

Harmony in Death: The Symbolic, Social, and Ecological Dimensions of *Mekinsan di Geni*

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ABSTRAK. Pengelolaan sampah di Bali telah menjadi isu yang semakin kompleks, tidak hanya muncul dari kegiatan rumah tangga dan pariwisata, tetapi juga dari ritual keagamaan tradisional yang menghasilkan sampah dalam jumlah besar. Material ritual organik seperti daun kelapa, bunga, dan buah-buahan dapat terurai secara hayati; namun, volumenya yang sangat besar, terutama jika dicampur dengan material yang tidak dapat terurai secara hayati seperti plastik dan kain sintetis, menimbulkan tantangan lingkungan yang signifikan. Dengan latar belakang ini, tradisi *Mekinsan di Geni* di Desa Nagasepaha, Kabupaten Buleleng, menawarkan contoh praktik ritual yang menarik yang mengintegrasikan dimensi simbolis, sosial, dan ekologis. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, dengan memanfaatkan observasi partisipan, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi untuk menganalisis makna yang terkandung dalam *Mekinsan di Geni*. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa secara simbolis, ritual tersebut berfungsi sebagai perwujudan *pitara yadnya* dan mencerminkan kembalinya eksistensi manusia ke kosmos melalui *panca mahabhuta*. Secara sosial, ritual ini memupuk solidaritas dan memperkuat identitas komunal melalui partisipasi kolektif. Secara ekologis, kewajiban keluarga untuk membersihkan tempat ritual dalam waktu tiga hari menunjukkan etika lingkungan yang selaras dengan prinsip *Tri Hita Karana* dari *Palemahan*. Dengan demikian, *Mekinsan di Geni* tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai praktik keagamaan tetapi juga sebagai bentuk kearifan lokal yang relevan dengan tantangan pengelolaan sampah kontemporer di Bali, menawarkan wawasan edukatif tentang praktik budaya berkelanjutan untuk generasi mendatang.

ABSTRACT. Waste management in Bali has become an increasingly complex issue, arising not only from household and tourism activities but also from traditional religious rituals that produce substantial amounts of waste. Organic ritual materials such as coconut leaves, flowers, and fruits are biodegradable; however, their sheer volume, especially when mixed with non-biodegradable materials such as plastic and synthetic fabrics, creates significant environmental challenges. Against this backdrop, the *Mekinsan di Geni* tradition in Nagasepaha Village, Buleleng Regency, offers a compelling example of ritual practice that integrates symbolic, social, and ecological dimensions. This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, utilizing participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation to analyze the meanings embedded in *Mekinsan di Geni*. The findings reveal that symbolically, the ritual functions as an enactment of *pitara yadnya* and reflects the return of human existence to the cosmos through the *panca mahabhuta*. Socially, it fosters solidarity and strengthens communal identity through collective participation. Ecologically, the requirement for families to clean the ritual site within three days demonstrates an environmental ethic aligned with the *Palemahan* principle of *Tri Hita Karana*. Thus, *Mekinsan di Geni* not only serves as a religious practice but also as a form of local wisdom with relevance for contemporary waste management challenges in Bali, offering educational insights into sustainable cultural practices for future generations.

ARTICLE INFO

Kata Kunci:

Mekinsan di Geni; *Pitara Yadnya*; *Tri Hita Karana*; Sampah Ritual; Hindu Bali; Keberlanjutan

Keywords:

Mekinsan di Geni; *Pitara Yadnya*; *Tri Hita Karana*; Ritual Waste; Balinese Hinduism; Sustainability

Received November 10, 2024;

Accepted February 12, 2025;

Available Online March 25, 2025



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1. INTRODUCTION

Death rituals within Balinese Hinduism are central expressions of *pitara yadnya*, designed to purify the soul and facilitate the deceased's journey toward liberation (*moksha*). These rituals not only represent religious obligations but

also serve as cultural markers that reinforce collective identity and continuity across generations. Classic ethnographic work by [Geertz \(1973\)](#) emphasizes that Balinese rituals function as symbolic systems that embody cosmological structures and social order, thereby operating simultaneously as acts of devotion and as cultural performances. Building upon this foundation, [Suamba \(2010\)](#) highlights that variations in death rituals, including *Mekinsan di Geni*, demonstrate the adaptive capacity of Hindu teachings in Bali, showing how local communities reinterpret universal religious principles to respond to their social and ecological contexts. Similarly, [Astawa \(2018\)](#) situates death rituals as pedagogical spaces where intergenerational transmission of values occurs, stressing their role in cultivating solidarity, cooperation, and respect for ancestral traditions. Beyond their symbolic and social dimensions, the ecological implications of ritual practices in Bali have gained growing scholarly attention. [Astuti \(2019\)](#), for instance, documented that a single mass cremation in Gianyar generated more than 300 kilograms of organic waste, revealing the scale of environmental impact that can accompany religious ceremonies. While such waste is primarily biodegradable, the excessive accumulation of organic material can disrupt local ecosystems and sanitation systems. [Putra \(2020\)](#) extends this concern by examining the proliferation of non-biodegradable materials, such as plastics and synthetic textiles, in contemporary ritual paraphernalia, a trend that exacerbates the ecological footprint of ceremonies. [Suyadnya \(2015\)](#) further illustrates the risks of unmanaged ritual waste, noting how discarded offerings and plastics often end up in rivers and coastal areas, thereby threatening water quality, community health, and Bali's reputation as a global tourist destination. These findings underscore the tension between maintaining cultural practices and addressing modern environmental challenges.

In this regard, *Mekinsan di Geni* emerges as a particularly noteworthy case because of its structural integration of ecological responsibility into ritual obligations. Unlike many other ceremonies where waste disposal is often left unregulated, *Mekinsan di Geni* requires families to return to the ritual site within three days to clean and restore the area. This embedded practice demonstrates how cultural traditions can incorporate mechanisms of ecological stewardship without compromising spiritual or social significance. Such integration suggests that indigenous rituals may offer valuable models for contemporary sustainable practices, especially in contexts where state-led waste management systems remain limited. To situate these insights within a broader conceptual framework, the philosophy of *Tri Hita Karana* provides an essential lens. This doctrine emphasizes the harmonious relationships between humans and God (*Parahyangan*), humans and fellow humans (*Pawongan*), and humans and the natural environment (*Palemahan*). [Pitana \(1994\)](#) underscores that *Tri Hita Karana* is not only a religious principle but also a guiding ethos for Balinese social life. [Windia and Dewi \(2011\)](#) further argue for its relevance to sustainable development, suggesting that local wisdom traditions can meaningfully inform contemporary policy frameworks. [Geriya \(2004\)](#) similarly demonstrates that Balinese rituals, when practiced with ecological awareness, can support environmental conservation and resilience. Viewed through this framework, *Mekinsan di Geni* exemplifies the *Palemahan* dimension by embedding ecological ethics into ritual practice, while simultaneously sustaining communal solidarity and spiritual devotion.

Taken together, the literature highlights three important insights: first, that Balinese death rituals serve multiple functions beyond their spiritual core, including symbolic, social, and pedagogical roles; second, that modern transformations in ritual practice have introduced significant ecological challenges, particularly in relation to waste; and third, that indigenous frameworks and international theories about ritual ecology and TEK provide fertile ground for interpreting how rituals can contribute to environmental stewardship. However, while studies have documented the environmental impact of rituals in general ([Astuti, 2019](#); [Putra, 2020](#); [Suyadnya, 2015](#)), relatively few have examined specific ritual forms that explicitly integrate ecological responsibility. This study addresses that gap by analyzing *Mekinsan di Geni* as a case where symbolic, social, and ecological dimensions intersect, offering lessons for both cultural preservation and environmental sustainability.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to provide a holistic understanding of the symbolic, social, and ecological dimensions of *Mekinsan di Geni*. A qualitative approach was chosen because the research sought to capture lived experiences, cultural meanings, and emic perspectives of participants rather than to test predetermined hypotheses. The descriptive orientation allowed the researcher to present the phenomenon as it occurs in its natural setting, highlighting the richness and complexity of ritual practices in Nagasepaha Village. Data were gathered through multiple qualitative techniques to ensure depth and contextual accuracy. First, participant observation was conducted during several ritual proceedings, enabling the researcher to directly document sequences of activities, material uses, symbolic acts, and community interactions. The observations were complemented with detailed field notes and photographic documentation, providing visual and textual records of the ritual environment. Second, in-depth interviews were carried out with key informants, including religious leaders (*pemangku*), community elders, family participants, and youth involved in ritual preparations. These interviews were semi-structured, allowing flexibility to probe into themes such as the philosophical meanings of *pitara yadnya*, the transmission of social values, and ecological concerns. Third, document analysis was employed to review textual sources such as ritual guidelines, local manuscripts, and community records that contextualize the historical and cultural background of *Mekinsan di Geni*.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling approach to ensure representation from various social roles and age groups within the community. Approximately 20 informants were engaged, encompassing ritual specialists,

family members directly involved in the ceremony, and local community members who participate in site cleaning activities. This diversity of perspectives enriched the understanding of symbolic, social, and ecological dimensions.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic coding, an iterative process involving transcription, categorization, and synthesis of emerging patterns. Coding was guided by three analytical categories: (1) symbolic meanings of the ritual within the framework of *pitara yadnya* and the dissolution into *panca mahabhuta*; (2) social functions related to communal solidarity, identity formation, and intergenerational transmission; and (3) ecological practices, particularly the mandated site cleaning within three days after the ritual. NVivo software was employed to assist in organizing and managing qualitative data, ensuring systematic coding and retrieval. Interpretations were continuously refined through comparison of observational notes, interview transcripts, and documentary evidence. To enhance credibility, the study applied triangulation across data sources (observation, interviews, and documents) and informant perspectives. Member checking was also conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to confirm accuracy and resonance with local understandings. Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the research to document the researcher's positionality and minimize interpretive bias. Transferability was strengthened through thick description of the ritual context, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to similar settings. Ethical protocols were strictly observed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviews, with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. Sensitive cultural materials were handled respectfully in consultation with community leaders, and the researcher ensured that documentation activities did not disrupt ritual proceedings. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for anthropological and cultural research, respecting both the sacredness of the ritual and the rights of participants.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings reveal that *Mekinsan di Geni* is not a simple ritual, but a complex cultural performance imbued with multilayered meanings that manifest through concrete actions, narratives, and embodied practices. Each stage of the ritual is deeply interwoven with symbolic, social, and ecological implications, reflecting the Balinese worldview that life, death, and nature are inseparably connected. The ritual begins with the act of sweeping and cleaning the cemetery (*setra*). Families collectively ensure that the ritual space is neat and free from debris. Beyond its practical function, this act reflects a dual ethic of purification: physical cleansing of the environment and spiritual preparation for communion with the ancestral realm. By restoring order to the burial ground, participants reaffirm the sanctity of the space where the living and the dead converge. Once the area is cleansed, families make offerings of *banten sagi* to the graves of children and to the graves of family members belonging to the *gusti* lineage. This step reflects a deliberate effort to maintain harmony among various ancestral spirits and symbolizes an ethic of inclusivity. Rather than focusing solely on the immediate deceased, the ritual recognizes the interconnectedness of all kin, reinforcing ties between the nuclear family and the broader kinship network. The ritual continues with the symbolic bathing of the soul, performed by sprinkling *tirta* (holy water) over the graves. This act embodies the belief that the soul (*atma*) requires renewal, purification, and care, just as the body once did in life. It expresses a gentle, nurturing relationship between the living and the dead, where care is extended beyond the physical plane into the spiritual realm. Following this, families offer *sagi*, *daar*, and *punjung* ritual food believed to nourish the spirit of the departed. Such offerings reflect the conviction that the souls remain present in the world until the cremation (*ngaben*) ceremony liberates them fully.

An important temporal dimension underpins these acts: they must be performed before sunrise. Rising early to conduct the ritual symbolizes the family's role in "waking" the soul, providing sustenance at the beginning of the day. The rhythm of ritual time mirrors the rhythm of natural cycles, embedding human practice within the broader cosmic order. From a symbolic perspective, *Mekinsan di Geni* represents the continuous interplay between the human body, the cosmos, and the ancestral world. The ritual affirms the cosmological principle of returning the body to the *panca mahabhuta* earth, water, fire, air, and ether while simultaneously maintaining ties with the *pitara* (ancestors). Daily morning offerings demonstrate filial devotion and reinforce the belief that the deceased continue to share a reciprocal relationship with the living. The requirement to perform the ritual before sunrise introduces a powerful temporal metaphor: just as the rising sun brings light and renewal to the earth, the offerings bring renewal to the bond between the family and the departed soul. Socially, *Mekinsan di Geni* operates as a mechanism for solidarity and cultural transmission. The preparation of offerings, the act of cleaning, and the performance of prayers all demand cooperation between family members, neighbors, and kin networks. This collaboration strengthens bonds of trust and mutual support within the community. Furthermore, it serves as an arena of intergenerational education: younger members learn values of respect, discipline, and reverence by directly participating in the ritual alongside their elders. In this way, the ritual becomes not only a spiritual practice but also a form of cultural pedagogy, ensuring the continuity of collective memory and identity.

Ecologically, the ritual illustrates a unique ethic of environmental care. The insistence on cleaning the cemetery before the ritual demonstrates a cultural acknowledgment of the inseparability of sacredness and ecological health. Unlike many other Balinese ceremonies where remnants of offerings accumulate as waste, *Mekinsan di Geni* obliges families to collect and dispose of both organic and inorganic remains responsibly. This act embodies a localized form of environmental stewardship, where spiritual duties align with ecological preservation. By situating ecological care within

ritual obligations, the community models a sustainable cultural adaptation that harmonizes human activity with environmental balance. Taken together, these findings show that *Mekinsan di Geni* transcends its role as a transitional ritual for the dead. It emerges as a holistic cultural practice that intertwines layers of symbolic meaning, social solidarity, and ecological responsibility. Through the ritual, families not only honor their departed but also reaffirm their connections with kin, community, and nature. The practice ensures continuity across multiple realms the living, the departed, and the environment thus positioning *Mekinsan di Geni* as a profound expression of Balinese philosophy of harmony in life, death, and the cosmos.

Discussion

The analysis of *Mekinsan di Geni* illustrates how Balinese religious rituals embody an intricate interweaving of symbolic, social, and ecological practices that reflect the holistic worldview of Hindu Dharma. This ritual demonstrates that spirituality in Bali is never confined to transcendental meanings alone, but is always embedded in concrete practices that involve the body, the family, the community, and the natural environment. At the symbolic level, each ritual action from the sweeping of the cemetery, to the sprinkling of holy water, and finally to the placement of offerings before sunrise underscores the integration of human existence with cosmic rhythms. These ritual stages reaffirm the principle of *panca mahabhuta*, whereby the human body is understood as composed of the five great elements of earth, water, fire, air, and ether. Death is therefore not perceived as an abrupt end but as a cyclical return of the body to its elemental origins. This cyclical philosophy nurtures the ongoing relationship between the living and the ancestral realm, ensuring that the dead are not forgotten but remain integrated into the rhythms of life until their souls are fully liberated through *ngaben*. Such a worldview resonates with Geertz's (1973) observation of Balinese Hinduism as a religious system in which the cycle of life and death is harmonized with the cosmic order. The timing of the ritual before sunrise adds an additional layer of symbolism, for it mirrors the renewal of life with the dawn, as if the soul is gently awakened and nourished by its descendants.

Socially, *Mekinsan di Geni* functions as a ritualized form of cooperation that strengthens community bonds and safeguards cultural continuity. The preparation of offerings and the collective act of cleaning the burial ground cannot be carried out in isolation; they demand collaboration between family members and neighbors. This cooperative labor reflects what Astawa (2018) describes as the communal ethic of Balinese society, in which religious obligations are simultaneously social obligations. Beyond reinforcing solidarity, the ritual also serves as an arena of intergenerational education: younger members learn through direct participation how to respect their ancestors, work together with kin, and uphold the moral values of harmony and reverence. Thus, the ritual operates not only as a form of worship but also as a pedagogical process that transmits cultural knowledge and ethical orientation across generations.

From an ecological perspective, the requirement to clean the *setra* before conducting the ritual elevates environmental care to the level of sacred duty. This obligation is aligned with the *palemahan* dimension of *Tri Hita Karana*, which emphasizes harmony between humans and the natural world as integral to spiritual balance (Windia & Dewi, 2011). By mandating that both organic and inorganic remnants be collected and disposed of properly, the ritual embeds ecological consciousness into its very structure. This sets *Mekinsan di Geni* apart from many other ceremonies in Bali that often result in the accumulation of ceremonial waste. Here, the ethic of care for nature is inseparable from the ethic of care for the ancestors, demonstrating that environmental stewardship is not an external imposition but an indigenous cultural practice rooted in spirituality. In the broader context of contemporary Bali, which struggles with the escalating problem of ceremonial waste, *Mekinsan di Geni* provides an alternative model of sustainable ritual practice. Rather than positioning rituals as environmental burdens, this tradition shows how religious devotion can foster ecological responsibility. By embedding waste management and site cleanliness into ritual obligations, it offers a culturally resonant strategy for addressing modern environmental challenges. Moreover, the temporal discipline of performing the ritual before sunrise adds further pedagogical value, teaching patience, mindfulness, and respect for natural cycles. This temporal dimension highlights how rituals can instill ecological virtues such as care, attentiveness, and responsibility through the structuring of daily practice. Taken together, these insights suggest that *Mekinsan di Geni* is more than a mortuary practice. It is a profound expression of *local genius* that integrates symbolic cosmology, social solidarity, and ecological stewardship into a single, coherent framework. By sustaining ancestral ties, strengthening communal cooperation, and embedding environmental ethics into ritual practice, *Mekinsan di Geni* exemplifies how indigenous knowledge systems can provide meaningful pathways for engaging with contemporary global concerns while remaining firmly rooted in cultural tradition.

4. CONCLUSION

Mekinsan di Geni in Nagasepaha Village represents a distinctive expression of *pitara yadnya* that encapsulates the deep interrelation between symbolic, social, and ecological dimensions of Balinese Hindu practice. On a symbolic level, the ritual embodies the dissolution of human existence into the *panca mahabhuta*, affirming the cyclical philosophy of life and death while sustaining the relational bond between the living and the ancestral world. On the social plane, the ritual reaffirms the importance of communal participation and collective responsibility, strengthening ties among family members, neighbors, and the wider community. Ecologically, the mandatory act of cleaning the cemetery prior to ritual proceedings illustrates an indigenous ethic of environmental care, transforming what might otherwise be seen as a

religious obligation into a practical expression of ecological stewardship. By embodying the principles of *Tri Hita Karana* particularly *Palemahan* or harmony with nature *Mekinsan di Geni* demonstrates how traditional cultural practices can contribute meaningfully to the discourse on sustainable development. It highlights that sustainability need not always be approached through external frameworks, but can also be cultivated through local wisdom (local genius) that has been embedded for generations in ritual life.

Preserving and promoting *Mekinsan di Geni* carries multiple implications. For Balinese society, it safeguards cultural identity in the midst of modernization and global pressures, ensuring that younger generations remain connected to ancestral traditions. For scholars, the case provides fertile ground for interdisciplinary inquiry, bridging anthropology, religious studies, and environmental studies to show how ritual practices can illuminate broader human-environment relationships. For policymakers, it offers culturally grounded insights into waste management and ecological education, suggesting that solutions to contemporary challenges can be found within the moral and ritual frameworks of local communities. For younger generations, participation in the ritual ensures intergenerational transmission of values devotion, solidarity, discipline, and environmental responsibility thus shaping them into culturally rooted yet globally relevant citizens. Ultimately, *Mekinsan di Geni* demonstrates that cultural traditions, when practiced consciously and transmitted across generations, are not static relics of the past but dynamic vehicles for addressing the needs of the present and the future. The ritual exemplifies how local knowledge and spirituality can offer innovative contributions to ecological sustainability, reminding us that pathways to environmental care can emerge from the sacred as much as from science.

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