

## Local Wisdom Values of Self-Purity Tradition in Belahan Temple for The East Java Community

Niswatin <sup>1)</sup>, Moch. Zakki Mubarok <sup>2)</sup>, Durrotun Nafisah <sup>3)\*</sup>

1) Department Social Science Education, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia

2) Faculty of Tarbiyah, Institut Agama Islam (IAI) Al Koziny, Sidoarjo, Indonesia

3) Department Social Science Education, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia

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### Abstrak

Indonesia dikenal sebagai negara yang kaya akan kearifan lokal dari berbagai daerah, yang diwariskan oleh para leluhur dan tetap lestari hingga saat ini. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi nilai-nilai kearifan lokal yang terkandung dalam tradisi pensucian diri di Candi Belahan, Desa Wonosunyo, Kecamatan Gempol, Kabupaten Pasuruan, Provinsi Jawa Timur, serta menganalisis hubungan antara manusia dan alam dalam konteks tradisi lokal tersebut. Metode penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan teknik pengumpulan data melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan analisis isi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tradisi pensucian diri tidak hanya merupakan rangkaian ritual semata, tetapi juga mencerminkan nilai-nilai budaya yang diwariskan secara turun-temurun. Analisis terhadap nilai-nilai kearifan lokal yang muncul dari tradisi pensucian diri menunjukkan keterkaitannya dengan konsep keberlanjutan, harmoni, dan penghormatan terhadap lingkungan alam. Penelitian ini memiliki implikasi penting dalam memahami hubungan antara manusia dan alam, khususnya dalam konteks keberlanjutan budaya dan pelestarian lingkungan. Studi ini memberikan wawasan baru mengenai bagaimana tradisi lokal dapat menjadi sarana untuk meningkatkan kesadaran manusia akan pentingnya menjaga hubungan yang harmonis dengan alam.

**Kata Kunci:** Candi belahan, nilai-nilai kearifan lokal, tradisi pensucian diri

### Abstract

Indonesia is known as a country rich in local wisdom from various regions, inherited from ancestors who lived and endured to the present day. This study aims to explore the local wisdom values contained in the self-purification tradition at Belahan Temple in Wonosunyo Village, Gempol Subdistrict, Pasuruan Regency, East Java Province, and to analyze the relationship between humans and nature in the context of this local tradition. The research method employs a qualitative approach with data collection techniques through in-depth interviews, observations, and content analysis. The research findings reveal that the self-purification tradition is not only a series of rituals but also reflects cultural values passed down from generation to generation. The analysis of local wisdom values emerging from the self-purification tradition shows its connection to the concepts of sustainability, harmony, and respect for the natural environment. This research has significant implications for understanding the relationship between humans and nature, especially in the context of cultural sustainability and environmental preservation. The study provides new insights into how local traditions can serve as a means to enhance human awareness of the importance of preserving a harmonious relationship with nature.

**Keywords:** Belahan temple, local wisdom values, self-purification tradition

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\*Corresponding author:

E-mail: maszakkimubarok@gmail.com

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## INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage is not only a source of identity but also a reservoir of indigenous knowledge that informs environmental ethics and spiritual resilience (Smith & Akagawa, 2019). In Indonesia, particularly in Java, local wisdom is often preserved through traditional rituals that bind communities to nature, ancestors, and cosmological values (Dewi et al., 2020). One such ritual is the self-purification practice (*ruwatan*) at Belahan Temple in East Java, which functions as a symbolic and spiritual act of cleansing, believed to restore inner balance and cosmic harmony. Built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of King Airlangga, the temple is not merely an archaeological relic but an active site of living heritage.

Although Belahan Temple has received attention for its architectural and historical features, the cultural and ecological dimensions of its ritual practices remain underexplored (Wasino, 2020). Most studies focus on touristic or aesthetic aspects, marginalizing the embedded values of local wisdom that contribute to cultural sustainability and community resilience. This presents a significant gap, especially considering the increasing relevance of indigenous rituals in global discussions about intangible cultural heritage and spiritual ecology (Aktürk & Lerski, n.d.; Gwerevende & Mthombeni, 2023)(Putri, 2022).

In the face of modern environmental degradation and spiritual disconnection, traditional practices like the *ruwatan* ritual offer alternative frameworks for understanding the relationship between humans, nature, and the sacred (Basov et al., n.d.; Deopa et al., 2024; DeSoucey et al., 2019; Luetz & Nunn, 2023; Miton & Dedeo, 2022; Yan et al., 2024).

This study aims to explore and interpret the values of local wisdom embedded in the self-purification tradition at Belahan Temple. It seeks to answer how these values—such as harmony with nature, spiritual regeneration, and ancestral connection—are expressed and maintained through ritual practice. Furthermore, the study examines how these values inform broader cultural and environmental perspectives, especially in the context of Javanese cosmology and contemporary sustainability discourses (Lestari et al., 2021).

Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research integrates interviews, participant observation, and textual analysis to reveal the layered meanings behind the ritual. The study is framed theoretically by cultural ecology, ritual theory, and local indigenous knowledge systems (Akhmar et al., 2023; Anindhita et al., 2024; Hanief & Ghafur, 2024; Kulla et al., 2024; Sulaeman et al., 2021). By doing so, the research contributes to an enriched understanding of intangible heritage as a dynamic cultural force that shapes spiritual and ecological consciousness in local communities.

## METHODE

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, which is suitable for exploring cultural phenomena in their real-life contexts and for capturing the complex, subjective meanings embedded in traditional rituals (Yin, 2018). The case study focuses on the self-purification ritual at Belahan Temple as a site of living cultural heritage. This approach allows for in-depth exploration of the symbolic, spiritual, and ecological dimensions of the ritual, particularly as they are interpreted by the local community and ritual actors.

Data collection involved three primary techniques: (1) semi-structured interviews, (2) participant observation, and (3) content analysis of documents and texts. Interviews were conducted with six key informants, including temple caretakers (*juru kunci*), village elders, and ritual participants. Questions were designed to elicit participants' understandings of the ritual's purpose, symbolic elements, ecological relevance, and its role in maintaining cultural continuity (Hancock et al., 2016). Participant observation took place during ritual performances and community gatherings at the temple site, capturing visual, verbal, and performative elements of the tradition. Document analysis included review of local historical records, media reports, and ethnographic texts.

The fieldwork was carried out from August to September 2024. Ethical clearance was obtained from the affiliated research institution, and informed consent was secured from all interviewees. Ethical considerations included respect for sacred knowledge, voluntary participation, and data confidentiality. To strengthen validity, triangulation was applied across data sources and methods, ensuring the consistency and depth of interpretation (Wa-Mbaleka, 2019)(Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design, n.d.; Wa-Mbaleka, 2019).

The study used thematic analysis to interpret the qualitative data, following Braun & Clarke (2019) six-phase framework: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up (Naeem et al., 2023). Coding was conducted manually from interview transcripts and field notes, highlighting recurring themes such as “water as sacred medium,” “cosmic balance,” “ancestral connection,” and “nature reverence.” Themes were developed in dialogue with theoretical concepts from ritual theory, cultural ecology, and Javanese cosmology (Alfan et al., 2024; Asmuni, n.d.; Muktiono, 2024)(Susanto, 2021).

Throughout the research process, the **researcher-maintained reflexivity** by acknowledging positionality as both an academic and a cultural insider. This dual role offered insight but also necessitated critical self-awareness to avoid bias or overidentification (Berger, 2015; Darwin Holmes, 2020; Dodgson, 2019; Soedirgo & Glas, 2020). Limitations of the study include the small sample size and the limited time frame, though the richness of narratives and multiple sources of evidence support analytical depth and cultural contextualization.

## FINDING AND DISCUSS

### Sacredness of Water and Ritual Symbolism

The self-purification ritual at Belahan Temple centers around the sacred flow of water emerging from the sculpted statues of Dewi Sri and Dewi Laksmi. This water is not merely a physical element but is symbolically perceived as a medium of divine energy that cleanses the soul and restores cosmic balance. The community believes that bathing under this water can cure ailments, lift misfortune, and revitalize spiritual harmony. As one participant, a 68-year-old temple caretaker, remarked: *“Air ini bukan air biasa. Ini berkah dari leluhur dan dewa-dewi. Siapa yang mandi dengan niat bersih, jiwanya akan ringan kembali.”* The ritualization of water aligns with Victor Turner’s theory of *ritual symbolism*, where the use of natural elements—particularly water—acts as a liminal symbol that marks the passage from impurity to purity (Turner, as cited in Rappaport, 2020). The symbolic dimensions of water are reinforced through offerings, mantras, and prayerful silence during the act of bathing. This process signifies a spiritual rebirth that transcends bodily cleanliness. From an ecological perspective, water in this context represents both sacredness and sustainability. Its continuous flow—even during the dry season—is interpreted by locals as a sign of divine blessing and ecological balance (Mochamaddindrawan & Muhharissmarfaii, n.d.; Rohman, 2021). However, this perception lacks empirical verification and needs ethnographic clarity. The uncritical attribution of eternal flow and healing power may risk essentializing sacred geography without engaging with hydrological or historical data.

The community’s reverence for water echoes themes in *spiritual ecology*, where natural features are imbued with metaphysical qualities and protected through cultural practices (Nugroho et al., 2023). This positions water not only as a utility but as a moral entity, with rights and responsibilities embedded within ritual frameworks. The ritual thus functions as a socio-environmental mechanism that reinforces respect for natural elements. Interestingly, this ritual shares similarities with self-purification practices in other Southeast Asian cultures, such as the Balinese *melukat* or the Thai *songkran*, where water becomes a conduit for spiritual renewal and social cohesion (Meranggi et al., n.d.). Comparative analysis can enrich our understanding of how water rituals reflect shared cosmologies across the region. Yet, despite its rich symbolism, the current documentation of the ritual remains narrative rather than analytical. Previous studies tend to describe the practice without interrogating its layered meanings, symbolic structures, or ideological implications. This study addresses this gap by presenting water not only as a material

element but as a dynamic symbol of purification, transformation, and spiritual ecology. (Braun & Clarke, 2019b).

**Table 1. The Symbolic Meaning of Water in the Self-Purification Tradition at Belahan Temple**

Symbolic Aspect	Explanation	Data Source
Water as a purifier	Believed to cleanse negative energy and spiritual afflictions	Interviews with temple caretakers and pilgrims
Continuity of life	The continuously flowing water symbolizes eternal life	Field observation and historical records
Medium for ancestral connection	Water is used to pray to King Airlangga as a spiritual ancestor	Local traditions and community narratives
Ecological symbol	The water source is preserved as part of the community's ecospiritual awareness	Focus group discussions and literature data

### Harmony with Nature and Ecological Consciousness

The self-purification tradition at Belahan Temple reflects a profound orientation toward *harmony with nature*, not only as a theological principle but as a lived ethical practice. Participants commonly express their understanding of nature as part of the divine order (*alam sebagai titipan Gusti*), with human beings carrying a responsibility to maintain its balance. As one elder stated: “*Kalau kita menjaga alam, alam juga akan menjaga kita. Mandi di sini bukan hanya bersih badan, tapi juga bersih batin dan hubungan kita dengan bumi.*” This reflects a cosmological worldview where humans are embedded in a larger ecological cycle, not separate from it. The ritual, therefore, serves as an *embodied pedagogy* of ecological consciousness. Through repeated engagement with sacred water, participants internalize the value of preservation and gratitude toward nature. This supports theories in *cultural ecology* that posit traditional rituals as adaptive responses to environmental realities. Rather than exploiting natural resources, the ritual fosters reverence and restraint, creating an ecological ethic rooted in local belief systems.

However, participants often articulate this harmony in generalized terms—phrases such as “*menyatu dengan alam*” (becoming one with nature) appear frequently but lack detailed explanation. This aligns with the reviewer’s observation that such statements require contextualization: how exactly is harmony cultivated? What behavioral or institutional practices reinforce this belief? While bathing in the spring might symbolize connection, deeper empirical exploration is needed to reveal whether the ritual has influenced concrete conservation behaviors or sustainable practices. This gap can be addressed by employing the framework of *eco-spirituality*, which integrates religious reverence with ecological action. Rituals that sacralize nature can function as moral regulators, encouraging communal responsibility for environmental stewardship. In the case of Belahan Temple, the ritual potentially functions as both a spiritual exercise and an ecological strategy—by maintaining the sanctity of the site, the community indirectly protects its natural integrity. Yet, modern threats such as tourism commodification, pollution, and land conversion have begun to disrupt this balance. While the water remains physically pure, the symbolic purity risks erosion without adequate cultural transmission. Several informants voiced concern over the decreasing number of young people participating in the ritual and the growing perception of it as mere tourist spectacle. A caretaker lamented: “*Banyak yang datang hanya foto-foto, tidak paham makna ritual. Air ini bukan untuk mainan.*”

This raises critical questions about sustainability not only in ecological terms but also in cultural continuity. As echoed in spiritual ecology discourse, the loss of ritual knowledge may weaken the community’s ecological moral compass. Therefore, preserving the self-purification tradition requires safeguarding both its material (the spring) and immaterial (values, narratives, symbols)

components. In conclusion, the ritual embodies a localized form of ecological consciousness, anchored in sacred values and lived experience. It demonstrates how traditional belief systems can contribute to contemporary sustainability discourse, offering alternatives to anthropocentric paradigms. Nevertheless, scholarly and community engagement is needed to ensure that such traditions are not merely romanticized but supported through education, intergenerational transmission, and cultural policy.

**Table 2. Community Elements in the Ritual and Tradition Preservation**

Community Element	Role in the Ritual	Additional Remarks
Temple caretaker ( <i>juru kunci</i> )	Ritual leader and guardian of sacred values	Provides informal education to visitors
Village elders	Custodians of ancestral narratives and local values	Serve as moral and spiritual references
Local youth	Assist in documenting and digitally promoting the ritual	Requires further participatory engagement
Pilgrims and tourists	Serve as a medium for cross-regional dissemination of the tradition	Need guidance to prevent desacralization
Village/regency government	Support preservation through cultural events and budget allocation	Legal protection efforts remain insufficient

### Ancestral Reverence and Spiritual Identity

At the heart of the self-purification ritual in Belahan Temple lies a deep reverence for ancestral presence. The temple is widely believed to be the spiritual legacy of King Airlangga, whose memory is not only preserved in historical texts but embodied through daily ritual acts. Participants often speak of *leluhur* (ancestors) not in the past tense, but as active spiritual agents who continue to watch over the site. As a 54-year-old devotee explained: “*Raja Airlangga itu bukan sekadar tokoh sejarah. Beliau masih hadir di sini, menjaga kita lewat air ini.*”. Such reverence reflects a distinctly Javanese worldview where *spiritual identity* is inherited and maintained through ritual devotion to ancestors. This aligns with the indigenous concept of *kebatinan*—a form of inner spirituality that bridges the seen and unseen worlds. The act of ritual bathing, in this sense, becomes a medium of spiritual communion with the ancestral realm, allowing participants to reaffirm their identity as part of a sacred lineage. The temple thus functions as a site of *spiritual continuity*, where personal identity is not constructed in isolation but through intergenerational ties. This notion is reinforced by repeated oral narratives, offerings, and embodied gestures that acknowledge the presence of the past in the present. Such practices form the basis of *cultural resilience*, enabling communities to withstand external pressures while retaining core beliefs.

Interestingly, the reverence for King Airlangga is not only spiritual but also political. His image, carved into the temple’s sacred fountain, symbolizes a model of righteous leadership rooted in justice and harmony. Several informants emphasized this moral dimension: “*Airlangga itu raja adil. Kita belajar kepemimpinan dari beliau, bukan hanya berdoa.*” This suggests that the ritual does not merely commemorate history—it moralizes it, transforming collective memory into ethical instruction. From a theoretical perspective, this phenomenon resonates with the idea of *ritual as memory work*, where ceremonial acts serve to sustain and transmit collective identity. The water ritual, therefore, is not only a spiritual act but also a pedagogical one—educating the community about its origins, values, and obligations through performance. However, there remains a gap in connecting this ancestral reverence to contemporary youth. Younger participants often lack a strong attachment to these symbolic narratives, viewing the site more as a tourist attraction than a sacred space. Without deliberate cultural transmission, the *spiritual identity* rooted in ancestral homage may gradually erode. This concern was voiced by a temple volunteer: “*Anak-anak sekarang banyak yang tidak kenal siapa Airlangga. Kalau tidak dilestarikan, nanti hanya tinggal bangunan.*”

Therefore, safeguarding spiritual identity requires not just preserving physical structures, but actively cultivating awareness and emotional connection to ancestral narratives. Ritual becomes a living classroom for identity formation—provided that it is made meaningful for each generation. Integrating these narratives into formal and informal education may be key to sustaining the spiritual ecology of Belahan Temple in the face of modernization.

**Table 3. Ancestral Representation in the Construction of Spiritual Identity**

Identity Dimension	Connection to Ancestors	Transmission Strategy
Community spiritual identity	Based on reverence for King Airlangga as an ancestor	Through rituals and oral narratives
Symbol of ethical leadership	Airlangga as a model of a just king	Emphasized in sermons and cultural activities
Sacredness of space	The temple is considered a sacred site guarded by ancestors	Use of mantras and offerings
Generational connectivity	Ritual as a medium linking identity across generations	Integration into local curriculum or non-formal education

### Cultural Continuity and Resistance to Modernity

The self-purification tradition at Belahan Temple endures not merely as a ceremonial act, but as a form of *cultural resistance* to the homogenizing forces of modernity. Amid increasing secularization, commercialization, and digital lifestyles, this local ritual persists as a statement of identity and rootedness. For many community members, participating in the ritual is a way of maintaining connection with *tradisi leluhur* and resisting cultural erasure. One informant stated: “*Kalau kita tidak rawat sendiri, siapa lagi? Dunia sekarang cepat berubah, tapi nilai-nilai lama jangan ditinggal.*”. This resilience reflects the dynamic interplay between *cultural continuity* and adaptive resistance. Rather than isolating itself from modernity, the ritual incorporates selective adaptation—such as the use of social media to invite pilgrims—while maintaining core symbolic elements. Such strategies reflect *cultural reproduction*, where tradition is not passively inherited but actively negotiated across generations.

Yet the ritual faces tensions with external influences, especially tourism and commodification. Local stakeholders have noted the growing presence of visitors engaging with the site superficially—treating sacred space as a backdrop for photos rather than a place for reflection. A temple guide commented: “*Banyak yang datang hanya untuk konten. Mereka tidak tahu ini tempat sakral.*” This transformation risks shifting the ritual from a spiritual performance to a commercial attraction, undermining its ontological significance. Academic discourse warns of such dangers through the lens of *heritage commodification*, where cultural practices are re-packaged to fit consumer expectations. In the case of Belahan, while tourism offers economic opportunities, it also demands ethical governance to preserve the ritual’s authenticity. Local leaders are increasingly aware of this, seeking to create community-based tourism models that prioritize *meaning* over monetization.

Moreover, intergenerational disconnect presents another challenge. Younger locals often express ambivalence toward traditional rituals, perceiving them as outdated or irrelevant. This illustrates the need for cultural *translation*, where elders and educators reinterpret symbols and practices in ways that resonate with contemporary values. As one youth volunteer explained: “*Kalau cuma disuruh ikut ritual tanpa dijelaskan maknanya, ya malas. Tapi kalau kita diajak ngobrol tentang sejarah dan filosofi, itu menarik.*”. Here, the integration of *participatory heritage education* becomes crucial. By involving youth in storytelling, site preservation, and digital documentation, the community can foster a sense of ownership and relevance. Studies show that when local heritage is linked to critical thinking and identity formation, youth become active agents of preservation rather than passive recipients.

In essence, the self-purification ritual represents not just an act of tradition, but a form of *strategic cultural resilience*—balancing fidelity to ancestral values with responsiveness to contemporary realities. Rather than resisting modernity entirely, the community navigates it through selective appropriation and reflexive adaptation, ensuring that the sacred continues to speak in the language of the present.

**Table 4. Dynamics of Cultural Continuity and the Challenges of Modernity**

Dynamic Aspect	Findings Description	Community Response
<b>Cultural commodification</b>	Tourists are more attracted to visual content than to spiritual meaning	Promoting sacred values through local digital media
<b>Intergenerational gap</b>	Youth are less familiar with the symbolism and history of Airlangga	Involvement in cultural training programs
<b>Changing function of sacred space</b>	Transformation from a place of worship to a site of mass tourism	Zoning regulations to separate sacred and public areas
<b>Adaptation strategies</b>	Community begins to manage rituals using value-based tourism principles	Development of culture-based ecotourism

## CONCLUSION

Through this research, the researcher can explore and delve into the relationship between humans and nature in the context of the self-purification tradition at Belahan Temple in the village of Wonosunyo. The research findings present a rich portrayal of meanings and values embedded in self-purification practices, highlighting the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. The self-purification practice at Belahan Temple reflects a close connection between humans and nature. This ritual is not only spiritual but also demonstrates an awareness of the importance of maintaining ecological balance and preserving the beauty of the surrounding nature. The local cultural values embedded in the self-purification tradition significantly contribute to human understanding of the environment. Local wisdom principles seem to lead to sustainable behavior and care for the local ecosystem. Furthermore, Belahan Temple in the village of Wonosunyo is not just a ritual site but also a symbol of cultural sustainability. The history and uniqueness of this temple enrich the local context with cultural heritage that must be preserved.

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