



# Symbolic Modification and Declining Community Participation in Cultural Traditions: A Study of the *Ngarot* Ritual in Tugu Village, Indramayu, West Java

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<p><b>Keywords:</b></p> <p><i>Ngarot;</i>  <i>participation;</i>  <i>cultural modification;</i>  <i>symbolism;</i>  <i>tradition sustainability.</i></p>	<p>This study aims to analyze the impact of modification on the declining community participation in the Ngarot ceremony in Tugu Village, Lelea Subdistrict, Indramayu Regency. Ngarot is an agrarian tradition that emphasizes the regeneration of cultural values through the active involvement of youth. Unlike Lelea Village, which has preserved the symbolic structure and educational function of Ngarot, Tugu Village has undergone format changes—such as the removal of agricultural training, the addition of religious recitations (<i>pengajian</i>), and entertainment—that have led to a disorientation of meaning and decreased engagement among younger generations. This study employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive-interpretative method. Data were obtained through interviews, observation, and document analysis, and were analyzed thematically and reflectively. The findings reveal that modifications that disregard the cultural structure of meaning can trigger symbolic alienation, interpretive conflict between cultural and religious narratives, and a sustainability crisis in traditional practices. The original contribution of this research lies in mapping the relationship between local policy, symbolic transformation, and cultural participation. This study recommends a contextual meaning-based preservation model and active youth engagement as an alternative approach to sustaining traditions amid ongoing social change.</p>
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**ABSTRAK**

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*Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis dampak modifikasi terhadap penurunan partisipasi warga dalam upacara Ngarot di Desa Tugu, Kecamatan Lelea, Kabupaten Indramayu. Ngarot merupakan tradisi agraris yang menekankan regenerasi nilai-nilai budaya melalui melibatkan aktif pemuda-pemudi. Berbeda dengan Desa Lelea yang masih mempertahankan struktur simbolik dan fungsi edukatif dalam Ngarot, Desa Tugu telah mengalami perubahan format—seperti penghilangan pelatihan bertani, penambahan unsur pengajian, dan hiburan—yang mengakibatkan disorientasi makna dan berkurangnya keterlibatan generasi muda. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode deskriptif-interpretatif. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara, observasi, dan studi dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis secara tematik dan reflektif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa modifikasi yang tidak mempertimbangkan struktur makna budaya dapat memicu alienasi simbolik, konflik tafsir antara budaya dan agama, serta krisis keberlanjutan tradisi. Kontribusi orisinal dari penelitian ini adalah pemetaan relasi antara kebijakan lokal, perubahan simbolik, dan partisipasi kultural masyarakat. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan pelestarian berbasis pemaknaan kontekstual dan partisipasi generasi muda sebagai pendekatan alternatif untuk menjaga keberlanjutan tradisi di tengah dinamika sosial.*

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

Culture is a product of human civilization that is formed and passed down across generations. Clifford Geertz (2014) asserts that culture is a system of meaning expressed through symbols that hold authority in shaping human behavior and understanding of the world. From this perspective, culture serves not only as an expression of collective identity but also as a value system that guides social conduct and everyday life. Although it is created by humans, culture possesses a binding force that influences social behavior and is inherited by future generations as a normative legacy to be respected. In many local communities, including rural societies in Indonesia, culture continues to serve as a framework for both social and spiritual orientation.

However, amid the forces of modernization and the rise of scientific and religious worldviews, culture—particularly local and traditional forms—faces mounting pressure (Kellner, 2003; Ngafifi, 2014). Culture is often viewed as an outdated value system that no longer aligns with the challenges of the present. Science offers knowledge rooted in rationality and empiricism, while religion offers an absolute belief system claiming transcendent truth. In such a context, culture is perceived as inferior or even contradictory to religious teachings or scientific logic (Simuziyya, 2022). Consequently, many cultural practices are either abandoned or modified to be more acceptable within religious or modern frameworks, which in turn can erode their original meanings (Bowie, 2021).

This phenomenon is clearly evident in the case of Tugu Village, located in Lelea Subdistrict, Indramayu Regency, which historically has participated in the *Ngarot* ceremony—a traditional agrarian ritual inherited from their ancestors (Rasmadi, 2023). Unlike Lelea Village, the birthplace of *Ngarot* that

still maintains its traditional form, Tugu Village has implemented several modifications in its execution. Although the initial intention behind practicing Ngarot in Tugu was rooted in kinship ties with Lelea, over time, the inclusion of modern entertainment and religious elements altered the structure of the ceremony and affected community participation. Some residents believe that *Ngarot* in Tugu has lost its original meaning, which has decreased their enthusiasm for involvement. Ultimately, the village authorities decided to discontinue the ceremony, citing budget constraints and concerns over immoral behavior such as alcohol consumption.

Numerous studies have explored agrarian rituals in the Indramayu region. Most of this research focuses on preserving the traditional forms, social functions, and spiritual meanings embedded in rituals like *Sedekah Bumi* (N. Silviana et al., 2021), *Mapag Tamba* (Rosadi et al., 2022), and *Mapag Sri* (Alfarisi & Saepuloh, 2023). These traditions are regarded as expressions of harmony between humans and nature, reflecting the local wisdom of agrarian communities. Much of the literature emphasizes the continuity of agrarian cultural practices as vital for maintaining identity and cultural resilience in rural society.

Beyond inland areas, various studies have also examined agrarian and maritime rituals along Indonesia's coasts. Rituals such as *Sasi* in Maluku, *Panglima Laot* in Aceh, *Awig-Awig* in Bali-Lombok, and *Larung Sembonyo* in Java represent customary practices that emphasize resource conservation and participatory environmental governance (Rizkina et al., 2024; Silviana et al., 2021). Rituals like *Koteklema* in East Nusa Tenggara and *Eret* in Pacitan highlight the importance of spirituality and communal cooperation in sustaining agrarian and maritime livelihoods (Setyawan & Saddhono, 2017; Wulandari et al., 2024). These studies also underscore the active role of local communities and their contributions to sustainable development and ecology rooted in indigenous knowledge (Silviana et al., 2020; Zamzami et al., 2020).

However, these studies tend to focus primarily on preserving the external form or socio-ecological functions of traditional rituals, rather than examining the ideological impacts on community participation. There remains a significant gap in research that explores how ritual modifications—especially those driven by dominant ideologies such as religion—affect people's enthusiasm and engagement with cultural traditions. Moreover, previous studies largely employ descriptive or normative approaches, often overlooking the deeper dynamics of meaning conflict, interpretive authority, or the power relations that shape such modifications.

Based on the reviewed literature, several research gaps emerge that previous studies have not adequately addressed. First, there is a lack of research specifically analyzing how modifications to ritual forms affect their meaning and community participation. Earlier research mostly focuses on preserving the external aspects and socio-ecological functions of traditions, without delving into the internal dynamics of meaning that shape community involvement. Second, the relationship between religion and local culture has not received sufficient attention, particularly in the context of conflicting authorities over meaning and changes in ritual structure. Studies examining the dominance of religious ideology over local traditions are scarce, especially in agrarian villages like Tugu. Third, there is limited research employing interpretive-critical approaches to investigate how local leaders reframe the meaning of traditions and how this process affects cultural identity preservation. Therefore, this study is significant in addressing these gaps by deeply exploring how modifications to the Ngarot ceremony—through the inclusion of entertainment and religious rituals—impact the transformation of cultural meaning and social participation in Tugu Village, which holds no formal customary obligation to conduct the ceremony.

This study aims to understand how modifications have influenced the declining participation of Tugu Village residents in the *Ngarot* ceremony. The research focuses on how the newly modified version of *Ngarot*—shaped by village authorities through adjustments to religious norms and the addition of entertainment elements—has shifted the original meaning of the tradition. The study also seeks to assess the extent to which these changes affect local perceptions of *Ngarot* as an ancestral cultural legacy. Using a qualitative, descriptive-interpretive approach, this research attempts to fill existing gaps by critically analyzing the relational and symbolic impacts of ritual transformations on participatory engagement.

The study is grounded in the assumption that the imposition of new values—whether from religious institutions or modern rationality—on traditional cultural structures can lead to a disorientation of meaning among local communities. When symbols and cultural orders are reshaped in the name of religiosity or modern efficiency, emotional and spiritual bonds to ancestral traditions may weaken. The central argument is that modifying the original structure of the *Ngarot* ceremony in Tugu Village, without a deep understanding of its sacred cultural meaning, has contributed to declining community participation. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt an approach that does not merely preserve the outer form of culture, but also respects the essence and value orientation embedded within it.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study analyzes the form and meaning of the *Ngarot* ceremony as practiced in Tugu Village, Lelea Subdistrict, Indramayu Regency, West Java, along with the community's participation in it. The research focuses on the relationship between modifications to the ceremony and the declining enthusiasm and involvement of residents in continuing the tradition. It also includes the ideas and policies of village stakeholders who play a role in shaping the direction of *Ngarot* implementation.

The study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-interpretive design (Maxwell, 2009). This approach is appropriate given the nature of the data—comprising opinions, perspectives, and experiences of various social actors, as well as interpretations of a cultural practice (Lune & Berg, 2017). It enables the researcher to capture the subjective and contextual dynamics of cultural phenomena and provides space for critical reflection on the social changes taking place in the *Ngarot* tradition.

The data sources fall into two main categories: primary and secondary data. The researcher collected primary data through in-depth interviews with various community members, including the village head, village secretary, village officials (*pamong desa*), cultural figures, and ordinary residents. Secondary data came from written documents such as the *History Book of Lelea Village*, official village records, and audiovisual materials documenting the *Ngarot* ceremony, both from local sources and online media.

Data collection used semi-structured interviews guided by a flexible interview protocol that allowed informants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives. In addition to interviews, the researcher conducted limited field observations and document studies. Since Tugu Village discontinued the *Ngarot* ceremony in 2020, the researcher could not observe the event directly. Therefore, descriptions relied on residents' narratives and available visual documentation.

The researcher analyzed the data using qualitative analysis techniques through three main stages: thematically classifying the data, interpreting meanings based on socio-cultural context, and drawing conclusions. The analysis proceeded in a reflective and iterative manner, considering the relationship between ritual modifications, public perceptions, and village policy decisions. The findings are presented as interpretive descriptions that emphasize the link between ceremonial modifications and the crisis of community participation, offering new insights into the meaning of culture in relation to authority and local identity.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### a. History of the Ngarot Ceremony

The *Ngarot* ceremony is one of the agrarian cultural heritages deeply rooted in the life of the people of Lelea Village, Lelea Subdistrict, Indramayu Regency, since the 17th century. The origin of this tradition can be traced back to the figure of Ki Kapol, a local leader and village head of his time, renowned for his generosity. Socially, Ki Kapol routinely invited the village's young men and women—locally referred to as *bujang-cuene*—to gather, socialize, and enjoy food and drinks that he provided free of charge (Dinas Komunikasi dan Informatika Kabupaten Indramayu, 2020). This activity later came to be known as *ngarot*, a term in the Lelean Sundanese dialect that literally means “eating and drinking together.” Initially, this gathering was a simple and intimate social event. However, as these interactions continued, the *bujang-cuene* felt moved to reciprocate Ki Kapol's kindness. They voluntarily

assisted him in cultivating his rice fields, which covered an area of 2.6 hectares—land he had managed alone due to living without a spouse or descendants.

Ki Kapol warmly welcomed this altruistic initiative. He not only accepted their help but also used the opportunity to transfer agrarian knowledge directly by teaching proper farming techniques. Later, when Ki Kapol served as the village head, he formalized the event and moved its implementation to the village hall courtyard to structure it as a collective public occasion. This marked the birth of the *Ngarot* ceremony as a village tradition that is not only cultural but also pedagogical in nature. The village heads succeeding Ki Kapol institutionalized the activity as an annual event that must be preserved. After his passing, the status of his rice field changed to *sawah adat* (customary land) and came under the authority of the village government. This field became the symbolic and practical space for agricultural education for the *bujang-cuene* during every *Ngarot* ceremony.

The current head of Lelea Village, Raidi, reaffirmed the noble values embedded in the tradition. In an interview, he stated: “*Ki Buyut Kapol lived roughly in the 16th or early 17th century. He had no children, so he thought of a way to gather the youth and create an educational event. That’s how Ngarot began.*” He further explained that the rice field donated by Ki Kapol—now known as *Sawah Kasinoman*—serves not only as a food source but also as a symbol of regeneration and self-reliance. “*Eventually, since Buyut Kapol had no heirs, he donated that 2.2-hectare plot, partly for Ngarot,*” (Interview, May 14, 2025).

The tradition continues to emphasize its educational dimension, passed down from generation to generation. During the ceremony, after participants are paraded to the village hall, a symbolic handover of farming tools takes place. According to Raidi: “*It’s agricultural regeneration. Don’t forget that you are the child of a farmer. Here are the seeds, the water symbolizing fertility and prosperity, the fertilizer representing growth, and the hoe for tilling the land,*” (Interview, May 14, 2025). This statement reinforces the understanding that *Ngarot* is not only a celebration of agrarian labor but also a cultural educational tool that reinstills awareness of farming identity among the younger generation.

Throughout its history, the *Ngarot* ceremony has experienced dynamics that reflect tensions between the idealism of tradition and the pragmatism of local policy. At one point, a village head questioned the competency of the *bujang-cuene* in managing the customary rice field, deeming them too careless and inexperienced in farming. He argued that this lack of skill negatively impacted the field’s productivity. Since the harvest from this field served as the main funding source for the *Ngarot* ceremony, the village implemented a policy to reassign the cultivation to more experienced farmers. Ironically, this decision backfired: crop yields declined, and pest infestations increased. The *Buku Sejarah Desa Lelea* (Lelea Village History Book) documented this failure as spiritual evidence that the *sawah adat* was destined to be cultivated by the *bujang-cuene*, even if the yields were not always optimal quantitatively (Tresnasih et al., 1992). The community’s collective belief affirmed that involving youth in cultivating the customary field was not merely a matter of efficiency but a fulfillment of ancestral mandates and a means of regenerating agrarian cultural values.

**Figure 1.** The *Ngarot* Ceremony Procession



Source: Rasmadi, 2023

This event became a turning point and reinforced the legitimacy that the *Ngarot* ceremony must not be neglected, as it concerns the continuity of values, identity, and local knowledge systems. Even during the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021, when social mobility was strictly limited, the *Ngarot* ceremony continued with several protocol adjustments. This decision not only demonstrated the strength of tradition in navigating times of crisis but also affirmed that for the people of Lelea, *Ngarot* represents a legacy of *urgencia kultural*. It is not merely a ceremonial event but a living process that forges connections across generations, between humans and the land, and between heritage and sustainability. Therefore, the history of *Ngarot* is not merely a chronicle of a ritual's origin—it is a collective narrative of the community's commitment to preserving identity, honoring ancestors, and sustaining socio-ecological harmony through an enduring agrarian tradition (Tresnasih et al., 1992).

### b. Implementation of the Ngarot Ceremony

The *Ngarot* ceremony in Lelea Village is one of the few agrarian traditions still preserved in its original form and remains a source of pride for the local community. Unlike other customary rituals that are sacred in nature and oriented toward divine relations, *Ngarot* is more profane and social, as its primary aim lies in shaping the character of the younger generation through communal values and the ethic of hard work. According to the *Buku Sejarah Desa Lelea* (Village History Book of Lelea), the ceremony has three main objectives: “to serve as a platform for uniting the village's youth, strengthening mutual cooperation among them, and fostering their maturity by promoting independence” (Samian, 2003). These three goals affirm that *Ngarot* was not designed merely as a cultural performance, but as a medium for social education and the regeneration of agrarian values.

One of the central moments in the *Ngarot* ceremony is the recitation of *pituah kokolot*—ancestral advice delivered by local elders to the *bujang-cuene* (young men and women). These wise sayings serve as moral reminders and life guidance. Delivered in the Lelean Sundanese dialect, one such *pituah kokolot* reads as follows (Samian, 2003):

*Mikiran budak engkena kumaha,  
Senajan boga harta kudu tetep usaha.  
Kur ngora ula poya-poya,  
Kamberan kolot ula sengsara.  
Dlema laki kerja, ewena usaha.  
Neangan pekaya rukun runtut,  
Aturan agama kudu diturut,  
Slamet dunya akherat.*

The meaning of this *pituah* is clear: young villagers are reminded not to waste their youth in laziness or extravagance. They are encouraged to work hard, uphold social harmony, and, most importantly, obey religious teachings to achieve well-being in both this world and the hereafter. This counsel is not mere rhetoric; it is symbolically enacted through the activity of planting rice in the *sawah adat* (customary rice field) as part of the ceremony, reinforcing the message that labor and reverence for the land are forms of obedience and social responsibility (R.I & Lasmiyati, 2016).

The *Ngarot* ceremony typically takes place between November and December, coinciding with the rainy season. In the past, village ancestors used the *cerecap*—the first rain after the dry season—as a temporal marker for the event. Today, village leaders, elders, and officials jointly determine the timing through deliberation, officially announcing it during the *Sedekah Bumi* ceremony held one month prior. Two weeks before *Ngarot*, the participating youths hold their own meeting to decide the theme for makeup, costumes, and to select a representative to receive symbolic offerings from the village head. One rule that remains strictly observed is that *Ngarot* must always take place on a Wednesday. This day is considered sacred, believed to mark the arrival of Prabu Lelea, an ancestor of Prabu Siliwangi, to the Lelea region (Samian, 2003).

On the day of the ceremony, participants gather at their respective hamlet head's house starting at 7:00 a.m. Village officials and their spouses then escort them to the village head's residence. There, they are welcomed with a *jidur* performance—a traditional percussion ensemble using *rebana* and *gendang*. All participants then proceed in a procession to the village hall, led by the village head and his spouse. Since 2013, the procession has also included *Nang* and *Nok Dermayon*—local youth icons from Indramayu—and batik ambassadors, as part of regional cultural promotion. The events at the village hall include the reading of the *pituah kokolot*, a recounting of *Ngarot*'s history, a speech by the village head, a symbolic handover of farming tools and rice seedlings to youth representatives, and the beating of the *bende* (a large ceremonial drum) to officially open the ceremony. After the formal proceedings, the event continues with entertainment in the form of three traditional performances held simultaneously at different locations: *jidur* music for the general public, *tari topeng* for women, and *ronggeng ketuk* for young men.

The uniqueness of *Ngarot* as a tradition that endures amid modernity gained national recognition when, in 2010, the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture designated it as an Intangible Cultural Heritage under the category of customs, rites, and celebrations. However, historical records indicate that this ceremony is not merely a cultural artifact. According to the official website [warisanbudaya.kemdikbud.go.id](http://warisanbudaya.kemdikbud.go.id), *Ngarot* was first introduced by Ki Kapol, a Muslim from Banten, to the people of Lelea who at that time were predominantly Hindu. This reveals that the origins of *Ngarot* are inseparable from the history of Islamization in the region. Nevertheless, today's implementation of *Ngarot* shows a clear separation between religious and cultural aspects. While the two may intersect, they remain distinct systems of meaning. When religious or entertainment elements are added without proper contextual consideration, the original meaning of *Ngarot* can become blurred. Culture, in essence, is a tightly woven symbolic system—if one element is carelessly modified, the entire collective meaning risks being disrupted and losing its internal sacredness (Tresnasih et al., 1992).

### c. Social and Ecological Characteristics of Tugu Village

Tugu Village is one of eleven administrative villages within the jurisdiction of Lelea Subdistrict, Indramayu Regency, West Java Province. Covering an area of 7.19 square kilometers, Tugu ranks as the second-largest village in Lelea Subdistrict. The village's landscape is predominantly composed of fertile rice fields, making rice the primary agricultural commodity (Rudianto, 2021). Geographically, Lelea Subdistrict lies in the southern part of Indramayu Regency, reinforcing its identity as an agrarian region. Southern Indramayu, especially the areas bordering Sumedang and Majalengka, is widely recognized as a rice production center. Unsurprisingly, most Tugu villagers rely on farming as their main source of livelihood. Nevertheless, not all residents own rice fields. Some work as *penggarap* (sharecroppers) on others' land, while others earn a living as daily agricultural laborers.

According to 2020 population data, Tugu Village had approximately 3,900 residents. Ethnically, the majority are local Indramayu people who, historically, have intermixed with Sundanese communities, particularly those from Sumedang, as recorded in the *Buku Sejarah Desa Lelea* (Village History Book of Lelea). In addition, a minority of Chinese-Indonesian residents have settled in Tugu and operate small businesses. The Chinese community in the village runs various enterprises, including building supply stores, household goods shops, grocery stores, and food stalls. Meanwhile, most of the Indramayu-Sundanese population work in the agricultural sector, although a smaller portion are employed as village officials, educators, healthcare workers, or small business owners (*pelaku UMKM*). Religiously, the majority of Tugu's population adheres to Islam, while the Chinese-Indonesian minority generally follows Catholicism and Protestantism (Rudianto, 2021).

### d. Modifications and Implications of the *Ngarot* Ceremony in Tugu Village

The implementation of the *Ngarot* ceremony in Tugu Village differs fundamentally from that in Lelea Village, both in terms of ritual structure and symbolic meaning. One crucial difference lies in the absence of *sawah adat* (customary rice fields) in Tugu. In Lelea, *sawah adat* forms an integral part of the

*Ngarot* ceremony, where *bujang-cuene* (young men and women) receive hands-on training in agricultural techniques passed down from their ancestors. The lack of this element in Tugu has resulted in the disappearance of the ceremony's educational dimension, causing *Ngarot* to no longer reflect the spirit of agricultural value regeneration. What remains in practice is merely a youth parade and public entertainment performances, such as *Tari Topeng* and *Ronggeng Ketuk*. While these two traditional arts carry cultural value of their own, the absence of agrarian knowledge transfer has turned the *Ngarot* ceremony in Tugu into a mere entertainment festival devoid of its original meaning.

Another significant modification is the introduction of *pengajian* (Qur'anic recitation gatherings) into the sequence of *Ngarot* events in Tugu—something not found in Lelea's traditional implementation. In its original form, *Ngarot* was not a sacred ritual that explicitly invoked the presence of transcendental entities. Although prayer did exist, it functioned merely as an opening to hope for a smooth ceremony. These prayers were general in nature and not central to the ritual structure. The addition of *pengajian* has instead introduced a new interpretation to what was originally a profane tradition. The village head, who also serves as a religious leader, initiated the decision to include *pengajian*. Although it does not serve as the main event, the village has made it mandatory in every *Ngarot* ceremony. Its stated aim is to pray for a smooth planting season and an abundant harvest. However, when compared to other agrarian ceremonies such as *Sedekah Bumi*, such spiritual functions more appropriately belong within those frameworks rather than in *Ngarot*. Misplacing these ritual elements risks shifting the meaning and purpose of *Ngarot* as a whole.

These modifications have had direct implications for the declining enthusiasm of villagers—especially the youth—in participating in the *Ngarot* ceremony. For many young people, the loss of agricultural training has rendered *Ngarot* irrelevant to their identity and needs. Most youth who still attend do so merely for the entertainment, not for the tradition's cultural values. Ironically, older generations show more interest in participating, largely due to the inclusion of the *pengajian* session. Within the Islamic context adhered to by the majority of residents, attending *pengajian* constitutes a normative religious obligation that encourages communal participation. Aware of the youth's waning interest, the village government attempted to boost *Ngarot*'s appeal by adding *tarling* music—a traditional musical genre from Java's northern coastal region. While this strategy succeeded in attracting crowds, it also produced two adverse consequences. First, the ceremony's meaning further deviated, fully transforming it into a spectacle. Second, the entertainment zones became a space for some youth to engage in drinking and rowdy behavior, undermining the very values the ceremony aims to preserve.

This situation led the village government to conclude that continuing the *Ngarot* ceremony no longer yielded proportional benefits to its financial burden. Unlike Lelea Village, which can fund the ceremony through harvest yields from its *sawah adat*, Tugu Village relies on allocations from the village budget. The imbalance between cost, benefit, and shifting symbolic orientation became the primary consideration behind the decision to discontinue the *Ngarot* ceremony in Tugu starting in 2020. This decision marked a new phase in the relationship between residents, tradition, and the ideologies shaping local space: when cultural heritage is no longer practiced with deep appreciation, and when religious authority unilaterally reinterprets cultural meaning, even the most meaningful collective rituals risk being reduced to lifeless administrative agendas.

**Table 1.** *Ngarot* Ceremony Implementation in Tugu Village

Aspect	Tugu Village
Presence of <i>Sawah Adat</i>	None
Agricultural Training	None
Inclusion of <i>Pengajian</i>	Present (initiated by the Village Head)
Youth Participation	Low (more interested in entertainment)
Adult Participation	High (due to <i>pengajian</i> as the main agenda)

Source: Field Research, 2025.

The data presented reveals a stark contrast between the implementation of the *Ngarot* ceremony in Lelea and Tugu Villages. Lelea Village has preserved the original structure of the ritual, maintaining the *sawah adat* (customary rice fields) and its educational function through agricultural training for the youth. This makes *Ngarot* not only a ceremonial rite but also a means of intergenerational transmission of agrarian values. Conversely, Tugu Village has undergone several significant modifications. The educational function has disappeared, replaced by entertainment elements and the inclusion of *pengajian* (Islamic sermon gatherings) within the ceremony structure. These modifications have directly impacted community participation, particularly among the youth.

**Figure 2.** *Ngarot* Ceremony in Tugu Village



Source: Handayani, 2022.

Several patterns emerge from this comparison. First, the removal of agricultural training in Tugu Village has caused *Ngarot* to lose its relevance for the youth, resulting in a sharp decline in their interest and involvement. Second, the incorporation of *pengajian* indicates the dominance of religious ideology within local cultural structures, shifting the ceremony's meaning from a profane social rite toward a more sacred orientation. As a result, higher participation now comes from adults rather than the youth—who, in fact, were intended to be the ceremony's primary subjects. Third, entertainment-based modifications such as the addition of *tarling* musical performances have succeeded in drawing crowds, but have also triggered negative consequences, including increased deviant behaviors like alcohol consumption. This shift has transformed *Ngarot* into a mere festival, stripped of its educational and spiritual essence. Fourth, from an economic standpoint, *Ngarot* in Tugu Village depends entirely on the village budget due to the absence of *sawah adat* as an independent funding source. This makes the ceremony unsustainable in the long term and is perceived as a financial burden by the village administration.

From these observable trends, we can conclude that altering the structure and meaning of the ceremony without comprehensively considering its original functions has led to a decline in community participation and erosion of traditional values. A ritual once rooted in identity formation and cultural education now risks being reduced to a symbolic activity devoid of substantive meaning within the community's social life.

#### e. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the modified structure of the *Ngarot* ceremony in Tugu Village has significantly contributed to the decline in community participation, especially among youth, who traditionally serve as the primary actors in the ritual. The absence of *sawah adat* (customary rice fields) and the elimination of agricultural training have stripped *Ngarot* of its symbolic and educational

functions, which play a vital role in preserving the agrarian identity of the community. Furthermore, the inclusion of *pengajian* (Qur'anic recitation gatherings) and the dominance of religious agendas have shifted *Ngarot*'s orientation from a profane-traditional rite to a sacral-religious one. The addition of entertainment elements, such as *tarling* music performances, intended to attract broader community interest, has instead resulted in unintended consequences like increased deviant behavior. Eventually, the village government deemed the ceremony inefficient due to its high cost and limited social impact, leading to its termination in 2020.

These findings reveal a causal relationship between the transformation of the ritual and the weakening of public engagement. The removal of agricultural elements—the very essence of *Ngarot*—has caused younger generations to lose their cultural orientation as children of farmers. In this context, participation is not merely physical presence but emotional and cultural involvement. When rituals become reduced to entertainment and formal symbolism devoid of meaning, people cease to feel ownership or authentic involvement in the tradition. The introduction of *pengajian*—although likely intended to provide spiritual nuance—has reinforced the dominance of religious interpretations over what was once a religiously neutral cultural practice. While such modifications might symbolically align local culture with the norms of the religious majority, they simultaneously restructure historically embedded meanings.

Compared to previous studies, this research offers a dimension that has rarely been explored in depth. Most earlier studies on agrarian rituals in Indonesia—such as *Sedekah Bumi*, *Mapag Tamba*, or coastal rituals like *Sasi* and *Panglima Laot*—tend to emphasize the preservation of outward forms and the ecological or spiritual functions of tradition (Silviana et al., 2021; Wulandari et al., 2024). These studies highlight rituals as tools for environmental conservation and human-nature harmony. For instance, in sea rituals like *Mappandesasi* or *Tuturangjana Andala*, there exists a strong spiritual sense of gratitude toward the sea as a livelihood source, reflected in high community participation (Wulandari et al., 2024). Similarly, the *Roko Molas Poco* ritual in Manggarai, which uses specific trees for traditional house construction, functions not only architecturally but also symbolically to connect communities spiritually with the forest, reinforcing identity and ecological awareness (Naingalis et al., 2025).

However, few studies explicitly examine how structural changes or ideological interventions—especially from religious institutions—affect the symbolic meaning of and community engagement in these traditions. This research addresses that gap by offering a critical framework that interrelates cultural meaning-making, local policy decisions, and youth participation. In the case of *Ngarot* in Tugu Village, the inclusion of *pengajian* and the removal of agricultural training have not merely altered the sequence of events but reshaped the symbolic relationships between youth and their cultural heritage.

Other studies have begun to approach this dimension. For instance, research on the *Maddoa* harvest ritual in South Sulawesi explores the assimilation of local agrarian rites with Islamic theology through religious symbols (Santalia et al., 2024). However, instead of enriching cultural meaning, the integration causes a shift in orientation that erodes traditional substance. Duggan (2011) found similar dynamics in the *Manu Kètu Lai* ritual on Savu Island, where modernity and bureaucratization blurred ritual values, displacing the original function of preserving social memory and structure. This study shows that, in the *Ngarot* context, religious interpretations have not only reconstructed cultural symbols but also redirected public participation—from agrarian regeneration to mere formal engagement in sacral or entertainment activities, disconnected from everyday identity.

Conversely, many scholars highlight the importance of preserving symbolic elements and ritual language to strengthen social cohesion and cultural memory. This is evident in studies on *Umpasa* among the Simalungun (Saragih et al., 2025) and *Korolele* in Manggarai (Ande et al., 2025). Language, ancestral teachings (*pituah*), and symbolic processions serve as key media in shaping generational awareness of community values. *Ngarot* in Lelea Village has preserved these through *pituah kokolot*, processions, and the symbolic handover of farming tools—practices almost entirely absent in Tugu Village. This proves

that when traditional symbolic systems are not maintained contextually, emotional attachment to tradition diminishes accordingly.

Thus, while most previous research has focused on preserving form, environmental conservation, and the spiritual roles of customary rituals (Ayuningtyas et al., 2024; Mukarromah et al., 2024), this study contributes by emphasizing the importance of preserving meaning structures and local authority in tradition. It also critiques how symbolic interventions from outside cultural systems can delegitimize youth participation. This perspective is crucial for designing heritage preservation models that go beyond formality and documentation to foster genuine and meaningful cultural engagement.

The findings hold deep social and ideological significance. In agrarian communities, rituals like *Ngarot* serve not merely as seasonal ceremonies but as media for transmitting values of labor, solidarity, and ancestral reverence (Haniah & Putra, 2021). When such structures are altered or imbued with new meanings without critical reflection, they risk dislocating rather than transforming meaning. The inclusion of *pengajian* and entertainment in *Ngarot*, viewed ideologically, illustrates a contest over interpretive authority between cultural and religious actors. In the end, this undermines the symbolic autonomy of local traditions. If dominant religious interpretations continually subjugate culture, cultural heritage will no longer foster inclusive public spaces.

These reflections also reveal structural dysfunction in village-level tradition management. Good intentions to adapt traditions to religious norms or boost engagement through entertainment become counterproductive without a thorough understanding of symbolic structures. This causes a rupture in symbolic and educational meaning, leading to cultural alienation and youth disorientation. Sitokdana et al. (2019) and Zubaidah (2021) similarly noted how globalization and modernization have eroded local cultural values, including the loss of languages and traditional practices that once served as pillars of community identity. The erosion is compounded by the insufficient promotion of *Pancasila* values in education, causing youth to lose their national and cultural orientation (Karyono et al., 2023).

Within this context, the disproportionate inclusion of religious elements like *pengajian* into a profane ritual such as *Ngarot* reflects an implicit conflict between religious and cultural interpretations. Research by Hamayotsu (2014) and Parker (2014) found that growing religious intolerance and dominance in public spaces in Indonesia have contributed to the marginalization of local cultural expressions. When religious interpretations monopolize the legitimacy of tradition, formerly open and inclusive rituals risk becoming rigid and exclusive symbolic formalities. In Tugu Village, youth—once the main subjects of the tradition—now feel the most alienated due to the disappearance of agricultural training and the imposition of religious norms that do not resonate with their social lifestyles.

Additionally, from an economic and sustainability standpoint, reliance on village funds without support from local assets like *sawah adat* renders the ceremony unsustainable and vulnerable to being seen merely as an administrative burden. This reflects an imbalance between cultural-symbolic dimensions and modern bureaucratic logic. When culture becomes a checklist for budget compliance, its meaning quickly erodes. Moreover, disrupting local symbolism without integrating cultural spaces like *musyawarah adat* (customary deliberations) or cultural schools further increases the risk of generational disconnect.

Nevertheless, findings from other regions offer promising alternatives. Studies by Rasyid et al. (2023) and Gede Agung et al. (2024) show that local wisdom-based and interfaith dialogue approaches effectively harmonize religious and cultural interpretations. Similarly, efforts to foster inclusive identity through social media (Saud et al., 2025) and the formation of youth community spaces in third places such as coffee shops (Salsabila & Sihombing, 2024) present alternative strategies for engaging youth with local culture without compromising their social self-expression.

Therefore, this study affirms that tradition must be modified through participatory and contextual approaches. It requires synergy among traditional elders, village authorities, religious leaders, and youth to re-negotiate the symbolic values embedded in ritual. Without such efforts, *Ngarot* risks becoming an empty memory—stripped of its spirit by modernity and ideological pressure.

Based on these results and reflections, policymakers must develop more culturally sensitive action plans. Village governments should include elders, youth, and multi-generational residents in shaping ritual implementation to prevent interpretive monopolies. The revitalization of *Ngarot* must focus not only on form but also on spirit—restoring its educational function, reinforcing agrarian identity, and maintaining interpretive plurality without symbolic reduction. Preservation efforts should target meaning maintenance as part of a holistic social ecology. Through a participatory and interpretive contextual approach, *Ngarot* can still serve as a unifying force, a cultural compass, and a living educational space for future generations.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that changes in the structure and meaning of the *Ngarot* ceremony in Tugu Village—particularly the removal of its educational elements and the addition of *pengajian* (Islamic preaching sessions) and entertainment—have significantly contributed to the decline in community participation, especially among the youth. The ceremony, which once served as a means of agrarian regeneration and collective value education, has undergone meaning disorientation and now faces a sustainability crisis. In contrast, Lelea Village, which has preserved the symbolic structure and agricultural functions of *Ngarot*, demonstrates higher levels of social engagement and greater success in transmitting agrarian cultural values across generations. These findings suggest that preserving tradition is not merely about maintaining its external form, but rather sustaining its meaning, symbolic authority, and the community's connection to their cultural identity.

The main contribution of this research lies in its emphasis on the relationship between the symbolic structure of tradition, local policy, and the cultural participation of younger generations—a perspective that has remained critically underexplored in studies of agrarian cultural preservation in Indonesia. By combining symbolic, historical, and sociological analysis, this study deepens the understanding of how religious interpretations or administrative policies can diminish the vitality of a tradition when they fail to align with its original structure of meaning. This study also presents an important discourse on the need for a cultural preservation approach that is contextual, participatory, and not merely ceremonial or documentary.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. One major constraint was the inability to conduct direct observation of the *Ngarot* ceremony in Tugu Village due to its discontinuation since 2020. In addition, the qualitative approach used in this study did not incorporate quantitative dimensions that could statistically measure shifts in participation levels and community perceptions. Therefore, future research should broaden the data scope by including more sites of agrarian rituals across Indonesia and integrating mixed-methods approaches to obtain a more comprehensive picture of tradition transformation and sustainability challenges amid ideological pressures and modernity.

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