

Harmony of Nature and Culture: Symbolism and Environmental Education in Ritual

Sigit Fitro Prasetyo^{1*}

¹ UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia; Email: sigitfp97@gmail.com

* Corresponding author

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Abstract

This study delves into the role of cultural rituals in environmental conservation and local wisdom, with a specific focus on the Sundanese tradition of *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang*. This ritual holds immense religious and environmental significance, making it an ideal case study for understanding the potential of rituals in promoting environmental awareness and conservation. The research addresses the social importance of preserving cultural heritage, as well as the scientific relevance of exploring the symbiotic relationship between rituals and environmental education. Employing qualitative methods, including interviews, direct observation, and literature analysis, the study unveils the profound symbolism within *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang*, which symbolizes the connection between humans and nature, as well as their spiritual ties. This ritual instills a deep appreciation for the natural environment and encourages the celebration of cultural diversity through these symbols. The findings reveal that the ritual serves as more than just a religious practice, becoming a powerful means of fostering environmental consciousness and preserving local heritage. By shedding light on the significance of cultural rituals in environmental conservation and offering insights into their potential as tools for education, this research contributes to the understanding of the inherent link between culture and nature. The study's emphasis on the importance of preserving local wisdom in the face of global challenges aligns with the journal's interdisciplinary focus on sustainability, culture, and conservation, making it a valuable addition to the literature on environmental studies and cultural preservation.

Keywords: Environmental Conservation; Environmental Education; Local Wisdom; Symbiotic Relationship.

Introduction

Rituals hold a significant role in global communities, and many of them continue to be practiced today. These rituals reflect cherished values and social norms and serve as tools for preserving ancestral traditions and cultural heritage. Examples include India's Kumbh Mela Festival, a major religious event where millions bathe in sacred rivers seeking spiritual blessings (Buzinde, Kalavar, Kohli, & Manuel-Navarrete, 2014; Fibiger, 2015). Ecuador's "Inti Raymi" stands out as an ancient Inca celebration of the harvest season with rich cultural symbolism (Carvache-Franco, Carvache-Franco, Borja Morán, & Contreras Moscol, 2018). In Mexico, "Día de Muertos" is a unique ritual honoring ancestors' spirits (Zagal & Edwin, 2023). In various parts of Africa, such as Ghana, the "Dipo" is an initiation ritual for girls becoming women dewasa (Abbey & Nasidi, 2023; Boakye, 2010). These cultural rituals are upheld due to their vital role in preserving identity, strengthening social bonds, and fulfilling spiritual and emotional needs (Beoku-Betts, 1995; Marsh, 2004). Research and literature emphasize the cultural and social values passed down through generations to support the sustainability and relevance of

these rituals.

Rituals serve as not only cultural and spiritual expressions but also as tools for environmental and nature conservation. Various societies worldwide have developed specific rituals emphasizing the importance of preserving ecosystems as integral to their way of life. For instance, Geng et al. (2017) research reveals the Naxi community's ritual practices and use of plants contribute to conserving biodiversity and sacred forests in their revered mountains. Another study by Hou (2016) illustrates how Tuvan rituals and cultural beliefs support nature conservation in landscapes considered sacred in China. Among Sundanese communities, certain rituals relate to ancestral myths and environmental preservation. Success in conserving nature is influenced by local traditions and ancestral wisdom more than Islamic doctrines of worship (Syukur & Qodim, 2017). Balinese Hindu traditions also reflect environmental values. The Balinese Aga community maintains traditional ecological knowledge and Tri Hita Karana beliefs, maintaining the balance between humans, God, and nature, with customary law (*Awig-awig*) playing a vital role in environmental preservation amid the global ecological crisis (Qodim, 2023). These rituals play an essential role in teaching and reminding communities about the significance of preserving nature as part of their cultural identity and reflect local wisdom in sustainable environmental conservation.

In the Bandung region, specifically at the Batu Kuda tourist site on Mount Manglayang, there exists a Sundanese tradition known as *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang*. This tradition is routinely performed every year by the local inhabitants around the mountain, and it is also attended by several regional officials and cultural figures. The *Ruwatan* serves not only as a way to preserve and pay respect to the mountain's natural environment but also as an effort to reintroduce Sundanese traditions to the succeeding generations of the nation. With the awareness that humans coexist with nature, this *Ruwatan* becomes vital as a means of safeguarding and honoring the environment, as protecting nature also entails safeguarding humans from adverse effects such as environmental degradation and floods due to unsustainable land clearance practices.

The objective of this research is to delve deeper and comprehend the role of the *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang* tradition in conserving the natural environment and Sundanese cultural values in the Mount Manglayang area, Bandung Regency. This tradition was chosen because of its cultural values, local knowledge, and close relationship with the surrounding natural environment, making it a relevant cultural ritual to be studied as a means of preserving cultural identity and ecosystem balance in the region. This research contributes scientifically by providing profound insights into how this ritual plays a role in preserving the mountain's natural environment and how Sundanese traditions remain relevant and are passed down to the younger generations in the face of environmental degradation challenges and lack of environmental awareness. The results of this research are expected to contribute to efforts in conserving the natural environment and local wisdom in the area and to inspire similar endeavors in nature and cultural conservation in other locations with similar contexts.

Research Method

This research adopts a qualitative approach using methods of observation, in-depth interviews, and literature review to gather the necessary data and information. Observations were carried out at the site of *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang* in the Mount Manglayang area, Bandung Regency, to directly observe and

record the implementation of the ritual and the community's interactions with the surrounding environment. In-depth interviews were conducted with the local residents around the mountain, several regional officials, and cultural figures involved in this tradition to understand the perceptions, beliefs, and cultural values related to the ritual. The literature review was conducted to support and reinforce the data obtained from observations and interviews with information from theoretical sources and related research. By using this qualitative method, this research aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the role and significance of the *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang* tradition in the context of environmental conservation and Sundanese cultural values.

Results and Discussion

1. Religious and Environmental Values in Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang

Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang is a tradition and ritual that encapsulates strong religious and environmental values. In this *ruwatan* ceremony, Islamic elements are prominently featured and intertwine with the rich cultural values of the Sundanese people.

Within *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang*, Islamic practices take center stage and constitute a significant part of the ritual. Participants recite specific remembrances (dhikr) and prayers that are customary in Islam, such as “Lailahailallah” and “Bismillahirrahmannirrahiim”. This illustrates that *ruwatan* is a form of worship and ritual directed towards seeking closeness to Allah, seeking forgiveness, and seeking protection from all calamities.

A crucial message conveyed through this *ruwatan* is the significance of worship and adherence to Allah’s commandments as a manifestation of gratitude for all the blessings bestowed, including the blessings of nature and the environment. The *ruwatan* event serves as a moment for participants to contemplate and reflect, reminding them that as creatures of Allah, they bear the responsibility of preserving and conserving nature as a divine trust.

For example, in a quoted interview with one of the *ruwatan* participants:

It is of great importance for us to participate in this *ruwatan* as an expression of obedience to Allah and gratitude for all His blessings. We firmly believe that by worshiping and preserving the environment, we can coexist harmoniously with His creations. (ED, Personal Communication, March 17, 2019)

Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang also showcases an awareness of the significance of environmental conservation. The selection of Mount Manglayang as the ritual's venue, being a natural tourist attraction, symbolizes nature's integral role in this event. Participants also bring offerings, comprising various foods and plants, as a sign of reverence towards nature and the life-sustaining resources provided by Allah.



Figure 1 Symbolic handover of red shoot tree saplings from Perhutani

Figure 1 represents the symbolic handover of red shoot tree saplings from Perhutani, a tangible demonstration of collective commitment and responsibility in environmental conservation. Through this scene, the importance of maintaining ecological balance and respecting what Allah has provided as part of our living environment becomes evident. The symbolic handover of red shoot tree saplings from Perhutani marks a concrete effort in reforestation and restoring the sustainability of the environment, which may have been disrupted by various human factors.

An essential and prominent element in environmental conservation efforts is the planting of hundreds of red shoot tree saplings after the completion of the ritual procession. This demonstrates the participants' commitment to actively engage in reforestation and caring for what Allah has bestowed as part of their living environment. The tree planting activity sends a message that environmental conservation is a shared responsibility and must be upheld for future generations.

The planting of tree seedlings in this ruwatan reflects the importance of community involvement in environmental conservation. In this way, the ruwatan tradition goes beyond being merely a religious ritual but also becomes a tangible effort in maintaining ecological balance and preserving natural resources for the future (KM, Personal Communication, February 2, 2020).

The results of the observation show that all participants of the ruwatan enthusiastically and wholeheartedly engage in the procession. They appear genuinely committed to carrying out each ritual step and adhere to all rules that respect the environment and the surrounding nature. The planting of red shoot tree seedlings becomes the most anticipated moment for the participants, as they feel directly involved in the conservation effort.

The results of this study indicate that Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang embodies strong religious values, with elements of Islamic beliefs being dominant and forming a central part of the ritual. This finding is consistent with previous research on the role of cultural rituals in shaping the religious and cultural identity of a

community (Tumbelaka, Lattu, & Samiyono, 2020). Participants in the *ruwatan* emphasized the importance of performing religious acts and following Allah's commandments as a form of gratitude for the blessings of nature and the environment bestowed upon them. This aligns with Islamic teachings on humanity's responsibility to protect the Earth as a trust from Allah (Quran, 2:30). Therefore, *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang* can be seen as a religious ritual that imparts lessons on the significance of worship with conscious regard for environmental conservation as an expression of gratitude to Allah for His bounties.

In addition to the religious values, the findings of this research also highlight the participants' awareness of the importance of environmental preservation. The choice of Mount Manglayang as the location for the ritual, being a natural tourist destination, signifies that the participants appreciate and respect nature as an integral part of the event. In the ritual, participants bring offerings of food and plants as a form of reverence for nature and the resources of life bestowed by Allah. This finding is consistent with previous research on the role of cultural rituals in maintaining ecological balance and biodiversity (Qodim, 2023; Syukur & Qodim, 2017). The symbolic gesture of the symbolic handover of red shoot tree seedlings from Perhutani represents a collective commitment and responsibility in environmental preservation, demonstrating that this ritual goes beyond being merely a religious ritual but a tangible effort to safeguard the environment as a legacy for future generations.

2. Symbolism in Ritual for Environmental Conservation

Symbolism in *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang* is an essential aspect that signifies the close relationship between cultural traditions and environmental conservation efforts. Through various symbols present in the ritual procession, participants are symbolically guided to appreciate nature and preserve it. One of the most prominent symbols in the ritual is the use of *Parukuyan*, *Puncak manik*, and *Sesajen*. *Parukuyan* is the most important tool in *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang*. Its function as a container for charcoal, incense, and other materials symbolizes reverence for ancestors and the human connection with Allah. Made from yellow clay, *Parukuyan* is used in burning charcoal, producing red flames and white smoke that carries meanings related to human attributes. Throughout this process, *Parukuyan* holds significant representation in the ritual celebration, teaching about environmental preservation and devotion to the Creator.

In addition to *Parukuyan*, another prominent symbol in *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang* is *Puncak Manik*. *Puncak Manik* is a cone or triangular-shaped rice cone with yellow color. Inside it, white-colored rice is inserted, and at the very top of the cone, a boiled egg is placed. The yellow color of *Puncak Manik* holds profound meanings related to human character. Through this rice cone, it serves as a reminder of the importance of having an open and generous heart. Every intention and purpose in performing various actions should be carried out with a good and pure heart, and one should be able to accept everything with an open heart. A pure heart is considered highly essential and is regarded as the highest level to be attained.

With these two symbols, *Parukuyan* representing respect and the relationship between humans and Allah, and *Puncak Manik* signifying an open and generous heart, *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang* becomes a celebration that conveys a powerful message about environmental conservation and deeper spirituality. Participants of the ritual are reminded of their collective responsibility in preserving the environment

and the significance of self-improvement and connection with the Creator.

Sesajen serves as one of the essential components in *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang*. *Sesajen* is a traditional Javanese and Sundanese cultural practice, which involves the offering of various items, typically food, flowers, incense, and other symbolic objects, to honor and appease ancestral spirits, deities, or other supernatural beings. The term "sesajen" is derived from the Javanese word "sajen" or "sesaji," which means an offering or tribute. Besides functioning as a symbol, *Sesajen* carries profound meanings about life and the relationship with Allah. It represents a cultural heritage passed down from ancestors that is still cherished and preserved to this day.

In the *sesajen* of *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang*, various components merge with their respective symbols. For example, the coconut tree holds the meaning of life and time, teaching that human dedication should benefit fellow creations of Allah in doing good deeds. The "bakakak" or grilled chicken symbolizes the necessity of having an open and generous heart in living life. The "sisir enteung" represents problem-solving and avoiding chaos. These symbolic elements in the *sesajen* carry profound meanings that guide the participants of *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang* to pursue a life of righteousness and kindness, harmoniously integrated with their spiritual beliefs and cultural heritage.

There are various types of cigarettes that symbolize the equality of all human beings and their unity. The "air tujuh rupa" (seven types of water) represents water used for irrigation, emphasizing the importance of nurturing and providing attention so that everything can grow and bear fruit. Furthermore, there are five types of water, namely bitter coffee, sweet coffee, bitter tea, sweet tea, and plain water, which represent different traits within human beings such as generosity, cheerfulness, sullenness, stinginess, and kindness. Plain water, being pure water, signifies the importance of purifying the heart and these traits before performing the five daily prayers. The presence of these various symbolic elements in the ritual of *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang* underscores the message of unity, equality, and spiritual guidance that the participants internalize in their cultural and environmental preservation practices.

The symbolism in *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang* plays a significant role in conveying messages about environmental conservation and local wisdom. Through traditional musical instruments such as *kecap* and *ngeknekek*, as well as *sesajen* with symbolic materials, the participants of the *ruwatan* are directed to appreciate nature, diversity, and local culture. This symbolism reminds the participants of the importance of maintaining harmony with nature, preserving local cultural values, and addressing environmental issues wisely. As a result, *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang* becomes an event that is not only rich in religious significance but also serves as an effective educational tool for environmental conservation through symbolism in local culture.

The symbolism in *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang* plays a crucial role in conveying messages about environmental conservation and local wisdom. Through symbols such as *Parukuyan*, *Puncak Manik*, and *Sesajen*, the participants of the ritual are directed to appreciate nature, diversity, and local culture. Previous research has shown that symbolism in cultural rituals can serve as an effective means of education and understanding of environmental values and conservation alam (Ardoin & Heimlich, 2021; Niswatin, Wasino, Suyahmo, & Arsal, 2020; Swan, 1983). In the context of *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang*, this symbolism becomes a vital tool to raise awareness among participants about the importance of maintaining harmony with nature, preserving local cultural values, and addressing environmental issues wisely. Through

these symbolic messages, the tradition and ritual of *ruwatan* become an effective means to teach and encourage community awareness to contribute to environmental conservation.

The symbolism in *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang* also contains messages about spirituality and the values of goodness for humanity. The use of symbols such as *Puncak Manik*, *Sesajen*, and various elements in the *sesajen* conveys the importance of self-improvement, having a pure heart, and engaging with others in kindness (ED, Personal Communication, March 17, 2019). Research on symbolism in culture has shown that these symbols can have a positive impact on shaping cultural identity and local wisdom (Hariyanto, 2017; Sulaeman, Rijal, Malawat, & Sere, 2021). In the context of *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang*, this symbolism delivers a strong message about the significance of spirituality and the values of goodness in living life, thereby reminding the participants of their responsibility in preserving nature and the environment as part of Allah's creation.

3. Ritual as an Effort in Environmental and Cultural Education

Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang is not merely a religious ritual but also serves as an effective effort in environmental and cultural education. Through various processions and symbolism present in the *ruwatan*, participants are encouraged to better understand the importance of preserving the natural environment and conserving local culture.

Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang provides a unique platform for educating the community about environmental preservation. Through the *ruwatan* processions, such as planting hundreds of tree seedlings and using *sesajen* containing symbols of nature, participants are prompted to realize the significance of maintaining ecological balance and respecting the natural resources bestowed by God. During the processions, *ruwatan* leaders also provide teachings and explanations regarding the environmental and religious values embedded in each action taken, allowing participants to comprehend and internalize the meanings behind each step in the *ruwatan*.

I feel greatly inspired by the tree planting activity in this *ruwatan*. It provides us with the opportunity to directly contribute to environmental conservation and impart the values of togetherness and environmental care to the younger generation (ET, Personal Communication, July 19, 2020).

Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang also serves as an effective means of preserving local culture. Activities such as wearing traditional attire, using traditional musical instruments, and singing Sundanese hymns help preserve the cultural heritage of our ancestors and encourage the younger generation to recognize and appreciate the richness of our local culture. By continuing this tradition, Sundanese culture continues to thrive and evolve, avoiding the risk of extinction due to the impact of globalization that tends to overshadow local culture.

The tradition is a tangible form of cultural preservation and teaches the younger generation the importance of safeguarding the identity of our local culture. By introducing and understanding this tradition, future generations can take pride in the cultural richness passed down by their ancestors (ED, Personal Communication, July 16, 2020).



Figure 2 Children and young people who are enthusiastic when participating in the *ruwatan*

Figure 2 shows that all participants of the *ruwatan*, especially children and the younger generation, appear enthusiastic and eager to participate in each stage of the ritual related to environmental and cultural education. They demonstrate excitement and interest while engaging in the processions, singing Sundanese hymns, and wearing traditional attire. The planting of tree seedlings becomes a memorable moment for the young participants, who seem delighted while sowing the seeds and feel directly involved in environmental preservation.

Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang has proven itself to be an effective effort in environmental and cultural education. Through various symbolisms and processions in the *ruwatan*, participants are not only invited to understand the importance of environmental preservation but also to internalize the rich values of local culture. The involvement of the younger generation in this ritual also opens opportunities for them to know, love, and understand local wisdom, encouraging them to become agents of change in preserving and strengthening the cultural identity of the region.

Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang can serve as an example of an effective approach in environmental and cultural education within the community. By integrating religious values, environmental preservation, and local culture, *ruwatan* becomes a holistic and meaningful celebration. The active participation of the community, especially the younger generation, demonstrates that this activity has successfully created awareness and inspired tangible actions to protect nature and preserve traditional culture.

Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang has successfully demonstrated its effectiveness as an effort in environmental and cultural education within the community. By employing rich symbolism and meaningful processions, the *ruwatan* is able to effectively convey messages about environmental preservation and local wisdom to the participants. Previous research has emphasized the significance of cultural approaches in environmental education to achieve deeper and more sustainable understanding (Sponsel, 1987; Zeyer & Kelsey, 2013). In the context of *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang*, this approach has proven successful, as the

participants, especially the younger generation, appeared enthusiastic and eager to engage in every stage of the ruwatan related to environmental and cultural education. Therefore, ruwatan can serve as an exemplary and effective approach in environmental and cultural education efforts within the community.

Conclusion

Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang embodies strong religious values, where participants engage in prayers and rituals as acts of reverence and obedience to Allah. Additionally, the ruwatan reflects awareness of the importance of environmental preservation. Participants demonstrate their commitment to caring for the environment by involving the entire community in planting red shoot seedlings after the procession. Moreover, *ruwatan* serves as an effort in environmental and cultural education, especially for the younger generation, who learn about the richness of local culture and the significance of preserving traditions and cultural identity.

Despite the strong religious and environmental values of *Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang*, this research faces some limitations. Firstly, the sample size and research location are limited, focusing only on one ritual event in Mount Manglayang. Research involving more locations and participants could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of this tradition in environmental preservation. Secondly, there are challenges in measuring the real impact of ritual on the sustainability of the local environment and culture in the long run. Further studies with longitudinal approaches are needed to observe the ongoing positive effects of ritual.

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