

# INTERACTION OF RELIGION AND LOCAL CULTURE IN SYMBOLIC COMMUNICATION OF AGRICULTURAL RUWAT FOR STRENGTHENING INDIGENOUS AUTHORITY ACROSS JAVANESE ETHNICS

**Eneng Purwanti**  
UIN Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten, Indonesia  
eneng.purwanti@uinbanten.ac.id

**Khairil Anam**  
UIN Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten, Indonesia  
Khairil.anam@uinbanten.ac.id

**Ilah Holilah**  
UIN Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten, Indonesia  
ilah.holilah@uinbanten.ac.id

**Kamaluddin Nurdin Marjuni**  
Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA), Brunei Darussalam  
kamaluddin.nur@unissa.edu.bn

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**Corresponding Author:**  
**Eneng Purwanti**  
UIN Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten, Indonesia  
eneng.purwanti@uinbanten.ac.id

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## Abstract

*This study addresses a critical gap in comparative research on the agricultural rutawat tradition as an integrated model for national food security within Indonesia's ethnic diversity. The objective of this study is to analyze the symbolic communication and value negotiation of Ruwat Pertanian across three communities: Kasepuhan Ciptagelar, located in West Java, Kasepuhan Cicarucub in Banten, and Adirasa in Central Java. A qualitative comparative-ethnographic approach was employed to collect data through in-depth interviews with traditional leaders and direct observations. The results identify three distinct models of cultural resilience: the Conservative Model in Ciptagelar, which strictly preserves ecological authority to maintain food sovereignty; the Integrative Model in Cicarucub, which harmonizes ancestral customs with Islamic values; and the Pragmatic Model in Adirasa, which rationalizes rituals for economic utility. Despite these variations, Ruwat functions as an ecological rite of passage that serves to legitimize spiritual authority and sustainable cultivation norms. These findings offer critical policy implications, suggesting that integrating these diverse local wisdom typologies specifically the leuit system and syncretic practices into national strategies is essential for achieving food sovereignty and religious moderation.*

**Keywords:** agricultural ruwat, symbolic communication, value negotiation, traditional authority, food security.

## Abstrak

Penelitian ini menanggapi kesenjangan kritis dalam studi perbandingan mengenai tradisi ruwat pertanian sebagai model terintegrasi untuk ketahanan pangan nasional di tengah keragaman etnis Indonesia. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis komunikasi simbolik dan negosiasi nilai Ruwat Pertanian di tiga komunitas: Kasepuhan Ciptagelar (Jawa Barat), Kasepuhan Cicarucub (Banten), dan Adirasa (Jawa Tengah). Dengan menggunakan pendekatan etnografi-komparatif kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan tokoh adat dan observasi langsung. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi tiga model resiliensi budaya yang berbeda: Model Konservatif di Ciptagelar yang secara ketat menjaga otoritas ekologis demi kedaulatan pangan; Model Integratif di Cicarucub yang menyelaraskan adat leluhur dengan nilai-nilai Islam; dan Model Pragmatis di Adirasa yang merasionalisasi ritual untuk utilitas ekonomi. Meskipun terdapat variasi ekspresi, Ruwat secara konsisten berfungsi sebagai ritus peralihan ekologis untuk melegitimasi otoritas spiritual dan norma budidaya berkelanjutan. Temuan ini memberikan implikasi kebijakan yang krusial, menyarankan bahwa pengintegrasian tipologi kearifan lokal yang beragam ini khususnya sistem leuit dan praktik sinkretis—ke dalam strategi nasional sangat penting untuk mencapai kedaulatan pangan dan moderasi beragama.

**Kata Kunci:** ruwat pertanian; komunikasi simbolik; negosiasi nilai; otoritas adat; ketahanan pangan

## INTRODUCTION

The global community is facing significant challenges, particularly amid extreme climate change, as evidenced by the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) 2023 report on global food security and environmental sustainability (FAO, 2023; Reyes-García et al., 2024). A sustainable food system is supported by social, ecological, and cultural dimensions beyond production. Agriculture, cultivation, and industrial activities conducted within the same area without adequate attention to land stewardship often disrupt the natural balance of the environment. This makes local knowledge very important.

In this context, local and indigenous knowledge systems are increasingly recognized by international institutions as vital resources for addressing the climate crisis and achieving agricultural resilience (Berkes & Berkes, 2008). This traditional knowledge, tested over generations, offers a holistic perspective on natural resource management. In Indonesia, this indigenous knowledge is frequently expressed through traditional rites. Agricultural rituals, such as *ruwat* practices in an agrarian context, serve as social and spiritual mechanisms that regulate the harmonious relationship between humans, nature, and ancestors (Setiawan, 2018). Therefore, examining the function and meaning of these rituals is crucial not only for cultural preservation but also for exploring the potential ecological values that can be integrated into sustainable development policies at the national and global levels (Wiersum, 2006).

Traditional agrarian communities in the archipelago employ intricate ritual systems that serve not only as spiritual expressions but also as ecological regulatory mechanisms, governing planting calendars and resource distribution (Barman et al., 2024). It is imperative to acknowledge that agricultural rituals cannot be regarded exclusively as cultural expressions or spiritual performances. Within the framework of the commons, rituals function as informal institutions that establish access boundaries, rules of use, and social sanctions to prevent the overexploitation of natural resources (Ostrom, 1990). A substantial body of scholarship has documented the role of agrarian rituals in Java and Sunda as rites of passage that symbolize ecological cycles (Setiawan, 2018). However, in an era of accelerated modernization, these customary institutions face intense external pressures, ranging from market penetration and state policies to climate change that demand a renegotiation of traditional values. These rituals inherently adhere to subsistence and balance values but face pressures from modernization that demand commercialization and production efficiency. Consequently, the threats they face are not only economic but also cultural and structural in nature.

Although previous studies are rich in ethnographic descriptions (Ismail et al., 2025; Mariani, 2017; Rodiyah et al., n.d.; Setiawan, 2018; Yanti, 2017), they tend to be single case studies and lack comparative-synthetic analysis, especially in terms of agriculture or institutional structures (Setiawan, 2018). A significant gap lies in the lack of a comparative analysis explicitly comparing the symbolic practices of the agricultural *ruwat* ritual in three communities with different cultural (Sunda-Javanese) and administrative (West Java, Banten, and Central Java) roots. This gap hinders our understanding of variations in symbolic communication, such as how central symbols (e.g., the goddess Sri and offerings) are interpreted and codified differently among the Sunda, the Sunda Pesisir, and the Central Javanese, and how these differences influence their value negotiation strategies. For instance, it is important to understand how the meaning of ruwatan has evolved from an individual purification ritual (*sukerta*) to a symbol of collective resistance in the realm of social criticism (Riswari & Sugiantoro, 2025a). Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by applying a communication lens to comparatively analyze the symbolic systems and value-negotiation processes across these three contexts. The study will present a comparative model of how traditional agrarian practices strive to remain relevant while maintaining *Ruwat Pertanian* as their primary ritual.

This study compares three agrarian communities located in a cultural transition zone. The *Seren Taun Kasepuhan Sunda* (Juhendi, 2018; Malik, 2017) is a harvest ritual rooted in Sundanese philosophy, practiced in Sukabumi, West Java (Widianingsih et al., 2023). A strong customary structure supports the rituals and has strict rules regarding forest zoning (Suganda, 2009). Cicacurub, located in Lebak Regency, Banten Province, represents a *kasepuhan* (a traditional Sundanese customary community) with Sundanese coastal characteristics. It also has a strong

customary structure (*olot*) and rituals that glorify Dewi Sri and perform *tolak bala (babay)*, rituals intended to ward off misfortune. This community uniquely harmonizes Islam and customs; the *numbal* ritual facilitates supernatural communication for collective and personal interests (Somantri, 2009). In Adirasa, Central Java, *Mimiti* represents Mataraman Javanese practices. The *Mimiti* ritual, which signifies the beginning of something, is associated with *ruwatan* practices, such as *Ruwatan Rambut Gembel* (purification ceremony for children with dreadlocked hair) (Albizzia & Safitri, 2025)

The discourse of mass *ruwatan*, related to cleansing the country of political and social *sukerta*, enriches this context (Riswari & Sugiarto, 2025b). This study compares these three contexts to understand their symbolic communication strategies in *ruwat* agriculture to prevent disasters. The goal is to understand the cultural resilience of kasepuhan communities through communication. Specifically, this study aims to: first, identify and map the differences and similarities in the symbolic communication systems (symbols, artifacts, and rituals) used in *ruwat pertanian* practices across communities. Second, analyze how value negotiation (between sacred/ecological and profane/economic values) is conducted amid pressures of modernization and commercialization.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method (Berger, 2016; Lungu, 2022; Öberseder, 2013) with an ethnographic approach (Hine, 2020) to thoroughly examine the symbolic systems and cultural meanings within agricultural rituals. The data collection process used purposive sampling, with a strategic emphasis on key informants who wield customary authority in three distinct Kasepuhans: Ciptagelar (West Java), Cicarucub (Banten), and Adirasa (Central Java). The primary informants included the traditional leaders (*Sesepuh/Abah*), customary elders (*Olot*), and religious leaders (*Kyai Desa*) who preside over the *numbal* and *mimiti* rituals. The data collection process spanned six months, encompassing the agricultural cycle from planting (*ngaseuk/mimiti*) to harvest (*seren taun*). Three techniques were employed in this study: the researchers engaged in participant observation, immersing themselves in the ritual processions to capture the “sacred atmosphere” and nonverbal symbolic communication. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore unwritten norms and value negotiations. A documentation study was also conducted, in which ancient manuscripts and local archives related to customary land zoning (*Leuweung Titipan*) and previous ritual records were reviewed. This multi-method approach captures both the explicit practices and the community’s tacit knowledge.

The present study employs the structural-functional approach to analyze the data. In this context, the research does not merely view *ruwat pertanian* as a ceremony, but rather as a “social structure” that maintains the stability of the community. The analysis focuses on the function of ritual elements (structures) in maintaining ecological balance and social solidarity. Examples of such elements include the prohibition on selling rice in Ciptagelar and the distribution of Rujak Water in Cicarucub. We examine the function of these ritual structures in mitigating conflicts between traditional values and modernization pressures, thereby ensuring the system attains a state of equilibrium or *slamet* (safety). The data analysis was executed in accordance with the interactive model which involves the processes of data condensation, display, and verification (Miles et al., 2013)

To ensure data validity, a triangulation of sources was conducted by cross-checking statements from the *Sesepuh* against farmers’ actual practices and secondary data from government reports. The ethical considerations were strictly observed; informed consent was obtained from all traditional leaders before observation, and sensitive sacred knowledge (*kawruh*) that is forbidden to be published was respected and excluded from this report to maintain the sanctity of the Kasepuhan.

## RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents a comparative analysis of field findings on the practices of agricultural/traditional *ruwat* in Kasepuhan Ciptagelar and Kasepuhan Cicarucub, as well as the *Mimiti Adirasa* ritual. *Ruwat* is generally understood as a traditional ceremony aimed at obtaining safety and freeing a person or community from all kinds of misfortune or *sengkala* (Setiawan, 2018; Sugiarti & Fitriani, 2021) Three main findings are discussed based on the research objectives.

### Symbolic Communication of Ruwat as a Manifestation of Food Authority vs. Spiritual Authority

The fundamental difference in the Symbolic Communication system lies in the sanctified object, which, in turn, defines customary authority. *Ruwat*, as a communal ritual in agrarian societies, is always associated with rice and natural life cycles. In Kasepuhan Ciptagelar, Symbolic Communication centers on food sovereignty, primarily through the *Leuit Si Jimat* artifact. The *Seren Taun* ritual serves as an affirmation that communal harvests are stored rather than sold, symbolically projecting the elders' authority as managers of community resources and morality (Ikmaludin et al., 2018) Rice itself is seen as a symbol of life, so selling it is considered a grave sin equivalent to murder. This belief is reinforced by strict agrarian rituals, such as *ngaseuk* (planting) and *mipit* (harvesting), which must be carried out from generation to generation and only once a year.

Authority communication in Ciptagelar is also reinforced through the performing arts. The *Seren Taun* ritual involves performances of wayang golek (wooden rod puppet theatre), jipeng (traditional Sundanese folk dance), and pantun (rhyming verses to express ideas, moral values, or feelings) to tell the story of *ngaseuk* (seed planting) and transmit ancestral values. Meanwhile, the symbolic communication of the Kasepuhan Cicarucub in Banten is dominated by efforts to harmonize Islamic values and ancestral beliefs, which are reflected in their syncretic religious system. The main symbol is not rice as a commodity, but rather the process of purification and safety. The *Numbal* ritual (burning incense and chewing *panglay* or Java ginger) is at the core of *Olot*'s spiritual mediation to ensure the community's safety (*salamet*) (Somantri, 2009).

Artifacts communicated in Cicarucub, such as *rujak* water in the *Mapag Panyiraman* ritual, serve as a medium for distributing blessings (Somantri, 2009) The *rujak* water, prayed over by *Olot*, is then spread throughout the rice fields, demonstrating *Olot*'s spiritual authority in influencing agricultural yields. Conversely, the practice of *ruwatan* in the context of *Mimiti Adirasa* (Central Java) has shifted to become an identity shaped by Javanese and Pure Islam. Traditional symbolic communication here has experienced fragmentation, as seen in the use of *sentir* (oil lamps), which were traditionally placed next to offerings to ward off demons, but are now only practiced by the Kejawen Islamic group. In the context of Dieng (Central Java), the meaning of *ruwatan* has been reconstructed into cultural capital that is communicated on a mass scale. The *Ruwatan Rambut Gembel* (purification ritual for dreadlock-haired children) has been transformed into the Dieng Culture Festival (DCF), creating a unique social identity that attracts tourism (Albizzia & Safitri, 2025). Communication here is expressive-expansive through the mass media, no longer merely local customary instructions. Therefore, the differences in artifacts (*leuit* vs. *air rujak* vs. *sentir/tahlil*) clearly show the priority of symbolic communication in each community: moral/food Control (Ciptagelar), distribution of blessings/religion (Cicarucub), and pragmatic/commercial protection (Adirasa).

**Table 1.**  
Community, Main Artifact, and Primary Symbolic

No	Feature	Kasepuhan Ciptagelar (West Java)	Kasepuhan Cicarucub (Banten)	Mimiti Adirasa (Central Java)
1	Dominant Authority	Ecological Authority ( <i>Sesepuh</i> )	Spiritual-Integrative Authority ( <i>Olot</i> )	Pragmatic Authority ( <i>Kyai/Committee</i> )
2	Core Value	Sacred Ecology: Rice is <i>Dewi Sri</i> , absolutely not for sale.	Syncretism: Harmony between Islam & Ancestors ( <i>Salamet</i> ).	Utility: Practical success & Religious compliance.

3	Resilience Model	Conservative Resilience (Resistance): Rejecting market values to maintain identity.	Integrative Resilience (Accommodation): Merging rituals ( <i>Manaqib</i> ) to survive.	Pragmatic Resilience (Rationalization): Discarding “mystical” costs for efficiency.
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(Source: Processed by Author, 2025)

The table shows findings regarding the tradition of *ruwat* that cannot be reduced to a mere series of ceremonies. However, it must be analyzed as a complex symbolic communication action that mediates the crucial relationship between the material realm (food/human authority) and the spiritual realm (ancestral/natural authority). The essence of this ritual is the community's attempt to organize its own universe of meaning, a phenomenon closely connected to the framework of symbolic interactionism. Specifically, the *ruwat* ritual is best studied through the lens of symbolic anthropology, pioneered by Clifford Geertz. Geertz argues that humans are creatures who live in “webs of meaning they themselves have spun” (Geertz, 1980) Therefore, the *ruwat* ritual functions as a web of meaning that not only reflects their agrarian reality but also actively shapes that reality. *Ruwat* is a model of (a pattern for understanding the cosmic order) as well as a model for (a pattern for acting in an agricultural context).

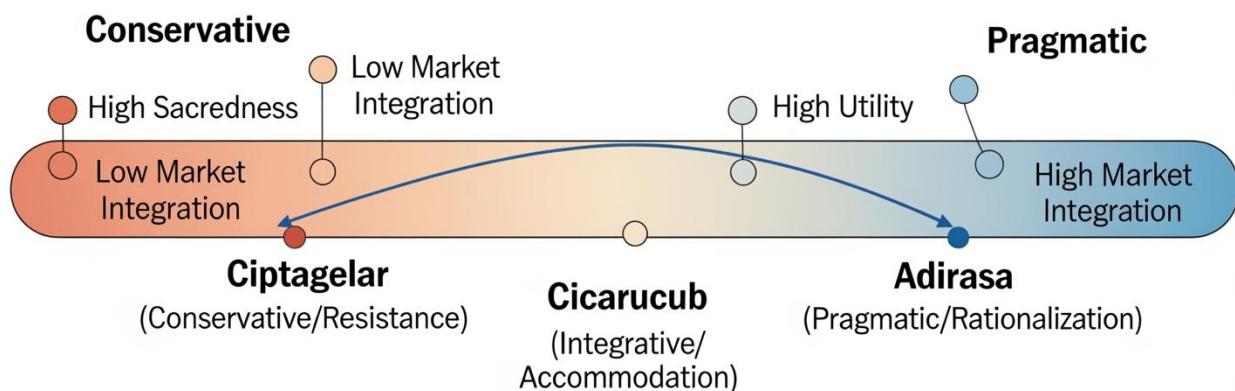
Food authority, which is the domain of humans and the result of farmers' hard work, is communicated through material and practical symbols. These include offerings (the best harvest offerings), the determination of superior seeds to be planted, and customary regulations prohibiting the sale of grain before the *Seren Taun* ceremony. These material symbols convey a collective message to the community that food prosperity results from human discipline, obedience, and agrarian strategy; however, recognition of these resources must precede gratitude. *Ruwat*, in this case, becomes a symbolic marker that humans have fulfilled their material obligations and are now ready to negotiate with greater powers.

Conversely, spiritual authority is articulated through sacred and performative symbols. The role of traditional leaders (Kasepuhan), the recitation of mantras invoking cosmic powers, and the sacred procedures that must be fulfilled are all symbolic codes. These symbols convey the message that fate, luck, and the land's freedom from disaster (*sengkala*) are under supernatural control. Thomas Fawcett argues that ritual language is a “symbolic language” that serves to create deep meaning, not merely to describe: “The language of religion is therefore symbolic language, which does not simply describe reality, but rather creates and communicates a world of meaning for its adherents” (Fawcett, 1971)

Essentially, the *ruwat* ritual is a symbolic negotiation process that constructs social reality. Humans present symbols of obedience (harvest yields) to obtain cosmic permission from spiritual authorities. The implications of this finding are profound: *Ruwat* becomes a mechanism that ensures that every human agrarian endeavor is considered meaningful only if it is in harmony with the spiritual order. If there is a failure in the ritual, or if communication is interrupted, that is, failure to obey the symbols and processes, then material failure will occur. As confirmed by findings in the field “*Kalau kita tidak melaksanakan Ruwat, nanti hasil panennya tidak akan bagus. Ada saja sengkala (kesialan) yang datang. Ini bukan hanya untuk padi, tapi untuk seluruh masyarakat, supaya selamat. Itu sudah jadi pesan dari leluhur, kita harus patuh*” (“If we don't perform the *ruwat* ritual, the harvest will not be good. There will always be some kind of misfortune. This ritual is not only for rice crops but for the whole community, so everyone stays safe. This is a message passed down from our ancestors, and we must follow it” This quote shows that *sengkala* (misfortune or disaster) is a symbolic consequence of failed ritual communication. In the theoretical framework, *sengkala* is not just bad luck, but a real representation of cosmic chaos that is avoided through symbolic obedience. Therefore, *ruwat* is a fundamental communicative act that seeks to harmonize the cosmic order with the socio-economic order to achieve *ayom ayem tentrem* (safety, happiness, and peace of mind).

## Value Negotiation and Cultural Resilience Models

The finding that the three elders (Ciptagelar, Cicarucub, and Adirasa) adopted different resilience models (conservative, integrative, and pragmatic) is clear evidence of value negotiation amid the pressures of modernization and commercialization. This phenomenon is best studied within the frameworks of cultural conflict theory or cultural resilience theory, which emphasize how groups maintain their core identity while adapting to structural changes (Hapsari et al., 2019; Koentjaraningrat, 1985). This value negotiation is a vital communication strategy to ensure the continuity of tradition. Value negotiation is an adaptive process in which sacred values (religious values) are maintained or altered to align with secular values. A comparison of these three models shows the spectrum of resilience resulting from the dialectical process between tradition and modernity.



**Figure 1.**  
Visual representation of the comparative position

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the comparative position of the three communities on a continuum of cultural resilience. The spectrum delineates a linear progression from “resistance” to “rationalization” in response to external modernization pressures.

Kasepuhan Ciptagelar, located on the far left, exemplifies the Conservative Model (Clapp & Moseley, 2020). These entities occupy the pole of “High Sacredness/Low Market Integration.” Theoretically, their resilience is built on a “Moral Economy” (Scott, 1977) in which the ecological imperative (preserving rice varieties) overrides economic logic. The maintenance of boundaries in this context is characterized by rigidity, with a negotiation strategy that involves resistance against commodification. This resistance is employed to preserve the purity of Dewi Sri. This belief is the main ideological bulwark in value negotiations. He notes its affirmation: *“Padi adalah jelmaan dari Dewi Sri, dewi padi. Sehingga padi harus dimuliakan dan disakralkan agar padi yang ditanam menghasilkan panen yang melimpah dan tidak mendapatkan musibah atau malapetaka”* (rice is believed to be the embodiment of Dewi Sri, the goddess of rice. Therefore, rice must be honored and regarded as sacred so that the crops planted will yield an abundant harvest and be protected from misfortune and disaster. This quote logically links resilience with spiritual obedience: as long as rice is revered, survival is guaranteed. Conservative resilience is hard resiliency, in which core values (such as the prohibition on selling rice) cannot be challenged (Hefner, 2020; Widianingsih et al., 2023)

Kasepuhan Cicarucub occupies the center of the integrative model. This position indicates a “middle path” or equilibrium. The mechanism at work is “syncretism” (Geertz, 1980) wherein traditional authority (*Olot*) successfully negotiates values by grafting Islamic elements onto agrarian rituals (e.g., using *manaqib* or agiographical accounts of saints instead of *mantras*). This accommodation enables the community to preserve its cultural core while accommodating the demands of religious modernity. Resilience is achieved through the harmonization of two strong value systems, not total rejection. The most crucial integration mechanism is replacing ritual elements considered non-Islamic with religious practices. This is done to keep traditional rituals

relevant and socially acceptable without being labeled as *bid'ah* (unwarranted religious innovation). We find this transformation in the *Ngubaran Pare* ritual: "Ritual Ngubaran Pare ini sekarang tidak lagi dibacakan mantra murni, melainkan diiringi dengan pembacaan kitab *Manaqib Syaikh Abdul Qadir Jaelani* (*Manakiban*). Hal ini merupakan upaya agar ritual tersebut diterima dalam bingkai ajaran agama Islam" ("the *Ngubaran Pare* ritual is no longer accompanied by the recitation of purely traditional incantation. Instead, it is now accompanied by the recitation of the *Manaqib* of Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani) The shift from the original mantra to the *manakiban* is a clever strategy of cultural brokerage. *Manakiban* is a recognized practice in the Islamic tradition of the archipelago, especially in Nahdlatul Ulama circles. By using authoritative religious texts, the Kasepuhan Cicarucub effectively changed the ritual's function (praying for a good harvest) into a practice with dual legitimacy: sacred in terms of custom (because of its purpose) and valid in terms of religion (because of its medium). This is a form of flexible resilience that secures the continuity of rituals from internal and external criticism. The implication of this negotiation is the achievement of social resilience. The integrated ritual then functions as a mechanism for distributing blessings and strengthening social solidarity amid diversity (Fuadi et al., 2024; Hasanah et al., 2024)

On the far right, *Mimiti Adirasa* represents the pragmatic model. They are positioned at the forefront of 'high utility/high market integration.' The concept of "rational choice" is a theoretical framework that explains the observed resilience of these communities. According to this theory, ritual elements are considered functional and entail no mystical costs, such as offerings. Instead, these elements are retained solely for their practical utility, such as facilitating social gatherings or determining optimal planting times. In this context, the "sacred canopy" has mainly been rationalized to align with a contemporary, market-oriented, and puritanical religious framework. This spectrum concludes that "cultural resilience" is not a singular concept but rather a dynamic range of strategies. Communities do not merely "survive" or "perish"; instead, they actively negotiate their position along this spectrum based on the strength of their customary authority and the intensity of external pressures. It underscores this fundamental change "Dalam upacara *Mimiti* (awal menanam) sekarang tidak lagi menggunakan sesaji. Upacara yang dipertahankan adalah *tahlil* dan doa bersama yang dipimpin oleh kyai desa. Ini adalah upaya perubahan dan penyesuaian ritual pada masa lalu dengan ajaran Islam sekarang" (In the *Mimiti* ceremony (the beginning of the planting season), offerings are no longer used. The practices that have been maintained are the recitation of *tahlil* and collective prayers led by the village *kyai*. This reflects an effort to transform and adapt past ritual practices to align with contemporary Islamic teachings). The decision to replace offerings and sentris with *tahlil* proves that traditions are still being preserved. However, their legitimacy is embedded in a religious framework that is more widely accepted. This is a form of value resilience that sacrifices sacred depth for functional acceptability. Despite a drastic shift in ritual aspects, values with practical rationality are preserved intact (Hjarvard, 2008).

### **Contestation of Meaning and Its Implications for Customary Authority**

The shift in meaning of the *Ruwatan Pertanian* ritual, which was originally understood as a spiritual cleansing effort, has now entered a broader arena of contestation, fundamentally challenging the foundations of customary authority (*sesepuh*) in various regions. This phenomenon, which has been systematically identified in the communities of Ciptagelar, Cicarucub, and Mimitis, shows that the continuity of customs depends not only on internal compliance but also on their structural adaptability to external pressures. Customary authorities (*sesepuh*) must now act as negotiators of meaning rather than as guardians of static traditions. At the heart of this contestation is a struggle over the narrative of key concepts, namely safety (*slamet*) and prosperity. For traditional communities, *slamet* is achieved through spiritual purification (*ruwatan*) and harmony with nature; however, modernization offers *slamet* in the form of economic prosperity and state legal protection (Liliweri et al., 1973) This is a dilemma for traditional leaders who wish to maintain their *authority*.

The most sensitive contestation of authority stems from the intersection of traditional customs with formal religion, particularly Islam. *Ruwatan* rituals, rooted in the worship of ancestral spirits or the goddess Dewi Sri, are often accused by puritanical groups of containing elements of *shirk* (the act of attributing divinity to being other than Allah), thereby directly delegitimizing the

spiritual role of traditional leaders (Humaeni, 2018). This opposition creates rifts within the community, forcing traditional authorities to take a defensive stance. However, traditional communities respond with a flexible strategy, namely operational syncretism. In Kasepuhan Cicarucub, for example, Islamic traditions and teachings are believed to coexist harmoniously as two equal guidelines for life (Somantri, 2009). This attitude allows the *sesepuh* to recontextualize ritual meanings, replace ancient mantras with Islamic prayers, or involve formal religious figures in traditional ceremonies. This strategy is not merely a compromise, but a strategic maneuver to maintain the relevance of spiritual authority in the eyes of the younger generation who have been exposed to formal religious education. The inclusion of religious elements becomes a practice of re legitimization, in which traditional authority shifts from purely spiritual power to power that is also theologically validated. Through rituals, traditional leaders demonstrate that they communicate not only with their ancestors but also with God, as understood in Islamic terminology. This change is a complex model of structural adaptation that allows traditional structures to survive under pressure from the dominant culture (Giddens, 1989).

The second vector of contestation comes from the state, particularly through the implementation of state law policies that often ignore customary rights and traditional jurisdiction. The case of Kasepuhan Ciptagelar, where the customary area was designated as the Gunung Halimun-Salak National Park, is a clear example of this territorial authority conflict. The battle here focuses on the definition of space: whether the forest is ancestral heritage and a food barn (customary meaning) or a conservation area under state control (positive legal meaning) (Suganda, 2009). This contestation directly eroded the jurisdiction of customary authorities. The authority of the *sesepuh* to regulate forest management (*Leuweung Titipan, Tutupan, Garapan*) now had to be negotiated with the government bureaucracy. As a result, the role of customary leaders has changed from managerial decision-makers to negotiating and advocacy forces (Suganda, 2009). Their authority is no longer exercised through purely customary sanctions, but through their ability to secure bargaining positions at the negotiating table.

The third vector of contestation is the most subtle but destructive to the meaning of the ritual. When the *ruwatan* ritual interacts with the market, it risks commodification, where spiritual meaning is replaced by economic value. As a result, the authority to carry out the ritual has shifted from the *sesepuh*, who maintain its sanctity, to the organizing committee, which manages logistics and revenue. This threatens *wibawa* (dignity) because the value of the ritual is now measured by the number of tourists or revenue, not by its spiritual effectiveness. This contestation requires strict cultural tourism regulations to prevent the ritual's meaning from being degraded. Policy makers must ensure that the commodification of rituals in Dieng is not only profit-oriented but also has a clear reinvestment mechanism to preserve authenticity and sustain the welfare of indigenous communities. The goal is to make tourism a tool for strengthening, not weakening, indigenous authority. In contrast, Ciptagelar demonstrates extreme resistance: a ban on the sale of rice. Traditional authorities have decisively won the contestation against the market by maintaining subsistence ethics and by placing rice as a sacred goddess (Nyi Pohaci), which must not be commercialized (Khomsan et al., 2013).

This collective contestation of meaning forces customary authorities to undergo a process of role transformation. Customary leaders are now respected not only because of their inherited position, but because of their practical abilities in three new roles: (1) Cultural Innovators (creating acceptable syncretism), (2) Political Negotiators (countering state claims), and (3) Communal Managers (ensuring food security and asset management). The main struggle for traditional authorities now is to redefine their legitimacy within the framework of modernity. Authority is no longer *given* (bestowed at birth) but must be fought for through agency. Every successful *Ruwatan*, every *Seren Taun* that guarantees a harvest, is a reaffirmation of the collective *authority* of the *Sesepuh* against external forces.

### **Policy Implications for National Food Security and Religious Moderation**

The findings of this study offer strategic implications for the formulation of national policies, particularly regarding the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into climate change adaptation and food security strategies. Specifically, the food barn (*leuit*) model, strictly practiced by the Kasepuhan Ciptagelar community, has demonstrated higher ecological resilience than

open-market systems, which are vulnerable to fluctuations. Consequently, the Ministry of Agriculture and the National Food Agency are strongly encouraged to not only position *leuit* as a cultural tourist attraction, but also to adopt it as a formal prototype for “community food reserves.” This policy must be accompanied by legal protection of customary forest areas as zones for sustainable food production, rather than merely as passive conservation zones. This is imperative given that customary agricultural practices have been proven to mitigate unpredictable climate risks through local wisdom in planting calendars (Barman et al., 2024; Widianingsih et al., 2023)

Beyond the ecological dimension, the findings on “integrative resilience” in Kasepuhan Cicarucub have significant implications for the Ministry of Religious Affairs’ agenda to strengthen religious moderation. Operational syncretism practices, such as replacing mantras with recitations of *manaqib* and communal prayers, demonstrate that local traditions do not threaten religious purity. Instead, these practices serve as social capital, helping prevent extremism. Policymakers must leverage these Islamized agricultural practices as a pedagogical medium to educate the grassroots population on the principles of religious moderation. The role of traditional leaders (*sesepuh*) as “cultural brokers” who bridge sacred and profane values is crucial in the creation of social cohesion in an increasingly pluralistic agrarian society (Fuadi et al., 2024; Hasanah et al., 2024)

Moreover, within the domain of agrarian governance, this study underscores the pressing need to address tenure conflicts between indigenous communities and the state, particularly in conservation areas such as Gunung Halimun Salak National Park. The government must adopt a participatory spatial planning approach that formally recognizes customary forests (*Leuweung Titipan*) in the national spatial plan. The failure to acknowledge customary jurisdiction has been demonstrated to lead to the initiation of vertical conflicts and to the erosion of *sesepuh*’s authority to preserve ecological equilibrium. To facilitate the transition of indigenous communities from a status of “squatters” occupying state-owned land to that of strategic partners in community-based environmental conservation, there is a necessity for policies that accommodate customary law within the framework of positive law (Hapsari et al., 2019; Scoones, 2024; Wiersum, 2006)

In light of the commercialization of rituals, as evidenced in Dieng, local governments must implement stringent cultural tourism regulations to avert the desacralization of ritual significations. A fundamental shift in tourism policy is imperative, moving from an orientation toward quantitative assessment of visitor numbers to a sustainable tourism model that respects the spiritual authority of ritual practitioners. A mechanism for reinvesting tourism profits in cultural preservation is needed to ensure that the transformation of rituals into tourist attractions does not erode the community’s social capital. These regulations are of paramount importance in ensuring that economic modernization occurs in tandem with the preservation of cultural identity, thereby positioning tourism as a catalyst for strengthening traditional authority rather than undermining it.

## CONCLUSION

This study mapped the spectrum of cultural resilience through a comparative analysis of *Ruwat Pertanian*, confirming that this tradition functions as a dynamic adaptive mechanism to modernity, rather than merely a static legacy. The primary conclusions of the study identify three distinct models of value negotiation: the conservative (Ciptagelar), integrative (Cicarucub), and pragmatic (Adirasa) models. These findings demonstrate that the sustainability of customs depends on the community’s capacity to rationalize or accommodate external pressures from religion (puritanism), the state (positive law), and the market (commodification). The primary scientific contribution of this study lies in its identification of the transformation of the role of traditional authorities (*sesepuh*). These authorities have shifted from guardians of tradition to negotiators of meaning and communal managers. To establish their legitimacy, these authorities must demonstrate their practical agency and ecological success.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for the formulation of national policy, as they directly address the imperative to incorporate local knowledge and expertise into policy

frameworks. The Ciptagelar conservative model (*leuit* system) is an ideal blueprint for community-based national food security and the legal protection of customary territories as productive zones. Secondly, the Cicarucub integrative model (operational syncretism) has been demonstrated to be an effective prototype for promoting religious moderation at the grassroots level, thereby showing that rituals can serve as instruments of social cohesion. Consequently, this research not only elucidates the survival of traditions but also underscores the imperative of recognizing customary systems as strategic assets for a sustainable and harmonious future for Indonesia.

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