Reflexive Fieldwork Practices in a Sacred Context: Researching the Baduy Religious Landscape

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ABSTRACT

The growing academic interest in Indigenous communities has led to a surge of studies on the Baduy people in Indonesia. However, many of these studies have been criticized for relying on Western paradigms that misalign with the Baduy's cosmological, ethical, and relational worldview. This research aims to critically re-examine fieldwork practices in the sacred Baduy context by adopting a decolonial and relational approach that foregrounds methodological sensitivity and epistemic justice. Employing an autoethnographic method, the author reflects on personal experiences conducting collaborative fieldwork with the Baduy community. The study highlights essential elements of Baduy lifeways—including pikukuh, buyut, and principles of asceticism—alongside formal and informal rules that shape engagements with outsiders. The findings underscore the necessity of conducting research that is reflexive and respectful, rooted in the Baduy's spiritual-relational epistemology. The discussion calls for a rearticulation of research ethics within sacred and Indigenous settings and advocates for pluriversality as a framework to honor diverse ontologies and knowledge systems. This study offers an original contribution by centering Indigenous epistemologies in research methodology and advancing a collaborative model for ethical engagement in sacred landscapes.

ABSTRAK

Meningkatnya minat akademik terhadap komunitas adat telah mendorong bertambahnya kajian tentang masyarakat Baduy di Indonesia. Namun, banyak studi tersebut dikritik karena masih mengandalkan paradigma Barat yang tidak selaras dengan pandangan kosmologis, etis, dan relasional masyarakat Baduy. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk meninjau ulang secara kritis praktik penelitian lapangan di dalam konteks sakral Baduy melalui pendekatan dekolonial dan relasional yang menekankan pada sensitivitas metodologis dan keadilan epistemik. Dengan menggunakan metode autoetnografi, penulis merefleksikan pengalaman pribadi dalam melakukan penelitian kolaboratif bersama komunitas Baduy. Studi ini menyoroti unsur-unsur penting dalam

cara hidup masyarakat Baduy—termasuk pikukuh, buyut, dan prinsip asketisme—serta aturan formal dan informal yang membentuk relasi dengan pihak luar. Temuan menunjukkan pentingnya pelaksanaan penelitian yang reflektif dan penuh hormat, yang berakar pada epistemologi spiritual-relasional masyarakat Baduy. Bagian diskusi mendorong rumusan ulang etika penelitian dalam konteks sakral dan masyarakat adat, serta menyerukan adopsi prinsip pluriversality sebagai kerangka yang menghargai keberagaman ontologi dan sistem pengetahuan. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi orisinal dengan memusatkan epistemologi adat dalam metodologi riset serta mengusulkan model kolaboratif untuk keterlibatan etis di dalam lanskap yang sakral.

1.   INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been growing academic attention toward Indigenous communities in Indonesia, especially the Baduy people of Kanekes Village, Lebak Regency, Banten. Divided into the Baduy Dalam (Inner Baduy), who inhabit areas near the sacred *leuweung titipan* (forbidden forest), and the Baduy Luar (Outer Baduy), living on the village periphery, the Baduy uphold a distinct religious and ascetic lifeway rooted in principles of simplicity, restraint, and spiritual harmony with nature. The Baduy have drawn interest from scholars across disciplines such as religion, anthropology, ecology, tourism, and cultural studies, reflecting broader global concerns about sustainability, Indigenous rights, and the preservation of spiritual ecologies (Dachlan, 2019; Ichwandi & Shinohara, 2007; Mahendra & Kasmana, 2022; Munawaroh, 2024; Setiawan, Mardiana, & Adiwibowo, 2023; Solikhah, 2020; Suryani, 2014; Wahid, 2012).

However, this increased interest in the Baduy also reveals a tension between scholarly inquiry and Indigenous sovereignty. Several members of the Baduy community have expressed concern over the exposure and appropriation of sacred knowledge through academic publications. Controversial cases, such as the book *Saatnya Baduy Bicara* or Geise's *Badujs en Moslims*, which included written versions of mantras and pantun considered taboo, have raised critical questions about the ethics of conducting and publishing research in sacred Indigenous contexts (Geise, 2022). These incidents underscore the urgency of rethinking how academic research engages with Indigenous communities whose cosmologies, spiritual practices, and relational worldviews resist objectification and instrumentalization by external frameworks. Particularly in the Baduy case, ethical obligations extend beyond physical locality, as spiritual boundaries are not confined to geography but are embedded in cosmological orders and ancestral mandates.

Furthermore, the sacredness of the Baduy landscape—both physical and metaphysical—is integral to their way of life. The *pikukuh* (traditional law), *buyut* (ancestral taboos), and other oral traditions serve not only as cultural expressions but also as binding spiritual frameworks that govern daily practices, ecological relations, and social interactions. Violations of these spiritual codes, even unintentionally committed by researchers, are considered serious transgressions that may disrupt communal harmony and spiritual balance. Consequently, researchers are expected to engage not only with the social and cultural dimensions of the Baduy but also with the spiritual and metaphysical orders they embody. As Wahid (Wahid, 2012) and Suryani (Suryani, 2014) suggest, any form of documentation or inquiry that enters Baduy territory—literal or epistemic—must be approached with reverence, negotiation, and humility.

The academic literature on the Baduy can be grouped into three broad categories. First, studies based on textual and document analysis (Kenedy & Deffinika, 2022; Setiawan et al., 2023; Suryani, 2014) have provided valuable insights into Baduy traditions but often fail to account for the relational ethics required when handling sacred narratives. Second, fieldwork-based studies using interviews and observation (Ichwandi & Shinohara, 2007; Mahendra & Kasmana, 2022) enable closer engagement but frequently lack follow-up collaboration, raising concerns of extractivism. Third, methodological critiques (Drawson, Toombs, & Mushquash, 2017; Munawaroh, 2024; Smith, 1999) highlight how research often imposes Western paradigms that are incongruent with Indigenous epistemologies. These include frameworks like Spradley's ethnography or Dell Hymes' communication theory, which, though claiming insider perspectives, still operate within secular, positivist logics. Notably, scholars like Munawaroh (Munawaroh, 2024) have begun addressing these issues using decolonial concepts such as "relationality" (Moreton-Robinson, 2017), yet discussions on tailored methodologies for the Baduy context remain underdeveloped.

This study aims to address the above gaps by critically re-examining the ethics and methodologies of conducting research within the sacred and religious landscape of the Baduy. Specifically, it seeks to articulate a decolonial and relational framework that responds to the Baduy's spiritual worldview and relational ethics. Drawing on the Indigenous Religious Paradigm (Maarif, 2019), the study emphasizes a subject-subject ontological model and proposes research practices rooted in reciprocity, epistemic justice, and spiritual sensitivity.

The central argument of this paper is that research in Indigenous sacred contexts like the Baduy must move beyond inclusion or cultural sensitivity toward epistemological transformation. It should not merely adapt Western frameworks to local settings but rather decenter them altogether by embracing Indigenous cosmologies as legitimate sources of knowledge production. This entails acknowledging taboos, oral restrictions, and sacred codes as not peripheral obstacles but core epistemic boundaries. By adopting principles of pluriversality and relationality, this study advocates for a reimagining of research ethics where Indigenous communities are not subjects of knowledge but co-authors in meaning-making.

2.   RESEARCH METHOD

This study investigates the ethical, spiritual, and relational dimensions of conducting research within the sacred religious context of the Baduy community. The unit of analysis in this research includes the author's own field experiences and interactions with the Baduy people, focusing particularly on the methodological tensions that arise when conducting research in a sacred Indigenous setting. The study reflects on how the Baduy's religious worldview and customary law (*adat*) shape not only daily life but also influence the norms of knowledge sharing and research conduct.

To explore these dimensions, the study adopts a qualitative design, specifically autoethnography. This method is chosen because it allows the researcher to critically reflect on personal experiences and cultural encounters as a means to explore broader sociocultural phenomena (Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017; Djunatan, Haq, Viktorahadi, & Samosir, 2024; Méndez, 2013). Autoethnography is especially appropriate for Indigenous contexts because it emphasizes relational accountability, honors vulnerability, and centers the interconnectedness between researcher and community. This method not only captures experience but also engages critically with how that experience is shaped by power relations, ethical tensions, and cultural expectations (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2022; Sparkes, 2020).

The primary sources of information for this research include the researcher's reflexive journals, analytic memos, self-observations, and direct field interactions with the Baduy community. Supplementary insights were derived from unstructured interviews with key Baduy informants who shared perspectives on research ethics, sacred taboos, and acceptable boundaries of inquiry. These data sources are deeply situated within the cultural, spiritual, and ethical context of Baduy life.

Data collection was carried out through four interconnected techniques: (1) reflexive journaling to document daily thoughts, challenges, and ethical dilemmas; (2) analytic memoing to track

interpretative shifts and deepen thematic insight (Tarisayi, 2023); (3) self-observation to capture the researcher's embodied responses; and (4) field engagement, including participant observation and unstructured conversations with Baduy individuals. These methods were designed not only to gather data but also to foster ethical presence and dialogical respect.

The data analysis process was iterative and reflexive, involving repeated engagement with fieldnotes, personal narratives, and memos written during and after field immersion. The researcher identified recurring themes by cycling through writing, re-reading, and critical reflection. Writing itself served as a central analytical tool—enabling simultaneous meaning-making and self-inquiry. Thematic patterns were evaluated within the framework of *adat*, with careful attention to spiritual boundaries and relational ethics. Throughout the analysis, relational accountability remained central, ensuring that interpretations honored the sacredness of Baduy cosmology and were developed in ways that upheld the values of respect, reciprocity, and epistemic humility (Poerwandari, 2021).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a. A Brief of Baduy's Religious Context

The community commonly referred to as the Baduy—who identify themselves as *Urang Kanekes* (Kanekes people)—is a name popularly assigned by outsiders. According Danasasmita & Djatisunda (1986), Baduy people were officially designated as a *mandala*—a sacred territory—by the ruling monarch, due to their responsibility to protect the *kabuyutan*, a sacred ancestral site devoted to the veneration of forebears. This spiritual duty is not rooted in Hinduism or Buddhism but rather reflects a distinct indigenous belief system centered on ancestral reverence and local cosmology (Wahid, 2011). The religious belief system of the Baduy community, commonly referred to as *Sunda Wiwitan*, reflects a deeply rooted Indigenous spiritual tradition (Munawaroh, 2024). Etymologically, *Sunda* refers to the Sundanese ethnic group, while *Wiwitan* signifies 'origin' or 'beginning', thus denoting the "original" or "first" Sundanese belief. Followers of Sunda Wiwitan regard their belief system as monotheistic, centered on a singular divine supreme power called *Sanghyang Keresa* (The Almighty), who is believed to reside in the Buana Niskala, the invisible Upper World or metaphysical realm. Alongside reverence for this supreme being, ancestral veneration also forms an integral part of their spiritual worldview. Their everyday life is governed by *pikukuh*, a codified set of moral and spiritual principles that inform both ritual and daily conduct. These principles are intended to sustain harmony and balance within the *jagat mahpar*, the material and social world where human interactions occur (Hakiki, 2015).

The Baduy community's worldview is fundamentally grounded in *pikukuh,* also referred to as *pikukuh karuhun*, which translates as the ancestral code or guiding principles inherited from their ancestors. This normative framework is considered sacred and unchangeable, structuring not only the community's daily conduct but also their relationships with fellow humans, the natural world, and the Divine (Prabowo et al., 2023). Any attempt to alter *pikukuh* is considered a serious transgression known as *buyut*, a term used to describe actions that violate these sacred ancestral norms. As noted by Wahid (Wahid, 2012), *pikukuh* encompasses the following tenets:

Table 1. The *Pikukuh*

Pikukuh	Translation
Buyut nu dititipkeun ka Puun	*Buyut* entrusted to *Puun*
Nagara satelung puluh telu	Thirty-three countries
Bangsawan sawidak lima	River sixty-five
Pancer salawe nagara	The center of twenty-five countries
Gunung teu meunang dilebur	Mountains must not be destroyed
Lebak teu meunang diruksak	Valleys must not be damaged
Larangan teu meunang ditempak	Prohibitions must not be violated
Buyut teu meunang dirobah	Buyut must not be changed
Lojor teu meunang dipotong	Long must not be cutted
Pondok teu meunang disambung	Short must not be connected
Nu lain kudu dilainkeun	The other must be distinguished

Nu ulah kudu diulahkeun	what is not allowed must be prohibited
Nu enya kudu dienyakeun	What is right must be justified
Mipit kudu amit	Picking must be excused
Ngala kudu menta	Taking must ask
Ngeduk cikur kudu mihatur	Scooping cutcherry must be done with the owner's permission
Nyokel jahe kudu micarek	Prying ginger must tell the owner
Ngagedag kudu beware	Shaking a tree must announce first
Nyaur kudu diukur	Speaking must be measured
Nyabda kudu diunggang	Words must be considered
Ulah ngomong sageto-geto	Do not speak carelessly
Ulah lemek sadaek-daek	Do not speak at will
Ulah maling papanjingan	Do not steal even if you do not have enough
Ulah jinah papacangan	Do not commit adultery in a relationship
Kudu ngadek sacekna	must be cut/strike precisely
Nilas saplasna	Slash as hard as you can

Source: Wahid, 2012.

Beyond the framework of *pikukuh*, the Baduy people uphold a series of traditional responsibilities articulated through culturally embedded expressions that reflect their cosmological worldview and socio-political obligations. These responsibilities include: (1) *Ngareksakeun Sasaka Pusaka Buana*, the preservation of the sacred legacy of the world; (2) *Ngareksakeun Sasaka Domas*, the safeguarding of spiritual heritage; (3) *Ngasuh ratu ngayak menak*, the protection and moral support of the ruler—be it king, sultan, or president—and noble lineages; (4) *Ngabaratakeun nusa telu-puluh-telu, bangawan sawidak lima, pancer salawe nagara,* the performance of ascetic practices across thirty-three hamlets (a number that continues to grow), sixty-five rivers, and twenty-five regions; (5) *Kalanjakan kapundayan*, the ritual hunting and fishing practices in preparation for kawalu; and (6) *Ngukus kawalu muja ngalaksa*, the offering of incense and the performance of both *kawalu* and *ngalaksa* rituals as forms of devotion and spiritual discipline (Iskandar, 1998).

b. Rules on Visiting Baduy

Conducting research within the Baduy territory extends beyond the formalities of academic procedure; it constitutes an engagement with a sacred socio-religious landscape governed by *pikukuh*, ecological ethics, and religious discipline. For the Baduy people, especially those in the Inner Baduy (*Baduy Dalam*), what might appear to outsiders as "traditions" are in fact cosmological commitments that shape all aspects of daily life. As a researcher and guest, the authors quickly learned that access to this space involves navigating a network of rules that are both formally outlined and relationally maintained. While official guidelines are recorded by the local government through *Saba Budaya Baduy* and Regional Regulation No. 32 of 2001, the deeper layers of consent and trust are built through interaction, respect, and humility. The *Saba Budaya Baduy* guidelines, as articulated in the document "Saba Budaya Rules" issued by Kanekes Village, are as follows:

1. Guests who wish to stay overnight are required to report to the Head of Kanekes Village 1 x 24 hours.
2. For those who do not stay overnight, simply fill in the guest book provided at the service post and pay a fee of Rp. 5,000/person for local visitors and Rp. 25,000/person for foreign visitors.
3. Respect and honor the customs of the Baduy people while in the Baduy area.
4. Do not bring a radio tape, and do not play it while in the Baduy area.
5. Do not bring a guitar or other musical instrument and play it while in the Baduy area.
6. Do not bring loudspeakers in the area (Baduy in Cibeo, Cikeusik, Cikartawana and protected forests).
7. Do not bring air rifles or similar weapons or hunt using other tools.
8. Do not litter (especially cans and plastic).

9. Do not throw rubbish and the like into the river.
10. Do not carry boxed rice to the Outer Baduy and Inner Baduy areas.
11. Do not throw away cigarette butts that are still lit.
12. Do not cut down trees carelessly and do not uproot them along the road and damage them.
13. Do not enter prohibited forests (protected forests and closed forests).
14. Do not bring or consume alcoholic beverages.
15. Do not bring or consume illegal drugs (narcotics, crystal methamphetamine and the like).
16. Do not violate moral norms.
17. Staying in Baduy, women and men must be separated, unless the husband and wife by showing a marriage certificate.
18. Do not use soap, shampoo, toothpaste when bathing in the river (Inner Baduy only).
19. For white-skinned foreigners it is forbidden to enter Inner Baduy.
20. It is not allowed to take pictures, make video recordings of TikTok content and other sound recordings (in Inner Baduy).
21. Visitors are not allowed to enter Inner Baduy during the *Kawalu* month according to the Baduy traditional month (for three months Inner Baduy is closed) for groups.
22. Every guest entering the Baduy area must be accompanied by a local guide/Baduy person.
23. For researchers, you must bring a research certificate from each institution or campus.
24. Visitors must comply with the laws and regulations in force in Indonesia.
25. Visitors must maintain security, stability, public order and cleanliness.
26. Visitors must carry out religious teachings/commandments in an orderly manner according to their respective religions and not be conspicuous.
27. The provisions above are only a small part of the customs of the Baduy community. For further clarification, you can ask the Baduy community leaders and the Kanekes Village government officials.
28. Visitors must report to the village government or to the Saba Budaya Baduy service officer before and after carrying out activities.
29. Visitors are prohibited from setting up tents or using customary land for personal interests.
30. It is prohibited to use drones throughout the Baduy customary land, both within and outside Baduy.
31. Guests are prohibited from entering at night, especially in Inner Baduy, after 20.00/8pm.
32. If the above regulations are violated, the penalty is imprisonment for a maximum of 6 (six) months and a maximum fine of 5,000,000 (five million rupiah) Regional Regulation Number 32 of 2001 concerning Customary Rights.

As indicated in point 27 of the *Saba Budaya* guidelines, there exist numerous customary rules that are not formally documented, necessitating that all visitors—including researchers—be accompanied by a member of the Baduy community. In this context, visiting and conducting research in the Baduy territory requires more than securing formal institutional permission and approval. It demands ethical attentiveness to a living cosmology encoded in both written regulations and unwritten relational expectations. The extensive list of prohibitions and protocols outlined by Saba Budaya Baduy and Regional Regulation No. 32 of 2001 only partially reflects the depth of accountability expected from guests. The most critical and meaningful form of access is not administrative, but relational, earned through sustained trust, cultural sensitivity, and humility in acknowledging one's positionality as an outsider. For researchers in particular, being accompanied by a Baduy guide is not merely a procedural requirement, it represents an ethical bridge into the community's sacred world—one that requires more than observation, but a commitment to respectful presence and dialogical understanding.

c. Ethical Issues on Conducting Research in Baduy's Religious Context

Although the Baduy community has established customary regulations governing visits, conducting research within this context requires careful consideration of additional ethical and cultural

dimensions beyond those expected of ordinary visitors. Researchers, unlike casual guests, typically engage in prolonged stays and develop more sustained forms of interaction with the community, which necessitates a deeper level of awareness and responsibility. It is essential that researchers secure proper permission to conduct their study, including obtaining consent from *adat* leaders, the broader community, and individual research participants. Furthermore, they must be attentive to local taboos and uphold respectful conduct at all times, recognizing the sacredness of Baduy cultural values and the importance of behaving in accordance with community norms. This ethical stance is not merely procedural but reflects a broader commitment to relational accountability and cultural sensitivity throughout the research process.

1.   *Permission and Informed Consent*

Gaining research permission in the Baduy religious context was a deeply relational and culturally grounded process, shaped by the community's adherence to oral traditions and sacred customs. Upon first arrival, we presented our official research clearance letters from our respective academic institutions to the *Jaro Pamarentah* (the administrative head of the village) as part of the formal entry protocol as researchers into the Baduy region. In addition, our initial entry required a respectful and humble approach, beginning with a verbal request for permission to conduct research directly to the *Jaro Pamarentah*. This verbal consent was consistent with the Baduy's oral tradition and was granted based on trust, relational conduct, and the perceived sincerity of the researcher's intentions. While some research ethics protocols require a written or printed consent form, such forms were not requested nor considered necessary by the community. However, to fulfill the ethical requirements of the academic institution, a follow-up visit was conducted during which written consent forms were introduced and explained to *Jaro Pamarentah*. It was signed with the understanding that it is used for external documentation purposes, not as a replacement for the relational and verbal agreement that held greater legitimacy in the Baduy worldview. This experience highlights the importance of adapting research ethics to local cultural epistemologies, where consent is not merely procedural but embedded in trust, presence, and respectful relationality.

In addition to obtaining permission from the *Jaro Pamarentah*, it is also essential for researchers to secure consent from the broader community and individuals directly involved in the research. These parties are entitled to receive comprehensive information regarding the study, including its purpose, intended activities, and the types of data to be collected related to the Baduy community, their *adat*, and surrounding environment. Moreover, they hold the authority to determine which areas, information, and forms of knowledge may or may not be accessed by the researcher. Through this process of consent, the researcher acknowledges and prioritizes the voices, agency, and decision-making power of the local community in shaping their involvement in the research. For us, building trust with research participants was a critical and urgent aspect of the fieldwork. In fact, establishing rapport with both the community and individual participants emerged as one of the most challenging yet essential elements influencing the direction and quality of the research process. Although we each adopted different approaches in fostering trust, we shared a commitment to openness and a genuine acceptance of local customs, as well as a deep respect for the Baduy's *adat* and cultural values.

2.   *Taboos*

Another crucial consideration for researchers working in the Baduy context involves adhering to the taboos and restrictions upheld by the community. Given that the Baduy people maintain a distinctive system of *adat* and cultural values, which are rooted in specific norms and spiritual principles, cultural awareness and adaptive sensitivity are essential prerequisites for ethical research that centers local interests and priorities. This aspect of fieldwork presented significant challenges, particularly as we approached the community as outsiders and unfamiliar with their ways of life. At times, we resided in the homes of research participants in *Baduy Dalam* without electricity or modern lighting, relying instead on traditional oil lamps made from coconut shells, natural oils, and cloth wicks to write field notes or reflexive journals at night. Bathing routines in *Baduy Dalam* also required adjustment, as we made use of designated communal bathing areas—some by the river which are

designed separately for men and women—to respect local customs. The use of chemical-based products such as soap, shampoo, or toothpaste was strictly prohibited, and we aligned ourselves with these practices out of respect for the community's environmental ethics and harmony with nature.

While researchers are often associated with the use of recording devices and cameras during interviews or data collection, we consciously refrained from using such tools—particularly during our time in *Baduy Dalam*, the most sacred neighborhood of the Baduy community. The use of electronic devices, including voice recorders, cameras, and video equipment, is strictly prohibited in this inner territory. As an alternative, we took handwritten notes of key points from every conversation and interview. We also maintained reflexive journals to document personal thoughts and reflections whenever we encountered significant or thought-provoking moments during fieldwork. Once we had exited the Baduy area and regained access to our laptops, we would expand these notes into full narratives to ensure that important insights and details were carefully recorded. Furthermore, instead of capturing images or videos, we often sketched simple illustrations to help us remember specific scenes, spatial arrangements, or meaningful moments that would have been difficult to express in words alone. Avoiding these taboos is not merely a behavioral adjustment but reflects a deeper commitment to being mindful researchers, those who prioritize the values, dignity, and sacred ways of the local community.

In addition, there are sacred areas within the Baduy territory that outsiders are strictly prohibited from entering, as well as specific locations considered sacred where photography is not permitted under any circumstances. These restrictions are deeply rooted in the community's spiritual beliefs and customary law and must be understood and respected by researchers. Failing to adhere to such boundaries not only risks violating cultural protocols but may also generate conflict or tension that can disrupt the research process and damage the trust built with the community. Recognizing and honoring these limitations is therefore not only an ethical obligation but also a crucial step in maintaining respectful and sustainable engagement within Baduy's sacred landscape.

3.   *Interaction and respectfulness*

Beyond adhering to taboos and *adat*-based restrictions, a fundamental aspect that must be carefully considered is the manner and pattern of interaction between the researcher and the community, particularly with research participants. As the Baduy people practice a form of cultural asceticism and uphold a life guided by strict norms and values, consistent respect and humility in engaging with them are essential. Their worldview is governed by specific ethical codes and behavioral expectations that are not always visible or immediately comprehensible to outsiders. This aspect of fieldwork was especially challenging for us, as individuals unfamiliar with the intricacies of local customs, taboos, and value systems. We often felt uncertain about whether certain actions, behaviors, or words might unintentionally violate *adat* or be considered inappropriate or taboo. To navigate this, we made it a consistent practice to seek clarification, asking for guidance or confirmation from community members before acting, speaking, or engaging in unfamiliar situations. This ongoing communication became a key strategy for building respectful relationships and ensuring ethical conduct throughout the research process (Wahid, 2012).

As researchers, we are the ones in need of data and information, and thus it is our responsibility to adjust to the availability and schedules of our research participants or partners. We were mindful not to impose upon their time or routines and did not insist on their participation in research activities if they were unwilling or unavailable. For instance, we refrained from conducting interviews when participants needed to tend to their fields or engage in ritual or ceremonial obligations. This approach reflects our commitment to ethical engagement, emphasizing flexibility, respect for the participants' priorities, and sensitivity to the rhythms of daily and spiritual life within the community.

Regarding permission to stay within the Baduy area, customary law clearly outlines specific limitations for outsiders. Visitors are only permitted to stay for a maximum of three nights in Baduy Luar, while in Baduy Dalam, the rule allows only a single overnight stay—or up to three nights if staying in different households each night. In adherence to these local regulations and protocols, we

adjusted our fieldwork strategies accordingly, each of us finding ways to navigate these limitations while maintaining respect for the community's customary governance and spatial boundaries. This included staying in accommodation outside the Baduy area and conducting fieldwork, such as participant observation and interviews, during the day within the Baduy region. On occasion, we also stayed briefly within both Baduy Luar and Baduy Dalam, ensuring that our presence fully complied with the established customary rules.

In addition, we found it necessary to engage one or more local residents who could serve as guides and informants—individuals who were willing to accept, orient, and brief us on the customary rules and boundaries we were expected to respect. These individuals acted as indigenous research partners, playing a vital role not only in informing us about cultural protocols but also in accompanying us to certain places or facilitating meetings with particular individuals or groups. Their involvement was crucial in navigating the research setting appropriately. Drawing on the analogy of being a guest in someone's home, we believed it was neither appropriate nor respectful to explore the community independently without the presence or guidance of a host. This approach reflects a commitment to ethical engagement, relational accountability, and humility in conducting research within a sacred and culturally governed space.

Throughout our research journey, we consistently emphasized and remained mindful of the principle that the Baduy people are the rightful holders of their own knowledge. We did not pressure them to disclose information or respond to specific questions, especially when such information was considered taboo or sacred, and thus not meant to be shared with outsiders. We respected their right to withhold knowledge that is protected by *adat*. To uphold ethical standards and ensure respectful representation, we also conducted member checking to confirm whether the information they had shared was accurate, appropriate, and permitted for publication. This step was particularly important given that certain aspects of their local knowledge are intentionally kept confidential and are not to be disseminated beyond the community.

With a deep awareness of Baduy *adat* and cultural values, we, as researchers and academics, intentionally refrained from positioning ourselves as superiors. Instead, we sought to establish an equal and mutual relationship with the Baduy community—one that centers on co-constructing knowledge together. Rather than imposing our own research agendas, we engaged in continuous dialogue with community members and *adat* leaders, carefully listening to their perspectives, concerns, and expectations, and integrating them into every stage of the research process. We also recognized the importance of reciprocity in research, positioning our study not solely to fulfill academic interests, but also to contribute meaningfully to the local context. This included identifying ways the research could support the needs of the community and acknowledging that shared knowledge should benefit those who participate in its creation. Acts of reciprocity, no matter how small, became a foundational principle in guiding our ethical engagement and our commitment to collaborative knowledge production.

d. Discussion
1. Reframing Research Ethics in Indigenous and Sacred Contexts
The research process is often dealt with ethical considerations, particularly when it involves human participants. Research ethics refers to the norms and guidelines that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the field of research, including the principles and standards that guide researchers in conducting their studies with integrity, respect for life, and adherence to human rights (Wiles, 2013; Zhang, 2020). Western ethical frameworks are frequently based on the notion of universal principles and norms assumed to apply equally to all people, in all places, at all times. However, the application of such universal ethics can become problematic, irrelevant, or decontextualized when imposed upon specific groups, communities, or settings, including indigenous contexts. For instance, Western institutions have historically failed to acknowledge indigenous peoples as rights holders, even though indigenous epistemologies and ontologies are essential for conducting

research in a good way with and within indigenous communities (Bull et al., 2020). Additionally, in many cases, the dominant ethical standards assume a literate, individual-based, and secular context, such as the concern about informed consent (Kang & Hwang, 2021; Sutrop & Lõuk, 2020). This becomes particularly problematic when researching in communities like the Baduy, whose oral traditions and sacred cultural values do not align with these assumptions. Applying rigid, universal ethics to such settings risks dismissing local sacred knowledge systems and indigenous sovereignty over cultural practices.

In the Baduy context, ethical conduct is not merely procedural or regulatory but deeply rooted in a spiritual and relational worldview governed by *adat*. From an emic perspective, what is considered ethical extends beyond formal permissions or research protocols. It involves a conscious alignment with the moral and cosmological order maintained by the Baduy community. Consent, for instance, must be sought from local *adat* authorities such as the *Jaro Pamarentah* and community elders, if necessary, whose roles are embedded in sacred responsibilities. Moreover, ethical behavior is shaped by an adherence to taboos, which are not just social prohibitions but are believed to safeguard the spiritual balance between humans, nature, and ancestral spirits. Violating these taboos, such as entering restricted sacred spaces, using electronic devices in *Baduy Dalam*, or failing to observe respectful interactions, can be seen as more than disrespectful. It is considered a transgression that can disrupt cosmic harmony and bring spiritual consequences, particularly to the community. In this way, indigenous ethics in the Baduy setting emphasize relational accountability, collective well-being, and a reverence for the sacred, which challenge conventional and individualistic research ethics frameworks.

Toward a more constructive and decolonized vision of research ethics, particularly in sacred and indigenous contexts such as the Baduy, it is important to shift toward a framework rooted in relational accountability, respect for community-defined boundaries, and meaningful reciprocity. This means that researchers must follow institutional procedures and prioritize the relational dimensions of their work. They need to engage with local customs, acknowledge spiritual values, and center the voices and authority of indigenous communities. Ethical reviews conducted by academic institutions might include indigenous advisors or local cultural liaisons to ensure that the standards applied are contextually grounded and culturally informed. Ultimately, reframing research ethics in this way is not merely about preventing harm or meeting procedural requirements. It is about honoring the epistemological and spiritual integrity of the communities involved and enriching academic inquiry by incorporating it within a framework of deeper moral responsibility.

2. *Pluriversality on Religious Context in Indigenous People*

In conducting research with indigenous people, it is important to be aware that one-size-fits-all methods are not only insufficient but also perpetuate the colonial logics which ignore the diversity of thinking and way of life. Mignolo (2011) explained colonial epistemic power, which belief there is only one truth or one legitimate knowledge system, is harming human well-being on this planet. In the context of decoloniality, pluriversality emerges as a form of dismantling the claim of Western universalism. Later, Escobar (2018) expanded on the idea of pluriversality by stating that the pluriverse is an ontological and political project for living in a plural world, where each community has its own way of caring for life.

Research based on the relational paradigm—as practiced by indigenous communities such as the Baduy—demands an understanding that life cannot be separated from the network of relationships between humans, nature, and spiritual entities. Importantly, the concerns and worldviews of the Baduy community cannot be homogenized or assumed to mirror those of other indigenous groups, such as coastal communities in Papua or highland societies in Nusa Tenggara, since each community operates within its own ontological and epistemological framework. Yet, within this diversity lies a shared principle: the sustenance of life is contingent upon the maintenance of respectful, reciprocal, and balanced relationships. In the Baduy context, *pikukuh* articulates a specific cosmology of interconnectedness and ethical conduct; elsewhere, these relational principles may take different names

or forms, but they similarly emphasize harmony among all entities. Recognizing this plurality affirms the legitimacy of indigenous frameworks as equally valid foundations for knowledge and research.

Researchers must recognize and embrace the *pluriverse*—a multiplicity of lifeways in which communities coexist with others in relational harmony. At the epistemological level, Indigenous worldviews that emphasize interconnectedness between human and non-human entities require research designs and methodologies that not only respect Indigenous peoples but also actively engage them as co-creators of knowledge. Such engagement acknowledges the variability and situatedness of epistemologies. Moreover, scholars must remain critically aware that research is never neutral; it plays a constitutive role in shaping the realities it seeks to represent. Thus, adopting approaches that honor cosmological pluralities and Indigenous ways of being constitutes an ethically grounded research practice (Escobar, 2018).

The emergence of these findings can be explained by the deeply interwoven nature of religion, cosmology, and social life in Baduy society. The Baduy community views knowledge not as an object for extraction but as something sacred and relational, embedded in cosmological and ancestral orders. Therefore, research conducted without honoring these orders is not only methodologically flawed but spiritually offensive. The relational paradigm of the Baduy necessitates that the researcher's presence is ethically negotiated through trust, not merely institutional approval. The ethical emphasis on verbal consent, behavioral humility, and adherence to *buyut* (taboo norms) reflects a worldview that prioritizes harmony and balance between humans, ancestors, nature, and the divine.

Compared to previous studies, such as Ichwandi & Shinohara (Ichwandi & Shinohara, 2007) and Mahendra & Kasmana (Mahendra & Kasmana, 2022), which mainly focused on environmental and socio-cultural aspects without deeply engaging relational ethics, this study presents a more reflexive, decolonial, and participatory approach. While Munawaroh (Munawaroh, 2024) initiated discussions on "relationality," this study deepens it by providing a grounded, lived account of negotiating consent, facing taboos, and practicing reflexive humility in the field. Unlike earlier studies that applied Western theories like Spradley's ethnography or Dell Hymes' communication model, this research applies Indigenous Religious Paradigm (Maarif, 2019) and concepts of pluriversality (Escobar, 2018), thus offering methodological novelty.

The findings highlight that the ethics of research in Indigenous sacred contexts cannot be reduced to procedural compliance. They represent a broader ideological shift toward recognizing Indigenous sovereignty, epistemic justice, and cosmological pluralism. In the Baduy context, respecting *pikukuh* and local restrictions is not only a cultural obligation but an ethical necessity grounded in relational ontology. This challenges dominant paradigms that treat Indigenous communities as mere objects of knowledge, and instead affirms them as epistemic agents and co-authors of research. The study, therefore, contributes to a growing body of work advocating for decolonized and pluriversal approaches to research ethics.

Functionally, the study demonstrates that a respectful, relational, and reflexive methodology enables ethical access, meaningful engagement, and sustainable research partnerships with Indigenous communities. It affirms the possibility of co-constructing knowledge in a way that benefits both academic and local contexts. However, dysfunctions remain, particularly the limitations imposed by institutional research protocols that are often incompatible with Indigenous ethical systems. The requirement for written consent, standard documentation, or empirical "objectivity" can marginalize oral-based and spiritual epistemologies. Moreover, researchers unfamiliar with local cosmologies may unintentionally perpetuate extractive practices if they fail to engage deeply with relational ethics.

To support ethical research in Indigenous and sacred contexts, several steps should be considered: (1) Academic institutions should integrate context-specific ethical protocols that involve Indigenous elders or cultural advisors during review processes. (2) Researchers must receive preparatory training on relational accountability and cosmological sensitivity. (3) Funding bodies should recognize the time-intensive nature of building trust and support longer, more flexible timelines for fieldwork. (4) Ethical frameworks should be pluralized to accept verbal, relational, and collective forms of consent. (5)

Research outcomes should be made accessible and useful for the local community, not just for scholarly dissemination. These steps will help ensure that research practices respect and uphold the spiritual and epistemological sovereignty of Indigenous communities such as the Baduy.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the ethical, spiritual, and relational complexities involved in conducting research within the sacred context of the Baduy community. The main finding underscores that research in Indigenous religious settings must move beyond formal procedural ethics and instead embrace relational accountability rooted in *pikukuh*, taboos (*buyut*), and the Baduy's sacred worldview. Informed consent, ethical behavior, and knowledge sharing must be approached not merely as administrative formalities but as deeply cultural, spiritual, and relational acts. Researchers must not only avoid extractive practices but also cultivate humility, reciprocity, and trust.

The scientific contribution of this study lies in its methodological novelty and epistemological sensitivity. By applying autoethnography and drawing from Indigenous Religious Paradigm and the pluriversal framework, this research offers a decolonial approach that centers Indigenous cosmologies and relational ethics. It contributes to existing literature by providing a grounded, emic-based perspective on ethical fieldwork and challenges dominant Western paradigms that often marginalize spiritual and oral epistemologies. The study also expands theoretical discourse on relationality, informed consent, and pluriversality in Indigenous research methodologies.

Despite its contributions, this research acknowledges certain limitations. The study is based on specific ethnographic experiences within the Baduy community and may not be generalizable to other Indigenous contexts. The reliance on autoethnography, while offering depth and reflexivity, may also introduce subjectivity that limits broader empirical comparison. Future research could explore comparative Indigenous contexts or develop cross-cultural ethical frameworks that further integrate spiritual cosmologies into academic methodologies. Nonetheless, this study offers a critical step toward reimagining ethical research in Indigenous and sacred landscapes, rooted in mutual respect, cosmological awareness, and epistemic justice.

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