



Reproduction and Sustainability of the Ngasa Gandoang Tradition in Salem, Central Java

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Abstract. This study investigates the reproduction and sustainability of the Ngasa Gandoang Tradition, a mountain-offering ritual in Salem, Central Java, that embodies the community's spiritual connection to nature and ancestors. The research aims to uncover how this cultural practice has survived through generations despite modernization, economic transitions, and the gradual erosion of tangible heritage. Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach, the study examines the mechanisms of ritual reproduction, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and adaptive strategies ensuring cultural resilience. The Ngasa Gandoang ceremony unfolds through a sequence of sacred acts: cleansing the pathways to Mount Sagara, performing ritual bathing at Pancuran Lima, visiting the Tomb of Batara Guru, preparing communal offerings, and concluding with shared prayer and symbolic meals of *kejong jagong* (corn rice). Each stage functions as both spiritual purification and social renewal, reaffirming solidarity within the community. Data were gathered through participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation involving thirty-two key informants, including *kuncen* (ritual custodians), elders, youth, migrants, and local religious leaders. Findings reveal that the sustainability of Ngasa Gandoang rests upon three interrelated pillars: (1) continuity of traditional knowledge safeguarded by the *kuncen*, (2) communal solidarity expressed through intergenerational participation, and (3) adaptive flexibility that allows ritual forms to evolve without compromising sacred meaning. The study argues that the endurance of local traditions depends not on static preservation, but on a living process of cultural reinterpretation. Consequently, Ngasa Gandoang continues to serve as the spiritual, social, and ecological foundation of the Salem community, symbolizing the dynamic resilience of Indonesian indigenous heritage.

Keywords: Cultural Reproduction, Mountain Offering Rituals, Tradition, Local Traditions Identity

1 Introduction

Rural modernization in Indonesia has intensified changes in cultural behavior, economy, and belief systems, increasingly marginalizing local traditions that once shaped the moral fabric of village life. Amid these transitions, the Ngasa Gandoang ritual in Salem, Central Java, stands as a striking example of cultural resilience. This mountain-offering ceremony rooted in ancestral gratitude toward nature and the divine continues to be practiced despite the erosion of its material heritage and the disappearance of megalithic relics. What keeps it alive is not only its sacred symbolism but also the collective awareness of its social value. The Ngasa Gandoang functions as a communal mechanism of redistribution and solidarity: through collective labor, shared meals, and ritual cooperation, villagers strengthen kinship ties and sustain local welfare (Munggara, 2024). Within a rapidly changing rural economy, the ritual has become more than a religious observance; it is a social anchor reaffirming identity, belonging, and moral balance.

Existing scholarship on mountain-offering traditions, however, still leaves important analytical spaces unaddressed. Studies such as those by Hastuti et al. (2021) discuss ecological ethics and ritual symbolism, yet they provide limited insight into how cultural reproduction operates within village structures. Similarly, research by Rachmawati et al. (2019) situates such rituals within frameworks of cultural tourism and post-disaster recovery, thereby shifting focus away from the agency of local actors as custodians of heritage. Meanwhile, Oktavia et al. (2023) emphasize the function of sedekah gunung as socio-ecological mitigation but give insufficient attention to its internal adaptive mechanisms. These approaches, while valuable, often treat tradition as a static object rather than a living process shaped by negotiation, creativity, and intergenerational learning. Consequently, the sustainability and reproduction of local mountain rituals such as Ngasa Gandoang remain under-theorized and inadequately explained in academic discourse.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the mechanisms that ensure the continuity of the Ngasa Gandoang Tradition amid social transformation. It aims to answer three central questions: (1) how the tradition is practiced and managed by ritual actors and the surrounding community, (2) what structural and cultural factors sustain it through changing times, and (3) how its continuity contributes to the well-being, solidarity, and identity of the Salem community. By combining ethnographic observation, interviews, and documentation, the study uncovers how leadership authority, family participation, and communal adaptation form the foundation of ritual sustainability. Findings from the field indicate that role inheritance remains stable, nuclear families are vital agents of transmission, and ritual adjustments while minor allow practices to remain aligned with contemporary socioeconomic realities.

This paper rests on the assumption that the endurance of Ngasa Gandoang derives from the synergy of three interrelated forces: the ritual authority of the kuncen (spiritual custodian), the consistent involvement of family and community networks, and the adaptive flexibility of tradition to evolving social contexts. These forces collectively ensure that sacred values remain intact even as external conditions change. The ritual's sustainability also generates tangible community benefits strengthening cooperation,

redistributing resources, and maintaining emotional and social equilibrium. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that the survival of Ngasa Gandoang depends not on the preservation of fixed symbols but on the living reproduction of moral and ecological values within the community's everyday life. In doing so, it seeks to articulate a more comprehensive understanding of how local rituals endure as vital systems of cultural resilience in modern Indonesia..

2 Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Reproduction

Cultural reproduction is the process by which a community preserves its social and moral order through the transmission of values, norms, and practices across generations. Nur (2021) interprets this as an active process of socialization that ensures cultural survival. Čolić (2022) emphasizes its dual nature formal and informal while Chi-Kin Lee (2020) identifies language, rituals, and belief systems as its primary vehicles. In most traditional societies, the family acts as the first site of reproduction, embedding ethical and symbolic frameworks that are later reinforced through education (Martinek & Lee, 2012). Alhosani (2022) further notes that institutionalizing cultural content within formal curricula strengthens identity and continuity.

Baral (2023) highlight the importance of social institutions in moral transmission. Lu & Chien (2023) demonstrate how local curriculum integration supports the adaptation of cultural knowledge among youth, while Shih (2022) stresses the need for culturally responsive educational methods. Technological advances add another layer: as Cai et al. (2019) and Danesi, (2020) point out, digital platforms now function as spaces where traditions are both reproduced and reinterpreted. Thus, cultural reproduction in the digital era requires a balance between conserving authenticity and embracing change. In the context of Ngasa Gandoang, reproduction occurs through oral transmission, apprenticeship, and embodied practice. The kuncen and village elders function as living archives of ritual knowledge, while younger participants internalize values through participation rather than instruction. This aligns with Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* a system of embodied dispositions that perpetuates culture through practice rather than doctrine. Such reproduction ensures not only the continuity of form but the survival of meaning.

2.2 Mountain Offering Rituals

Mountain-offering traditions are deeply embedded in Java's cultural landscape, reflecting a cosmology that connects human life with natural and ancestral realms. Fuaddah (2022) describes these rituals as forms of sacred communication that preserve local wisdom while reinforcing social solidarity. Kurniawan & Setyawan (2021) interpret them as indigenous models of disaster mitigation rooted in ecological awareness. Through collective participation and ancestral invocation, these ceremonies express gratitude and renew the moral contract between humans and the environment.

However, Masruroh et al. (2021) observe that such rituals increasingly adapt to new socio-economic realities. In tourism-oriented communities, sacred performances are re-interpreted as cultural assets, while Rachmawati & Srimuda (2018) warns that digital mediation risks commodifying sacred meaning. Despite these transformations, rituals like sedekah gunung and Ngasa Gandoang maintain their essence by integrating new forms without losing their spiritual depth. This adaptability underscores what Asikin (2021) calls “social cohesion of local wisdom” the ability of tradition to regenerate itself through collective will and flexible reinterpretation. The Ngasa Gandoang ceremony exemplifies this dynamic adaptability. While rooted in pre-Islamic cosmology, it now harmonizes with Islamic prayer structures and modern ecological ethics. Its sustainability derives from its inclusivity: participation transcends age, gender, and economic class, reinforcing unity and shared responsibility.

2.3 Local Traditions and Identity

Local traditions serve as cultural DNA, encoding a community’s moral, linguistic, and spiritual identity. Pranata et al. (2021) define them as a repository of values transmitted through lived experience, language, and ritual. Putra et al. (2021) emphasize their role in preserving local identity amid globalization, while A’zizah (2023) cautions that unregulated exposure to digital media can erode traditional norms. Tolgfors & Barker (2023) argue that survival depends on the ability of local institutions to renew meaning through reinterpretation rather than mere preservation.

Empirical studies further illuminate this interplay between continuity and change. Adom (2019); Csurgó & Smith (2022); and Yeh et al. (2021) identify intergenerational learning as the backbone of cultural identity. Majid & Sugiarto (2022) and Muza & Thomas (2022) underscore that distinctive social norms ensure behavioral coherence, while Ande et al. (2025); Fürst & Grin (2023); and Rahmasari & Shakti (2024) demonstrate that linguistic and ritual creativity reinforces belonging. Folgado-Fernández et al. (2019) and Sasaki et al. (2021) extend this view globally, showing that local creativity enables adaptation to global systems without losing authenticity. In the Salem context, the Ngasa Gandoang Tradition embodies this principle. It functions as a living identity marker that unites villagers, including those who have migrated. Annual participation reaffirms communal bonds and ensures that ancestral values remain relevant in contemporary life. In short, the ritual serves as both a mirror and a mediator of identity reflecting who the community is and negotiating what it is becoming..

3 Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with an ethnographic design to examine the processes of reproduction and sustainability of the Ngasa Gandoang Tradition in Salem, Central Java. The ethnographic method was chosen for its ability to capture the living dynamics of ritual practices, the social relationships among participants, and the symbolic systems that continue to shape the community’s worldview. Fieldwork was

conducted in Gandoang Village, Salem District, focusing on several sacred sites, including Gedong on the slopes of Mount Sagara, Pancuran Lima, the Tomb of Batara Guru, and the mountain summit. The main period of research took place from January to March 2028, encompassing direct observation of the Ngasa Gandoang ritual held on January 28, 2028, along with preparatory activities preceding the ceremony.

Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure diverse representation. The study involved 32 informants, consisting of senior and junior kuncen (ritual custodians), village elders, families of ritual practitioners, youth participants, migrants returning for the ritual, and religious leaders who led the closing prayers. Data collection combined participatory observation throughout the ritual sequence, in-depth interviews to explore meaning and mechanisms of ritual inheritance, and comprehensive documentation including photographs, community archives, ritual route maps, and local records. Each observation was systematically recorded to trace the symbols, gestures, and shifts in atmosphere that animate every stage of the ritual.

Data analysis was conducted through a process of reduction and thematic coding, focusing on major categories such as customary authority, communal solidarity, ritual adaptation, and ecological dimensions. Triangulation across observation, interview, and documentation strengthened the validity of the findings. The interpretations were then framed within theories of social cohesion, cultural transmission, and spiritual ecology to construct a holistic understanding of ritual sustainability. Ethical principles were rigorously upheld throughout the research process: informed consent was obtained from all participants, anonymity was maintained through coded identities, and full respect was given to customary norms and sacred boundaries observed during fieldwork.

4 Result and Discussion

The Ngasa Gandoang Mountain Offering ritual reflects the living endurance of a cultural system deeply rooted in the community's cosmological beliefs. More than a ceremonial performance, it serves as a sacred dialogue that unites humans, ancestral spirits, nature, and the Divine. Its carefully ordered structure represents an implicit moral code that guides both social life and spiritual harmony. Empirical evidence shows that every stage of the ritual is carried out with shared conviction and reverence. Movements, prayers, offerings, and precise timing act as symbolic expressions of gratitude, respect, and moral duty. Together, these elements sustain the values of tradition amid the pressures of social change. The ritual functions as a stabilizing force, maintaining balance between the physical and the spiritual worlds. It perpetuates a moral rhythm that aligns human intent with divine order. Thus, Ngasa Gandoang stands not as a relic of the past but as a living cultural organism continuously renewed through collective participation and shared faith. Its resilience underscores the essential role of ritual in preserving communal identity and moral equilibrium within the shifting landscape of modern life..

4.1 Ritual Practices and Symbolic Meanings of the Ngasa Gandoang Ceremony

The Ngasa Gandoang ritual reveals a sacred and intricately organized sequence of practices rich with symbolic meaning. Each stage of the ceremony represents the interconnected relationship between humans, ancestors, and nature the very foundation of the Gandoang community's cosmology. At the opening The Ngasa Gandoang ritual reveals a sacred and intricately organized sequence of practices rich with symbolic meaning. Each stage of the ceremony represents the interconnected relationship between humans, ancestors, and nature—the very foundation of the Gandoang community's cosmology. At the opening stage, as explained by R1, a male participant involved in the early preparations, the act of cleansing the sacred path leading to Mount Sagara—passing through Gedong, Pancuran Lima, the Tomb of Batara Guru, and finally the mountain's peak—serves as a fundamental step. This process transcends technical necessity; it is understood as a purification of sacred space. By clearing the path, the community symbolically reopens the spiritual passage between the profane and the sacred realms, while ensuring the safety of participants before they enter the consecrated area.

R2, a kuncen (ritual guardian), stated that wearing white garments and preparing ritual offerings symbolize spiritual readiness. The color white embodies purity and sincere intention, while offerings serve as the medium of communication between humans and ancestral spirits. In this role, the kuncen acts as a spiritual mediator, ensuring that the opening rites are conducted according to customary law. As noted by R3, the journey's commencement at dawn signifies the beginning of the sacred cycle. Some participants even spend the night atop the mountain as a form of laku prihatin—an ascetic discipline aimed at deepening spiritual connection with nature and the divine forces believed to dwell within the mountain.

The purification ritual through sacred bathing, as described by R4, is a vital stage before entering the sacred domain. This act symbolizes both physical and spiritual cleansing, affirming the participants' moral and emotional readiness to engage in the ceremony with humility and sincerity. The pilgrimage to the Tomb of Batara Guru and the summit of Mount Sagara, according to R5, represents the spiritual axis of the ritual, reinforcing the enduring bond between the community and their ancestors. This pilgrimage renews ancestral protection and reaffirms the community's sense of continuity and belonging. During the preparation of prayers, R6 explained that arranging offerings and preparing nasi jagung (corn rice) are performed collectively. The spatial arrangement of offerings reflects shared prayers and communal hope, while nasi jagung embodies prosperity, simplicity, and agricultural resilience. R7, the senior kuncen, added that the burning of white incense and the opening prayer formally mark the beginning of the ritual process. The rising incense smoke is believed to summon ancestral blessings and create a sacred atmosphere that distinguishes ritual time from everyday life.

The sitting posture cross-legged with hands raised described by R8, expresses humility and spiritual connectedness with the unseen world. This bodily gesture, enhanced by the presence of incense smoke, reinforces the transcendental dimension of the ritual. As R9 observed, the collective prayer with hands lifted to the forehead embodies unity and inner harmony, transforming prayer into a shared spiritual experience that synchronizes individual consciousness into one communal rhythm. The repetition of the sacred

phrase “pun sadupun” three times, as explained by R10, amplifies the symbolic power of the ritual utterance. This repetition serves as a spiritual bridge between humans and ancestors, solidifying the legitimacy of the prayers offered. The final stage of the ritual, as described by R11, incorporates an Islamic prayer led by a ustaz. This closing act signifies a form of religious syncretism, where local beliefs and Islam coexist harmoniously within a single ceremonial continuum.

The distribution of the blessed nasi jagung, noted by R12, symbolizes the sharing of blessings and reinforces social solidarity. The communal meal functions as a social mechanism for strengthening community cohesion after the sacred proceedings. Moreover, the collective tree-planting activity, as described by R13, introduces an ecological dimension to the ritual. This act translates spiritual gratitude into concrete environmental stewardship, reaffirming the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature. Finally, as R14 remarked, the participants’ return home marks the closure of the sacred cycle a symbolic reintegration into the everyday world, carrying with them renewed moral and spiritual balance.

Empirical findings on the stages of the Ngasa Gandoang ritual demonstrate that it operates as a layered symbolic system that structures the relationship between humans, ancestors, and nature. The ritual’s sequence—from cleansing the sacred path, performing purification rites, donning white garments, burning incense, to collective prayer forms a coherent sacred order. This gradual transition from the profane to the sacred signifies both physical and spiritual readiness. Field data show that every stage is carried out with deep symbolic awareness, never treated as a mere technical routine. The kuncen’s role as ritual leader highlights a form of symbolic authority that ensures the continuity and legitimacy of local tradition. This authority is collectively recognized and serves as the moral and ritual compass of the community. As Sudarto et al. (2022) note, customary rituals serve as instruments for internalizing moral values and spiritual ethics. Thus, the Ngasa Gandoang ritual functions as both a regulator of the sacred order and a stabilizing force for the community’s social structure.

The integration of Islamic prayer at the closing stage illustrates adaptive and contextual religious syncretism. Rather than replacing the indigenous framework, Islamic elements complement it within a coherent structure. This pattern demonstrates the community’s ability to negotiate traditional and formal religious beliefs without creating symbolic tension. Data suggest that Islamic prayer is embraced as a legitimate part of the ritual, reinforcing collective spiritual security. Such balance allows the ceremony to remain relevant amid shifting religious landscapes. Kogoya et al. (2023) argue that religious acculturation within local rituals enhances social cohesion by fostering inclusive spiritual dialogue. Within Ngasa Gandoang, this syncretism safeguards ritual legitimacy in a devout society. Hence, the integration of formal religion serves as a cultural strategy for sustaining ritual continuity.

Furthermore, the tree-planting practice within the Ngasa Gandoang sequence underscores the ritual’s tangible ecological spirituality. The ceremony extends beyond symbols and prayers into concrete environmental action. Field data reveal that the planting activity is perceived as a gesture of human gratitude to nature after receiving blessings. This act nurtures ecological awareness through meaningful collective experience. Verawati and Wardani (2024) emphasize that indigenous rituals function effectively as

culturally grounded ecological education. Their findings affirm that environmental values are more readily embraced when interwoven with spiritual practice. In this light, Ngasa Gandoang embodies a form of moral ecology—a living synthesis of spirituality, social ethics, and environmental responsibility that defines the community's harmonious coexistence with the natural world.

4.2 Factors Supporting the Continuity of the Ngasa Gandoang Tradition

Empirical findings reveal that the endurance of the Ngasa Gandoang tradition is not solely determined by adherence to ritual procedures but is also reinforced by the social and cultural structures that sustain its continuity. Among these, ritual authority occupies a central position. One informant emphasized that the ceremony must be led by a *kuncen* who thoroughly understands the customary laws. This statement highlights that the *kuncen*'s symbolic authority functions as a legitimizing force, preserving the sacred order and ensuring the ritual's moral and spiritual integrity. Without this figure, the ritual risks losing its normative meaning and traditional validity. Another crucial factor is intergenerational transmission, which is carefully preserved through oral traditions. Informants consistently stressed that ancestral teachings must not be altered, reflecting a strong orientation toward preserving continuity. This pattern of transmission maintains ritual authenticity while fostering a collective awareness that excessive change may disrupt the inherited symbolic balance. Extended family participation, including members returning from migration, further reinforces this continuity. Informants noted that relatives from outside the village always return to attend the ritual, turning it into a space of social reconsolidation that strengthens kinship bonds and broadens participation beyond geographic boundaries.

The involvement of younger generations emerges as an important indicator of cultural regeneration. As explained by one informant, youth participation in activities such as cleaning sacred paths and carrying offerings serves not only a technical role but also a symbolic learning process. Through this engagement, the younger members internalize local wisdom and develop a sense of pride and ownership toward their heritage. Interestingly, the ritual's continuity persists even after the loss of some physical artifacts, such as ancient sacred stones. One participant stated that despite the disappearance of material elements, the tradition continues. This reflects a form of cultural adaptability, where symbolic meaning is prioritized over physical representation, allowing the ritual to endure amid material loss.

Economic adaptability also plays a role. Informants emphasized that the essence of the ritual lies in gratitude rather than in the luxury of offerings. This principle reflects a flexible economic ethic and a value orientation that privileges spiritual sincerity over material display. Communal solidarity is another sustaining factor. One participant asserted that without collective cooperation, the mountain pilgrimage could not take place. Thus, the ritual serves as a social arena of collaboration, strengthening mutual trust and interdependence among community members. At a deeper level, Ngasa Gandoang acts as a cultural identity marker. Informants expressed that the ritual defines who they are as a community, functioning as a cultural compass that links ritual practice with belonging, collective identity, and social continuity.

From the social practices surrounding Ngasa Gandoang, this study finds that the ritual operates as a mechanism for shaping solidarity, social stability, and cultural pride within the Salem community. Empirical evidence shows that the continuity of Ngasa Gandoang is maintained through the combination of ritual authority, intergenerational transmission, and collective participation all of which reinforce communal cohesion and shared identity. The ritual authority of the kuncen stands as the main pillar of this continuity, serving as the symbolic and moral center of the community. The kuncen is responsible for ensuring that each stage of the ritual aligns with local cosmology and customary order. This authority extends beyond the technical; it embodies spiritual legitimacy, as the kuncen is seen as the intermediary between humans, ancestors, and nature. Field data indicate that community members believe the absence of the kuncen would diminish the ritual's sacred power and meaning. This confirms that the ritual structure depends on a figure collectively recognized for their sacred authority. These findings align with Nisa'u and Widiyanto (2024), who affirm that customary-religious figures play a vital role in preserving local traditions. Thus, the kuncen functions as both the stabilizing pillar of the ritual and the guardian of the community's social order.

Beyond authority, knowledge transmission across generations remains vital for maintaining Ngasa Gandoang amid social change. The inheritance of values and practices occurs through oral teaching and the direct involvement of youth in ritual activities. This pattern ensures that symbolic meanings are internalized contextually and sustainably. Field data show that young participants actively join in clearing sacred paths, preparing offerings, and carrying ritual equipment. Their participation serves as a medium of cultural learning and identity formation. Mubayanah and Amin (2024) assert that enduring rituals are those capable of being reinterpreted by new generations without losing their core meaning. In the context of Ngasa Gandoang, this intergenerational regeneration maintains the balance between continuity and adaptation. Therefore, transmission across generations serves as a strategic pillar in ensuring the ritual's longevity.

The adaptive dimension of Ngasa Gandoang is also evident in its capacity to survive despite material and economic changes. The loss of sacred artifacts and the simplification of offerings do not undermine the ritual's essence, as symbolic meaning continues to take precedence. The community's value orientation places sincerity and gratitude at the heart of the ritual rather than material grandeur. Field data reveal that simplicity is embraced as an authentic aspect of the tradition. Rosdahliani (2025) notes that spiritual ecology emphasizes the dynamic relationship between humans, nature, and sacred symbols within cultural adaptation. These findings are consistent with Sudarto et al. (2022) and Verawati and Wardani (2024), who highlight the integration of spiritual and ecological values within local rituals. Hence, the adaptability of Ngasa Gandoang demonstrates that it is not a static practice but a flexible and resilient cultural system one that harmonizes spirituality, ethics, and ecology in sustaining the moral and social life of the community.

4.3 Social Implications of the Tradition's Continuity

The continuity of the Ngasa Gandoang tradition not only preserves ritual practices but also generates tangible social impacts within the daily life of the Salem community.

This ritual cultivates solidarity, strengthens social relationships, and fosters community stability through recurring collective participation. The social dimension of the Sedekah Gunung Ngasa Gandoang ceremony is most vividly expressed through acts of collective gratitude. One informant emphasized that all participants, without exception, share a communal meal. This practice creates an egalitarian social space where distinctions of social status are temporarily suspended. The shared meal thus functions not merely as the ritual's closing act but as a symbolic mechanism that reinforces unity and mutual well-being.

Cooperation stands as the foundation of this continuity. According to several informants, every stage of the ritual before, during, and after the ceremony is carried out through *gotong royong*, or mutual cooperation. This collaborative pattern strengthens the community's ethic of mutual assistance and affirms the ritual's role as a social arena where collective responsibility is learned and performed. The spiritual continuity of the community is equally evident in the prayers led by the *kuncen*. Informants noted that these prayers serve as moral reminders to honor both nature and the ancestors. Through this, the ritual reinforces ethical and ecological awareness, ensuring the transmission of spiritual values that define the relationship between humans, their environment, and ancestral heritage.

Beyond its spiritual and moral functions, Ngasa Gandoang also acts as a connective thread for community members living far from home. Informants shared that many migrants return annually to join the ritual, treating it as a homecoming that renews kinship bonds and emotional attachment. This phenomenon demonstrates that the ritual revitalizes social networks and reaffirms the village as the spiritual and cultural center of identity. Social stability is nurtured through the collective experience of the ritual. As one informant described, the atmosphere becomes peaceful after the communal meal a sign that the ritual operates as a mechanism for reducing social tension, rebuilding trust, and reinforcing post-ritual cohesion. On a broader symbolic level, the Sedekah Gunung Ngasa Gandoang ceremony instills a profound sense of cultural pride. Informants expressed that this tradition is uniquely theirs, representing a distinct local identity and a source of collective dignity that differentiates their community from others while deepening their sense of belonging to their ancestral heritage.

The social dimension of the Ngasa Gandoang tradition is most clearly reflected in the practices of communal dining and cooperative labor, both of which shape an egalitarian social sphere within the community. During the ritual, social, economic, and generational hierarchies are consciously suspended, placing every participant on equal footing. This temporary dissolution of hierarchy allows interaction free from domination or subordination. Field data reveal that participation in cooking, distributing, and consuming the ritual meal is open to everyone, without restriction. The act of eating together also serves as a symbolic medium for evenly redistributing blessings among all members of the community. Muhammad (2024) argues that collective participation in customary rituals strengthens social cooperation through shared emotional experiences. Within the Ngasa Gandoang context, this emotional solidarity is manifested through both physical and symbolic togetherness, reinforcing a sense of fairness and intergenerational unity. Thus, the ritual functions as a social instrument for reproducing egalitarian values in the communal life of Salem's people.

Beyond fostering solidarity, the Ngasa Gandoang tradition serves as an important mechanism of social stabilization. The ritual creates a symbolic space for releasing social tension arising from economic strain, interpersonal conflict, or social change. Through communal prayers, ritual silence, and shared interaction, participants experience emotional reconciliation. Interviews reveal that villagers feel calm and at peace once the ritual concludes evidence that the ceremony effectively regulates collective emotions and restores psychosocial balance. From an anthropological perspective, this supports the notion of ritual as a tool for social integration. The Ngasa Gandoang ceremony, therefore, is not only a cultural symbol but also a form of social therapy that contributes directly to the maintenance of communal harmony and enduring social stability.

Furthermore, the tradition fosters cultural pride, reinforcing the collective dignity of the Salem community. The ritual serves as a marker of local identity, distinguishing the community from its neighboring groups. This identity is expressed not only through symbols and narratives but also through active intergenerational participation. Data show that both younger generations and migrant members continue to return and participate in the ceremony despite constraints of time and distance. (Nisa'u & Widiyanto (2024) affirm that indigenous rituals play a strategic role in preserving local identity amid modernization. In addition to its social aspects, Ngasa Gandoang integrates spiritual and ecological values most clearly through acts of nature reverence and the symbolic planting of trees. This integration extends the ritual's meaning beyond devotion, framing it as a cultural strategy for adaptation and resilience. In essence, the Ngasa Gandoang tradition stands as both a moral and social foundation an enduring source of cultural strength and continuity for the people of Salem.

4.4 Social Implications and Cultural Meaning

Beyond its ceremonial form, the Ngasa Gandoang ritual functions as a vital social mechanism that continuously shapes the moral and cultural structure of the Salem community. Through its recurring collective enactment, the ritual renews solidarity, strengthens kinship, and reinforces communal stability. It is not merely a symbolic performance of devotion but a lived expression of harmony embodied in social action. During the communal feast where every participant eats together without distinction an egalitarian space of gratitude is created. As one informant noted, "During the meal, everyone is the same." This temporary suspension of hierarchy dissolves social boundaries and nurtures shared values of equality, humility, and mutual respect. Cooperation serves as the central foundation of the ritual's continuity. Every stage from preparation and offerings to closing is grounded in the principle of *gotong royong*, where collective labor becomes both a sacred obligation and a lesson in interdependence. Through these shared practices, participants internalize a sense of mutual responsibility that extends beyond human relationships to include the natural and spiritual realms. The prayers led by the *kuncen* function as moral and cosmological reminders, reaffirming harmony between human actions, ancestral will, and natural rhythms. This triadic relationship forms what may be described as an ethical ecology a lived awareness that spiritual and environmental harmony are inherently intertwined.

Equally meaningful is the ritual's role as a symbolic homecoming for community members living away from Salem. Their annual return for Ngasa Gandoang transforms the event into a living symbol of belonging. This shared return revives kinship ties and emotional connections, renewing social bonds that transcend distance and time. Informants often describe the atmosphere after the ritual as peaceful and unifying a psychosocial outcome that underscores the ritual's role as a communal emotional regulator. This observation resonates with anthropological interpretations of ritual as a medium of social integration and collective therapy, where communities reestablish cohesion and emotional balance through shared sacred experience. At a broader symbolic level, Ngasa Gandoang cultivates a deep sense of cultural pride and reinforces the community's local identity. The ritual distinguishes the Salem people from neighboring groups while affirming their dignity as custodians of ancestral wisdom. The participation of both youth and returning migrants reflects intergenerational continuity and the resilience of cultural identity. As noted by Bodi (2019); Husen Alhaddad et al. (2022); and Nisa'u & Widiyanto (2024), local rituals function as strategic instruments in preserving identity and moral coherence amid modernization.

Moreover, Ngasa Gandoang integrates ecological consciousness through acts such as tree planting and reverence for natural elements. This synthesis of environmental ethics and spiritual devotion illustrates the community's adaptive intelligence—its ability to preserve traditional meaning while responding to contemporary environmental awareness. Such adaptation demonstrates that the ritual is not static but dynamically evolving with the moral and ecological needs of the present. Ultimately, Ngasa Gandoang transcends its ritual boundaries to stand as a comprehensive cultural institution an enduring foundation of social resilience, moral balance, and sustainable harmony. Through this living tradition, the people of Salem continually negotiate the tension between continuity and change, ensuring that their cultural pulse remains vibrant across generations.

5 Conclusion

The Ngasa Gandoang Tradition in Salem illustrates how a local ritual can sustain its vitality through the interplay of structured ceremonial order, enduring customary authority, and inclusive community participation across generations. Each stage of the ritual from the cleansing of sacred pathways and the preparation of offerings to purification rites and collective prayers demonstrates that its continuity is not sustained merely by spiritual symbolism. Rather, it endures through the regular enactment of social mechanisms that bind individuals to their ancestors, their environment, and each other. Through this rhythm of participation, the community continually renews its moral and ecological bond with the world around it.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the discourse on cultural sustainability by revealing how social cohesion, collective identity construction, and spiritual ecology operate together as a resilient framework for preserving tradition. The fusion of sacred values with human relationships to nature and communal solidarity transforms ritual

from a static religious act into a living space of identity negotiation. Within this space, the people of Salem reinterpret ancestral heritage to meet contemporary realities blending old wisdom with modern adaptation. The findings affirm that traditions are not fixed relics of the past but dynamic cultural entities that evolve through interaction, reinterpretation, and adaptive transformation.

Ultimately, the Ngasa Gandoang Tradition stands as a tangible example of cultural resilience in motion. Its strength lies not in resistance to change but in the community's capacity to reproduce core values gratitude, harmony, cooperation through meaningful adaptation. By maintaining sacred continuity while embracing renewal, the people of Salem demonstrate how local wisdom can thrive amid the forces of modernization. The tradition therefore transcends its role as a cultural ceremony; it becomes a living philosophy, a moral compass, and a collective expression of the community's enduring harmony with the natural and spiritual worlds.

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