

The Tradition of *Ngaibakan* Benda Pusaka in the Pulo Traditional Village: Symbolic Negotiation of Islam and Local Wisdom in the Construction of Collective Identity

Tradisi *Ngaibakan* Benda Pusaka di Desa Adat Pulo: Negosiasi Simbolis antara Islam dan Kearifan Lokal dalam Pembentukan Identitas Kolektif

Luk Luk Atin Marfuah¹

¹ Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati, Bandung, Indonesia
luklukatin@gmail.com

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji ritual *Ngaibakan* benda pusaka di Kampung Adat Pulo, Kabupaten Garut, Jawa Barat, sebagai arena negosiasi simbolik antara ortodoksi Islam dan kearifan lokal dalam konstruksi identitas kolektif. Meski menghadapi intensifikasi gerakan purifikasi Islam dan tekanan modernisasi, komunitas adat ini mempertahankan praktik keberagamaan sinkretis yang mengintegrasikan nilai-nilai Islam dengan kosmologi pra-Islam secara harmonis. Menggunakan pendekatan etnografi komunikasi, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif selama enam bulan (Mei–Oktober 2024), wawancara mendalam dengan 14 informan kunci, dan analisis dokumentasi. Penulis menemukan tiga mekanisme reproduksi identitas kolektif yaitu: memori kolektif yang diritualkan melalui reaktivasi naratif genealogi leluhur, pemeliharaan batas simbolik melalui objek sakral dan konfigurasi spasial, serta transmisi nilai antargenerasi melalui partisipasi performatif. Ritual mendemonstrasikan "sinkretisme dialogis" proses negosiasi dinamis di mana teologi Islam dan kosmologi adat saling mentransformasi tanpa satu mendominasi yang lain, dicapai melalui stratifikasi kosmologis, reinterpretasi simbolik, dan legitimasi teologis. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada studi komunikasi dengan mendemonstrasikan bagaimana komunikasi ritual mengonstitusi realitas sosial, dan pada studi Islam dengan menawarkan model dakwah kultural yang menghormati keragaman budaya dalam kesatuan teologis.

Kata Kunci: Dakwah Kultural; Identitas Kolektif; Islam Pribumi; Komunikasi Ritual; Negosiasi Simbolik

ABSTRACT

This study examines the *Ngaibakan* benda pusaka ritual (heirloom bathing ceremony) in Kampung Adat Pulo, Garut Regency, West Java, as a site of symbolic negotiation between Islamic orthodoxy and local wisdom in constructing collective identity. Despite intensifying Islamic purification movements and modernization pressures, this indigenous community maintains syncretic religious practices that harmoniously integrate Islamic values with pre-Islamic cosmology. Using an ethnography of communication approach, data were collected through six-month participant observation (May–October 2024), in-depth interviews with 14 key informants, and documentation analysis. Findings reveal three mechanisms of collective identity reproduction: ritualized collective memory through narrative reactivation of ancestral genealogy, symbolic boundary maintenance via sacred objects and spatial configuration, and embodied value transmission through performative participation. The ritual demonstrates 'dialogical syncretism' a dynamic negotiation process whereby Islamic theology and indigenous cosmology mutually transform each other without either dominating the other, achieved through cosmological stratification, symbolic reinterpretation, and theological legitimation. This study contributes to communication scholarship by demonstrating how ritual communication constitutes social reality, and to Islamic studies by offering a contextualized da'wah model that honors cultural diversity within theological unity.

Keywords: Collective Identity; Cultural Da'wah; Indigenous Islam; Ritual Communication; Symbolic negotiation

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia faces a contemporary religious paradox: on the one hand, Islamic purification movements emphasizing doctrinal orthodoxy are gaining momentum (Mudhoffir 2017); on the other hand, hundreds of indigenous communities across the archipelago maintain syncretic religious practices that integrate Islam with ancestral traditions (Halim, Basyid, and Prihananto 2021; Tahara, Al Isra, and Tiro 2023). This tension between 'universal Islam' and 'local Islam' reflects a fundamental struggle over identity: how Indonesian Muslim communities negotiate their commitment to Islamic theological unity (*Tauhid*) with the cultural diversity that forms the basis of their collective identity (Azra 2005).

The Pulo Traditional Village in Garut Regency, West Java, offers a significant case for understanding these negotiations. As an indigenous community that embraced Islam in the seventeenth century, the people of Kampung Pulo continue to observe the ritual of *Ngaibakan Benda Pusaka* the ceremonial bathing of sacred heirlooms such as the keris, kujang, and spear on every fourteenth day of Maulud. This ritual constitutes a unique communication system embedding a pre-Islamic cosmology concerning the spiritual power of objects and nature-guardian spirits, while simultaneously integrating Islamic practice. What draws academic attention is that this ritual has survived an era in which many similar practices have eroded under Islamic purification pressures (Arifin, Abdullah, and Ratnawati 2019; Hefner 2021), and that the community does not experience serious internal conflict between tradition-preserving and purification-seeking factions (Hilmy 2018) a situation that stands in sharp contrast to many other Indonesian Muslim communities.

From a communication studies perspective, *Ngaibakan Benda Pusaka* is a complex ritual communication phenomenon. Ritual is not merely a sequence of ceremonial acts; it is a performative symbolic communication system that does not only represent reality but actively constitutes the social and religious reality of the community (Rothenbuhler 1998; Trillo, Hallinan, and Shifman 2022). Through ritual participation, individuals do not simply receive messages about community values they *become* legitimate members of the community through what Carey (2009) terms the 'ritual view of communication.' Yet studies of ritual communication in Indonesia remain largely limited to the analysis of verbal interaction patterns (Kuswarno 2008), while the performative-symbolic dimension of collective identity construction has received insufficient attention.

Several studies have examined Kampung Adat Pulo from different perspectives, yet each leaves a substantive gap that this research addresses. Ethnographic descriptions of the community's social life and value systems have been offered in a descriptive manner without a robust theoretical framework (Sucipto 2003). Studies of traditional house architecture from a traditionalism perspective (Alamsyah 2011) and cultural value symbols in traditional house design (Emilda and Rohaeni 2019) have advanced understanding of material cultural aspects but have not examined communication rituals or their function in collective identity formation. The da'wah process of Embah Dalem Arief Muhammad in spreading Islam in Kampung Pulo has been historically researched (Hanipa 2024), yet this work focuses on the early seventeenth-century Islamization period rather than on contemporary Islam-custom negotiation dynamics through ritual practice. In the broader West Java context, Alfian's (2024) study of Djawa Sunda cosmology in Cigugur the closest comparable case addresses cultural preservation and social cohesion, but does not analyze the communicative mechanisms through which Islam and local wisdom are symbolically negotiated. Accordingly, no study to date has analyzed the *ngaibakan benda pusaka* ritual as a symbolic communication system using a systematic ethnography of communication framework.

International studies of Islamic negotiation with local wisdom in Southeast Asia provide important comparative context but also reveal where this study departs from existing scholarship. Islamization across the region was not the product of a single dominant source, but rather of diverse commercial and cultural circulations that adopted local traditions to produce dynamic vernacular Islamic expressions (Feener 2019; Feener et al. 2021). The Javanese *slametan* ritual has been examined as a site of negotiation between Islamic theology and Javanese cosmology (Nasir 2019) a finding this study extends by demonstrating that comparable negotiation operates through a systematic six-stage communicative structure rather than an informal, diffuse process. Studies using ethnography of communication to examine ritual in South Sulawesi and Maluku (Hadawiah et al. 2025; Ridwan et al. 2020; Ridwan, Sulaeman, and Nurdin 2023) offer the closest methodological parallel to this study; however, their focus on cross-religious ritual contexts where Muslim communities participate in non-Islamic ceremonies differs fundamentally from the intra-Islamic negotiation with pre-Islamic custom documented here. Zainuddin, Sammak, and Salle (2024) offer a parallel case of Patuntung-sharia syncretism in South Sulawesi, but without the integrated ritual communication framework that allows this study to explain *how* negotiation is communicatively enacted, not merely that it occurs.

Based on this literature review, three principal research gaps and correspondingly, three dimensions of this study's novelty emerge. *First*, no study has analyzed the *Ngaibakan Benda Pusaka* ritual as a symbolic communication system using an ethnography of communication framework to understand how meaning is constructed and negotiated in ritual contexts; this study addresses that gap by applying the SPEAKING framework systematically to a complete annual ritual cycle. *Second*, the mechanisms of symbolic negotiation between Islam and local wisdom in religious-customary rituals have not been explored in depth; this study proposes 'dialogical syncretism' as a new analytical framework that transcends the syncretism-orthodoxy dichotomy and explains the dynamic, mutual transformation at work. *Third*, the relationship between ritual communication, collective identity construction, and cultural da'wah strategies has not been studied integratively in Indonesian indigenous community contexts; this study provides that integration, linking ethnographic evidence directly to da'wah practice implications.

This study addresses the central question: How does symbolic negotiation between Islam and local wisdom unfold in the *ngaibakan benda pusaka* ritual, and how does this negotiation function in constructing the collective identity of the Kampung Adat Pulo community? Three sub-questions guide the inquiry: (1) How is the communication structure of the *ngaibakan benda pusaka* ritual constituted from an ethnography of communication perspective? (2) Through what mechanisms do cultural rituals reproduce collective identity amid Islamic purification and modernization pressures? (3) How can the symbolic Islam-custom negotiation model inform contemporary cultural da'wah strategies? The study aims to describe and analyze the ritual's communication structure, identify the mechanisms of collective identity reproduction, and formulate a model of symbolic negotiation with implications for cultural da'wah.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework rests on the integration of three perspectives: ethnography of communication, ritual theory and collective identity, and dialogical syncretism with cultural da'wah. Together, these enable analysis of the *Ngaibakan Benda Pusaka* ritual as a phenomenon that is simultaneously communicative, social, and religious.

Ethnography of communication serves as the methodological framework for analyzing ritual as a culturally structured communicative event. Proceeding from the assumption that communicative meaning cannot be separated from its socio-cultural context, this approach treats ritual as a communication system with its own rules, norms, social roles, and internal logic (Duranti 2009; Hymes 1972; Saville-Troike 2008). The SPEAKING framework is applied to identify how sacred settings, hierarchically positioned participants, manifest and latent goals, ritual action sequences, emotional tone, multimodal communication channels, interaction norms, and ritual genres simultaneously construct collective meaning. Ritual communication is thus understood not as information transmission but as a practice that actively constitutes social and religious reality consistent with Carey's (2009) ritual view of communication.

Theories of ritual, symbolism, and collective identity provide the substantive lens. Ritual is understood as a structured, repetitive, collective symbolic action whose meaning transcends the instrumental function of the act itself (Bell 1992; Turner 1969). Through collective participation, individuals experience collective effervescence shared emotional intensity that strengthens collective consciousness and social solidarity (Durkheim 1995; Gabriel et al. 2020). Ritual stages of separation, liminality, and reaggregation create a threshold space enabling *communitas* an egalitarian experience of togetherness that transcends everyday social structure (Turner 1967). Ritual symbols such as heirlooms, water, and offerings function as multivocal symbols condensing historical, cosmological, and moral meanings simultaneously (Turner 1967). Collective identity is thus not a static essence but a social construct continuously reproduced through collective memory, symbolic practices, and embodied transmission (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Priwati and Sanitoso 2024; Wimmer 2013).

Dialogical syncretism and cultural da'wah provide the framework for understanding the Islam-custom relationship. Unlike the traditional conception of syncretism often normative and treating it as passive blending or theological deviation dialogical syncretism denotes a dynamic, ongoing negotiation process in which Islam and local wisdom interact through symbolic reinterpretation and contextual theological articulation (Boogert 2023; Ikhwan et al. 2024; Nasir 2019). Ritual practices are organized through cosmological stratification that positions God as the ontological center while ancestors and natural elements serve as symbolic intermediaries within God's creation. Reinterpretation of traditional symbols in Islamic theological language, use of *fiqh al-'urf* references, and legitimation through pilgrimage and ancestral respect ethics constitute forms of *theological work* enabling ritual continuity without sacrificing religious legitimacy (Kamali 2003; Sodiqin and Umroh 2023). Cultural da'wah is understood as a dialogical, accommodating Islamic communication strategy that employs local culture as a medium for internalizing Islamic values distinct from puritan approaches that tend toward elimination (Azra 2005; Syabibi et al. 2021).

The integration of these three perspectives enables a holistic analysis: ethnography of communication explains ritual communication structure and practice; ritual theory and collective identity explain social functions and identity reproduction mechanisms; and dialogical syncretism with cultural da'wah explains how Islam-custom negotiation unfolds and what it implies for community cohesion and da'wah strategy.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using the ethnography of communication method (Duranti 2009; Hymes 1972; Ridwan et al. 2020; Saville-Troike 2008). The research site is Kampung Adat Pulo, Cangkuang Village, Leles District, Garut Regency, West Java selected because this community consistently observes the *Ngaibakan Benda Pusaka* ritual and exemplifies a unique integration of Islam and customary practice.

Fieldwork was conducted over six months (May–October 2024), encompassing one complete annual ritual cycle. Informants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques, comprising: one traditional head (Kuncen), one Deputy Kuncen, two religious figures, six active community members, two cultural heritage managers, and two local cultural experts totaling 14 informants. Data collection employed three techniques: (1) participant observation the researcher resided in the Cangkuang Village area, visited Kampung Pulo three to four times per week, participated in community life, and attended the complete ritual (yielding 280 photographs, 12 hours of video footage, and structured field notes); (2) in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in Sundanese and Indonesian, lasting 60–120 minutes per session across 28 sessions (producing 387 pages of verbatim transcripts); and (3) documentation study collecting written records, visual archives, and cultural artifacts. Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures (Braun and Clarke 2006) conducted iteratively with theoretical triangulation. Validity was maintained through source triangulation, method triangulation, member checking, prolonged engagement (six months), and reflexivity. Research ethics: informed consent was obtained from the community; informant identities were protected through pseudonyms; and customary prohibitions were observed throughout the research process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Communication Structure of the *Ngaibakan Benda Pusaka* Ritual: An Analysis of Gradual Communicative Events

The *Ngaibakan Benda Pusaka* ritual constitutes a complex, structured communicative event unfolding across six interrelated stages: communal deliberation, division of responsibilities, collection of ritual media, collective verification, anticipatory pilgrimage, and the core ritual. This six-stage structure extends Nasir's (2019) analysis of the Javanese *slametan* as an arena of Islam-cosmology negotiation: whereas Nasir found negotiation embedded within a single ceremonial event, the present study reveals that negotiation is distributed across a temporal cycle of preparatory and performative stages each with a

distinctive communicative function that contributes cumulatively to the ritual's identity-reproducing and Islam-custom-negotiating work.

Stage 1: Communal Deliberation of Setting and Participatory Legitimacy

Seven days before the ritual (D-7), community leaders the heads of the six traditional houses of Kampung Pulo convene a deliberation to determine the ritual venue. Contrary to the common assumption that traditional rituals are spatially rigid, practice at Kampung Pulo reveals spatial flexibility alongside structural stability: the venue rotates among the traditional houses, yet the ritual structure and sequence remain invariant (Observation, September 8, 2024). The Kuncen explains: "The ritual venue can change every year it need not be held in my house as Kuncen. Every family wants its home to serve as the ritual site, because it is believed to bring blessings. So we deliberate and take turns fairly. What matters is not the place, but the intention and proper observance of ancestral custom." (Interview, September 10, 2024)

This venue rotation carries three communicative functions: *first*, affirming egalitarianism consistent with Turner's (1969) concept of *communitas*; *second*, creating distributed sacredness sanctity is not concentrated in a single locus but dispersed across the village space (Bell 1992; Eliade 1959); and *third*, strengthening active participation of all community members (Hobson et al. 2018; Seligman 2008). This finding complements Alfian's (2024) observation of social cohesion through shared ritual in Cigugur, but goes further by identifying the specific deliberative mechanism rotating venue with communal deliberation through which cohesion is communicatively produced rather than simply assumed.

Stage 2: Sharing of Responsibility and the Mobilization of Mechanical Solidarity

Following agreement on the venue, the community proceeds to the division of ritual labor for collecting ritual media. This division follows principles of competence and equitable burden-sharing, covering sacred materials (frankincense, seven-variety flowers, water from seven holy springs, perfume), symbolic offerings (*nasi tumpeng*, *kupat lepet*, bitter and sweet coffee, cigars, fish, eggs, *rujak*), ritual equipment (*boeh larang*, water jars, *parupuyan*), and communal feast provisions. The Deputy Kuncen explains: "We divide tasks according to ability. The one with access to the spring fetches the water. The one who cooks well prepares the feast. The one who is more financially able purchases the frankincense and perfume. There is no coercion everything is done sincerely." (Interview, September 1, 2024)

This division manifests Durkheim's (1893) mechanical solidarity, whereby each member holds a specific role essential to the ritual's success, generating functional interdependence that strengthens social bonds (Collins 2014; Irving et al. 2024). The principle of 'according to ability, all done sincerely' reflects a moral economy distinct from market logic (Scott, 1977) a finding that supports Ikhwan et.al (2024) argument that ritual practices function as arenas for integrating religious and cultural values, while extending it by demonstrating the concrete distributional mechanism through which this integration is practically achieved. Figure 1 shows the ritual media collected by community members prior to the ceremony, including sacred materials, symbolic offerings, and ritual equipment.

Figure 1. Ritual media in the tradition of *ngaibakan benda pusaka*.



Source: Author's documentation.

Stage 3: Ngala Cai Kukulu Ritual Communication with Nature and Cosmological Stratification

Three days before the ritual (D-3), the *Ngala Cai Kukulu* (collection of water from seven holy springs) is performed as a sub-ritual with complex communicative structure. The group, led by the Kuncen in modest attire and headband as a purity marker, visits seven springs in Pasir Eurih Village: Cikembul, Cipondok, Ciburial, Ciputri, Ciguntur, Citanduy, and Situ Kumbang Bungur all held in collective memory as the former territory of the Kasepuhan Sunda. The number seven is not merely geographical but cosmological, signifying perfection in both Sundanese and Islamic cosmology. Figure 2 shows the *Ngala Cai Kukulu* gathered from the seven holy springs, stored in traditional jars to be used in the *Ngaibakan Benda Pusaka* ceremony.

Figure 2. *Cai kukulu* (water from the seven holy springs) collected for the ritual.



Source: Author's documentation.

At each spring, a ritual communicative act reveals cosmological stratification: "*Bismillahirrahmanirrahim. Permissi, nyuhunkeun cai suci, kanggo ngabersihkeun pusaka karuhun. Mugi-mugi berkah ti Gusti Allah, sareng penjaga tempat ieu. Hatur nuhun.*" (In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. Excuse me, we request this holy water to cleanse the ancestral heirlooms. May the blessings of God Almighty, and the guardian of this place, attend us. Thank you.) (Observation, September 11, 2024). This formula integrates three cosmological layers: Allah as the supreme source of blessing; the place's guardian (a nature spirit from pre-Islamic belief) as a respected entity; and the ancestors (*karuhun*) as the ritual's beneficiaries.

A religious figure provided the theological legitimation: "We do not believe the spring possesses its own power. We believe God created supernatural beings that may inhabit certain places. When we ask for permission, we are respecting God's creation and asking not to be disturbed. This is courtesy, not shirk." (Interview, September 12, 2024). This constitutes *theological work* the community's articulation of local practice in Islamic theological language (Bowen 2012; Sodiqin and Umroh 2023). This parallels Zainuddin, Sammak, and Salle's (2024) finding in the Ammatoa Kajang community, where Patuntung beliefs and Islamic sharia are reconciled through analogical reasoning. The crucial difference is that in Kampung Pulo, this theological work is embedded within a communicative formula performed at each ritual sub-site making the negotiation a repeated, structured communicative act rather than an implicit cultural accommodation.

Stage 4: Collective Verification and the Ritual Prayer over Water (D-0, Afternoon)

On the day of implementation, the Kuncen conducts a final verification of all ritual media not a mere administrative checklist but a quality-control ritual affirming commitment to ritual perfection. The Kuncen explains: "Everything must be complete according to the ancestors' provisions. If something is missing, the ritual is imperfect; it will not be blessed." This concept of 'complete = perfect = blessed' reflects the ritual perfectionism Bell (1992) identifies as characteristic of traditional rituals. Following verification, before Maghrib prayer, the Kuncen leads the prayer over the water: "O God, the Most Holy, we ask You to bless this holy water... May this water preserve the heirlooms, protect us from harm, and fill our village with Your blessings. Amin." The water is believed to carry divine *barakah* spiritual potency

originating from God, not from the water itself (Eliade 1959) a reinterpretation that exemplifies the dialogical syncretism Boogert (2023) theorizes as characteristic of Javanese Islam, here operating in a Sundanese ritual context.

Stage 5: Anticipatory Pilgrimage Collective Memory Activation and Appeal for Spiritual Legitimacy

Following Maghrib prayer, all participants undertake a collective pilgrimage to the tomb of Embah Dalem Arief Muhammad, led by the Kuncen. This pilgrimage serves three communicative functions. *First*, collective memory activation through genealogical narrative. At the tomb, the Kuncen recounts the history of Embah Dalem his arrival from Mataram, the spread of Islam, and the founding of Kampung Pulo particularly for younger participants. A community member explains: "Since childhood I have attended this pilgrimage with my parents. The Kuncen tells the story of Embah Dalem. Now it is my turn to listen while bringing my own children. This is our way of teaching village history not from books, but from stories told directly at the grave." (Interview, September 15, 2024). The spatial context of the pilgrimage lends the narrative a performative dimension that books cannot replicate: the story is not merely heard but experienced in a space that physically connects participants with their ancestors (Assmann 2011; Connerton 1989). This supports and extends Hadawiah et.al (2025) finding that ritual communication in Indonesian communities functions to transmit collective memory though where Hadawiah dkk. documented this in a cross-religious context, the present study demonstrates the same function operating within an intra-Islamic community whose memory is specifically tied to Islamization history.

Second, appeal for spiritual legitimacy through collective prayer integrating Islamic greetings and Sundanese supplication: "*Assalamu'alaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh, Embah Dalem Arief Muhammad*. We all ask for your blessing and prayers of support for the ritual tonight." The ancestors are perceived as intermediaries (*wasilah*) conveying prayers to God a practice with precedent in Islamic jurisprudence (Syakur and Khoiroh 2021). *Third*, the pilgrimage marks the transition to liminality the threshold phase in which participants enter sacred time (Turner, 1969).

Stage 6: Implementation of the Core Ritual Multimodal Performative Communication (00.00–03.00 WIB)

The core ritual begins precisely at midnight (00.00 WIB) a cosmologically determined timing: midnight on the full moon (14 Maulud) is believed to be the moment when 'the boundary between the visible and invisible world is at its thinnest, making prayers more readily received by God' (Interview with Kuncen, September 10, 2024). This concept of cosmological boundary thinning integrates pre-Islamic beliefs about sacred time with the Islamic concept of *waqt mustajab* the time when prayers are most readily answered constituting what this study terms cosmological syncretism at the level of temporal experience.

The *first* sub-stage (23.45–00.00) involves preparation of ritual space: mats in a circular pattern symbolizing equality; heirlooms keris, machetes, kujang, round cannons, wooden staves, sacred stones placed on white *boeh larang* cloth at the center; water vessels mixed with seven flower varieties positioned near the heirlooms; offerings arranged around the perimeter; and the *parupuyan* incense burner lit, creating an olfactory atmosphere that marks the sacred (Pink 2015). The circular spatial arrangement echoes the egalitarianism of the deliberation stage and reinforces *communitas* before the ritual even begins. Figure 3 shows the arrangement of the ritual space, including the circular mat layout, heirlooms placed on white cloth at the center, offerings arranged around the perimeter, and the lit incense burner.

Figure 3. Preparation of ritual space and media for the *ngaibakan benda pusaka* ceremony.



Source: Author's documentation.

The second sub-stage (00.00–00.15) is the Kuncen's opening address in Sundanese: "*Simkuring ngucapkeun wilujeng sumping. Hadirin, siram jimat ieu anu ditinggal karuhun, aya dina rahmat sareng shalawatna, mudah-mudahan aya hikmah sareng manfaatna.*" (I bid you welcome. Honored guests, the bathing of this heirloom bequeathed by our ancestors, carried out under God's grace and blessings, may it bring wisdom and benefit.) (Observation, September 14, 2024). This functions as *frame setting* (Goffman 1974), establishing the interpretive framework that positions the ensuing activity as sacred rather than profane. Figure 4 shows the Kuncen delivering the opening address at 00.00 WIB, establishing the sacred interpretive frame for all participants.

Figure 4. Opening address and welcome by the Kuncen at the commencement of the core ritual.



Source: Author's documentation.

The third sub-stage (00.15–00.30) is tawasul and collective prayer. All participants jointly recite: "*Allahumma shalli 'ala Sayyidina Muhammad... Subhanallah wal hamdulillah wa la ilaha illallah wallahu akbar...*" The recitation generates *collective effervescence* (Durkheim 1995; Gabriel et al. 2020) the collective emotional intensity arising from vocal synchronization. Observations show that as prayers grow louder, participants close their eyes and adopt solemn expressions, with some shedding tears affective arousal deepening solidarity (Collins 2014). This finding supports Ridwan et.al (2023) observation of collective prayer generating communal bonds in Moluccan ritual contexts, while distinguishing itself by documenting the specific embodied markers of effervescence within a single-faith indigenous community. Figure 5 shows participants jointly reciting tawasul and prayers, a moment marked by collective emotional intensity and deepened communal solidarity.

Figure 5. Recitation of *tawasul* and collective prayer by all participants.



Source: Author's documentation.

The *fourth* sub-stage (00.30–02.00) is the bathing of the heirlooms the ritual's climactic moment. The Kuncen lifts each heirloom with both hands (a mark of respect), immerses it in flower-water with a clockwise circular motion (three turns, symbolizing wholeness), allows it to drain completely, sprays it with perfume, and re-wraps it in fresh white cloth. Each movement is a nonverbal communicative act expressing reverence and sacredness (Kendon 2004; Streeck, Goodwin, and LeBaron 2011). During bathing, the Kuncen occasionally enters a ritual trance body trembling, eyes half-closed, movements slowing. The Deputy Kuncen explains: "When bathing the heirloom, I sometimes feel someone else is guiding my hand. I am only a medium." (Interview, September 26, 2024). This trance legitimizes the Kuncen's authority as a spiritual intermediary, and simultaneously creates intensive liminality a *communitas* experience in which social hierarchies are suspended (Turner 1969). Unlike Alfian's (2024) documentation of cultural preservation rituals in which leaders maintain full rational agency throughout, the trance phenomenon here reveals that the Kampung Pulo ritual produces a qualitatively different form of communal experience one mediated by embodied spiritual authority rather than cultural performance alone. Figure 6 shows the Kuncen performing the ritual bathing of heirlooms using flower-infused water, following the prescribed choreography of respectful lifting, clockwise immersion, and re-wrapping in white cloth.

Figure 6. The *Ngaibakan Benda Pusaka* the ceremonial bathing of sacred heirlooms.



Source: Author's documentation.

The *fifth* sub-stage (02.00–02.30) is the closing prayer and storage of heirlooms, marking closure of the liminal phase. The *sixth* and final sub-stage (02.30 onwards) is the communal feast the reaggregation phase in which all participants, regardless of social status, share a meal of *tumpang* and other dishes. The feast is not logistical closure but an essential moment of reaggregation in which participants return to ordinary social life with strengthened bonds (Bell 1992; Turner 1969), the atmosphere shifting from solemnity to warmth and

laughter. Figure 7 shows the Kuncen leading the closing prayer in Arabic and Sundanese, marking the end of the liminal phase and the transition to reaggregation.

Figure 7. The closing prayer and conclusion of the *Ngaibakan Benda Pusaka* ritual.



Source: Author's documentation.

Figure 8 shows participants sharing a communal meal of tumpeng and other dishes, marking the transition from sacred ritual time back to ordinary social life with renewed communal bonds.

Figure 8. The communal feast (reaggregation phase) following the completion of the core ritual.



Source: Author's documentation.

Mechanisms of Reproduction of Collective Identity

The ritual reproduces collective identity through three mechanisms: ritualized collective memory, symbolic boundary maintenance, and embodied transmission. First, Ritualized Collective Memory. The pilgrimage to the tomb of Embah Dalem Arief Muhammad activates community memory through the formula: "*Mugi-mugi Embah tétéla masih ngajagi kami*" (May Embah continue to watch over us). Embah Dalem is not merely a historical figure but an ongoing spiritual presence what Connerton (1989) terms 'inscribing memory,' and what Assmann (2011) identifies as the work of cultural memory: transforming historical persons into founding figures whose significance is renewed through each ritual cycle. The heirlooms function as 'material memory' (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy 2011; Sasaki and Baba 2024) biographical objects storing ancestral stories and binding their custodians in genealogical relationships (Hoskins 2013; Zuanni 2023). The Kuncen explains: "Every time I hold this keris, I feel a connection with Embah... This is a symbol that we are descendants of Embah Dalem, heirs of his mandate." (Interview, September 14, 2024). This mechanism of ritualized memory differs from Sucipto's (2003) descriptive account of community values in Kampung Pulo: where Sucipto recorded values as static cultural content, this study reveals that those values are actively reproduced and can only persist through repeated performative re-enactment. Memory here is not stored but enacted.

Second, Symbolic Boundary Maintenance. Heirloom ownership functions as a positive boundary marker. The Kuncen explains: "This heirloom was entrusted by Embah Dalem to his

descendants. Not everyone may hold it... This is what distinguishes us from outsiders." The heirloom constitutes symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986) conferring legitimate membership status in the community (Ayeni, Omigbodun, and Onibalusi 2025; Oshotse, Berda, and Goldberg 2024). The spatial configuration of six houses and one mosque constitutes identity inscribed in space (Low and Lawrence-Zuniga 2003; Moosavi et al. 2025) place of memory (Nora 1989) where identity is materially encoded. Customary prohibitions function as negative boundary markers, defining identity through what members must *not* do. This extends Barth's (1998) theory of ethnic boundary-making from ethnic to religio-cultural identity, showing that boundaries are maintained not through external exclusion but through internal sacred practice a subtle but theoretically significant distinction that prior studies of Kampung Pulo (Alamsyah 2011; Emilda and Rohaeni 2019) documented materially without explaining communicatively.

Third, Embodied Transmission. Children are socialized through 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger 1991): first observing, then assuming small responsibilities, and finally participating fully. The body becomes a site of memory through sensory experience the scent of frankincense reflexively evokes ritual memory and feeling (Connerton 1989; Pink 2015). A community member recounts: "When the prayers are recited together... I feel goosebumps... I feel part of something larger than myself." (Interview, September 14, 2024). This *communitas* constitutes the affective glue holding the community together (Collins 2014; Turner 1969). The embodied quality of this transmission explains what Hilmy (2018) observed but did not account for why this community is more resistant to purification pressures than many others: identities formed through sensory ritual experience are not amenable to rational-discursive critique in the same way that propositional beliefs are (Nelson 2005). What is learned through the body is defended through the body.

Symbolic Negotiation: Dialogical Syncretism in Practice

Negotiation unfolds through four mechanisms. First, cosmological stratification. The community's cosmology is structured in layers: God at the apex as the sole creator; ancestors as spiritual intermediaries (*wasilah*); and nature spirits as a third layer within God's creation. A religious figure explains: "*We worship only God... but we believe God created supernatural beings... When we ask permission from the guardian of the spring, we are respecting God's creation. There is no contradiction.*" (Interview, September 12, 2024). This constitutes theological integration pre-Islamic concepts reframed within an Islamic cosmological hierarchy (Feener et al. 2021). This is consistent with Nasir's (2019) finding that Javanese Muslim communities integrate pre-Islamic cosmological elements through Islamic framing; the present study extends this by showing that the integration is not merely implicit in cultural practice but explicitly articulated through formal ritual formulae spoken at each sub-site of the ritual.

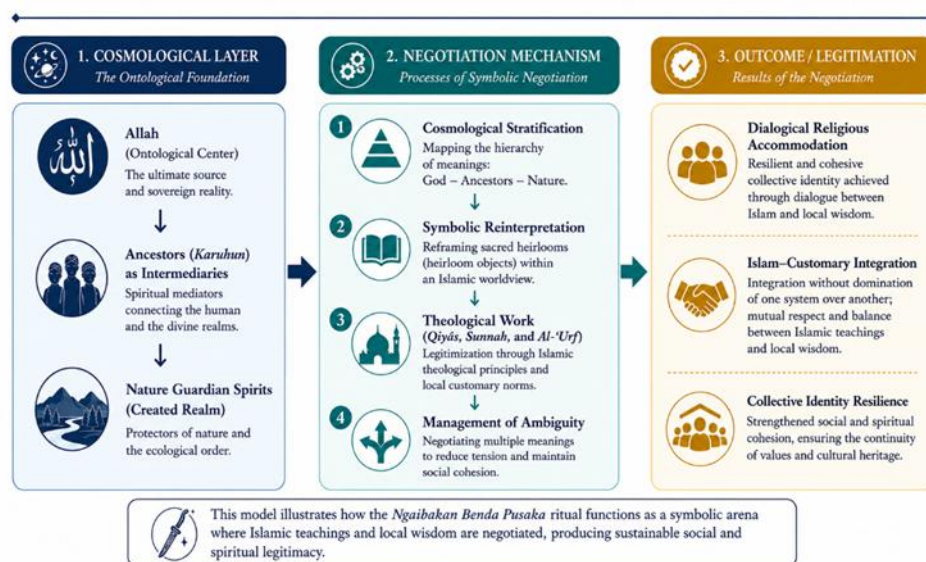
Second, symbolic reinterpretation. Offerings are transformed from 'gifts to spirits' into 'philosophical symbols of life.' A cultural expert explains: "Offerings are not to be 'liked' by spirits. Bitter coffee represents life's difficulties; sweet coffee represents happiness both to be accepted as God's decree." (Interview, October 18, 2024). This is symbolic displacement (Bowen 2012; Nasir 2019): original meaning replaced by a new meaning compatible with Islam, without stripping the ritual of its essential character. What is significant and what distinguishes this case from Zainuddin, Sammak, and Salle's (2024) Patuntung-sharia syncretism is that this reinterpretation is not the work of external Islamic scholars but of the community itself: it is endogenous theological labor, performed and transmitted by community members, giving it a legitimacy and sustainability that externally imposed reinterpretations rarely achieve.

Third, theological work. Three strategies of theological work were identified. *Birr al-walidayn*: 'Honoring Embah Dalem is birr al-walidayn devotion to ancestors who brought Islam to us. This is piety, not worship.' *Pilgrimage according to sunnah*: 'The pilgrimage to Embah Dalem's tomb follows the sunnah of the Prophet to remind us of death. This is not heresy.' *Al-'urf*: 'In jurisprudence, good custom may serve as a legal consideration, so long as it does not violate the sharia.' (Religious figure, September 12, 2024). These strategies constitute analogical reasoning (*qiyas*) extending Islamic principles to new contexts (Auda 2008; Kamali 2003; Sodiqin and Umroh 2023). They are the community's own fiqh applied,

vernacular, and ecologically embedded supporting Millie's (2017) argument that da'wah in Indonesia operates through localized Islamic reasoning rather than through the imposition of universalized doctrine.

Fourth, zone of ambiguity management. Puritan critiques classify the ritual as bid'ah or shirk. The community responds through defensive theology and pragmatic accommodation (Asad 1993; Boogert 2023; Bowen 2012). The younger generation is beginning to question ritual relevance, reflecting an epistemic shift from embodied to discursive knowledge (Millie 2017; Nelson 2005) creating a generational gap amid socio-economic transformation. This internal tension absent from Alfian's (2024) more consensual portrait of cosmological ritual in Cigugur suggests that the resilience of dialogical syncretism is not automatic but requires ongoing communicative labor to maintain, particularly as the epistemic basis of younger generations shifts from embodied ritual knowledge to discursive religious understanding. Figure 9 shows how the *ritual of Ngaibakan Benda Pusaka* serves as a symbolic arena where Islamic teachings and local wisdom are negotiated, resulting in a sustained social and spiritual legitimacy.

Figure 9. Symbolic Negotiation Model between Islam and Local Wisdom in the *Ngaibakan Benda Pusaka* Ritual



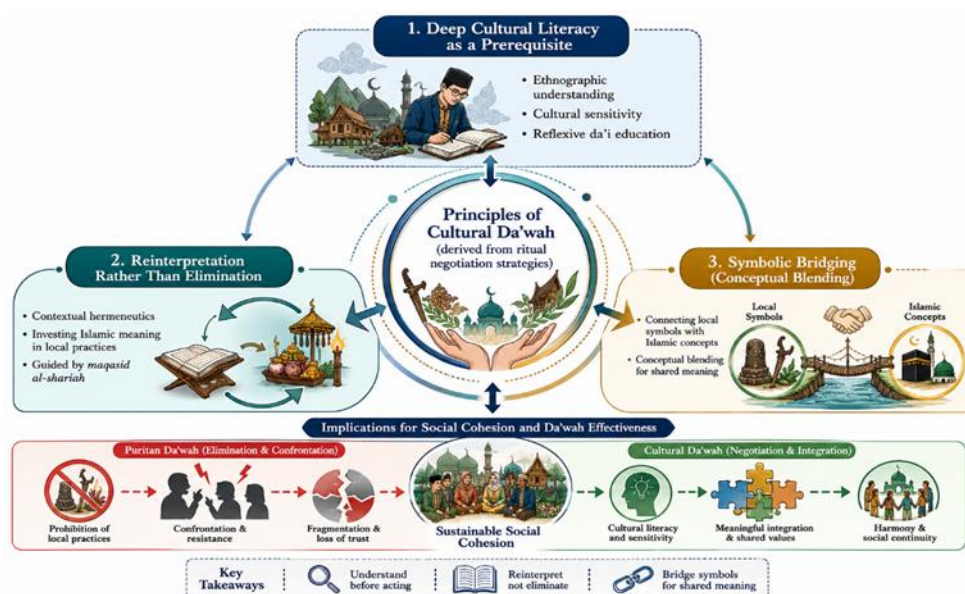
Source: Author construction based on field data analysis (2025).

Implications for Cultural Da'wah

The findings yield three principles of cultural da'wah, each grounded in the ritual's demonstrated negotiation strategies. *First*, deep cultural literacy as a prerequisite: effective da'wah requires thorough understanding of the local meaning system before any intervention. This implies that da'i education must incorporate ethnographic training to develop cultural sensitivity consistent with Millie, Syarif, and Fakhruroji's (2023) argument that Indonesian da'wah must become more disciplinarily reflexive to navigate contemporary pluralism. *Second*, reinterpretation rather than elimination: instead of prohibiting customary practices, da'wah should invest Islamic meaning in local practices through contextual hermeneutics within the framework of maqasid al-shariah (Auda 2008; Syabibi et al. 2021). *Third*, symbolic bridging: connecting local symbols with Islamic concepts through conceptual blending (Fauconnier and Turner 2008; Nasir 2019). This model contrasts sharply with puritan da'wah, which tends toward confrontation and elimination generating fragmentation (Choirin et al. 2025; Hasan 2009) and aligns with the moderation framework documented in other Indonesian indigenous communities (Nur, Siswayanti, and Nurrahmah 2021; Rahmaniar et al. 2020; Rohwati and Mamnuah 2025), demonstrating that cultural sensitivity in da'wah is not only more ethically respectful of local wisdom but demonstrably more effective in sustaining social cohesion.

These three interrelated principles are visualized in Figure 10 as the conceptual implications of the symbolic negotiation process on the practice of cultural da'wah. Figure 10 shows that cultural da'wah born from the symbolic negotiation process in the ritual of *Ngaibakan Benda Pusaka* runs through three interrelated principles, namely deep cultural literacy, reinterpretation instead of elimination, and the construction of symbolic bridges. These three strategies allow Islamic values to be integrated into local traditions without causing social fragmentation or division. In contrast to the puritanical da'wah approach which tends to prioritize confrontation and prohibition of local traditions, cultural da'wah actually encourages the formation of social cohesion, common meaning, and sustainable community harmony.

Figure 10. Implications for Cultural Da'wah: From Symbolic Negotiation to Sustainable Social Cohesion.



Source: Developed by the author based on research findings (2025)

CONCLUSION

This study produced four principal findings. First, the *Ngaibakan Benda Pusaka* ritual constitutes a complex communicative event structured across six interrelated stages, engaging a multimodal communication system that actively constitutes rather than merely represents the community's socio-religious reality through collective participation. Second, the ritual reproduces collective identity through three pre-reflexive mechanisms: ritualized collective memory, symbolic boundary maintenance, and embodied transmission. Because these mechanisms operate below the level of discursive consciousness, they confer a resilience that rational-doctrinal critique alone cannot easily erode which accounts for this community's sustained cohesion in the face of ongoing purification pressures. Third, the ritual demonstrates dialogical syncretism: a dynamic negotiation in which Islam and local wisdom mutually transform one another through cosmological stratification, symbolic reinterpretation, and theological legitimation, without either tradition dominating the other. The negotiation is not a historical compromise arrived at once and preserved intact, but an active, ongoing communicative achievement renewed at each ritual cycle. Fourth, the ritual offers a lived model of cultural da'wah dialogical, accommodating, and grounded in deep cultural literacy demonstrating that Islamic values can be internalized through local cultural forms rather than against them.

Theoretically, this study makes three contributions. It enriches ethnography of communication by demonstrating that ritual communication is constitutive of social reality rather than merely representational. It proposes dialogical syncretism as an analytical framework that moves beyond the passive syncretism-orthodoxy binary to capture the

dynamic, mutually transformative character of Islam-custom negotiation. And it identifies that collective identity endures through embodied, pre-reflexive practice a finding that has implications beyond the Indonesian context for any community navigating the tension between religious orthodoxy and inherited local tradition. In terms of limitations, this study focused on a single community over a six-month period, which constrains the generalizability of its findings and does not capture long-term dynamics; the economic-political dimension of ritual also warrants deeper exploration in future work. Three directions are recommended for subsequent research: comparative studies across different indigenous communities to test the generalizability of the dialogical syncretism model; analysis of digital media's role in reshaping younger generations' understanding of and engagement with ritual; and examination of the economic-political dimensions of ritual in the context of cultural tourism development. For da'wah practitioners, Islamic organizations, and cultural policymakers, the core implication is this: an approach grounded in cultural literacy, reinterpretation, and symbolic bridging is not only more ethically respectful of local wisdom but demonstrably more effective in sustaining the social cohesion of Indonesia's pluralistic indigenous communities.

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