

Jurnal Sosiologi Agama

Jurnal Ilmiah Sosiologi Agama dan Perubahan Sosial

EXPLORING THE RELEVANCE OF PANTHEISM WITH THE HALAIKA BELIEFS OF THE BOTI DALAM TRIBE

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Abstract

This article develops a research project originally funded by the Simlitabmas grant from the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture, conducted in 2022 in Boti Village, Ki'e District, South Central Timor Regency. In this article, the focus shifts to the concept of *halaika*. Reseacher focus on *halaika* belief and its relevance to Pantheism. The analysis uses the perspective of the Sociology of Religion. A qualitative ethnographic method was employed to investigate both the cultural aspects and belief system surrounding *halaika* within the Boti Dalam Tribe, supported by a literature review on Pantheism. The findings indicate a conceptual alignment between *halaika* and Pantheism, particularly in viewing nature as the source and sustainer of human life. Both perspectives (*halaika* and patheism) regard nature as not only the space for human existence but also as a manifestation of the divine. The belief about visible world reveals the presence of the invisible God emphasizes an inseparable unity between nature and divinity.

Keywords: Boti Dalam Tribe; Pantheism; Boti King; Boti Village

Abstrak

Artikel ini merupakan pengembangan dari Reseacheran yang didanai oleh hibah Simlitabmas Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia, yang dilaksanakan pada tahun 2022 di Desa Boti, Kecamatan Ki'e, Kabupaten Timor Tengah Selatan. Fokus utama dalam artikel ini adalah konsep *halaika* yang dianalisis melalui pendekatan Sosiologi Agama untuk menemukan kerangka ilmiahnya serta meninjau relevansinya dengan Pantheisme. Metode Kualitatif etnografi digunakan untuk melihat sisi kebudayaan dan sisi keyakinan *halaika* suku Boti Dalam. Studi pustaka digunakan untuk menambah kajian literatur terkait dengan paham Pantheisme. Hasil Reseacheran menunjukkan bahwa keduanya memiliki relevansi dalam hal pemaknaan alam sebagai sumber kehidupan bagi manusia. Alam menjadi tempat manusia menjalani dan mempertahankan hidupnya. Di samping itu, keduanya juga percaya bahwa di balik keberadaan alam dan kehidupan manusia terdapat sesuatu yang menyelimuti mereka dalam keterbatasan pemahaman mereka terkait hal-hal yang tidak bisa mereka lakukan. Alam juga memberikan pemahaman bahwa apa yang tampak terlihat adalah Tuhan yang berada dalam ketidaktampakan

itu, sehingga keberadaan alam dan Tuhan menjadi satu kesatuan yang tidak terpisahkan bagi keduanya.

Kata kunci: Suku Boti Dalam; Pantheisme; Raja Boti; Desa Boti.

INTRODUCTION

This research is based on previous research (2022) on Boti Village, Ki'e District, South Central Timor Regency. The research focuses on the king's policies, the weaknesses in education, and Freire's concept as a bridge for Christian religious education to free the Boti people from illiteracy, enabling them to be open to global developments that require adaptation. The research also highlighted the Boti tribe in general through observations related to social strata, social dynamics, the king's rules, government regulations regarding education, and Christian religious education in Boti village. This research found that education is constrained by the laws of the king, who is the complete owner of the land in Boti village, and many Boti people remain illiterate because they do not attend school. In this case, Christianity is considered a Western belief; the king, as an influential figure, holds the view that the local religion, also known as Halaika, is more suitable or preferable to other religions (Pandie et al., 2022). Based on this, *Halaika* has become a local religion that is predominantly believed in by the Boti people. Based on previous research findings, the researcher sought to develop an understanding of the essence of *balaika* through the sociology of religion to identify its scientific concept.

This article examines a religious-philosophical concept that shares characteristics with *balaika*, namely Pantheism. Pantheism, for instance, views the universe and God as inseparable parts. Pantheists do not believe in a personal, anthropomorphic, or creator God (Subeno, 2017). Pantheism posits that God can be perceived through the relationship with the universe. In other words, the universe and God are an inseparable unity. Everything is part of the cause and effect between God and nature and nature with God. Pantheism has undergone a long journey, marked by debate, and has given rise to various models of Pantheism with differing understandings. Although there are differences in the knowledge of Pantheism, the central idea is that the cosmos is a unity that encompasses everything and the sacredness of Nature (Mander, 2017). A more detailed discussion of Pantheism will follow in subsequent sections. Therefore, a clear understanding of Pantheism is necessary to avoid confusion with *balaika*.

This article seeks to answer the following: (1) Does *balaika* share core characteristics with Pantheism? (2) If so, in what aspects? (3) How can these similarities be conceptually formulated? To answer these questions, researcher analyze field data and some literature and views from writers who raise similar topics.

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach. *This method focuses on understanding the perspectives, lifestyles, emotional expressions, and belief systems of the studied community about the research problem.* This process includes interviews, documentation, participant observation, inductive data analysis, interpretation, and flexible reporting. Primary data were obtained through direct interviews, documentation, and observations, while secondary data included books, the Bible, online journals, theses, and websites. The research was conducted in Boti Village, Ki'e District, South Central Timor Regency. *The manuscript begins with an exploration of information related to the Boti Dalam Tribe.* After that, the author describes the findings in terms of the local wisdom values of the Boti Dalam Tribe to provide an overview of the local wisdom values of the Boti Dalam Tribe. Then, to explore the relevance between the pantheistic values contained in the wisdom of the Boti Dalam Tribe, the author conducts a mapping and provides a brief description, resulting in similarities between the two.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Boti Dalam Tribe

The Boti Dalam Tribe is part of the larger Boti Luar Tribe, which also inhabits the village of Boti. The Boti Dalam Tribe is determined to maintain ancestral traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation. *Boti Dalam tribe remains highly resistant to external influences, including formal education, modern technology, external aid (governmental or private), and major world religions such as Christianity, Catholicism, and Islam.* They reject formal education, arguing that it introduces harmful ideas that disrupt the inherited natural wisdom. They also oppose modern technology, believing it disrupts the natural order of air, land, lifestyle, and forests. *They believe that external aid fosters dependency and discourages hard work and stewardship of the land.* Christianity, Catholicism, Islam, and other religions are not aligned with local religious norms or ancestral traditions inherited from their ancestors. It is rejected because it is considered a foreign religion that lacks ethics and norms and is believed to damage the ancestral heritage that has been inherited (Researcher 2022). *Referring to that matter, the Boti Dalam Tribe maintains a closed stance toward elements perceived to threaten their ancestral legacy.*

The Boti Dalam tribe lives in harmony with nature, believing it is essential for prosperity and safety. Protecting nature is seen as safeguarding God, the giver of life. *As such, the prohibition of indiscriminate tree-cutting and land exploitation is a non-negotiable principle* (Andung 2014). In addition, the Boti Dalam tribe has values such as (a) the principle of humans with God (Andung & & Nope, 2017), (b) working hard (Ardan, 2019; Suminar, 2018), (c) love and care for nature (Suminar, 2018), (d) love and care for traditions (Ardan 2019; Suminar 2018), (e) love family, (f) uphold ethics (Rato et al., 2020), (g) maintaining human relations (Andung, 2014). In addition, there are also other values, such as a) customary values that are too binding on society; b) the king is the source of customary law, and obedience to the king is absolute submission; c) political and legal power is only managed by customary elders; d) not all children are allowed to go to school; e) not receiving any assistance from outside; f) not merging into the modernization system; g) Customary values bind society/do not give freedom to change (Researcher, 2021). These values are the teachings of *Halaika* (the religion of the Boti tribe). *Halaika* believes that the sky and nature are part of the givers of blessings to humans.

The Boti tribe is composed of 12 clans, namely Tefu, Nabu, Neolaka, Asbilak, Tekfan, Tefamnasi, Kao, Naat, Natonis, Lunesi, Tanesib, Benu. *The twelve clans share a common ancestry; they established a customary government system around 1955.* It was done to find a leader for *the newly established customary government.* Therefore, the Benu clan was chosen because it was the eldest brother among the ancestors. Furthermore, Naat and Natonis were selected as spokespersons and ritual leaders. *The initial government of Boti was structured around customary law. The government is headed by the Usif (King), a noble figure who leads the Boti community.* *Usif* is responsible for providing and supporting the kingdom and all its people's affairs. *The Usif is also responsible for maintaining the divine order, including conducting rituals such as harvest offerings, altar ceremonies, and war rites.* In addition, there is also *Amaf*. The function of *Amaf* is to provide and support the people. After that, *Meo*, who has the responsibility as a guard, and *Mafefa*, who has the responsibility as a spokesperson for guests and activities in the village of Boti. *The Mnane serves as a traditional healer, followed by the general populace at the base of the governance structure* (Researcher 2022).



Figure 1: shows the king and his nephew, both wearing their long hair styled in traditional buns.

Image source: When researchers conducted interviews at the residence of King Boti on June 6, 2022, at 19.00 WITA

Christianity entered the village of Boti around 1955 through one of the tribe's ancestors, *Sese Naat*. During his detention in the Netherlands, he studied the Christian faith. After his release, *Sese Naat* returned to Boti and began spreading Christianity. As the new religion gained followers, conflict arose between the *Benu* and the *Usif* appointed by *Sese Naat*. The dispute arose because, with the spread of Christianity, the *halaika* (tribal religion) was declining (Researcher 2021). It is seen as a problem because, in addition to the decreasing number of *halaika* followers, Christianity is considered to have damaged the ancestral order that Benu and his brothers have fought for. In response, the regional government of South Central Timor administratively divided the Boti Tribe into two groups: Boti Dalam, representing the traditional community, and Boti Luar, representing those who had converted to Christianity or Catholicism. The Boti Dalam people can be identified by the Boti men, who wear buns and do not wear shoes. The lives of the Boti Dalam people are simple and integral to their way of life. Their simplicity is reflected in the modest design of their homes and their traditional attire. The Boti people have a simple life principle because, for them, a simple life will make them feel no more superior to one another. In contrast, the Boti Luar community adopts a modern lifestyle similar to that of the broader Indonesian society (Researcher 2022).



Figure 2: men from the Boti Dalamtribe



Figure 3: women of the Boti Dalamtribe

Image source: at the residence of King Boti
on June 6, 2022, at 16.20 WITA

Image source: at the residence of King Boti
on June 6, 2022, at 16.20 WITA

The early government established by the founding clans of Boti took the form of a traditional kingdom. In this structure, the *Usif* (King) is a noble leader responsible for governing a specific region. He embodies the concept of *ahautafatis*, meaning 'provider and supporter' of the kingdom. The *Usif* oversees all matters concerning the people, a role known as *Lasi Atoni Pab Meto*. The *Usif* also serves as the primary guardian of the divine order. He leads rituals related to harvest offerings on the *tola naek* (a large sacrificial altar), as well as war ceremonies. The *Amaf* (customary elders) function structurally under the *Usif*. Like the *Usif*, they serve as providers and supporters of the community. Although *Amaf* is considered an official, he is not of noble descent. Instead, he is chosen from among the ordinary people due to his charisma and seniority and appointed as an elder in the kingdom's administration (Researcher 2022).

In addition to the *Usif* and *Amaf*, there is the *Mafefa* (spokesperson), a person with extensive knowledge of *lais meto* (Timorese teachings and social matters). The *Mafefa* acts as the kingdom's official speaker during public addresses or visits by guests, delivering messages on behalf of the *Usif*. *Usif* gives orders to *Mafefa* to convey the things that *Usif* wants to convey to his people. In addition to *Mafefa*, there is *Meo*. Another key figure is the *Meo* (war commander). *Meo* means "cat." A *Meo* is a person trusted to lead troops in war, possessing expertise in warfare. According to war rituals, the *Meo* are believed to attain immunity to weapons and sharp objects. In Timorese, he is referred to as *Atoniau-besi ma nakfatu*, a man with an iron body and a stone head, signifying both physical resilience and unwavering determination.

In addition to the warlord or *Meo*, some individuals serve as healers, known in Timorese as *Mnane*. *Mnane* acquires their role primarily through hereditary lineage, believed to possess natural charisma for healing. However, some also attain this position through the study of medicinal knowledge, reaching a high level of expertise in healing practices. The primary role of the *Mnane* is to identify medicinal substances and treat illnesses within the community. The *Tbo*, or ordinary people, form the largest group within the kingdom and are governed by the *Usif*. At the bottom of the social hierarchy are the *Ate* (servants), typically war captives taken by victorious kingdoms. In times of war, victorious kingdoms would take captives from the defeated side, who would then be assigned as *Ate* (servants) in the Boti kingdom. This social structure mirrors that of other traditional Timorese kingdoms. However, specific roles, such as the *Ate*, have ceased to exist, and the *Meo* no longer serve in their former wartime capacity, as there is no prolonged war in today's era. Consequently, the role of the *Meo* is now limited to serving as a bodyguard for *Usif* (Researcher 2022).

The governmental structure of the Boti Dalam Kingdom consists of the *Usif* (King), *Amaf* (customary elders), *Meo* (formerly warlords, now serving as royal guards), *Mafefa* (spokespersons), *Mnane* (healers), *Tbo* (commoners), and *Ate* (servants). This traditional governance system also facilitates religious rituals, which are regularly conducted on Wednesdays. Prior to the king's ritual offerings to the sky and nature, his subordinates are tasked with preparing the ceremonial site. These rituals typically take place in the forest and require the participation of all citizens. Non-participation is believed to bring misfortune; agricultural or livestock endeavors, for instance, are said to fail without ritual blessings. For example, gardening or raising livestock will not be blessed, and all that will be obtained is failure. Therefore, religious rituals are mandatory for all citizens who adhere to *Halaiika*, as they are considered essential for achieving smoothness and success in various endeavors (Researcher 2022).

God in the Perspective of the Halaika of the Boti Tribe

The cosmological belief system of the Boti Dalam Tribe, known as Halaika, comprises two primary entities: *uisneno* (the ruler of the sky) and *uispah* (the ruler of nature). Both of these deities are symbolically represented by the sun (*Nai Manas*) and the moon (*Bi Fuman*), who are conceptualized as husband and wife. Both take turns controlling day and night. When the sun sets, then the darkness of the Earth is controlled by the brightness of the moon. Conversely, if the moon is resting, then the Earth's light is controlled by the sun. The stars (*kfun*) are likened to the children of the sun and moon. In everyday life, the stars are messengers or assistants of *uisneno* (God) (Pandie & Sianipar, 2022). God is the controller of the whole of the universe. God has a form that can be encountered every day by humans in the form of the sun, moon, stars, and nature (place of human life). The sky is believed to be the home of a God who brings blessings in the form of rain and water of life, enabling humans to live and thrive in every effort and work. At the same time, the sun is likened to a God who is believed to be responsible for imparting fertility to what is being worked on. Then, the stars are believed to be the Gods who help the sun God and the moon God to work or give mandates to the king about what God wants. Nature is believed to be the Source of life, providing the results of life in the form of plants, animals, and other organisms. Therefore, the cycle of the Gods in *Halaika* is significant for the Boti tribe in sanctifying their lives (Pandie 2022).

All of these ways of thinking are categorized within a traditional time frame, specifically the day. As part of their *halaika* cosmology, the Boti people observe a sacred nine-day ritual cycle, where each day carries its specific symbolic significance. a) *Neon Ai* or fire day. The Boti people believe that fire brings prosperity. However, they also recognize that fire can be dangerous for humans, which is why the Boti people approach it with caution. Otherwise, there is a possibility of a big fire; b) *Neon Oe* or water day. Like fire, water also has a dual function, which can be either positive or negative. The Boti Dalam people are cautious in using water because it can cause flooding, or the water God, namely the crocodile, can prey on victims; c) *Neon Besi*, or iron or copper day. On Iron or Copper Day, the Boti people are cautious in using items made of iron. Otherwise, people can get hurt because they are harmed by iron or copper; d) *Neon Uisneno Ma Uis Pah*, or the day of the Earth God and the Sky God. The fourth day is filled with activities related to worshiping the sky God and the Earth of God; e) *Neon Suli*, also known as the day of quarrels or disputes. On the fifth day, the Boti Dalam people are cautious in their speech because disputes or fights can arise among them. However, that day is also very appropriate for resolving various problems that occur between individuals in the community; f) *Neon Masikat*, or the day of struggle. This day is not intended as an opportunity to seize other people's property. On the contrary, the day of struggle is an opportunity for people who work hard to get double the benefits, either in the form of natural or garden products or financial; g) *Neno Naek* or big day, which is the day when the Boti people build brotherhood, build harmony, increase fellowship, and avoid disputes; h) *Neon liana* or children's day, which is the day when children get the freedom to express themselves, explore and develop their potential through various activities that are suitable for children; i) *Neon Tokos* or rest day, which is the day the Boti people rest from all personal work. They gather in the *lopo* (a roundhouse or meeting place) in the royal palace area to listen to the king's advice and engage in various activities suitable for both men and women, fostering cooperation (Konay 2017).

The *halaika* ritual is led directly by the king and is performed in a secluded, sacred forest area. The divine response to each request can be known through the sound of birds singing when the king conveys every wish or hope to *uisneno* (the ruler of the sky) and *uispah* (the ruler of nature). Subsequently, the king relays his spiritual experience to the *halaika* followers, communicating the divine instructions he

received from *uisneno* and *uispab*. For example, protecting nature means not cutting down trees carelessly, repaying evil with good, helping those in need, and so on.



Figure 4. The king's ritual illustrates the deified status of the king among *halaiika* adherents. The image was taken at the royal residence of King Boti in June 2022

The image illustrates the king's prominent position within the socioreligious hierarchy of Boti village society. It portrays the king as a divine figure, whose blessings are deemed essential for communal and individual pursuits. The most prominent statue symbolically shows the king engaging in spiritual communication with nature and the heavens, embodying the collective aspirations of his people. Surrounding statues depict male and female figures seeking blessings from the king, revered as a divine entity, for matters concerning agriculture, work, and family life. Additionally, the horse statue represents the king's spiritual guardianship and his role in protecting the village of Boti from malevolent forces or criminal threats. To honor the sky and the earth, the king conducts a sacred ritual within a forested area that has been ritually prepared by his assistant, ensuring it remains out of public view to enhance its sanctity and exclusivity. Following this, the king permits community participation in the ritual but enforces strict boundaries to delineate sacred zones and limit access for ordinary participants. It is similar to the ritual performed by Israel in the Old Testament, where there are rooms that can only be entered or visited by the priest (or king) to convey requests and provide offerings in the form of sacrifices from chickens or other similar animals (Gulo et al. 2023).

Understanding God from the Perspective of Pantheism

Pantheism derives from the Ancient Greek words "*pan*" (meaning "all") and "*theos*" (meaning "God"). It is interpreted as the belief that the universe is identified with divinity or that everything collectively is a manifestation of God. Pantheism suggests that God is best understood as a way of relating to the universe, implying that the universe and God are an inseparable unity. Everything becomes part of the cause-and-effect relationship between God and nature and vice versa. The central idea of Pantheism is the cosmos as an all-encompassing unity, embracing the sacredness of Nature (Nego & Mondolu 2020).

There is a longstanding tradition of worldviews that perceive human nature as a microcosm of the universe. This relationship can be generalized to include not only humans but also all specific beings, resulting in a metaphysical framework where each part of the universe is structured to reflect the whole. In this perspective, the finite serves as an echo of the infinite. Pantheism's metaphysical framework essentially portrays God as immanent, residing in and permeating all aspects of the world (Nego & Mondolu 2020). An alternative perspective suggests that, rather than conceiving God as mysteriously existing within the world, it may be more coherent to view the world as existing within God. Pantheism

is generally regarded as the view that nature is sacred and that God is perceived as an integral part of nature (Fairozi & Anggraini 2020). Thus, the more natural something is, the more divine it is considered.

Pantheism holds that all of existence is a single, unified reality that is also divine. According to Pantheism, only one ultimate being exists, and all forms of reality are either manifestations of or identical to this being (Theo 2023). This idea is central to the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza, who argues that apart from God, no substance can exist or be conceived. For Spinoza, the Nature of substance is entirely independent. It makes it unique and all-encompassing. It also renders it unconditioned and, therefore, infinite or perfect (Yusuf 2016). Pantheism involves reverence for the universe, not for a creator being or a personal God. These perspectives share a common emphasis on metaphysical unity. All have a strong emphasis on Nature as the focus of spirituality and ethics (Gaduh & Harsanada 2021). Thus, Pantheism posits that divinity and Nature are ultimately inseparable aspects of a singular reality.

From both theological and linguistic perspectives, a notable debate within the pantheistic community revolves around the use of the term "God." Pantheists do not adhere to a traditional concept of God; instead, they embrace a notion of God as personal and creative. This personal creative interpretation implies a deity characterized by will, personality, and creative agency. They deny the existence of a minded Being who has intentional states and related capacities, such as the ability to make decisions (Subeno 2023). Some modern pantheists avoid using the word God, considering it misleading. Others feel that the word of God is important in expressing the strength of their feelings about "Nature" and the "Universe." From an external perspective, some critics argue that Pantheism is simply a redefinition of the word of God to mean Nature, the Universe, or reality. However, if the word God is used merely to express the user's feelings rather than to denote a supernatural force in the Universe, then the meaning of 'God' shifts toward a symbolic or emotive function. John Macquarrie argues that there are times when God should be equally present in every part of the Universe. It may be an implication of the literal meaning of Pantheism, that everything is God or God is everything (Mander 2017).

Pantheism is not merely the view that God is the total unity of all things. For Pantheism to qualify as a religious view, it must involve some form of religious experience. However, no one can directly experience the universe as a whole. Humans can only perceive parts of it. Pantheists often express this by thinking that God is fully present in every part of the world. As Tillich put it, Pantheism is the doctrine that God is the substance or essence of all things, not the meaningless assertion that God is the totality of all things. Other writers suggest that Pantheism not only sees God as the unity of all things but also as the inner essence of each entity (Mander 2017). Examples can be found in Plotinus' writings, who states that each being contains all things within itself in such a way that all are reflected in each other. John Scotus Eriugena states that God is whole in all things the whole universe and all its parts because He is both whole and part (Silva 2018).

Exploring the Relevance of Pantheism in the Indigenous Halaika Tradition of the Boti Tribe

Pantheism, rooted in philosophical traditions across ancient Greece and India, contrasts with *halaika*, which emerges from the lived spiritual practices of the Indigenous Boti people in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. Each developed within distinct historical, cultural, and epistemological frameworks, one through systematic philosophical discourse, the other through oral tradition and ritualized communal life. *Halaika* emerged organically from the cosmology and daily practices of the Boti community, whereas Pantheism evolved through the speculative reflections of early philosophers such as Heraclitus, Plotinus, and Spinoza. The two differ significantly in terms of conceptual foundations and practical expressions. This distinction becomes evident in how each tradition interprets the relationship between humans, nature, and the cosmos. Nevertheless, certain thematic parallels can be drawn, particularly in the

reverence for nature and the perception of divinity as immanent within the material world. The chart below describes both *halaika* and Pantheism.

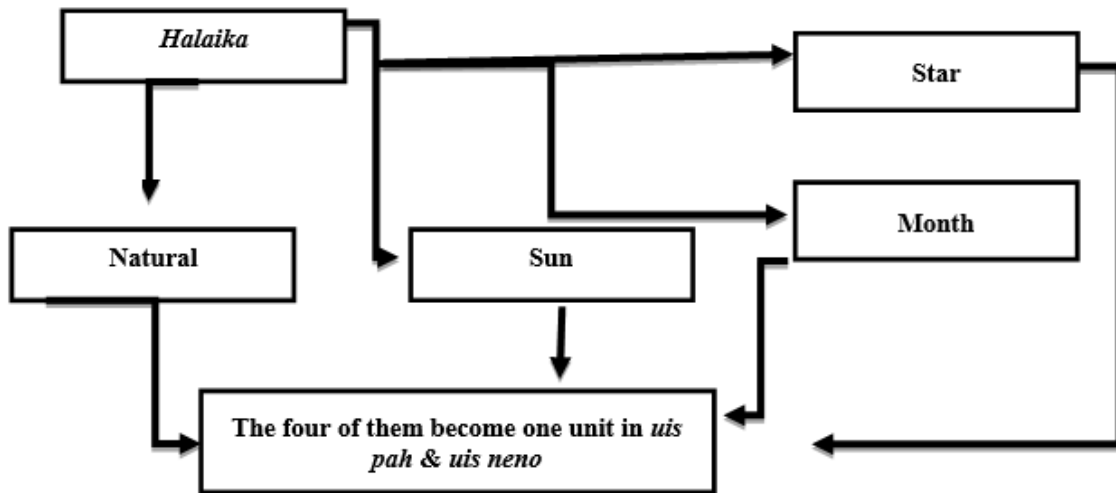
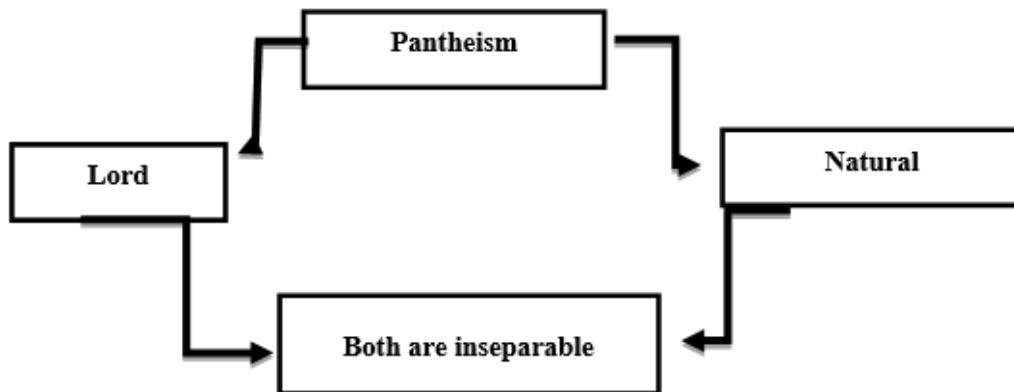


Figure 5. The Concept Nature and God of Halaika



Based on the description of Pantheism and *halaika* above, it can be seen that both have differences in terms of interpreting God, the placement of God, and the work of God. However, both share a common understanding of nature as the primary source and sustainer of human life. Nature is viewed as the dwelling place of humans and the foundation upon which they sustain their existence. Furthermore, both traditions acknowledge a transcendent dimension behind nature and human existence, something beyond comprehension that frames human limitations. It suggests that nature occupies a central role in shaping the worldview and daily lives of adherents in both traditions. Nature, in this context, reveals the idea that the visible world embodies the divine in its unseen dimension, thus rendering God and nature inseparable realities in both Pantheism and *halaika*.

CONCLUSION

In light of the previous discussion, it is clear that Pantheism and *halaika* have distinct ontological foundations, institutional structures, adherents, and spiritual authorities. However, when examining word usage and appreciation, it becomes evident that nature is central to both traditions. Nature is revered in each, not only for its role in human survival but also for its significance in fostering spiritual

understanding. In this context, nature is viewed as both a manifestation of the divine and a dwelling place for God. Therefore, it is undeniable that Pantheism is conceptually relevant to halaika, particularly regarding their shared acknowledgment of the sacredness of nature and its essential role in spiritual life.

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