

## Religious Dynamics and Traditional Beliefs in the Ruwat Laut Ritual Amidst the Pandemic Crisis

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### Abstract

This article delves into the profound meanings of religious practices and traditional beliefs within the context of the coastal community of Waymuli Village amidst the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Focusing on the Ruwat Laut ritual, this study analyzes how the interaction between traditional beliefs and the official religion, Islam, influences religious practices and the attitudes of the community in confronting global challenges. Through in-depth interviews with customary leaders, village heads, religious educators, farmers, and fishermen, the article reveals shifts in religious practices and the pandemic's impact on ritual implementation. The analysis results demonstrate transformations in traditional belief practices and community adaptations to changing circumstances, including social restrictions and ritual limitations. This article also discusses the factors influencing religious attitudes and practices during a crisis situation. The article's conclusion underscores the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of how communities uphold their beliefs and religious practices when facing modern challenges, while maintaining a balance between tradition and adaptation. This research contributes valuable insights to the study of religious diversity and community adaptation in the face of global crises.

Keywords: Adaptation; Traditional Beliefs; Pandemic Crisis; Religious Practices; Ruwat Laut Ritual.

### Introduction

In the midst of inevitable global changes, religious traditions and traditional beliefs continue to play a central role in shaping the identity and practices of communities, including coastal communities. Coastal communities often exhibit a rich and complex religious diversity. Along the coastlines, various religions and beliefs often coexist, creating a colorful religious landscape. This diversity can be reflected in the architecture of sacred buildings, such as temples, churches, and mosques standing in close proximity (Karim, 2020). The geographical conditions that allow access to various marine resources can also influence how coastal communities integrate their religious beliefs into their daily activities (Chiau, 1998). Furthermore, religious aspects often play a vital role in the traditions, customs, and social values of coastal communities, serving as a cohesive force in maintaining unity and harmony (Aghsari et al., 2018; Sumargono et al., 2023; Sumbulah et al., 2022). The religious diversity in coastal communities inspires a rich cultural harmony but also demands a deep understanding to foster coexistence amidst the challenges and opportunities they face.

In Waymuli Village, a coastal settlement located in South Lampung, Indonesia, the Ruwat Laut ritual has become an integral part of daily life. The Ruwat Laut ritual is a traditional religious ceremony celebrated at the end of the year as an expression of gratitude to God for the bounty of the sea and the safety of the fishermen. This ritual involves offering offerings to the open sea, believed to bring protection and abundance to

the fishermen in their livelihoods. However, with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, the sustainability and execution of the Ruwat Laut ritual have been affected, sparking debates on how the community's traditions and beliefs adapt to new challenges.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, several previous studies have described significant impacts on religious traditions and rituals. The first group of research focuses on how the pandemic has affected the religious practices of communities, particularly in terms of participation in rituals and changes in beliefs (Piwko, 2021). Aldona Maria Piwko (2021) explains how the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on religious practices within the Muslim community, particularly regarding restrictions imposed on religious practices such as congregational prayers, the performance of Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages, as well as religious celebrations like Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr. These impacts have led to changes in how Muslims carry out their religious practices, in line with efforts to implement health and safety measures in response to the pandemic. Hamdi (2022) delves into the pandemic's impact on rituals and religious practices within the Jamaah Tabligh community, exploring adaptation and changes in response to changing circumstances.

Meanwhile, the second group of researchers examines how technology and digital changes have played a crucial role in maintaining and altering the implementation of religious rituals during the pandemic. Many studies have highlighted the role of online platforms in sustaining participation in religious rituals, particularly through virtual worship services (Ben-Lulu, 2021; Claisse & Durrant, 2023; Dein & Watts, 2023; Harrison, 2023; Katoch & Rana, 2023; Upenieks et al., 2023). Some of these studies investigate how religious rituals and worship have shifted from physical experiences to virtual spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although focusing on different religions and communities, these studies reveal that the transition to virtual spaces has had significant impacts on the conduct of rituals, the sense of community, and the spiritual experiences of worshippers. Specifically, they highlight limitations in participation, feelings of connection, and the religious experiences resulting from virtual worship. These studies also consider the social and political implications of these changes for communities and society as a whole.

Furthermore, the third group of researchers describes adaptations and resilience in religious practices in response to the pandemic. Achour (2021) discusses coping strategies employed by Muslim communities in facing the pandemic, identifying how they use their beliefs and religious practices to overcome challenges. Cavaliere (2021) illustrates how meditation and Yoga practices within the Buddhist community in Japan play a role in building individual resilience and community solidarity during the pandemic. On the other hand, Bosire (2022) explores adaptations and resilience within the Christian community in Soweto, South Africa, depicting how their beliefs and religious practices have aided in confronting the pandemic and social changes.

Previous research has primarily focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious practices, technological adaptations, and coping strategies within various religious communities. However, to date, there has been a lack of specific research examining the pandemic's impact on the implementation of religious rituals within the context of coastal communities. While research has encompassed various religions and communities, there hasn't been a specific focus on how the pandemic has affected the traditions and religious rituals within coastal communities. Research in coastal areas is needed to explore how the pandemic has influenced the traditions and religious rituals and how coastal communities have adapted to these unique challenges. Therefore, there

is a research gap that needs to be filled to understand the impact and changes in religious ritual practices in coastal areas due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This research aims to examine the crucial role of adaptation in maintaining the continuity of the Ruwat Laut ritual in Waymuli Village, especially amidst the modern challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. We will investigate how coastal communities creatively and flexibly adjust their ritual practices within the constraints imposed during the health crisis. This will provide deep insights into the extent to which religious traditions can remain relevant and vital in an ever-changing context and the contribution of adaptation in sustaining them. By understanding the role of adaptation, this research will provide a more holistic view of how coastal communities preserve their beliefs and religious practices in the face of unprecedented modern challenges.

The contribution of this research is highly relevant in expanding our understanding of the complex relationship between tradition, adaptation, and social dynamics within coastal communities, especially in crisis situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. This research will not only provide deeper insights into how the community in Waymuli Village preserves and adapts their religious ritual practices but will also offer valuable lessons for the study of religious diversity and community adaptation worldwide. Furthermore, the findings of this research can contribute to our understanding of how coastal communities, in particular, can navigate changing social and environmental circumstances while maintaining their traditional values and practices, all while adapting to the ever-evolving modern reality. Therefore, this research has the potential to provide valuable guidance for policymakers and other researchers in their efforts to support communities in facing future global challenges.

## Research Methods

The research focuses on the Ruwat Laut ritual conducted in Waymuli Village, South Lampung's Coastal Area. This ritual is the primary subject of study because it holds significant importance within the coastal community's religious tradition and possesses unique characteristics. Ruwat Laut is a religious practice closely intertwined with the spiritual and social aspects of the coastal community, involving interactions with the sea as their primary source of livelihood and a symbol of life.

The choice of this specific ritual is based on the consideration that Ruwat Laut has a strong connection to the coastal environment and local religious traditions. Additionally, the ritual involves collaborative and participatory aspects that engage many members of the community. Thus, changes in its implementation due to the pandemic can provide insights into the complex social and spiritual dynamics. Waymuli Village in South Lampung's Coastal Area was selected as the research location because it possesses unique cultural and religious characteristics and may face distinct pandemic impacts compared to other regions. By focusing the research on this specific location and ritual, it is hoped that the findings will offer a more profound and contextual contribution regarding the pandemic's impact on ritual implementation and the religious significance within the coastal community.

This research employs a descriptive-qualitative approach with data collection involving in-depth interviews and observations. Data is obtained through in-depth interviews with community members participating in the Ruwat Laut ritual and direct observation of the ritual itself. The qualitative approach was chosen to detail the changes in ritual implementation and the adaptations made by the community. In-depth interviews and observations are used to explore the perspectives and experiences of individuals in

coping with these changes. With this approach, the research aims to provide deep insights into how the Ruwat Laut ritual in Waymuli Village has undergone transformations in the context of the pandemic, impacting both the ritual's execution and its religious significance.

## Results and Discussion

### 1. Traditional Beliefs and Religion in Coastal Communities: Perspectives and Changes

Waymuli Village, situated in a coastal area, brings with it cultural traditions rooted in the Banten region. This difference is evident in its stronger Islamic and Banten traditions compared to the native Lampung traditions. The majority of Waymuli Village's residents come from the Sunda and Javanese ethnic groups, who began settling there after the eruption of Mount Krakatoa. The rapid population growth in this village is attributed to the "kawin satu kampung" system, which encourages family clustering within the same village due to their common place of residence.

When discussing the aspects of traditional beliefs and religion in the Coastal Community of Way Muli, Lampung, it is important to understand that despite their diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, they still maintain elements of their traditional beliefs and practices. While Banten cultural traditions dominate, there are also influences from local beliefs that continue to play a role in the daily lives of the people in Waymuli Village. This diversity reflects the cultural richness and beliefs embraced and passed down by the village's inhabitants, creating a unique and valuable diversity in the coastal region of Way Muli, Lampung.

Waymuli Village is located in the Rajabasa District of South Lampung Regency, with a population of approximately 2,583 people, consisting of 1,367 males and 1,216 females. The village comprises four hamlets, including one main hamlet with 16 neighborhood units (RT) and 8 community units (RW). Waymuli Village is situated on the coast and borders the Rajabasa mountainous region.

As a tropical region like many areas in Indonesia, Waymuli exhibits the characteristics of a tropical climate. However, on December 22, 2018, the village experienced the tragic impact of a tsunami that resulted in significant damage and loss of lives. This event was different from previous tsunamis, such as those in Palu and Aceh. The Sunda Strait tsunami was not preceded by tectonic earthquakes that could provide early warning signs to residents, making it impossible for them to anticipate the event. The tsunami arrived suddenly, with high waves hitting houses along the coastline within minutes, causing settlements to vanish instantly.

Despite facing a devastating disaster, the people of Waymuli Village did not give up and continued to strive to rebuild their lives in their village. The remaining residents gradually recovered and rebuilt their community. In the aftermath of the tsunami, the lives of the Waymuli community became more visible and developed, with an indomitable spirit that strengthened them in their daily lives and the preservation of their traditional beliefs and religion amidst formidable challenges.

The richly rooted Traditional Beliefs and Religion in the lives of the coastal community of Waymuli, Lampung, reflect a deep and valuable cultural heritage. One significant aspect of these beliefs is Animism, which embodies a strong belief in the spirits of their ancestors. Their lives are filled with various religious rituals that have been passed down from generation to generation.

One ritual that is still closely upheld is the "Ruwat Laut" (Sea Cleansing) ceremony.

This ceremony is performed by the coastal community to offer offerings to the open sea (see Figure 1). Its purpose is to seek safety for fishermen embarking on fishing expeditions and to request an abundance of catches. Despite the pandemic and stay-at-home orders affecting its implementation, the Waymuli community strives to maintain this tradition more flexibly, conducting it over an extended period or when situations demand it, such as during times of adversity.



**Figure 1 Releasing the Ruwat Ruwat Ritual Offerings**

The Mandi Bulan Syura ritual (Bathing in the Month of Syura) is a bathing practice conducted by the community during the month of Syura. This ritual takes place at the beach (see Figure 2) and primarily aims to seek forgiveness for sins. It is usually carried out at night during the month of Syura, specifically at midnight. According to the community's belief, at this time, forgiveness requests have a greater chance of being granted. However, due to the pandemic and concerns for safety, the implementation of this ritual has been discontinued. This decision was prompted by several tragic incidents related to high tides at sea that posed risks to participants of the ritual.



**Figure 2 Locations commonly used for Bathing in the Month of Syura**

The Sesajen ritual (see Figure 3) also plays a significant role in the lives of the Waymuli community. It involves offering offerings to supernatural beings believed to inhabit various places such as settlements, valleys, mountains, hills, and the sea. Farmers in this area perform Sesajen to protect their farmland and seek bountiful harvests. Furthermore, this ritual is considered a form of safeguarding against potential damage or disruptions to their agriculture by individuals with malicious intent. Despite the ongoing pandemic, the Sesajen ritual continues, as it is only practiced in the rice field areas, with few people participating.



**Figure 3 Sesajen placed in the rice field**

All of these rituals reflect the deep connection between the Waymuli community and nature, as well as their belief in maintaining balance and seeking blessings from the supernatural forces they hold dear. This diversity and cultural heritage continue to evolve, despite modern challenges and changes in their surrounding environment.

One of the rituals to be discussed in greater detail is the Ruwat Laut Ritual. This ritual is of utmost religious significance to the coastal community and holds profound meaning in their lives. The Ruwat Laut Ritual is performed as a manifestation of seeking safety and abundance for the fishermen who make their livelihood at sea. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant changes to the implementation of this ritual, including alterations in its frequency and adaptations. Nevertheless, the religious significance and primary purpose of the Ruwat Laut Ritual remain relevant and robust in the face of health and life threats faced by the coastal community. This ritual also strengthens the spiritual and religious bonds between the community and the environment, as well as their ancestral traditions. In the context of the pandemic, the Ruwat Laut Ritual reflects cultural and religious resilience, as well as the community's ability to adapt to ever-changing circumstances.

## **2. The Meaning and Purpose of the Ruwat Laut Ritual in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The Ruwat Laut ritual holds deep meaning and purpose in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the pandemic has brought significant changes to the execution of this ritual, its religious significance and objectives remain relevant and robust. The ritual is conducted as a form of supplication for the safety and abundance of coastal communities, especially for the fishermen who make their livelihoods from the sea. The

pandemic has intensified the urgency of this supplication, given the health and life-threatening challenges faced by these communities.

In the pandemic situation, the meaning of the Ruwat Laut ritual also strengthens the spiritual and religious bonds between the coastal community and nature, as well as their ancestral traditions. The ritual serves as a means to express faith and reliance on higher powers in facing unforeseen challenges. Although adaptations have been made in terms of frequency and interaction, the core objectives of the ritual remain unchanged: to seek protection and prosperity for the coastal community.

In the context of the pandemic, the Ruwat Laut ritual demonstrates resilience and adaptability in preserving its meaning while adjusting to ever-changing circumstances. Coastal communities continue to uphold their religious values and spirituality, even amidst limitations and challenges. The meaning and purpose of the Ruwat Laut ritual become deeper and more complex in the pandemic context, reflecting the cultural and religious resilience in the face of changing times.

One of the interviews with a local fisherman, SUR (Personal Communication, May 09, 2022), highlights the significance of this ritual in the context of the pandemic. SUR said,

The Ruwat Laut ritual is when we seek protection and express gratitude to the sea that has provided us with sustenance for years. Now, with this pandemic, we feel more vulnerable than ever. We pray to continue to be blessed with safety and abundance.

In anthropological research on religious rituals in traditional communities, Geng's study (2017) states that rituals like these reflect the deep dependence of traditional communities on natural resources and religious concepts closely linked to natural elements. The COVID-19 pandemic, with its threats to the well-being of coastal communities, further underscores the importance of this ritual as a means to uphold beliefs and seek protection in a situation filled with uncertainty.

The Ruwat Laut ritual also holds significant social significance in the context of the pandemic. In addition to being a ritual that connects the community with their spiritual beliefs, it also serves as a platform for strengthening social bonds among members of the coastal community. During the pandemic, when social restrictions and isolation became common, this ritual may have become one of the most eagerly anticipated moments of their year. WAR (Personal Communication, May 09, 2022) expressed,

The Ruwat Laut ritual is held once a year. During this time, our families come together, share stories, and support each other, especially this year amid the pandemic. With this ritual, our bonds become even stronger.

The Ruwat Laut ritual plays a vital role in the context of addressing trauma and facilitating the healing process. This ritual creates a safe space where the community can celebrate and honor those who have passed away, especially those who may have lost their lives in disasters like the 2018 tsunami (DAT, Personal Communication, October 22, 2022). Furthermore, by performing this ritual together, the community feels connected to one another, strengthening social bonds and accessing much-needed sources of emotional support when dealing with trauma. Thus, the Ruwat Laut Ritual not only plays a significant role in preserving religious beliefs and traditions but also in helping coastal

communities understand and cope with the profound emotional impact of the traumatic experiences they have endured.

### **3. Impact of the Pandemic on the Implementation of Rituals and Religious Activities**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the implementation of the Ruwat Laut ritual and religious activities of coastal communities. Travel restrictions and limitations on social activities have altered the traditional way this ritual is conducted. Typically performed annually, the pandemic has restricted the frequency and scale of the ritual, even changing it to once every five years or during emergencies (WAR, Personal Communication, May 09, 2022). These limitations indicate that the religious significance remains intact, but adaptations in implementation are required in emergency situations.

Furthermore, the pandemic has also affected social interactions and participation in religious activities (Qodir et al., 2022).. Under these restrictions, gatherings for religious activities have become more challenging and risky. Nevertheless, coastal communities have demonstrated a strong commitment to maintaining social bonds and togetherness within the limits of what is possible. Field observations have also revealed that changes in the implementation of the Ruwat Laut ritual have influenced the spiritual and psychological dimensions of the community. Uncertainty and fear of the pandemic's impacts, including threats to the livelihoods of fishermen, have made the Ruwat Laut ritual a significant moment for seeking protection and blessings.

The pandemic situation has also sparked debates about the importance of adaptation and tradition preservation in the face of environmental changes. Some community members are more flexible in negotiating the frequency of ritual implementation, while others insist on maintaining traditional rites in accordance with norms that have been in place for years. These adjustments have not only impacted the physical aspects of implementation but have also altered perceptions and expectations regarding the ritual's meaning in the face of modern challenges.

### **4. Factors Influencing Attitudes and Religious Practices in Times of Crisis**

In the context of the pandemic, several factors have influenced the attitudes and religious practices of coastal communities regarding the implementation of the Ruwat Laut ritual. One of the main factors is the physical limitations and movement restrictions imposed by the government's social distancing measures. These limitations directly affect the community's ability to gather and perform rituals collectively, which, in turn, has led to adaptations in the implementation of more limited or individual rituals. This aligns with findings in Pavlović's (2020) research, which noted that social restrictions during the pandemic significantly impacted religious practices in various communities. These restrictions directly hindered the community's ability to gather and perform rituals collectively. In response to these limitations, coastal communities adapted the implementation of the Ruwat Laut ritual by transforming it into more limited forms or even conducting it individually. However, the pandemic also triggered a strong desire to maintain spirituality and nurture religious bonds in challenging circumstances. This is consistent with several research findings highlighting the vital role of religion in providing emotional support and solace during crises ((Dutra & Rocha, 2021; Saud et al., 2021; Siegel et al., 2001). It illustrates how coastal communities respond to changing situations with creativity and determination to uphold their religious values in the face of a pandemic that has altered many aspects of their lives.

Internal factors within the community, such as beliefs, culture, and local values, also



play a crucial role in shaping responses to the crisis. In this regard, the belief in the power and protection provided by the ritual, as highlighted in Nelson-Becker and Sangster's (2019) research, plays a central role in motivating coastal communities to find creative ways to maintain the implementation of rituals, even if it must be done on a more limited scale. The values of solidarity and mutual support reflected in collective efforts to negotiate changes in ritual implementation for the sake of communal well-being are also highly relevant in this context.

Additionally, perspectives on change and adaptation in a religious context are also reflected in the roles of traditional leaders and community figures in leading and facilitating these changes. Research conducted by Manguvo (2015) highlights the key role of traditional leaders in preserving and modifying traditional religious practices in the face of environmental and social changes. In the context of crises such as a pandemic, community leaders in the location where the Ruwat Laut ritual takes place bear significant responsibility in maintaining the continuity of tradition while responding to the dynamics caused by global environmental changes. Therefore, their leadership and positive outlook on adaptation in the context of religious rituals play a crucial role in preserving the tradition's sustainability while accommodating inevitable changes.

## Conclusion

This study has outlined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the Ruwat Laut ritual and religious activities in coastal communities. The findings reveal that the pandemic has brought changes in the frequency and manner of ritual implementation, with less frequent occurrences and adaptations during emergency situations. Despite these changes, religious values and the purposes of the ritual remain crucial in the community's perspective, demonstrating flexibility and resilience in the face of urgent changes.

The academic contribution of this research lies in a deeper understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Ruwat Laut ritual and religious activities in coastal communities. This research illustrates how the pandemic has affected the implementation of the ritual and altered its frequency, providing a concrete picture of the adaptations made by coastal communities in response to a global emergency situation. Furthermore, this research also emphasizes that despite changes in religious practices, religious values and the purposes of the ritual continue to play a central role in the community's perspective, highlighting their cultural flexibility and resilience. These findings can contribute to the literature on religion and cultural adaptation in the face of global crises and provide guidance for a better understanding of how communities maintain their beliefs and traditions in the face of urgent changes.

However, this research has several limitations. First, the research focus is limited to one type of religious ritual and a specific coastal community, so generalizing the findings needs to be done cautiously. Second, despite using in-depth interviews as a method, individual interpretations and perceptions can influence the research outcomes. Additionally, access limitations and technical constraints during the pandemic can also affect the quality and representation of data. Nevertheless, this research provides valuable insights into how coastal communities uphold religious values and traditions in the face of a global crisis that has changed the dynamics of their daily lives.

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