotheology, scholars have been compelled to propose typologies to introduce and categorize existing but diffuse ecotheological insights. This article takes a skeptical view regarding whether the typologies commonly taught sufficiently represent the ideas of theologians who have critiqued the power relations undergirding environmental degradation and ecological disturbance. Furthermore—or consequently—such typologies often overlook the potential influence of coloniality, the enduring colonial logic, and the paradigm within contemporary systems and institutions.¹ As a particular *epistemic* theology, ecotheology has always been a contested terrain, in which the coloniality and the imagination of the colonized (or formerly colonized) are perpetually in competition.

In this article, I offer an alternative way of typologizing, which I call *postcolonial typology*. This typology entails meticulously examining the extent to which ecotheologians engage with competing epistemes. I will argue for this in the first section by drawing from decolonial discourse and examining the available typologies in the field. To illustrate, I will also examine in the second section a range of ecotheological works from a postcolonial nation, Indonesia. I present three groups of ecotheologies: the *expansionist*, the *tribalist*, and the *essentialist* approaches (or strategies). The expansionist attempts to extend or expand the previously accepted theology formerly introduced by European missionaries during the colonial period. Typically, it premises traditional doctrines like theological anthropology, soteriology, or eschatology to develop a more systematic framework of ecotheology. In contrast, the tribalist approach prioritizes retrieving and incorporating local or tribal wisdom,

abandoning the need to construct a rigid theological system, knowing that such a system has been complicit in colonial projects and paradigms. Finally, the essentialist approach focuses on identifying categorical frameworks that may be considered “Indonesian” or that signify “Indonesianness”. This entails a “strategic” choice of essentialism, enacted for the sake of representability, particularly as a means of opposing Western/colonial influence.

Broadly speaking, this article demonstrates the potential benefits of applying post-colonial and decolonial frameworks to the field of ecotheology. Beyond its academic value, this investigation grapples with the very real memories, grievances, and ongoing process of disentanglement from the structural and intellectual legacy of colonial history that has justified land and water exploitation. In addition, this research has a pedagogical objective. I hope that this article will empower educators in theology and religion to convey to students how ecotheology, as an epistemic theology, may remain impacted by the legacy of colonialism and may challenge that harmful legacy. Such practice of conveying is a distinctive pedagogy that is not only ecological, as it concerns ecology, environment, and climate, but also decolonial since it “trains the mind to identify and emancipate oneself from reproducing colonial models of relationships” (Nogueira-Godsey 2019).

2. Typologies Reexamined

2.1. Ecotheology as an Epistemic Theology

Ecotheology is a field of dual aspects. It has something to do with its signifier, “eco”, or what it means to be “ecological”. One may define ecotheology as “an attempt to retrieve the ecological wisdom embedded in the Christian tradition as a response to ecological destruction and environmental injustices” (Conradie et al. 2014). In this sense, ecotheology is understood as a specific *ethical* theology because it joins the movement that is responding to the urgent ethical calls to safeguard creation and the environment. This ethically theological enterprise, as ecotheologian Celia Deane-Drummond notes, started back in the late 1970s and early 1980s under the term “green theology” and gained traction through scholars’ engagements with Jürgen Moltmann’s *God in Creation: An Ecological Theology* in the end of 20th century (Deane-Drummond 2017). Alternatively, ecotheology can also be defined, as environmental studies scholar Lisa Sideris articulates, as an endeavor that seeks “an alternative to ‘mechanistic’ (or ‘Newtonian’ or ‘Cartesian’) perspectives that regard nature and animals as mere matter and therefore perpetuate dualistic, objectifying, and instrumentalizing patterns of thought and behavior”.² In this sense, ecotheology is understood as an *epistemic* theology because it clarifies, justifies, or challenges the philosophical, scientific, and cultural assumptions behind a particular way of theological thinking.³ It is to this second aspect that my article is dedicated.

Many of the typologies taught so far have seemingly dealt with the epistemic aspect of ecotheology—although some of them were not necessarily intended to be as such. Each typology is rooted in a fundamental question that guides its categorization process. Yet, none of those questions are attentive to the colonial episteme behind one’s ecotheology. Consider, for example, a typology proposed by theologian Douglas John Hall, who scrutinizes a depiction of human position in relation to the rest of creation. His primary question revolves around whether theologians place humans “above”, “in”, or “with” nature.⁴ Sigurd Bergmann directs his focus to the tension between extending theological convictions (the “conjunction” model) and favoring contextual considerations (the “syncretic” model). His primary question is whether a theologian follows one of these contrasting approaches.⁵ Michael Northcott’s typology questions the foundational premise upon which one’s ecotheology is based. He identifies three premises from which theologians often start: human (*humanocentric*), God (*theocentric*), or nature (*ecocentric*).⁶ None of the typologies employed by these theologians attempts to question how or in what ways theologians have engaged with the influence of colonialism and coloniality in environmental degradation.

I am, of course, aware of how scholars in the field have recognized the contribution of Rosemary Radford Ruether’s ecofeminist approach and that of her followers, particularly in attacking Western colonial influence in its patriarchal form. Yet, I expected more from her

critical point of view when it comes to typology. The “transcendental dualistic” paradigm she identifies should have led her to propose a kind of postcolonial typology. Unfortunately, like the others mentioned above, her typology barely accounts for the different ways in which eco-scholars deal with the colonial episteme. In critiquing and searching of alternatives to the “conservationism”, Ruether identifies “covenantal” and “sacramental” traditions in lights of two tendencies of drawing either from the Old Testament or New Testament as their theological resources.⁷

2.2. Ecotheology as a Contested Terrain

To think of ecotheology as an epistemic theology entails recognizing it as more than a codified doctrine or set of ideas. As a discourse permanently embedded in (a) particular episteme(s), ecotheology should be viewed as a contested terrain where the colonial paradigm and the struggle for conceptual and imaginative autonomy intersect. Ecotheology, like other theologies, is a venue where coloniality is either perpetuated or contested. Decolonial and postcolonial discourse have been instrumental in illuminating this dynamic.

Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, for example, elucidates how Eurocentrism has justified the subjugation and exploitation of non-European people and culture. He describes Eurocentrism as

a specific rationality or perspective of knowledge that was made globally hegemonic, colonizing and overcoming other previous or different conceptual formations and their respective concrete knowledge, as much in Europe as in the rest of the world.⁸

Eurocentrism constantly attempts to erase the “previous or different” knowledge systems that prevent Europe from being perceived as hegemonic in global relations.⁹ Quijano also highlights that while European supremacy started with material and physical occupations, it was then perpetrated by gradually establishing a particular knowledge system and imagination. This knowledge system, in turn, justifies the contemporary colonial enactments and reproduces similar imbalanced power relations.¹⁰

Argentine semiotician Walter D. Mignolo later corroborates Quijano’s observation, asserting that colonizers not only exploited resources in Indigenous land but also, in doing so, generated a pervasive thought system that endures to this day in the fields of politics, race discourse, science, religion, environmental policy, and others. For Mignolo, the crucial task of postcolonial society today must be the decolonization or “de-Westernization” of knowledge, including knowledge production within religious discourse.¹¹ Joining Mignolo and Quijano, Puerto Rican sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel identifies this pattern of knowledge production in Westernized universities. He argues that the exertion of colonial power historically and figuratively manifested as a sequence: the will to conquer (*ego conquiro*), followed by the will to exterminate (*ego extermino*), and ultimately, the will to think (*ego cogito*). A colonizing subject intends first to conquer and then to erase the preexisting and alternative knowledge to create a new space for that conquering subject, from the position of power, to be an autonomous thinker, no matter how diverse the available sources of knowledge are.¹²

This is why decolonial theorists since Quijano have frequently juxtaposed the term “coloniality” with “colonialism”. This distinction highlights both the temporal distinction between past colonialism and its current legacy and identifies the specific model of power “beyond race and labor”, Quijano notes, that subtly yet pervasively operates. Coloniality of power is a lasting impact (or project) of colonialism. It is a prevalent logic in contemporary institutions, social imaginaries, and practices. If colonialism devalues the other races through physical violence, coloniality devalues other epistemologies, rendering them obsolete or nonexistent.

Theology, like other disciplines, can be a manifestation of the coloniality of power. Leading postcolonial theologian Kwok Pui Lan discusses the significant ties between theological imagination and one’s struggle with oppression. She asserts that imagination is the starting point for theological reflection. If the imagination of a colonized subject

is not incorporated, then any theological reflection would not be suitable or relevant for that subject's life. "For what we cannot imagine", Kwok writes, "we cannot live into and struggle for" (Kwok 2005). As long as the coloniality of power still occupies our imagination, the struggle to live and fight against colonial power remains unfinished. Following Kwok, theologian Joseph Drexler-Dreis confirms that "coloniality has remained not only on the level of being but also as a structure that orients ways of knowing" (Drexler-Dreis 2018). Framing theology as a "way of knowing", Drexler-Dreis further calls for a diagnosis of what he terms "systemic repression", which occurs when the ideas or testimonies of particular groups are dismissed due to prejudice related to their race or social status.¹³ To counter potential systemic repression, it is imperative to reframe ecotheology as a kind of contested territory in which different voices, thoughts, imaginations, credibilities, or sources can be (re)valued. This necessitates advocating more inclusive notions, terminologies, or sources of ecotheology.

Remember that this inclusion, as Mignolo astutely observes, cannot be reduced to mere "emancipation", a virtue often championed by postmodern thinkers. It also means liberation. For Mignolo, both emancipation and liberation are constitutive of the process of "epistemic delinking" (*desprendimiento*), namely, a self-critique of the totality of Eurocentric knowledge that has influenced particular ideas, logics, or cultures already subscribed by one's mind and imagination, which, by performing that critique, leads oneself to the "epistemic shift" that "brings to the foreground other epistemologies".¹⁴

2.3. Dealing with Colonial Episteme: A Recent Turn?

At this point, one might be tempted to say that the typologies mentioned above overlook the struggle against the colonial episteme because they were just uninformed about the later growth of the field when ecoscholars began to "decolonize" or "postcolonize" their understanding of creation and environmental ethics. That is partly true. At least within Anglophone academia, the typical turns toward attending to the colonial influences occurred in less than two decades. Theologians such as Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Joerg Rieger, and those involved in the *Decolonizing Ecotheology* volume, among others, serve as examples of such a turn (Moe-Lobeda 2016; Rieger 2022; Mendoza and Zachariah 2022).

However, more genealogical inquiries would allow us to see that the perception of ecotheology as a manifestation of coloniality is not recent in Western academic history. Take, for example, the classic text often featured in introductory ecotheology courses, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis", written by historian Lynn White, Jr. in 1967. Many readers will quickly interpret White as critiquing Christianity as a whole, or, at least, modern Christianity, evidenced by his offer of the medieval figure of St. Francis as an alternative ecotheological model. Others will contend that White's primary accusation lies with anthropocentrism as he traces the history of ecological change back to the human's "overenthusiastic hunting" in late 1627. However, a closer examination of White's line of thought reveals that his more profound concern was "the Baconian creed" which has equated scientific knowledge with "technological power over nature". White views the widespread acceptance of this creed in the eighteenth century as "the greatest event in human history since the invention of agriculture, and perhaps in nonhuman terrestrial history as well", which could be accused of being the "root" of our ecological problems (White 1967).

I am not saying that White's historiography is factually accurate. I am simply highlighting that he was concerned with the epistemic aspect of Christian ecotheology in his time, which was mainly the philosophy of Francis Bacon, who viewed it lawful and even godly for Christian Europeans "to cut [the savage people] from the face of the earth" for the sake of development and the glory of God (Bacon 2011). In challenging the Baconian worldview, White became an ecotheologian (surprise!) who sought to expose that episteme and to delink his thought from the coloniality of power, resulting in his preference for the Saint of Assisi. In Mignolo's framework, White performs an "epistemic delinking" as he

“leads to decolonial epistemic shift and brings to the foreground other epistemologies” (Mignolo 2010).

More genealogical analyses could be performed on the diverse ecotheological voices that emerged throughout history to show that such attempts are not new. Yet, that undertaking exceeds the scope of this article. At the least, I hope to have demonstrated that we need a typology that is sufficiently capacious to introduce different ways of dealing with the colonial episteme behind ecotheological insights, as exemplified by White, Moe-Lobeda, Rieger, scholars in the *Decolonizing Ecotheology* project, and others hailing from postcolonial societies. This capacity makes a typology (and therefore pedagogy) postcolonial.

3. Postcolonial Typology Exemplified

3.1. *A Postcolonial Nation: Robert Borrong’s Earlier Attempt*

As a quintessentially postcolonial nation, Indonesia offers a fertile ground for developing a postcolonial typology. By appealing to this particular context, I do not mean that such a typology can only be suggested by or relevant to Indonesian scholars. This section is merely an exemplary explication of sources close to home for me. Readers are welcome to propose another typology on their observations of a particular postcolonial context or of the broader field whose theologians struggle with a certain regime of knowledge. However, there is a particular feature of Indonesia’s theological outlook that would inform the field: Its current environmental degradation is inextricably linked to its colonial past.

The Portuguese and Dutch came to Nusantara (the precolonial name of Indonesia, the Malay peninsula, and the Philippines) because they were lured to the Spice Islands. The Banda massacre of 1621 was a testament to Dutch colonial brutality. Orchestrated by the ambitious Governor-General Jean Peterzoon Coen, the killings were intended to monopolize the spice trade, leveraging it to bolster the Dutch War of Independence against Spain. With the military forces authorized by the world’s first public company and the root of the now Amsterdam Stock Exchange, namely, *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC), Coen, in his second expedition to the Banda Islands, massacred nearly the entire population, which left only 480 survivors out of 14,000 inhabitants. The negotiation with good faith proposed by *Orang Kaya* (rich people) was ignored, and they ended up being executed, their bodies cut into parts. The desecration of the mosque, transformed into Dutch lodgings, broke the hearts of the local people. Humanitarian aid was conspicuously absent from Coen’s agenda. Even the few survivors had nothing to celebrate, for they were transported to be enslaved people in Batavia (now Jakarta) (see more on Hancock 2021; McGregor and Dragojlovic 2024). The situation got worse with the nationalization of the Dutch East Indies in 1800. The customary law (*hukum adat*) which had long governed land ownership and conservation was gradually supplanted by state law derived from European agrarian law. This left the “communal ownership” system disappearing slowly. Meanwhile, the Dutch government gained millions of *guldens* due to exploitation and forced trade.¹⁵

In the last twenty-five years, Indonesian theologians have exposed various colonial legacies that have shaped ecological and ecotheological discourses. Many of those expositions, however, have been spurred by the work of one individual, Robert P. Borrong, a pastor and former lecturer at Jakarta Theological Seminary and now President of West Sulawesi Theological Seminary, whose name unsurprisingly appears in many of the introductions of ecotheology books and articles. As a student of Ernst Conradie and Abraham van de Beek, Borrong has written significant works, including *Etika Bumi Baru* (New Earth Ethics), a dissertation piece titled *Environmental Ethics and Ecological Theology*, and multiple articles (Borrong, Robert Patannang n.d.; Borrong 2005; Deane-Drummond 2006; Borrong 1999). His insertion of the term “Indonesian” in his dissertation signals a conscious departure from the prevailing global emphasis on climate change. Unlike what many global leaders are typically concerned with, he contends, “[t]he problems facing Indonesia in its development program are not only pollution but also the problem of exploitation of natural resources, especially forest loss”, in which the role of human beings, he concludes, should be the focus of ecotheology.¹⁶

Seemingly following the discourse of European academia, Borrong seeks the correct “rational basis” upon which any ecological theory must rest. He reclaims God’s identity as the creator of the whole world and, consequently, as the sole owner of the entire creation (*theosphere*). This theospheric principle opposes and is in direct contrast to human authoritarian ownership of the natural world. For Borrong, human beings must incorporate the ecosystem into all their “decision-making processes” due to their responsibility to God (Borrong 2005). A similar thread runs through his later work on animal ethics, where he reiterates the detrimental actions of human beings that contribute to the ecological crisis (Borrong 2019a). In this regard, he corresponds with Northcott’s theocentric approach, which emphasizes God’s command over human responsibility—although Borrong prefers to call it “theocentric-holistic theology” (Borrong 2005).

Observing the local discourse, Borrong ventures into proposing a new typology in 2019. He drew from Canadian ethicist Stephen Bede Scharper’s book, *Redeeming the Time*, to identify three approaches: “apologetic”, “constructive”, and “listening”. Favoring the constructive over the apologetic approach, Borrong envisions a more promising future compared to the mere defense of the past (Borrong 2019b; Cf. Scharper 1998; See also Borrong 1998). This apologetic-or-constructive dualism carries temporal or “chronical” connotations, with the former perceived as retrospective, rooted in romanticizing the past, while the latter beckons toward a more innovative future. His typology implies that theologians tend either to stick with the obsolete paradigm or remain open to a renewed theology and renewed ethics for a better future. However, like Scharper, Borrong ultimately prefers the “listening” approach, where one should listen to nature and the inhabiting Indigenous communities. My take: It seems that Borrong has attempted to create a typology informed fully by the presence of colonial paradigms in the country. Yet, he failed to do so, as he rather focused on the category that promotes more contextualization projects and appreciates “local” cultural resources. I also think borrowing Scharper’s typology is a little bit stretched, as he disregards Scharper’s narrowly focused observation on how theologians responded to Lynn White Jr.’s critique.¹⁷

By advancing a question on the “degree” or “level” of epistemic delinking, I found, in various Indonesian ecotheological discourses, a kind of “strategy” or politics in how theologians grapple with the realities of environmental degradation. I identify three distinct strategies, each representing a different level of epistemic delinking. I call them the *expansionist* approach, *tribalist* approach, and *essentialist* approach. Remember that since they are approaches or strategies, they are to be applied to literary works, not scholars. One may perform an expansionist move at one time and a tribalist approach at another time.

3.2. The Expansionist Approach

The term “expansionist” refers to a cluster of ecotheological models that consider ecotheology to be an extension or expansion of previously adopted systematic theology. It typically includes traditional premises such as the doctrine of God, theological anthropology, soteriology, eschatology, and others. I use “expansion” here to align with the common understanding of the European “age of expansion”, which involved territorial expansion, settlement, spatial claim, and logic of sameness. I am aware, however, of Jamaican novelist Sylvia Wynter’s more celebratory view of this terminology. In remembering 1492, Wyntes asserts that contemporary thinkers may at least appreciate the potential “root expansion of thought” that could have happened in Columbus’ colonial voyage. As such, Wynter advocates for rethinking, reimagining, or revising our “subjective understanding” of ourselves during encounters with the unexpected other. Such an expansion of thought, if Columbus had engaged it vigilantly, could have led to a less Eurocentric and more “ecumenical” sense of the “we” (*nos*), one that embraces multiplicity, difference, and planetary solidarity (Wynter 1995). My use of the term “expansion” in this typology, instead, is the antonym of Wynter’s definition. The expansionist scholar claims a new theological territory that has never been touched before by projecting sameness and coherence with the formerly settled doctrines.

Perhaps the most famous model of this approach stems from theological anthropology, which centers on the assertion that human beings are accountable to God, the creator of all. Like in many places, theological anthropology in Indonesia is often framed by the theology of stewardship. Borrong's theocentrism aligns with this model, but as we have seen, he acknowledges the need for a contemporary approach, such as contextual theology, mainly due to his "anti-Western" stance.¹⁸ Additionally, theological anthropology models often necessitate reinterpreting Genesis 1:26–28, particularly revising what it means to "have dominion" over the earth (Ngahu 2020; Cahyono 2021; Mergart 2012; Tan 2012; Putri 2021). This is the expansionist move: The understanding of what it means to be a steward of God must now be expanded or extended to how that stewardship role instructs human responsibilities to care for God's creation.

The second model is soteriology, whose question resonates with French philosopher Bruno Latour's famous question, "Will non-humans be saved?" (Latour 2009). Marthinus Ngabalin from Papua is one example of a soteriological thinker. Learning from Leonardo Boff, he finds it crucial to expand the notion of soteriology in the face of ecological injustice. Furthermore, Ngabalin follows Borrong's discussion on John 3:10 to argue that God's salvific action extends to non-humans. Therefore, humans "do not have the right" to claim that God's love is exclusively meant for their individuals, groups, or species (Ngabalin 2020). Given the historical influence, however, it is understandable that many contemporary Indonesian theologians still refer to or depend on the contemporary Dutch Reformed theologians to "ecologize" (read: to expand) their understanding of salvation.¹⁹

The final model is ecological eschatology, which focuses primarily on future-oriented discussions and suggests hope regarding the status of the human condition. Yet, this model does not necessarily advocate for a shift from apologetic theology to constructive theology as suggested by Borrong's critical signal. Pentecostal theologian Jefri H. R. Katu's work showcases this model. Katu draws on Moltmann and introduces the term "eco-eschatology". For Katu, the (Pentecostal) church, as a community of believers in a "dynamic relationship" with God, must actively fulfill its role in embodying the divine mission through the proclamation of God's salvation. This involves striving to bring peace and harmony through ethical behavior and delivering the message that all things must be restored to the glory of God. Eco-eschatology is a hope that someday all creation will be in union with God.²⁰

The expansionist group, in comparison to the following two strategies, demonstrates a lesser degree of epistemic delinking, as it is closely rooted in the European "grand" theological system or systematic theology. Batakese woman theologian Novriana Hutagalung, whose stance is closer to tribalist one, for instance, notes this paucity by identifying the "theological despair" within many "institutional theologies" in Indonesia, characterized by a narrow focus on natural devastation and the human role at the expense of recognizing the sacredness and beauty of nature. She also argues that White's piece should instead be used by churches as resourceful guidance for "self-critiques" or even doctrinal revisions (Hutagalung 2017). Hutagalung's critique adheres to the earlier one by postcolonial theological R. S. Sugirtharajah whose observation found a "striking reluctance" among systematic theologians in general "to address the relation between European colonialism and the field [of theology]" (Sugirtharajah 2004). On the other hand, however, this strategy offers institutional or ecclesial advantages. By upholding and extending well-received dogmas, the calls to action are more readily accepted without eliciting unnecessary resistance from the church members.

3.3. Tribalist Approach

The tribalist approach has emerged as a distinct response to the Western Christian ideas disseminated by missionaries during the colonial period, ideas that many forefront religious and environmental activists deemed to be not only irrelevant but also erasing the local tradition. We have already been forewarned by Grosfoguel that absolutization of one's knowledge is always enabled by "epistemicide" (if not genocide), namely,

the “extermination” of others’ epistemology (Grosfoguel 2013). Theologians within this camp have rightly identified this phenomenon and, thus, sought to reclaim and revitalize local epistemologies. As such, they respond to prominent womanist theologian Mery Kolimon’s call to “fetch from the wells” (*menimba sumur*) of the Indigenous spirituality (Kolimon 2022).

However, the reason why I do not name this “Indigenous approach”, although it is more popular and would be more graspable in the eyes of Western academy, is because the term “tribalist” does not *only* signify the approach’s drawing from anything related to Indigenous communities, although it does *necessarily*. My purpose of such naming is to identify its inherently confident reliance on particularity as a way of opposing Western discourse. I will show later in the third approach that an idea can depart and draw from Indigenous wisdoms while still being framed with a generic term considerably relevant and relatable to other Indigenous communities.

While seemingly similar, this typology (expansionist vs. tribalist) should not be confused with Bergmann’s typology (conjunction vs. syncretism). The reason is that the primary tension where the tribalist approach lies is not between Christian theological purity and Indigenous-leaning syncretism but rather between preserving the Western legacy and pursuing a more anti-colonial reflection through which Christian theology might take its new form. In fact, tribalist theologians often borrow any articulation provided by sources outside the local community and systematic theology *insofar as* those sources help them to make the point.²¹

A recent example of this approach is worked out by Hendrik Jondri Paays, Steve G. Ch. Gaspersz, and Henky H. Hetharia, colleagues at Maluku Indonesian Christian University (UKIM), who draw from the wisdom of the Maneo tribe residing in Seram Island, Maluku. The Maneo tribe is generally spread out in the separate countryside (*negeri*), where most of them are Christians and members of the Maluku Protestant Church (Gereja Protestan Maluku; GPM). According to Paays, Gaspersz, and Hetharia, there are ways to reflect on the Maneo spirituality *Christianly* that would foster the refusal toward a “mechanistic” view of nation-building. For the Maneo people, the land and forest are inseparable from the identity of *Supa Hulawano* and *Pususu*. *Pususu*, their ancestral homeland, is considered a sacred site where the Maneo people first settled. *Supa Hulawano* is a divine gift from *Lahatala* (the Almighty divine entity), manifested as sacred water contained within a *tempayang* (sacred vessel). This water was sent down by *Lahatala* on a golden chain and received by a *pinamutu* (mother or matriarch) to sustain the Maneo people from their earliest ancestors until now. The *pinamutu* distributed this life-giving water to ensure the daily needs of the Maneo community. According to this oral tradition, this water is not an ordinary river but instead a divine guarantee of life for those who have come to inhabit Mount *Pususu*. To ensure their survival, the Maneo people have maintained *Pususu* as a sacred site, prohibiting any harm to its flora, fauna, or other elements. The prohibition against damaging *Pususu* in contemporary discussions and public policies reflects the profound reverence the Maneo people hold for this place. They call the land and forest “friends, family, house, or kitchen” in response to issues of land-grabbing and deforestation (Paays et al. 2022).

As indicated above, the Maneo understanding of the land assumes a sort of theocentrism, as they presuppose a divine entity often equated to the Christian idea of God as a provider. At the same time, their land and forest, due to their sacredness, are seen as family, seemingly to give them agency, which could be simply categorized into the ecocentric approach. This also shows that tribalist proposals would fit any premises, either theocentrism or ecocentrism, *insofar as* they help to refuse conformation toward colonial theology.²² This is the reason why Northcott’s typology (theocentrism vs. anthropocentrism vs. ecocentrism) would not apply to the work of Paays and his colleagues.

Most tribalist insights are not penned by theological patrons, although there are several influential names, such as Zakaria J. Ngelow, Merry Kolimon, Yudit Tiwery, or Borrong. This can be attributed, in part, to the sheer diversity of Indonesia’s ethnic groups, each having its own concerns or environmental issues. Additionally, limited access to

resources and demanding works of local activism often hinder the engagement of tribalist writers in broader academic conversations. As such, many tribalist theologians prefer or are capable of contributing through journal articles rather than monographs. In most cases, their voices are documented in anthologies. Societies such as Yayasan Oase Intim and the Indonesian Theologians Association, among others, have played a pivotal role in amplifying these marginalized voices. In the past five years, they have published four significant anthologies featuring contributions from over fifty authors (Mandalika et al. 2023; Ngelow and Mandalika 2022; Ngelow 2019; Kolimon 2022).

3.4. The (Strategic) Essentialist Approach

Beyond the existing polarity between expansionist and tribalist approaches, a distinct emerging approach merits careful attention. Rather than expanding the Western-inherited systematic theologies or relying on the vast diversity of tribal wisdom, this approach aims to utilize some notions, imaginations, or cultures/subcultures that might denote “Indonesianness”. This strategy, whether intentional or unintentional, distinguishes the Indonesian Christian community within the global discourse. I refer to this approach or strategy as “essentialist”. Comparably, Palestinian–American literary critic Edward Said once spoke of “Orientalism”, in which an essentialist view of a particular community is constructed by the colonial power to “enable” narration. However, Said sees the Orientalist tendency as being carried out by Western authors (the Occidental/the colonizer) with their gaze toward the East (the Orient/the colonized) (Said 2003). In contrast, the essentialist strategy in this context is undertaken by the colonized bodies themselves, seeking to unify their own identity as a postcolonial community and define their place within the global conversation.

This leads us to the well-known framework in subaltern studies called “the strategic choice of essentialism”, the phrase commonly associated with Gayatri C. Spivak to describe the phenomenon of a colonized subject adopting a reductive identity of themselves to access knowledge and power for liberation and resistance. Otherwise, the only remaining options are either to assimilate with the colonial power or complete silence because, as Spivak insists, the “subalterns” cannot speak for themselves due to the complex problems of inadequate representation.²³ In the wider Asian discourse, this strategy has been employed to delineate the essential differences between Asia and its past and current colonizers.²⁴ Similarly, theologians in Indonesia enact strategic essentialism to define the distinctiveness of Indonesia in relation to other countries or the West in particular.

There are three exemplary models of the essentialist approach. The first model focuses on pondering the concept of moderate life or “ordinariness” (*keugaharian*). While the spirituality and constructive theology of the ordinary has been popularized by renowned theologians such as Joas Adiprasetya, Andreas Yewangoe, and Henriette T. Hutabarat Lebang, some authors have attempted to adapt it to ecotheology, especially in the context of urban living (Adiprasetya 2016; Adiprasetya 2020; Hutabarat Lebang 2022; Yewangoe 2018). For example, Yornan Masinambow and Yuansri Kansil, drawing from Yewangoe, propose that *keugaharian* signifies a state of contentment and modesty characterized by a simple lifestyle despite abundant wealth. Living in *keugaharian*, however, does not mean adopting an ascetic lifestyle, nor is there a need for hypocrisy in their engagement with the world. It is about having and staying enough. Masinambow and Kansil further argue that the spirituality of ordinariness is linked to *process theology* and *deep ecology*, enabling individuals to recognize their place within a broader, more intricate system of life. Deep ecology propounds a radical paradigm shift, leading to a confidence that the natural world is sufficiently abundant to meet the needs of all beings. This paradigm shift requires dismantling the outdated notion that nature exists solely to satiate the insatiable greed of humanity. This perspective invites humanity to return to fundamental virtues such as self-restraint and simplicity, which are indispensable for ecological and economic sustainability (Masinambow and Kansil 2021).

The second model is centered on oceanic thinking. It draws from Indonesian archipelagic and coastal contexts. “Maritime” theologian Elia Maggang is well-known as the advocate for this model. He contends that much of Western ecotheological discourse has been dominated by land-based “green” ecotheology, ignoring the “blue” element of the earth. He thus calls for a theology that is sea-friendly, which he names “blue ecotheology” (Maggang 2019). A distinctive feature of blue thinking is a radical openness to indeterminacy, difference, disorder, and multiplicities in life and in facing creation’s future, depicted in the metaphor of fishermen who always follow where the wind and the wave lead them. This radical openness of the future also stands in stark contrast to Hegelian historical progressivism. Later, Maggang reflects on Jesus’ call to the Galilean fishermen in the Gospel of Mark, envisioning a “blue discipleship” in dialogue with Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson’s concept of “community of creation”.²⁵

The final model of the essentialist approach is the interreligious (or, better, interfaith) model, rooted in the multireligious context that defines Indonesian national identity. While scholars across various religious groups frequently debate issues such as the Trinity, Christology, and other theological differences, they often find common ground in discussing the climate crisis and land exploitation. In the history of Christianity–Islamic dialogue, theological resonance was often found in their concept of stewardship (Mehmet 2023). I must acknowledge, however, that in Indonesia, such conceptual appeals often originate from Muslim authors rather than Christians. Islamic scholars like Lalu P. Farhan and Prosmala Hadisaputra have demonstrated a willingness to broaden their examination to include Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. They are fascinated by the fact that all of these religions have “advocate[d] the values of ecological preservation and the responsibility of their people to address ecological crises” (Farhan and Hadisaputra 2022). Despite being members of the predominant religion in Indonesia, these scholars exemplify a humbleness to learn from other perspectives. In this regard, another important text is a special issue on “EcoAction” in the *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* journal, edited by Whitney Bauman. While this volume is more international, as it includes Marion Grau, Cara Judea Alhadeff, and Vani Vignesh, it also presents four Indonesian scholars: Andi Alfian, Bibi Suprianto, Andang Binawan, and Dewi Candraningrum (Suprianto 2023; Binawan 2023; Candraningrum 2023; Alfian 2023). Lastly, an anthology titled *Ekoteologi*, published by Yayasan Oase Intim, has a special section on “ecumenical and interreligious” conversations (Mandalika et al. 2023).

Identifiers such as “modest community”, “archipelagic country”, and “interreligious society”, as presented by the three models above, could be reductionistic or, at worst, fetishizing if they are expected to represent the fullness of postcolonial Indonesia. Those signifiers cannot fully capture the realities of consumerism in major cities, the pressing urban (land-based) issues requiring policy attention, and the prevalent conflicts (rather than activism) within interreligious encounters. Decolonial discourse is aware of this potential. Afro-Caribbean thinker Frantz Fanon, for example, has reminded us that intellectuals from the oppressed group might often enact a performance “of going as native as possible” to show off their unique identity and to refuse cultural subjugation by colonizers or the colonial paradigm. Fanon, however, speaks about African intellectuals who created a literature of negritude as an “affective antithesis” toward the colonial gaze. He also compares this intellectual phenomenon in Africa with the political phenomenon in the Arab League, where, as a way to oppose the West’s projection of them as “barbaric”, they similarly invoke Islam as an antithesis of the condemnation of the colonizers. Regardless, both suggest a more unified yet reductionary depiction of “culture” (Fanon 2004). Additionally, Fanon warns that these literary works not only use techniques borrowed from the occupier. They are also composed of those who “behave like a foreigner” (Fanon 2004). A similar reductionist temptation haunts Indonesian essentialist intellectuals. Either being motivated to contrast the colonial condemnation or being unintentional about it, they create a sort of category—culture, identity, customs, etc. The difference is that they, in contrast to the

African intellectuals, run the risk of “going as *non-native*” as possible in their pursuit of societal unity or national imagination.²⁶

Despite its potential limitations, the essentialist strategy offers certain benefits to the field. The most notable advantage is the creation of “imaginative geography”, as described by Said, which “help[s] the mind to intensify *its own sense of itself* by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away” (Said 2003; emphasis added). For theologians within this camp, imaginative geography becomes a tool for the refusal (or critique) of an Orientalist gaze.²⁷ Accordingly, it brings unity across tribes, cities, islands, or religious groups because the “discursive” or common identity is now defined.²⁸ For example, although I live in a different place and was born into a different tribe compared to these theologians, I can still relate to the problems they are facing and the theological ideas they argue for. I grew up and lived on the outskirts of a big city, where moderate life was once common but is now threatened by massive industrialization. I spent most of my childhood near the coastal area where my friends’ parents made a living by fishing. I also went to school with Muslim friends who make up more than 95% of the entire classroom. I can have an effective solidarity with these theologians because of this generic relatedness.

Furthermore, holding to this imaginative geography is crucial when the intra-Indonesian theological discourse is to be taken transnationally. To critique the manifestation of coloniality in contemporary geopolitical relations as well as to enter the global exchanges of knowledge, discursive identity such as “interreligious”, “moderate”, or “archipelagic” would better inform theological studies, particularly the field of ecotheology. In other words, challenging Western-inherited theology does not necessarily mean refusing anything that is less grounded, too discursive, or non-native. Postcolonial theologians Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera were precisely right. “The strategy of resistance . . . is irreducible to a simple and direct oppositionalism” (Rivera 2004).

4. Conclusions

I have already discussed how ecotheology *as a field* requires an alternative typology that accounts for theologians and insights engaging with the colonial episteme. By focusing on the postcolonial community of scholars like those in Indonesia, I have also endeavored to construct a typology that identifies strategies employed by ecotheologians. Their strategies include expanding Western systematic theology, embracing tribal wisdom, or favoring a discursive identity through strategic essentialism. There might be more to say if this typology is used to identify strategies employed in the historical and current major ecotheological works that have been commonly accepted in the Anglo-speaking academy. This, however, leads to another research goal.

The pedagogical implication of employing postcolonial typology is also significant. Instead of simply seeking a normative theological and ethical claim regarding creation, postcolonial typology fosters a deeper understanding of the overwhelmingly intricate and the *continuing* relationship between colonizers and the colonized, oppressors and the oppressed. If we believe that such a relationship still exists, then we need to avoid teaching theology simply through what Paulo Freire calls a “banking” method, namely, when “education becomes an act of depositing”, in which the teacher is the depositor for students’ brains (Freire and Macedo 2000). If the banking model persists, ecotheology risks becoming, to use Mendoza and Zachariah’s words, the “theological legitimations of colonization”. (Mendoza and Zachariah 2022) Such teaching is at best ignorant or at worst complicit in perpetuating the coloniality of power within epistemic theology such as ecotheology. Ecotheology, not only the idea but the field itself, can only be liberating when its epistemic aspect is subject to reexamination. Additionally, it is liberating if the teaching of ecotheology introduces diverse strategies of epistemic delinking as exemplified by scholars in the field. For example, when discussing the assigned reading material, teachers may ask, “What is the unsaid presupposition in this piece? Who/what does the author blame? Where does the author address the legacy of colonialism?” In this way,

pedagogy “does not and cannot serve the interests of the oppressor”, as Freire emphasizes, especially when the oppressor is the one responsible for major causes of the ecological damage we have seen so far (Freire and Macedo 2000).

Brazilian decolonial theologian and educator Elaine Nogueira-Godsey has reminded us that “social justice cannot be fully realized without affirming its intrinsic ties to environmental justice”. (Nogueira-Godsey 2019) In this sense, she does not mean to pit two important purposes against each other, working for social justice or working for environmental justice. Instead, her claim is meant to motivate learners to “delink” their thoughts from the subtle yet pervasive influence of the coloniality of power. Any learners and educators who share “environmental concerns also need to address the reasons *why people have been put in such positions of vulnerability in the first place*” (Nogueira-Godsey 2019). In this pedagogical setting, a “decological” praxis is called for. “Decological” is a truncation Nogueira-Godsey introduces to capture all three intertwined characteristics of theologians that struggle with the ongoing influence of colonial legacy: decolonial, ecological, and pedagogical, all in one breath. With decological praxis, students are given opportunities “to identify and emancipate [themselves] from reproducing colonial models of relationships” between themselves and other human beings as well as between themselves and broader planetary members (Nogueira-Godsey 2019). Starting with postcolonial typology, I contend, is one of the ways of performing decological praxis.

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Notes

- ¹ Peruvian decolonial scholar Aníbal Quijano introduced this term to distinguish between the historical, tangible manifestation of colonial power and its ongoing legacy. See Quijano (2000). I return to Quijano in Section 2.2.
- ² Sideris (2003). Sideris’ own work concerns an “ecological model”, which still does not adequately appreciate the relevance of evolutionary theory, although many scholars of such a model, according to Sideris, have claimed to be “grounded” in the scientific knowledge of the natural environment.
- ³ I borrow the term “episteme” from Foucault’s delineation of the paradigm of a certain context, culture, or time, which shapes one’s or society’s concepts. The term “epistemic” in this article is used as the adjective of the term “episteme” instead of “epistemology”.
- ⁴ Hall (2004). Hall’s pretension that the “stewardship model” is immune to the logic of domination leads him to dispense entirely with any “biocentric” proposal such as those posted by Elizabeth Dodson Gray, Sallie McFague, and others. Like Hall, James Gustafson employs five categories generated by a similar examination of human position. See Gustafson (1994).
- ⁵ Bergmann (2005). Bergmann later proposes the third approach, “integration”.
- ⁶ Northcott (1996). Like Northcott, John Haught also seeks a “theological rationale for earthkeeping”, and he identifies three possible rationales: “apologetic” (which reflects on the role of humans), “sacramental” (equal to ecocentric), or “eschatological” approaches in Haught (2004).
- ⁷ Ruether (2011). See also Ruether (1975). For other typologies, see Conradie (2006).
- ⁸ Quijano (2000). Quijano argues that since Europe not only had control of the world market but was also able to impose its colonial dominance over all regions of the planet, these regions “were attributed new geocultural identities”, such as “Indians”, “Black”, or others (Quijano 2000).

- 9 Quijano (2000). This erasure paves the way for the capitalist relational paradigm as well as the dyadic ideologies, which are “evolutionism” and “dualism”, that underpin the hierarchical relation between Europe and the rest of the world.
- 10 Quijano explains three steps of how coloniality of knowledge is established, which include the “expropriation” of cultural findings in the colonized societies, “repression” as much as possible of the colonized knowledge production, and the educational “enforcement” upon the colonized to learn the dominant culture (Quijano 2000).
- 11 Mignolo (2011). This epistemic hegemony, exposed by Quijano, Mignolo, and, later, Ramón Grosfoguel, was in fact materially illustrated by the political pattern that colonialism itself assumed, namely, that the land is empty, by the virtue of donation, or should be made empty, with or without force, to be developed and cultivated. We see this quite readily, for instance, in *Requerimiento* in 1513.
- 12 Grosfoguel (2013). Similar to Grosfoguel, Mignolo and Walsh point their fingers at both the university and the museum as colonial institutions (Mignolo and Walsh 2018).
- 13 Drexler-Dreis (2018). Drexler-Dreis draws from Miranda Fricker’s notion of “epistemic injustice” and Nelson Maldonado Torres’s theory of “epistemic racism” (Drexler-Dreis 2018).
- 14 Mignolo (2010). In fact, as already noted by Bartolome de Las Casas, emancipatory effort alone can inadvertently be Eurocentric and thus colonial if it still assumes that the subaltern, Indigenous, and the colonized need “help” from the West. Cf. Dussel (1995).
- 15 Fahmi (2020). See more on Hägerdal (2012). For more cases of Indonesian coloniality, see Penz (1993).
- 16 Borrong (2005). After discussing many causes, he then points to transnational issues, concluding that “[p]roduction and consumption certainly have to do with global markets and human greed” (Borrong 2005).
- 17 Borrong (2005). Although Borrong has rightly emphasized the historical ecological issues in the nation, invoking a “de-Westernization” of ecotheology, I find his underlying concern for temporality and his dichotomizing of the “apologetic” / “constructive” unable to account for the many cases in Indonesia where a retrospective stance toward the past can paradoxically be a constructive approach to facing the future; in the following section, I call this a “tribalist” approach. In addition to this fact, Borrong’s evolutionary paradigm nonetheless subtly carries a Eurocentric undertone and thus showcases the coloniality of power. This is apparent in his unequivocal endorsement of Douglass Hall, Jürgen Moltmann, and Walter Brueggemann as exemplars of the constructive approach, which appears to be valorizing the Hegelian paradigm of historical progress.
- 18 Borrong (2019b). See also similar works in (Putra 2000; Mamahit 2007). Both emphasize God’s identity as the “creator” and “provider” of creation, while human is merely an “agent” of God.
- 19 Similarities can be found between Indonesian theologians and those featured in Conradie (2011).
- 20 Remikatu (2020). Many Indonesian theologians have been dealing with Moltmann’s notion of eschatology, especially after his *God in Creation*, but only a few of them have developed his ecological notion.
- 21 For example, a group of women theologians, like Agustina Samosir and Ejodia Kakunsi, could not resist borrowing the insights from Sallie McFague, Rosemary R. Ruether, Elizabeth Johnson, Ivone Gebara, and Aruna Gnanadason, insofar their feminist frameworks could articulate the emphasis of the notion of the motherland. See Samosir and Kakunsi (2022).
- 22 For other examples, see Denar et al. (2021). A refusal to conform to coloniality is stated differently. Some are more explicit; some are not. Others appear in acts of silence, meaning that the authors move away from the missionary-inherited theology simply by not discussing it at all in their writings.
- 23 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Nelson (1988).
- 24 For example, Nami Kim and Kwok Pui Lan discuss how the term “Asian”—a notion that Asian theologians themselves did not create—has been used to identify the “third” identity amid the dichotomous identities of the West and the East. They both agree that strategic essentialism “signifies a collective consciousness” against the theological hegemony of the West based on their “common history” of oppression and struggle against colonialism. See Nami Kim, “The ‘Indigestible’ Asian: The Unifying Term ‘Asian’ in Theological Discourse, in Brock (2007); Kwok (2005).
- 25 Maggang (2022). See also Maggang (2021). I am aware of the possible reservations about this approach, typically from those who prefer the notion of “order” over “chaos” in thinking about creation (see Sihaloho and Novalina 2020). However, I view this reservation as an alignment with the expansionist approach.
- 26 This does not mean that those who propose a more essentialist approach *intentionally* support nationalism or denigrate their native identities. In fact, theologians who invest in the idea of ordinariness, Maggang who has an archipelagic focus, or many interreligious and comparative theologians always start with local contexts. The best way to frame this pitfall is that such discursive identities would be complicit to the nationalistic paradigm if they are not started or accompanied by concrete, local concerns in their surrounding communities.
- 27 This does not mean that the presented authors turn toward (as coined by Walter Mignolo and Susanne Zantop) an “Occidentalist” impulse, which pictures the other Western country in order to shape its own identity, typically done by other Western (or German) authors. See Mignolo (2000). See also Zantop (1997). Rather, this approach is an exemplification of autonomy as one belongs to a country, rather than to a tribal community. For more discussion on Said’s imaginative geography, see Valentine (1999).

- ²⁸ I follow Namsoon Kang's logic in her address to the use of strategic essentialism among Asian theologians. See Kang (2004). Focusing on Asia, Kang states that strategic essentialism "tends to suppress the diversity among people of different social/cultural strata within Asian countries, as if Asians were class-less, gender-less, state-less, race-less" (Kang 2004). Like Kang, I am also aware that the essentialist approach runs the risk of turning into a "tyrannical imposition" of the proper ways of being Indonesian, thus engendering monolithicism of Indonesia, as opposed to being a means of resistance, although this is not the intention of theologians in that camp.

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