

# The Dreadlock Hair Ritual as a Transformation of Ecological Consciousness and Collective Action among the Dieng Community

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history

Received: November 5, 2025  
Revised 1: December 27, 2025  
Revised 2: January 10, 2026  
Accepted: January 27, 2026  
Published: January 31, 2026

### Keywords:

Dreadlock Hair Ritual,  
Ecological Consciousness,  
Project Identity,  
Collective Action,  
Social Transformation.

## ABSTRACT

The dreadlock-cutting ritual of Indonesia's Dieng Plateau exemplifies the tension between tourism commodification and the preservation of spiritual meaning in the midst of an ecological crisis. This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in library research, engaging critically with academic literature, cultural texts, and theoretical discussions on ritual, identity, and environmental ethics. Drawing on Manuel Castells' framework of identity construction and Ann Swidler's concept of culture as a toolkit, the research examines how traditional practices can articulate ecological consciousness amid environmental degradation. Originally an exclusive communal rite, the ritual has been transformed into a public performance through the Dieng Culture Festival, producing cultural hybridity without entirely eroding its spiritual essence. Nevertheless, this transformation exposes a central paradox: rituals that symbolically promote harmony with nature are financially supported by tourism structures that often contribute to ecological harm. This contradiction enables the ritual to function as a form of *resistance identity*, fostering collective awareness and mobilization in response to environmental threats. Revitalization strategies are identified across four interrelated dimensions: holistic philosophical reinterpretation, ecology-based development, empowerment of community leaders as agents of change, and the strengthening of environmental advocacy. The study demonstrates that local traditions can serve as catalysts for social transformation.

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## 1. Introduction

Cultural identity in the era of globalization faces a complex paradox. On the one hand, traditional practices are increasingly commodified as tourism attractions that stimulate the local economy. On the other hand, the reduction of culture to mere symbols or inherited formalities threatens the essence of the values deeply rooted in the community's way of life. This phenomenon arises not only as a result of globalization's penetration but also as a reflection of the more intricate

dynamics through which cultural identity negotiates with the demands of modernity (Urbanus & Febianti, 2017).

The dreadlock hair ritual in the Dieng highlands is a concrete manifestation of this paradox. Originally functioning as a spiritual practice of purification and connection to the sacred, it has transformed into one of the main attractions of the Dieng Culture Festival—an annual event that not only promotes local cultural diversity but also serves as an economic strategy for the regional governments of Banjarnegara and Wonosobo to develop the tourism sector (Suprobowati, 2021).

The transformation of culture into tourism cannot simply be understood as a process of commodification that diminishes cultural authenticity. Rather, within the context of the ecological crisis faced by the Dieng region, the dreadlock hair ritual reveals its potential as a space of articulation for a deeper environmental consciousness. The practice embodies a spiritual-ecological dimension that emphasizes the interconnectedness between the Divine, humanity, and nature—a worldview that has become increasingly relevant amid the threat of environmental degradation and the fragility of Dieng's ecosystem (Mubin, 2016).

The Dieng Plateau today faces layered ecological pressures that endanger both environmental sustainability and local livelihoods. The Indonesian Forum for the Environment (WALHI) Central Java reports that the exploitation of geothermal energy in the region continues to be enforced despite the province's surplus electricity supply. The development of geothermal power plants not only poses health and air pollution risks but also carries a high carbon footprint that contradicts climate change mitigation commitments (WALHI Jawa Tengah, 2025).

These ecological challenges are further compounded by the massive expansion of potato farming by local farmers. Although economically profitable, the monocultural system on steep slopes has damaged soil structure, accelerated erosion, and increased surface runoff. The intensive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides not only degrades soil fertility but also diminishes biodiversity, as most farmers have abandoned more sustainable traditional agricultural systems. Even more alarming, agricultural expansion often occurs through forest clearing in the Dieng area, directly contributing to deforestation and habitat loss. These overlapping problems create an ecological crisis scenario that requires a holistic and integrated response—not only from a development policy perspective but also through cultural and spiritual dimensions capable of awakening the community's collective awareness (Anata, 2025; Wahyuningrum, 2023).

In facing such complexities, the dreadlock hair ritual cannot be understood through simplistic dichotomies such as tradition versus modernity or local versus global. Instead, it demands a theoretical approach capable of capturing the dynamics of cultural hybridity that emerge within intersections of multiple forces and discourses.

A review of previous studies reveals a significant gap in understanding the ecological dimensions of the dreadlock hair ritual. Atrinawati et al. (2021) focused on the ritual's spiritual purification aspects and its psychological impacts on children, showing how the ritual contributes to their spiritual and social development. Meanwhile, Ahmad Salehudin et al. (2017) explored the economic dynamics of the Dieng community in relation to Islamic religious values, emphasizing how these values shape social paradigms and influence agricultural practices that sustain local income and social solidarity. While both studies provide important insights into the spiritual and economic dimensions of Dieng's cultural practices, none specifically analyze the connection between the dreadlock hair ritual and social transformation amid ecological crisis.

This study adopts Manuel Castells' theory of cultural identity construction and Ann Swidler's concept of culture as social action. Castells explains that cultural identity is shaped by value systems governed by social actors, which can be internalized as social power. He classifies three types of identity: legitimizing identity (constructed by dominant institutions), resistance identity

(emerging from oppressed groups), and project identity (created by marginalized communities seeking to redefine themselves). (Manuel Castell, 2020) Meanwhile, Swidler (1986) emphasizes that culture operates as a form of social resistance, where symbolic experiences, myths, and rituals generate moods, motivations, moral orders, and social cohesion that together become resources for strategic action.

Both concepts highlight that culture is dynamic, integrative, and deeply intertwined with social realities and lived experiences. Thus, the dreadlock hair ritual should not be viewed merely as a traditional or folkloric performance but as a reinterpretive practice that embodies the community's efforts to make sense of their social and ecological reality. Culture, in this sense, is dynamic and creative—it deconstructs the assumption that traditions are passive spectacles and instead positions them as interactive spaces of meaning that can generate new forms of cultural identity (Homi K. Bhabha, 2004).

In contemporary globalization, the production of cultural identity simultaneously reinforces and redefines local boundaries, creating new possibilities for articulating identities beyond conventional cultural dominance. This dynamic enables the dreadlock hair ritual to function not only as a formal heritage practice but also as a medium for addressing contemporary issues, fostering critical awareness, and creating spaces for resistance and identity negotiation at the intersection of the local and the global (Moore-Gilbert, 1997).

In the context of Dieng, the encounters between local traditions and visiting tourists form a dynamic configuration where local knowledge, tourism interests, and economic imperatives intertwine. This interaction opens space for new interpretations and practices regarding the human–nature relationship. Within this perspective, the dreadlock hair ritual holds potential as both an educational discourse and an embodied expression of environmental awareness—one that transcends rhetoric and manifests through spiritual practice and collective social action (Mubin, 2016; Liao & Chan, 2016).

Based on the foregoing, this study seeks to examine: How can the dreadlock hair ritual, as a traditional cultural practice, function as a medium for articulating ecological consciousness amid Dieng's environmental crisis? This question is critical given the persistent gap between traditional spirituality and modern environmental activism, which are often perceived as separate domains. By pursuing this inquiry, the research aims to contribute to the development of a new paradigm that integrates cultural practice, environmental consciousness, and social transformation within communities facing ecological challenges.

## 2. Research Method

This study employs a library research method with a qualitative–interpretative approach to analyze how the dreadlock hair ritual functions as a medium for articulating ecological consciousness amid the environmental crisis affecting the Dieng Plateau. The library-based approach was chosen because the study's focus on the construction of project identity within the context of socio-ecological transformation requires a deep theoretical analysis that can be developed through a comprehensive literature review. The main theoretical frameworks applied are Manuel Castells' concept of identity construction—particularly project identity as an instrument of social transformation—and Ann Swidler's theory of culture as a toolkit, which emphasizes culture's capacity for collective action (Sugiyono, 2008).

Primary data sources include theoretical works such as Castells' *The Power of Identity* and Swidler's *Culture in Action*, as well as scholarly articles that specifically examine the dreadlock hair ritual in Dieng. These include Atrinawati et al. (2021) on the ritual's spiritual and psychological dimensions, Mubin (2016) on the community's religious values and social dynamics, and Suprobowati (2021) on the ritual's transformation within the Dieng Culture Festival.

Secondary data are drawn from reports by Wahana Lingkungan Hidup (WALHI) Central Java concerning ecological conditions and the geothermal energy project threats in Dieng, studies by Wahyuningrum (2023) and Anata (2025) on the environmental degradation caused by monocultural potato farming, as well as academic documentation and critical reflections on the commodification of culture in the tourism industry.

The selection of literature is based on thematic relevance to four primary focuses: Theories of identity construction and social transformation; Ritual practices and cosmological meanings; Ecological crisis and environmental awareness in Dieng; and The relationship between cultural tourism and the preservation of spiritual values. Data analysis was conducted through content analysis and critical interpretation using a hermeneutic approach to identify central themes, contradictions within the commodification process of the ritual, and the transformative potential of culture as an instrument for ecological awareness. This method allows the researcher to examine how the cosmological sacrality —emphasizing the triadic relationship between the Divine, humanity, and nature—can be mobilized as a basis of legitimacy for democratic and participatory environmental movements, while simultaneously deconstructing the paradigm of cultural commodification that risks eroding the ritual's spiritual and educational significance (Sujatmiko, 2020).

This critical library-based approach not only describes existing literature but also offers an integrative reinterpretation that interweaves spirituality, social solidarity, and ecological responsibility as responses to contemporary environmental crises. The limitation of this research lies in its conceptual–normative nature, as it does not include direct empirical data from the field. Therefore, the findings require further verification through ethnographic research or case studies in subsequent investigations to test the practical implementation of the transformative framework proposed in the context of the Dieng community.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. The Paradox of Cultural Identity in the Flow of Globalization

The *ruwatan cukur rambut gembel* (dreadlock cleansing ritual) in the Dieng Plateau was originally a communal rite performed to release children from *sukerto*—a form of inherited curse or misfortune. Over time, however, as tourism developed, this ritual has been elevated into a cultural attraction during the Dieng Culture Festival (DCF). Once a sacred, community-based ceremony, it is now a highlight of a broader cultural celebration attended by visitors from across Indonesia and even abroad (Suprobowati, 2021).

Among Javanese communities, particularly in Dieng, the ritual is conducted during the first month of the Islamic calendar, believed to be filled with divine blessings. Locals perform it to free children born with dreadlocks from future misfortune or calamity. The ritual's uniqueness lies in its subject—children with naturally matted hair—who, if not ritually cleansed, are believed to be denied happiness and good fortune in life (Atrinawati et al., 2021).

This tradition, passed down for generations among Javanese Muslims in Dieng and other local communities, reflects a deep cultural awareness of nurturing and protecting children's well-being. Beyond its religious dimensions, the ritual serves as a medium of spiritual communication between the Dieng people and the Divine, seeking blessings for prosperity and happiness. As noted by Atrinawati et al., the ritual encompasses multiple sacred meanings—psychological, social, and cultural—symbolized through the concept of *anak sukerto*, the ritual sequence, ceremonial objects, and the act of purification. The *cukur rambut gembel* has thus become a defining marker of Dieng's

cultural identity, distinguishing it from other Javanese traditions (Atrinawati et al., 2021; Mubin, 2016).

Children with dreadlocked hair are believed to be spiritual gifts from Mbah Kolodete, requiring ritual purification to remove the accompanying burden (*sukerto*). The dreadlocks can only be permanently removed when the child personally expresses the desire to have them cut and states their own request. Within the Javanese cosmological framework, *sukerto* is associated with impurity or misfortune that may attach not only to humans but also to the environment—fields, forests, and yards—necessitating *ruwatan* as a cleansing rite. Interestingly, scholars suggest that negative stereotypes toward dreadlocked children may originate from physical perceptions—such as unkempt or unpleasant hair—reflecting deeper social biases (Atrinawati et al., 2021).

The ritual sequence begins with a cultural procession (*kirab budaya*) starting from the house of the traditional leader. The parade carries rich symbolic meaning: elders dressed in traditional Javanese attire—black beskap, batik cloth, and blangkon—lead the procession bearing sacred heirlooms, followed by offerings and items requested by the dreadlocked children. Behind them walk the children with their parents, followed by troupes of local performers. After touring the village, the procession halts at Sendang Sedayu, where the *jamāsan* (purification bath) takes place. The ceremony begins with prayers recited by the elder, followed by the ritual bathing of each child with water from the sacred spring as a symbol of purification. From there, the group proceeds to the Arjuna Temple Complex, where the hair-cutting ceremony occurs. Accompanied by gamelan music and the presence of tourists, the ritual embodies both solemnity and communal festivity. The hair is cut, wrapped in cloth, placed in an earthen pot, and then set adrift in Telaga Warna, whose waters flow to the Serayu River and the South Sea—symbolizing the release of negative energy and the return to cosmic harmony. Afterward, each child receives the object they had requested, honoring their wish. The ceremony concludes with *ngalab berkah*, a ritual of sharing blessings where people scramble for food offerings such as *tumpeng*, roasted chicken, and local delicacies, believed to bring luck and prosperity to those who obtain them (Mubin, 2016).

This ritual, as Mubin (2016) argues, represents not only spiritual purification but also a profound symbol of human humility before the Divine—a recognition of spiritual weakness and the need for cleansing. Lawler (2014) interprets such cultural practices as both identity markers and social constructions, functioning as symbolic capital. Thus, the ritual is not a mere hereditary custom but also a living form of cultural education, a means of transmitting religious and moral values to future generations, and a medium that influences broader social groups, including outsiders. While this cultural practice affirms ethical and religious values—anchoring community life in local wisdom—it simultaneously faces the paradox of cultural commodification. On one hand, tourism development generates economic benefits for local communities by promoting cultural identity to national and international audiences. (Mubin, 2016; MacDonald & O'Regan, 2012) On the other hand, this commodification risks diluting the ritual's spiritual depth and educational meaning.

As Clifford Geertz (1976) notes, cultural symbols profoundly shape how communities interpret life. When the rambut gembel ritual, which traditionally embodies a cosmological relationship between humans, ancestors, and nature, becomes subordinated to tourism, its meaning risks reinterpretation—or even reduction—to mere spectacle. Yet this very reinterpretation also holds potential for cultural, theological, and ecological education if approached reflexively, rather than treated as entertainment devoid of substance.

Tourism, as I Gusti Agung Mudana observes, can be destructive when driven purely by economic motives without cultivating a sense of belonging and environmental responsibility.



Cultural commodification may generate revenue but, without human resource development and ecological sensitivity, can result in environmental degradation (Mudana, 2018).

Hence, the rambut gembel ritual stands at the crossroads of the sacred and the modern—functioning not only as a spiritual practice but also as a cultural and educational arena. Through its deeply symbolic process, the ritual bridges traditional wisdom and contemporary challenges, particularly the ecological crises caused by extensive monocultural potato farming, soil erosion, and pesticide use in Dieng. (Wahyuningrum, 2023; Haryanto et al., 2023; Anata, 2025) Paradoxically, while the ritual symbolizes cosmic harmony and reverence for nature, the community simultaneously faces an environmental crisis born from modern agricultural practices. In this sense, the ritual becomes a site of encounter—a living negotiation between tradition and modernity, between sacred cosmology and ecological reality.



Figure 1. The ritual witnessed by the local community and tourists (personal archive).

### 3.2. Reflecting on Public Sacredness in the Dreadlock Hair Ritual

The dreadlock hair-cutting ritual manifests a cultural expression that transcends mere festivity or tourism attraction. It represents a deep cosmological sacredness, reflecting the triadic harmony between the Divine, humanity, and nature as an inseparable unity. (Maarif, 2023) Rooted in reverence toward Kyai Kolodate—recognized both as an Islamic preacher and an ancestral figure with dreadlocks—the people of Dieng hold a spiritual cosmology that integrates divine, human, and natural dimensions. However, as the ritual becomes a tourism commodity involving multiple external stakeholders, it faces serious challenges to its sacred authenticity. Behind its popularity and commercialization lies a profound potential to function as a transformative cultural instrument for ecological awareness in the face of environmental crises threatening the Dieng Plateau (Mubin, 2016).

The dreadlock ritual is understood as an act of reverence toward sacred hierarchy—not only vertically but also horizontally. Sacredness is embodied through deep human dimensions, where the practice serves as a mechanism of social solidarity and both individual and communal transformation. The concept of *sukerto*—a curse or spiritual impurity to be released through the ritual—reflects an understanding that individual well-being cannot be separated from the harmony of social and spiritual relationships. This marks a movement from *being for the self* toward *being for the other*, as conceptualized by Yuxin Jia. (Yuxin Jia and Xue Lai Jia, 2017) Originally an exclusive local practice, the ritual has evolved into a form of public actualization with broader ethical and educational dimensions. The involvement of diverse actors in the Dieng Culture

Festival illustrates how sacredness has expanded beyond the communal sphere into a *public sacredness* with transformative potential (Suprobowati, 2021).

The ritual's essence lies in the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Within the traditional Dieng cosmology, the child's hair—central to the ritual—serves as a metaphor for the overall health of the ecosystem. The cutting of dreadlocked hair symbolically represents the release of cosmic imbalance, restoring harmony between humans and their natural environment. The Dieng Plateau, with its unique geographic and ecological character, is perceived not merely as a physical space but as a sacred entity possessing agency in the community's spiritual life. The ritual conveys that human well-being is inseparable from ecological health, embodying a profound ethic of ecological stewardship (Mubin, 2016; Tan, 2025).

Yet, the transformation of the ritual into a tourism attraction poses serious threats to its cosmological authenticity. The involvement of government and private sectors—including natural gas companies—in the ritual's organization raises concerns of co-optation, potentially undermining its educational and spiritual depth. Research by Ilham reveals that while the Dieng Culture Festival brings benefits, it also produces negative consequences such as waste accumulation, pollution, and public disorder. Additionally, the Dieng region faces ongoing environmental crises—landslides, ecological degradation, and public health issues—arising from unchecked development. This reflects how local tourism groups (*pokdarwis*) often overlook environmental impacts, promoting the beauty of nature and culture while concealing ecological damage.

Studies by Mubin and Ilham further reveal that cultural commercialization in Dieng has led to the erosion of local identity, as benefits are unequally distributed while environmental and social consequences persist. The construction of homestays, expansion of potato farming that depletes water catchment areas, and massive use of compost fertilizers are all driven by tourism demands—such as the production of potato chips and accommodations for visitors (Mubin, 2016 Ilham, 2022).

Bhabha (2004) warns that when culture is co-opted by external authorities, it risks losing its creative dynamism and being reduced to an empty formal ritual. This co-optation becomes even more problematic in the context of ecological degradation in the Dieng Plateau. An irony emerges when a ritual that traditionally teaches harmony among the Divine, humanity, and nature is sponsored by actors contributing to environmental destruction. Such contradiction disrupts the cosmological sacredness of the ritual, as its symbolic message of divine-human-natural harmony conflicts with the exploitative practices of the stakeholders and communities involved.

The dreadlock cutting tradition holds extraordinary potential to evolve beyond its role as mere cultural heritage into a powerful catalyst for environmental consciousness. While currently practiced within the framework of traditional preservation, this ancient ritual presents a remarkable opportunity to bridge indigenous wisdom with contemporary ecological education. This transformation can unfold by reimagining the dreadlock ceremony as an environmental storytelling platform that addresses the pressing challenges facing Dieng communities. Critical ecological issues—from unchecked geothermal exploitation to agricultural monoculture that's steadily eroding local ecosystem balance—can be woven into the cultural narrative. In doing so, this centuries-old ritual serves dual purposes: safeguarding cultural identity while awakening communities to environmental crisis.

What makes this approach so compelling is the organic alignment between ritual elements and ecological principles. The ceremony's sacred choreography incorporates nature's gifts: holy spring water, indigenous leaves, local blossoms, and other natural elements charged with symbolic meaning. These aren't mere ceremonial props—they're philosophical statements about humanity's harmonious relationship with the living world. This symbolism can be amplified and contextualized for today's ecological realities. The ritual use of water, for instance, becomes a poignant reminder of conservation urgency in Dieng, where water resources face mounting exploitation pressures. Similarly, the presence of native flora in the procession underscores the critical need to protect biodiversity threatened by monoculture farming practices



Figure 2. The ongoing hair-cutting procession (personal archive)

### 3.3. Culture as Collective Awareness

Cultural identity transcends ceremonial dimensions to become a force of consciousness and education that culminates in social resistance. In the context of the *rambut gembel* (dreadlock hair-cutting) ritual in Dieng, this cultural practice holds transformative potential that bridges horizontal relationships—not only among humans but also between humans and nature. When the value of harmony shifts or diminishes under the pressures of modernity and exploitation, cultural identity can be activated as an instrument of collective awareness to respond to such crises.

Karina asserts that identity is not a fixed or essential entity but a product that is continuously produced and reproduced through the narratives humans use to make sense of their existence. Ricoeur reinforces this by arguing that self-understanding can only be achieved through cultural symbols, signs, and everyday narratives. Thus, identity is formed through an interpretive process that unfolds within a dynamic cultural space (Korostelina, 2007).

Narrative plays a central role in connecting temporality—linking past, present, and future—through ongoing retelling. Memory, as used in narrative, is not an objective record but a socially constructed product continually reinterpreted in changing contexts. Myszal explains that memory is reconstructive; what is remembered is shaped by the framework of meaning prevailing within a community. This makes memory a non-neutral social construction, imbued with interests and ideologies (Steph Lawler, 2014).

The collective nature of cultural memory not only preserves experience but also regulates selectivity—determining what should be remembered and what should be forgotten. Collective memory functions as a shared narrative that shapes group identity, serving to affirm legitimacy, maintain existence, and act as a tool of resistance when group identity faces threats. Within the hermeneutic spiral of interpretation, the past is continuously reread through the lens of the present to shape visions of the future. This process reveals that culture possesses narrative and mnemonic power capable of strengthening solidarity, building historical consciousness, and serving as a form of resistance against external pressures—whether political hegemony or social marginalization (Steph Lawler, 2014).



The cultural identity embodied in the *rambut gembel* ritual is not static; it is a social construct continuously shaped through interaction, recognition, and collective narration. Within this identity framework, the cultural transformation and political interests involved represent processes of democratization and globalization. Local leaders and actors play a crucial role in articulating group identity—drawing on historical symbols and cultural traditions—thereby transforming identity into a tool of both resistance and solidarity (Castells, 2000).

In unpacking the ecological crisis in Dieng, the dreadlock hair-cutting ritual can be interpreted as a *project identity* within Castells' framework. This identity functions as a means of resistance and education through culture—voicing ecological concerns and anxieties faced by local communities. The people of Dieng have grown increasingly aware of the ecological challenges they face: monoculture farming, excessive chemical fertilizer use, land degradation, and geothermal development threats. These challenges can be addressed through the revitalization of cultural meaning.

Ann Swidler emphasizes that culture is not a unified system directing action in a consistent way but rather resembles a *toolkit*. Culture influences action by providing repertoires of values, strategies, and symbolic resources. Its potential lies in its ability to promote social transformation within specific geographical and historical contexts. Hence, cultural transformation not only transmits values to future generations but also influences outsiders and motivates individuals to internalize the values embedded in cultural practices.

The *rambut gembel* identity functions as a *project identity* capable of mobilizing collective action, as it embodies cultural meaning that unites the local community. This practice must be recognized not merely as a cultural festivity but as a reproduction of meaning—for future generations and visitors alike—about the symbolic interconnection between humans and nature.

The ritual's essence involves nature as a medium of purification from *sukerto*, demonstrating that the cosmological relationship between humans and the environment is fundamental. For the Dieng community, developing and expanding the meaning of the ritual is crucial so that it serves as a medium of awareness rather than mere cultural formalism. This awareness includes ecological consciousness and understanding of environmental degradation's impact on local life. A vital step is fostering collective awareness—among locals and visitors alike—that nature around Dieng is a living entity providing sustenance through agriculture, natural beauty, and water resources.

Revitalizing this meaning can be understood as a *culture of resistance* within Castells' conception—a peaceful form of resistance expressed through education, community programs, and initiatives that promote values relevant to the current situation. Such strategies should be carried out communally to build awareness and mobilize society in response to the ecological crisis. Confronting land degradation, geothermal threats, and other environmental issues, cultural moments can serve as platforms for coordinated education and consciousness-raising.

To achieve this, the *rambut gembel* ritual should be integrated with contemporary issues through a comprehensive cultural performativity framework encompassing four strategic dimensions:

### 3.4. Reinterpretation of Philosophical and Theoretical Foundations

This culture requires a philosophical and theoretical reinterpretation to avoid becoming repetitive formalism devoid of meaning. Revitalization should emphasize the triadic relationship between the Divine, humanity, and nature, elaborating its depth so that both the Dieng community and outsiders can understand its spiritual substance.

The transformation begins with reimagining the ritual's philosophical bedrock. Traditional elders and spiritual leaders stand as guardians of cosmological wisdom passed down through generations, serving as primary sources of knowledge about the triad relationship between the

Divine, humanity, and nature that pulses at the ritual's core. Yet this traditional knowledge cannot stand alone in our contemporary moment—it craves dialogue with scholars and researchers from anthropology, theology, and ecology who can critically interpret and contextualize these ancient insights for modern challenges.

Village and district governments play a pivotal bridging role, creating safe spaces where elders can share their wisdom while younger generations ask questions and engage critically. Meanwhile, local artists and cultural practitioners become translators, articulating complex philosophical meanings through accessible mediums—from performance art and visual installations to digital narratives that resonate with diverse audiences.

The implementation unfolds through carefully designed, participatory mechanisms. Regular intergenerational dialogue forums create recurring moments where traditional elders transmit deep understanding to youth in an atmosphere of conversation rather than indoctrination. Participatory documentation captures oral narratives about the triad relationship in audio-visual and written formats, ensuring this knowledge doesn't vanish with the passing of elders. Interpretive workshops then bring traditional knowledge into conversation with contemporary academic perspectives, yielding richer, more relevant understandings. These insights are published in multiple languages—Indonesian and English—reaching not just local communities but researchers, cultural enthusiasts, and preservation practitioners worldwide.

The institutional infrastructure supporting this process weaves together multiple organizations. The Dieng Traditional Council provides spiritual and cultural authority, legitimizing emerging interpretations. Universities with anthropology, religious studies, and ecology programs serve as research partners offering methodological and analytical frameworks. Cultural departments at district and provincial levels provide institutional support and formal legitimacy, while cultural and environmental study centers function as think tanks generating innovative ideas. Local museums and galleries become public spaces where these reinterpretations are exhibited and discussed with broader communities.

### 3.5. Ecologically Based Development Strategies

Addressing social issues and promoting ecological community-based development is essential. This can be achieved through continuous educational content, partnerships with environmental organizations, and reducing collaboration with extractive industries. Such approaches ensure consistency between promoted values and actual practices.

Farmer groups and organic agriculture communities become key actors as field practitioners implementing sustainable farming principles as alternatives to destructive monoculture. Local environmental activists who understand Dieng's specific ecological context serve as consultants and advocates connecting environmental issues with ritual meanings. Teachers in local schools become socialization agents integrating ecological values into daily learning processes, while sustainable tourism operators demonstrate that local economies can thrive without sacrificing the environment. Dieng's youth, as the generation inheriting both tradition and environment, must be empowered as change agents who understand both traditional values and ecological urgency.

Implementation mechanisms are designed to generate concrete, measurable impact. Ecological field schools integrate environmental lessons with ritual values into local curricula, ensuring every Dieng child grows up with ecological consciousness rooted in their cultural identity. Gradual agricultural conversion through pilot organic farming and agroforestry projects provides tangible alternatives for farmers trapped in monoculture systems, complete with technical support and market access. Collaboration audits critically evaluate partnerships with extractive industries using clear, transparent sustainability criteria—partnerships failing to meet standards must be terminated or restructured. The "Green Ritual" campaign packages ritual celebrations with zero-waste

practices, biodegradable local materials, and minimized carbon footprints, proving that modernity needn't conflict with spirituality. Establishing ecological cooperatives builds community-based economies that integrate ritual values into every economic transaction, creating systems that are both fair and sustainable.

The institutional infrastructure supporting this strategy involves environmental NGOs like WALHI, WWF Indonesia, or local organizations as technical partners providing expertise and networks. Agriculture and Forestry departments offer policy and technical support for sustainable farming transitions, including access to seeds, training, and organic certification. Local schools and Islamic boarding schools become educational institutions integrating ecological curricula, while National Park offices—where relevant to conservation areas—partner in natural resource management. The Ministry of Villages and Development of Disadvantaged Regions opens access to community-based development funding through Village Fund schemes and special programs. Corporate CSR forums operating in Dieng are engaged, but with strict MOUs emphasizing ecological principles and preventing greenwashing.

### 3.6. Empowering Community Leaders as Agents of Transformation

According to Swidler's concept of *unsettled lives*, community leaders, traditional practitioners, and ritual participants must be empowered as transformative agents capable of integrating cosmological sacredness with contemporary challenges. They serve as both guardians of authenticity and interpreters who translate traditional values into modern relevance. Through ecological education and capacity building, these leaders can reshape cultural capacity and narrate the ritual in ways that connect divine, human, and ecological dimensions with current realities (Swidler, 1986).

Transformation won't endure without strong, visionary local leadership. Religious leaders—whether kyai, pastors, or spiritual guides—function as moral and religious authorities providing spiritual legitimacy to ecological interpretations of the ritual. Ritual custodians and practitioners with deep technical knowledge of ceremonial procedures become guardians ensuring authenticity isn't lost in transformation. Informal community figures like tribal chiefs and community elders wield social legitimacy enabling them to mobilize community participation. Selected young people showing commitment to traditional values alongside openness to innovation are identified and prepared as future leaders. External facilitators from NGOs or academia provide methodological support and assist capacity-building processes without hijacking local leadership.

The empowerment mechanism unfolds holistically through a triad mentoring program where one traditional elder, one ecology expert, and one young leader work together in complementary teams. Multidimensional capacity training encompasses three core modules: a spiritual module deepening cosmological understanding and ritual meanings, an ecological module equipping participants with environmental science and contemporary crisis knowledge, and a communication module developing storytelling and public speaking skills to communicate transformative visions to diverse audiences. A ritual guide certification system develops as informal credentials recognizing leaders who've mastered integrative interpretation between spirituality and ecology. Exchange platforms facilitate networks of community leaders from various regions to share best practices and learn from each other's experiences. Every ritual performance becomes a direct learning moment where ecological narratives are woven into the procession, transforming the ritual from mere spectacle into public pedagogy.

Supporting institutions are remarkably diverse. Community training centers provide physical infrastructure and curricula for capacity-building programs. Religious organizations like NU, Muhammadiyah, or local groups offer spiritual legitimacy and access to networks of Islamic boarding schools and religious gatherings. Nonformal education institutes offer flexible programs aligned with community life rhythms. Indonesia's Indigenous Leaders Network facilitates peer

learning and inter-ethnic solidarity. Environmental education foundations provide modules and trainers with ecological expertise. Community media—from community radio to local YouTube channels—function as communication platforms reaching all levels of Dieng society.

### 3.7. Developing Ecological Advocacy Dimensions

The *rambut gembel* ritual holds potential as a platform for ecological advocacy. The public attention it draws can be leveraged to promote environmentally friendly practices and resistance to exploitative resource extraction. This dimension should involve collaboration with ecological solidarity groups and religious institutions, as public sacredness rooted in the ritual can legitimize environmental rights discourse and build broader ecological solidarity. This advocacy does not secularize the ritual but rather deepens its sacredness by embodying ethical responsibility toward creation. Reverence for the Divine is expressed through care for nature as God's manifestation, while human solidarity is enacted through collective commitment to preserve the environment for future generations.

Collaboration is crucial, as Castells emphasizes the interplay between *actors* and *networks*. Influential figures—such as cultural leaders, religious figures, or local influencers—possess symbolic power and platforms to amplify these issues. Meanwhile, networks involving institutions and local communities ensure sustainability. Strengthening these two dimensions of advocacy will help position ecological issues as central narratives within the living culture of Dieng (Manuel Castell, 2020).

Civil society coalitions concerned with environmental and indigenous rights become strategic allies amplifying Dieng communities' voices against external threats. Journalists and content creators serve as amplifiers communicating the ritual's ecological narrative to national and international audiences. Environmental and human rights lawyers provide legal protection when communities face conflicts with extractive industries or harmful policies. Local and national influencers with extensive social media reach can exponentially expand campaign impact. Interfaith religious communities build spirituality-based solidarity transcending denominational boundaries, demonstrating that care for creation is a universal value.

Advocacy mechanisms strategically leverage ritual momentum. Ecological ritual declarations transform ceremonial moments into platforms for public statements about environmental issues facing Dieng communities—such as rejecting destructive geothermal exploitation or committing to water conservation. Annual ecological solidarity festivals bring together Dieng communities with national environmental movements, creating spaces for dialogue and collaboration. Integrated media campaigns combine multiple formats: documentaries highlighting connections between ritual and ecological challenges, social media series with dedicated hashtags like #SaveDieng building consistent narratives, and opinion pieces in mainstream media bringing issues into public debate. Strategic litigation harnesses indigenous and environmental legal frameworks to fight destructive exploitation, using the legal system as a protection instrument. Strategic alliances are built with anti-mining movements, water conservation campaigns, organic farming networks, and faith-based environmental communities, creating permanent mutually-reinforcing coalitions. In special circumstances, ritual elements can be packaged as symbolic protest—peaceful actions leveraging ritual's sacred power to resist ecological threats.

The institutional network for advocacy is extensive and strategic. Environmental advocacy organizations like Greenpeace Indonesia, Jatam, and WALHI partner in campaigns and mass mobilization. Legal aid institutions provide legal protection for communities facing criminalization due to resistance against extractive industries. National and international media become publication channels bringing issues to global attention. Digital activism platforms like Change.org and Avaaz facilitate online petitions and digital support mobilization. Progressive religious institutions with ecological concerns, such as Muhammadiyah Environmental Council or NU Care-LAZISNU,

provide religious legitimacy to environmental advocacy. International networks like the Alliance of Religions and Conservation and GreenFaith connect Dieng's local struggle with global faith-based environmental movements. The National Human Rights Commission and Ministry of Environment and Forestry function as state watchdogs over environmental violations, while parliament and regional legislatures through relevant commissions become policy advocacy arenas.



Figure 3. The ritual of collecting water from seven springs (*ngalab berkah*) — a procession of togetherness (personal archive)

#### 4. Conclusion

This study reveals that the rambut gembel (dreadlock hair-cutting) ritual, as a traditional cultural practice, can function as a medium for articulating ecological awareness amid the environmental crisis faced by the Dieng Plateau. The findings indicate that this ritual holds significant transformative potential as an instrument for fostering collective ecological consciousness, despite facing serious challenges from the commodification of tourism.

The ritual embodies a cosmological sacredness that integrates a triadic relationship among the Divine, humanity, and nature. This spiritual practice is not merely an individual rite of purification from *sukerto* (impurity) but also reflects a holistic understanding of interconnectedness in life. The symbolism of releasing dreadlocks into Telaga Warna (the Colorful Lake) represents the Dieng community's cosmological awareness, where culture mirrors the balance of the ecosystem.

Through the theoretical lenses of Castells and Swidler, the rambut gembel ritual can be interpreted as a project identity that transforms social order toward a more progressive ecological consciousness. The ritual embodies values, memories, and strategic repertoires within the community that have the potential to mobilize collective action. It possesses the capacity to serve as an instrument of collective awareness, bridging spiritual consciousness with ecological responsibility. This practice becomes a medium for reproducing meaning—not only for future generations but also for visitors—about the importance of maintaining harmony between humans and nature.

This study encourages a transformation of understanding through the holistic reinterpretation of philosophical foundations, ecologically based development via continuous education, empowerment of community leaders as agents of change, and the development of environmental



advocacy dimensions. Practically, the research demonstrates that the rambut gembel ritual holds great potential to be developed as an effective platform for environmental education and advocacy. The Dieng Culture Festival can be optimized not merely as a tourist attraction but as a space for collective awareness about the urgency of preserving the Dieng ecosystem.

The transformation of the ritual—from a communal practice to a form of public sacredness—illustrates that culture is dynamic and adaptive. The main challenge lies in ensuring that this adaptation does not erode its transformative essence but rather strengthens its capacity as an instrument of collective awareness. In this way, the rambut gembel ritual can serve as a model of how local traditions contribute to global efforts in addressing ecological crises while maintaining authentic and meaningful cultural identity.

This research opens avenues for further exploration into how traditional cultural practices across Indonesia can function as instruments of social transformation in facing contemporary challenges. An interdisciplinary approach that integrates cultural studies, ecology, and social transformation is essential to understanding the potential of culture as a constructive and sustainable force for change.

## 5. Acknowledgment

The author would like to extend heartfelt gratitude to the people of Dieng, whose noble and profoundly rich cultural heritage has inspired and enabled this research. Their openness in sharing knowledge, values, and traditions has provided invaluable insight into the living wisdom embodied in the *rambut gembel* ritual and the collective consciousness of the Dieng community. Special appreciation is also given to the organizing committee of the *Dieng Culture Festival 2025*, whose dedication to preserving and promoting local culture has created meaningful spaces for reflection, collaboration, and cultural learning. Their efforts not only celebrate the beauty of Dieng's traditions but also strengthen the cultural continuity that underpins this study.

The author is deeply thankful as well to Rev. Agus Agung Prabowo and his family in Wonosobo, Central Java, Indonesia, whose warmth, generosity, and continuous support have accompanied the writing of this article. Their hospitality and encouragement have provided both inspiration and comfort throughout this research journey. This work stands as an expression of appreciation and respect for all who preserve and nurture Indonesia's living cultures, reminding us that tradition is not merely inherited—it is continually renewed through shared care, reflection, and love for the land and its people.

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