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# Tracing Collective Memory and Social Change in the Communities around Limboto Lake, Gorontalo

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**Abstract**---This paper analyzes the collective memories and social changes in communities that have been living around Limboto Lake. This lake, which has been praised by the ancestors of the people of Gorontalo, has turned into a catastrophic lake. This change is intimately related to changes in ways of thinking and the social conditions of the communities around the lake. These social changes are not only due to natural changes and disasters, but also the political, social, and economic situation. Furthermore, the community's attachment to their collective memory, which has been preserved through tradition and oral narrative, has been slowly disappearing. This study uses an ethnographic method to trace the collective memories of this society. Moreover, this paper utilizes the concept of oral tradition as history.

**Keywords**---collective memory, communities, natural, social, tradition.

## Background

Traditions are generally passed down orally as a way of preserving the collective memories of a folk (Danandjaja, 2007). Although folk or people's collective memories change over time, the core of their collective memories is preserved through oral tradition. However, these collective memories will face a crisis if the practice of orally transmitting the tradition ceases.

The traditions of people often actualize local wisdom and knowledge. The methods used by a society to manage the lives of its people and the environment are revealed through folklore, including poetry and songs; the performing arts, such as dance and the administration of medication through performance; traditional architecture; and embroidered and woven traditional clothes. All of these traditions are passed down orally (Vansina, 1985). People in Indonesian society possess unique forms of wisdom and local knowledge, including the Gorontalo people.

Gorontalo people preserve their myths, legends, songs, and performances through oral tradition. The Gorontalo people have various legends and myths related to Limboto Lake, and they even have a song that praises the lake. However, currently, only a few people around the lake know the legend and myth. Moreover, certain rituals that are related to preserving the lake are no longer practised. This paper argues that the poor condition of the lake, which is a result of both natural disasters and changes in human culture and society, can be traced through the oral traditions of the Gorontalo people, which are a repository for their collective memories. This study adopts the perspective that oral traditions can be seen as history because they preserve the collective memories of people. Vansina (1985), discusses the concept of collective memory, stating,

*Traditions are memories of memories. For each rendering, they must be presented and they are encoded again by listeners as well as by performers. Traditions presuppose the slow remodelling of*

*memory as well as reasonably frequent, more dynamic reorganizations. That this is collective memory is important [sic]. To a point all memory is collective, but memories of tradition are special so different people hear a single rendering and may or may not render it themselves. (Vansina, 1985)*

The above excerpt demonstrates that collective memory can be traced through people. They listen to messages from their ancestors and transmit them to the next generation in various ways. Local history, culture, and social changes over time can be traced in oral traditions.

This study employs an ethnographic method to trace the collective memories of society (Endraswara, 2006). This was achieved by interviewing mostly people who live on the south shore of Limboto Lake. Interviews were carried out using normal conversation, and we selected both male and female interviewees aged 50 to 79 years old. Interviews were conducted from July to September 2017.

## Discussion

### *Myth, legend, and history*

Mbu'i Bungale, the main character of the Gorontalo folk myth *Bulalo lo Limutu (Limboto Lake)*, states that Limboto Lake is a blessed place that needs to be guarded. Moreover, *The Legend of Du Panggola*, which has spread particularly on the south shore of the lake, tells the story of an old man who formed and guarded the lake. He advised people to protect the lake and guard their kinship ties (Tuloli, 1993). However, Mbu'i Bungale's statement and Du Panggola's advice appear to conflict with present-day facts. A massive flood hit many parts of Gorontalo District in 2016. Along some parts of the lake, homes remain inundated with water (It was still inundated when the interview was conducted in 2017).

This demonstrates that both Mbu'i Bungale's and Du Panggola's statements are no longer valid, whereas the ancestors of the Gorontalo people used myth and legend in the past to express that cultural heritage can protect the ecosystem of the lake through the messages in the myth and legend. Limboto Lake no longer serves as a rainwater reservoir for the surrounding rivers and creeks during the rainy season. Conversely, the lake has become the cause for water overflowing out of the lake. People and experts assumed that this was caused by the shallowing of the lake. In contrast, during the dry season, the lake is no longer able to provide water to irrigate the surrounding area. The local government and various involved parties are attempting to restore the condition of the lake. However, these efforts must be supported by the people living on the lake (Onaga, 2014; Tang, 2021).

C.B.H. Von Rosenberg, a Dutch scientist, visited Gorontalo and illustrated the landscapes he encountered. He wrote about his journey to Gorontalo, which he took in 1863. He recorded his travel in *Reistogten in de afdeling Gorontalo (The Trip to the Gorontalo Branch)*, which was published in 1865. He discussed what he saw and experienced, including nature, flora and fauna, culture, and the language used by the Gorontalo people. Rosenberg (1865), described his visit to Gorontalo in detail. He stated that in 1863 around Limboto Lake, there were many birds, and he also saw many plants and sago palm trees when he sailed on the lake. Furthermore, Rosenberg (1865), mentioned that there was much familiar fish in the lake, including *hulu'u*, *payangga*, *tola*, *dumbaya*, *okili*, and some fish that sound unfamiliar today, such as *dumalaloto* and *hunuto*. In his illustrations, he depicted many large crocodiles that measured approximately six feet in length. At that time, crocodiles were hunted. A crocodile approximately 6 ft. in length (about 2 m) was worth 3 guilders, and crocodiles shorter than 6 ft. were worth 1 guilder. Crocodile eggs cost 5 cents each. Moreover, the lake was still expansive at that time. The lake no longer looks the way that Von Rosenberg described it, which was spacious and full of crocodiles.

Von Rosenberg also described the width and depth of the lake as follows:

*Het meer van Limbotto, bij den inboorling bekend onder den naam van „Boelallo-moepato,” beslaat het westelijk gedeelte der vlakte in eene nagenoeg westelijke rigting; de lengte kan op 12, de breedte op 5 en de vierkante inhoud op 35 □ paal geschat worden, terwijl de diepte tussen 2½ vadem en weinige voeten afwisselt. Het heeft een eliptischen vorm, zonder diepe bogten of insnijdingen.”*

*Lake Limboto is known to the natives as “Bulalo Mopatu.” The western part of the lake is the largest. Its length is 12; its width is 5, and it is 35 m<sup>2</sup> in paal. The depth varies between 2.5 fathoms and a few feet. The shape of the lake is elliptical without any deep curves. (Translation provided by the researcher; Von Rosenberg, 1865, p. 62)*

If the size of the lake in *paal* (measured in the Dutch Colonial era) were converted to the scale of the meter or kilometre, then the length of the lake would be over 18 km and the width would be 7.5 km, with an inner square-shaped measure of 52.5 km<sup>2</sup> in large. The lake area is bigger than that. Because of its elliptical shape, the lake is estimated only from the inside of the square-shaped part of the lake, but the curve sides of the elliptical shape were not measured. Von Rosenberg did not record the exact depth of the lake; it is likely that he simply estimated the depth of Lake Limboto as 2.5 fathoms plus a few feet. This estimated measurement was made in 1863.

Nevertheless, present-day research shows that the lake is currently approximately 30 km<sup>2</sup> with a depth of approximately 2–4 m. In 1934, its large was 70 km<sup>2</sup>, and its depth was 14 m (Firman, 2009). According to a study by the Bandung Institute of Technology, in 1934 the large of the lake was 70 km<sup>2</sup>, which is slightly different from the measurement made by Von Rosenberg. This is because Von Rosenberg's record was just the inside square measurement of the lake. It is worth noting that the large and the depth of the lake both shrank dramatically.

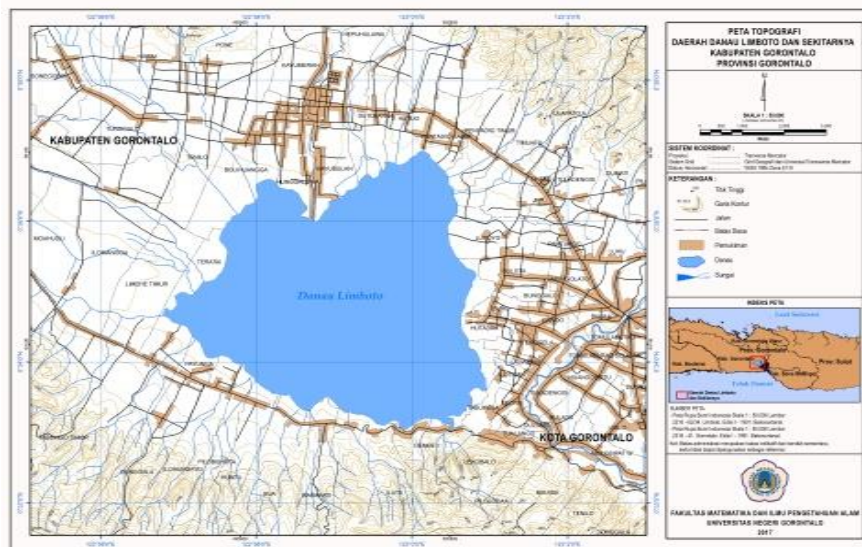


Figure 1. Present-day Map of Limboto Lake

### *The present condition of Limboto Lake*

The current state of Limboto Lake contrasts with the representation of the lake in the Gorontalo myth and legend and the historical record. The Lake no longer functions as it should because of shallowing and narrowing. The lake is no longer a blessing; rather, it has become a disaster. Data from the year of 2000 shows that Limboto Lake is the shallowest lake in Indonesia with a maximum depth of just 2 m. Additionally, the area of the section of the lake in Gorontalo Province narrowed to 3,000 ha (Siswo, 2009). This change was accompanied by a reduction in the function of the lake. Originally, the lake served as a reservoir in the rainy season to prevent flooding. It also supplied water to the surrounding area in the dry season. However, it has transformed into a tank that distributes water to surrounding areas in the rainy season, which has caused flooding. Additionally, it can no longer provide water in the dry season because the lake's water volume is insufficient (Scheyvens, 1999; Kiss, 2004).

Limboto Lake is located directly on the border separating the city of Gorontalo from the regency of Gorontalo. The lake is located in the lowlands at 4.5 m above sea level. It is formed by the meeting of four major rivers in Gorontalo: the Alo, Daenaa, Biyonga, and Molalahu rivers. Then, the water of the lake flows through the Tapodu River, and its downstream merge with the Bone-Bolango River and continue to flow into the sea (Henga & Solihin, 2009).

The water of Lake Limboto comes from rainwater that falls directly into the lake and rivers that flow into the lake. 23 rivers flow into Limboto Lake, including the Aloe, Marisa, Meluopo, Biyonga, Bulota, Talubongo, Pohu, and Ritenga rivers. The longest rivers are the Alo Molalahu River (348 km) and the Pohu River (156 km). The only river that flows all year is the Biyonga River. Nevertheless, the Biyonga River has a weak current and it covers a relatively small area of 68 km<sup>2</sup>. This river is the smallest tributary that flows into Limboto Lake (Nontji, 2016).

In this way, Lake Limboto is both downstream from many rivers in Gorontalo and upstream from some other rivers. The shallowing indicates that this lake has been filled up by eroded earthen materials that have settled on the

bottom of the lake. Presumably, only a small amount of eroded material is carried to the sea by the stream. If this trend continues, the lake will be transformed into a delta. The surrounding environment is becoming dangerous. The surrounding area will become a rainwater reservoir because the landscape of the central mainland part of Gorontalo tends to be flat.

#### *The present condition of the Gorontalo Society*

Limboto Lake still serves as a source of livelihood for villagers living around the lake. Locals use the lake for fishing, watering their fields, and completing household tasks. Restoring these functions of the lake is not a simple task because it is not only the lake that must be restored but also the upstream rivers. Moreover, river erosion is not solely due to natural cycles; the acceleration of the deterioration of the lake is also related to human activity. Thus, it is necessary to raise awareness of this problem in Gorontalo society. Gorontalo people must be informed about the current state of Limboto Lake, and they should follow the wisdom of their ancestors, which is embodied in the myth and legend of the lake. This is especially true for the people who are in direct contact with the lake (McGehee & Santos, 2005; Taylor, 2005).

People living around the lake fish on the lake to earn money. However, they also throw household waste and garbage into the lake. Consequently, the quality of the water is poor. However, they must use this lake water to complete household tasks. Moreover, because of the poor water quality, fishing revenue has decreased. The people living around the lake are overwhelmed by poverty, and they live in miserable conditions. Although restoring the lake would benefit the local economy, they do not know how to improve the condition of the lake. They seem to have accepted the status quo as their destiny. Some destitute young men have left for other cities to find work; others have changed professions from fishermen to *bentor* drivers (a *bentor* is a typical Gorontalo vehicle used for public transportation).

The areas around the lake were devastated by a flood in 2016, which exacerbated the poor conditions of the people. In some areas, houses remain inundated with water. The dwellings that people now live in were once part of the lake that has now dried up due to shallowing. Therefore, it is not surprising that when there is considerable rainfall, some areas become flooded. However, the topography and rainfall are not the only causes of flooding; waste and garbage are also complicated factors that cause flooding. The conditions notably worsened after the construction of the ring road on the eastern part of the lake.

The people, including officials in the Gorontalo provincial, municipal, and regency governments, need to be aware of the situation. In particular, people living around the lake need to be made aware of the problem. Most people have ignored culture, which is extremely significant. Culture is connected to the mind. The mind determines how people think and manifest their thoughts in daily life (Németh & Cronin, 2009; Wilkie et al., 2020).

The worsening condition of the lake demonstrates that there is a transformation in the culture of the Gorontalo people because nature depends on how humans treat it. If humans treat it well, it will become better; if humans treat it poorly, it will become worse.

#### *The disappearance of oral tradition*

Collective memories are generally preserved through oral traditions. Oral traditions include everything related to the knowledge and customs of a region, such as local habits and customs, methods for building houses, techniques for preserving the environment, and oral myths and legends. Myths and legends are generally created by the community itself. Myths and legends reflect how a society thinks and organizes itself, and how it conceives of the relationships between humans and the Creator and humans and nature (Wirawan et al., 2022).

Surprisingly, people living around the lake generally are unaware of their traditional stories, including the legend and myth of the lake. We asked some people living on the south shore about the legend and the myth of the lake. The legend and myth were generally only known by people in their 60s and above who had lived on the lake since they were born. Even for those who did know these stories, the stories were simply regarded as tales without symbolic meaning. This shows that the messages regarding the lake were not passed down to the next generation.

Harun Pakaya (60 years old) and Oneng Umar (55 years old) are fishermen from Iluta Village (part of Gorontalo Regency); they stated that they were very familiar with the legend of Du Panggola. The people in this area believe that Du Panggola never lived in the past and they can denote his tomb, but they also stated that certain people still occasionally see the old man nowadays. He wears a big traditional straw hat. They called him “Ti Wonduwu Da’a” (meaning, “The Big Straw Hat”).

They stated that—based on the tales of their ancestors—the tomb of Du Panggola had originally been on the edge

of the lake because the old man was known as the guardian of the lake, but it had moved to the hill. Both of these men did not remark that the lake had once been more than 20 m deep. It means that the shallowing of the lake had been happening for a long time, and then the lakeside became a cliff. Not surprisingly, the tomb of the old man is on a hill now.

When they were asked whether they knew about the myth and legend of Mbu'i Bungale, they replied that they did not recognize the story. We hypothesize that the story of Mbu'i Bungale is not known on the south shore of the lake because the people there know only the legend of Du Panggola, who is the guardian and creator of the lake.

The Mbu'i Bungale story is well-known on the north side of the lake. The legend states that Mbu'i Bungale ever stated wise values about how to protect the environment of Limboto Lake. She stated that the area of Limboto Lake must be occupied by good people, not liars or treacherous people because the area is blessed. This statement limited the type of people who should live around the lake. It also demonstrates how important the role of the lake is for the sustainability of the social and cultural life of the community. The lake is an integral part of the life of the Gorontalo people. The lake not only provides income and livelihood for the surrounding community but is also a groundwater supply for the city of Gorontalo

Meanwhile, the human relationship with the environment is reflected in Gorontalo folk songs, the title follows the name of the lake *Bulalo lo Limutu* (Lake Limboto). The creator of the song is unknown. It is a typical folk song; the song belongs to the public. The lyrics reveal the message of the song.

*To Bulalo lo Limutu [On Limboto Lake]  
 Tahitaeya to bulotu [People sail in boats]  
 Taluhu hi ila-ilata [The water is sparkling]  
 Otinela lo dulahu [Reflecting the sunlight]  
 Huidu totililiyo [The mountains are alongside]  
 Bongomoyidu dungiyu [Coconut trees have green leaves]  
 Taatto pilohala hibiteya [People sail to earn money]  
 Mamohala popehu [Looking for earnings]  
 Bulalo lo limutu [Limboto Lake]  
 Dila ta olipata'u [I'll never forget you]  
 Teto hila'u lali tuwau [There, my heart unites]  
 Olota ilotoliangu'u [With someone I care about]*

The first lines of the song highlight the beauty of Lake Limboto with its sparkling water surrounded by mountains and coconut trees. The song describes how the community around the lake lives. The relationship between humans and nature is portrayed as harmonious in the lines of this song. The lake serves as a source of income for the surrounding community. The end of the song is heartbreaking when considering the present condition of the lake. The lyrics of the song state that the lake will never be forgotten because it is linked to feelings. However, in reality, the lake was forgotten and its roles of maintaining the balance between humans and nature and providing for the community have been lost. It is also no longer a beautiful landscape.

This song transmits messages from the past that contain collective Gorontalo folk memories about their blessed lake; however, it no longer has meaning for present-day Gorontalo people. It became just an ordinary song. The shallowing and the narrowing of the lake demonstrate how humans have contributed significantly to destroying the lake. The wise words of Mbu'i Bungale have been forgotten. The advice of Du Panggola has been stripped of meaning. Mbu'i Bungale was a fictional character, and Du Panggola was also likely a fictional character. They were created by an ancient community to educate the people about the value of maintaining the lake and its cultural significance. These values had been passed down from generation to generation, but over time, they have been forgotten.

There was also a traditional ritual meant to preserve the lake. The native referred to this ritual as "*mopo'a bulalo*" (feed the lake) and "*mopoyilihu*" (flowing). For this ritual, the people provided offerings to the lake usually accompanied by drum beats (*towohu*) and spells recited by a shaman (*wombuwa*) to drive away diseases and summon the rain during the extreme dry season. The ritual was also used to ask for plentiful fishing. However, apart from a small minority of people, this ritual is rarely performed by Gorontalo people.

We observed something strange when interviewing someone in their 70s. They were somewhat anxious and appeared worried when they were asked why the traditional rituals were not carried out anymore. For example, Uko B Lasena (80 years old), who lives in Iluta Village, became anxious when he was asked this question. At the time, he was a fisherman. He was reluctant to explain the reason. He simply stated that the younger generation has their own beliefs and that they are not eager to perform the ceremony, so it is better to avoid conflict. Moreover, according to



him, few remaining shamans know how to perform the spells.

Meanwhile, Yusuf Karim (73 years old) was very enthusiastic when he was asked about the lake. He lives in the Lekobalo area (part of Gorontalo city). The lake terminates in this area, and the water from the lake enters a tributary that flows to the sea. Yusuf Karim was worried about the condition of the lake. However, when we asked him why the traditional ceremony, which involves presenting an offering to the lake, is no longer carried out, he reluctantly explained that they did not do that anymore because the times had changed.

According to both men, the ritual is no longer compatible with present conditions, and the reasons are not necessary to converse. Regardless, they eventually acknowledged that if the rituals were still performed, it would lead to a complicated situation because the younger generations have their own beliefs. On this point, they referred to Islam. In Islamic culture, the ritual may be seen as an activity that opposes Allah's words.

Accordingly, there is a large gap between the younger and older generations. We found that there is a silent conflict between religion and old traditions. The older generation cannot pass down the tradition because they are reluctant to cause uncomfortable situations. Simultaneously, the younger generation has rejected the old traditions. This rejection is a result of new thoughts that have influenced the minds of the younger generation.

The opinions of the younger generation were well represented in an interview with Marten Zakaria (50 years old). He lives in Dembe Village. This area is in the border area between Gorontalo Regency and the city of Gorontalo. He stated that the old traditions are no longer accepted by the people because many of them feel that they contradict Islamic culture. They must first talk with a local religious leader if they intend to perform an old traditional ritual. They had ever performed old traditions at Otanaha Fortress, which is located in Dembe. The performance was conducted by shamans who chanted spells, but the performance was not related to the tradition of preserving the lake. The performance was stopped halfway through because the people felt a dreadful, demonic presence, and the area religious leader cancelled the performance. For this reason, local people do not desire to preserve the old traditions.

Some women voiced similar opinions. Leno P. Nur (65 years old) lives in Ilohungayo Village. She stated that she and her family never perform the ritual for preserving the lake; however, a few people in her village still do. Nevertheless, the shaman passed away last year. The shaman was a woman, and people called her Mali Sele. Because the shaman who always performed the ritual has died, the observance of the ritual in the village ended. Regarding the legend of Lake Limboto, she did not know it well, despite living near the lake. She may not know the story because Ilohungayo Village is far from what is believed to be the site of the grave of Du Panggola. She was even less aware of the legend of Mbu'i Bungale, which is well-known on the north shore of the lake.

Nontje Lasena (50 years old), the daughter of Uko Lasena from Iluta Village, acknowledged that she had never seen the lake offering ritual when she was a child, but she had just watched it. She did not know the exact meaning of the ritual, but she stated that people said that it could banish the plague and increase the number of fish caught in the lake. When she was asked whether she believes the ritual is effective, she stated that it is not following her religion (Islam). Additionally, she does not recognize the legends. She is familiar with the legend of Du Panggola, but she is only somewhat aware of it and does not understand the meaning behind it, nor does she recognize the story of Mbui Bungale.

The cases of both women imply that the collective memories of the society have been passed down through oral stories. Women play an important role as carriers of oral traditions. Generally, stories and oral traditions are told by women because they serve as mothers and educate the traditions of the next generation. When women do not recognize or understand their own community's oral traditions, the messages and memories will not be transmitted to the next generation.

This situation demonstrates that there has been a significant change in society. This change occurred because of shifts taking place in people's minds. Islamic culture has influenced how Gorontalo people perceive their old traditions. This influence occurred slowly over centuries, starting after the Gorontalo people first came into contact with Islam.

Tacco (1935), writes that based on an interview of Marsaoleh, the head of the Gorontalo sub-District in the 1930s, by a Dutch Controller, Islam entered Gorontalo society in the 16th century. Islam spread easily because the king of Gorontalo converted to Islam. Initially, Islamic teachings did not penetrate deeply into Gorontalo society. This condition happened because Islam arrived in Gorontalo alongside Arabic mystical thought. Indeed, this indicates that the above situation made it easier for Islam to mix with local beliefs, leading to the gradual decline of local oral traditions. Nevertheless, as time passed, Islamic concepts became stronger in the minds of the Gorontalo people, and they begin to abandon their old traditions.

The above condition demonstrates that there is a transformation in Gorontalo people's minds. Gorontalo people ignored the oral traditions that had been passed down by their ancestors, and at the same time, Islamic culture was

only used for religious rituals, not for worship in the true sense, such as how Islam teaches to preserve nature and cleanliness.

However, this shows that in general, the people of Gorontalo are in the process of changing their thinking. They begin to leave old values and start living with new values even though they are not complete yet in practice. Moreover, syncretism is generally avoided by adherents of Islam, and because of this, old mystical values are trying to be abandoned.

People change usually when there are new values that they consider more suitable, but unfortunately, these new values are not followed along with the values of protecting nature that is being taught. This is what happened in the community around Lake Limboto. Various factors can be the cause of their indifference to their environment. However, it is the poverty factor that seems to be a very significant thing. People are busy meeting their daily needs without caring about the environment they live in. They also do not care about the messages of their ancestors from the past about the lake, nor do they pay attention to religious teachings about cleanliness, because their lives are always in disasters, floods and droughts always come at any time resulting in prolonged poverty.

## Conclusion

Collective memories are usually preserved through oral traditions. Oral traditions encompass everything related to the knowledge and customs of a region, including local habits and customs, methods for building houses, techniques for preserving the environment, and oral stories such as myths and legends.

Limboto Lake presents a complex problem. The destruction of the lake is occurring at an alarming rate because not only has a natural balance been disturbed, but also sociocultural and economic balances have been disrupted. Since this natural damage occurs in a cycle that revolves around humans and nature, then the ecological conditions and the way people treat nature must both be improved.

The alternation of people's thoughts affects collective memories, which are passed down to the next generation. The flexible nature of culture allows for society to be transformed due to other cultural influences. Therefore, the conflict between different cultures can occur. Syncretism, which refers to a mixture of different beliefs, presents a solution to this situation. In the case of the Gorontalo people living around the lake, it appears that there is a tendency to abandon syncretism. The older generation has tried to forget the collective memories stored in tradition. Consequently, oral traditions cease to be transmitted. Simultaneously, the younger generation rejects these collective memories. As a result, the messages from the past about preserving nature are no longer manifested in everyday life.

In contrast, Islamic culture, which has been adopted by the younger generation, is not fully established. Guidelines on how to treat nature well in Islam are not practised. For instance, the teaching that states "cleanliness is a part of godliness" is not properly practised. Islam remains only used for ritual activities. Therefore, people do not treat nature according to God's commands.

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