

# Deconstruction of the Ngaben Kusa Pranawa Ceremony in Pujungan Village: A Hindu Theological Perspective

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Inputed : 08 July 2025  
Accepted : 09 July 2025

Revised : 02 September 2025  
Published : 02 September 2025

## Abstract

Hinduism demonstrated remarkable dynamism and flexibility, adapting to socio-cultural changes while preserving its core essence. This adaptability manifested in diverse ritual practices, including unique variations of the ngaben (cremation) ceremony in Bali. This study focused on the distinctive ngaben tradition of the Tutuan community in Pujungan Customary Village, Tabanan, which deviated significantly from common Balinese practices. Its uniqueness lay in three key aspects: employing lalang grass as the pengawak (effigy), selecting the officiating priest (pemuput) exclusively from the Brahmana caste (Ida Pedanda), and utilizing specific locations and burial procedures. The research investigated the form, function, and theological meaning of this tradition. It aimed to analyze the relevance of its spiritual, social, and ecological values to contemporary Hinduism and evaluate its resilience to modernization and socio-economic pressures. A descriptive qualitative methodology was employed, integrating ethnographic and Hindu theological approaches. Data were gathered through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, interpreted using deconstruction theory. Results reveal that the Tutuan ngaben transcends mere ancestor veneration. It embodies the principles of tri hita karana (harmony with God, humans, and nature) and tat twam asi (universal self). Lalang grass symbolizes simplicity and ecological connection, while involving Ida Pedanda reflects deep spiritual commitment. Conducting rites at cangkem setra (cemetery edge) with burial demonstrates a contextually faithful interpretation of dharma. The study concludes that this practice represents authentic, contextual, and ecological Hindu spirituality. Preserving it is crucial as intangible Balinese heritage, offering valuable insights for religious, cultural, and spiritual education rooted in local wisdom.

**Keywords** : Ngaben ceremony, Tutuan community, Deconstruction, Hindu theology

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### Citation :

Suadnyana, I. N., Sudiana, I. G. N., & Putrawan, I. N. A. 2025 Deconstruction of the Ngaben Kusa Pranawa Ceremony in Pujungan Village: A Hindu Theology Perspective. *MSJ: Majority Science Journal*, 1(1), 202-211

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## 1. Introduction

Hinduism's enduring global presence is fundamentally predicated on its dynamic ontology, namely a theological elasticity manifested in the axiomatic principle of desa, kala, patra (place, time, circumstance). This core hermeneutic facilitates its profound adaptation across diverse socio-cultural and historical milieus while preserving the essential Vedic-derived doctrines concerning Dharma (righteous duty), Karma (causality), and Moksha (liberation). Its inherent non-dogmatism and universalist affirmation, "Ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti" (The Truth is one; the wise call it by many names), allows for a multiplicity of ritual expressions while maintaining an underlying, unifying philosophical framework. This capacity positions Bali as a critical microcosm, where Hinduism permeates the adat (customary law) complex, infusing art, architecture, social structure, and daily rituals (yajña) (Wardana, 2019; Wicaksono, 2024).

However, this integration also engenders significant tensions within the socio-ritual economy, particularly concerning mainstream mortuary practices like the ngaben (cremation). These widely observed rites increasingly face pressures from escalating costs driven by competitive displays, epitomized by elaborate bade towers signifying status; these are socio-



economic burdens documented by scholars, and a discernible drift toward commodification. This commodification risks obscuring the ritual's core soteriological purpose: facilitating the atman's (soul's) release and the return of the Panca Maha Bhuta (five gross elements) through fire (Ariani & Dewi, 2021; Dananjaya & Hartaka, 2025; Lindayanti et al., 2020; Sedana, 2024).

Conventional responses to these pressures, such as mass ngaben (ngaben masal), primarily address economic accessibility but often fail to confront the underlying distortions of spiritual meaning and the reinforcement of hierarchical social structures embedded within lavish displays (Indarwati et al., 2025; Suastini, 2020). It is precisely within this context of ritual standardization and commercialization that the Tutuan community in Pujungan Traditional Village, Pupuan District, Tabanan Regency, emerges as a compelling counter-example of Hinduism's contextual flexibility, grounded in the theoretical frameworks of *desa kala patra* and *Tri Hita Karana* (harmony with God, humans, and nature) (Adnyani & Purnamawati, 2020; Mahyuni & Dewi, 2020).

Their *pengabenan* (death ritual) constitutes a profound deviation from the Balinese norm through its steadfast adherence to *awig-awig* (customary law) mandating *mependem ring pertiwi* (interment in the earth), an act theologically interpreted as a purer, more direct return of the corporeal elements to the sacred Earth (*Ibu Pertiwi*) and ancestral origins (Pertiwi & Mardiana, 2020). This practice fundamentally rejects the dominant cremation paradigm; asserting a localized hermeneutic of death grounded in ecological reciprocity and cosmic reintegration (Indarwati et al., 2025; Suwindia & Kurniawan, 2023).

Further embodying radical simplicity and egalitarian principles, the Tutuan community exclusively utilizes *lalang* grass (*cogon* grass) for the *pengawak* (the ritual base structure substituting for the physical body), irrespective of the deceased's social standing or familial wealth. This deliberate choice transcends mere practicality, functioning as a powerful symbolic repudiation of materialistic display and status competition pervasive elsewhere, resonating with the ethical principle of *satyam* (truth) (Indarwati et al., 2025). The *lalang*, a wild, ubiquitous plant, signifies purity, humility, and the universal human condition; all beings ultimately returning to the same elemental source, reflecting *Tat Twam Asi* ("Thou art That") (Rai, 2023). This emphasis on ontological equality starkly contrasts with status-driven variations in *pengawak* materials, such as sandalwood, observed in other regions (Suwindia & Kurniawan, 2023).

The ritual's spatial specificity further underscores its unique local theology; the crucial *meseh lawang* (purification/cleansing rite) is performed not at the conventional *catus pata* (major crossroads) but at the spiritually charged *cangkem setra* (cemetery gate), a potent liminal threshold understood locally as the definitive portal where the soul transitions from the tangible (*sekala*) to the intangible (*niskala*) realm, received by ancestors. Maintaining this distinct ritual integrity necessitates strict adherence to traditional sacerdotal authority; the ceremony must be led by an *Ida Pedanda* (Brahmin priest), ensuring orthodoxy and ritual validity despite the village's geographical remoteness (Indarwati et al., 2025). This requirement reinforces the community's connection to established Balinese Hindu religious structures while simultaneously legitimizing their unique interpretation. The presence of the *Ida Pedanda* often includes *dharma wacana* (religious discourse). This strengthens the symbolic bond with institutional Hinduism and provides essential spiritual pedagogy, embedding the ritual's deeper meanings within the community's consciousness.

Collectively, the mandated burial, the use of *lalang*, the specific location of *meseh lawang*, and the indispensable role of the *Ida Pedanda* coalesce to form a distinct cultural identity for the Tutuan people within Bali's diverse tapestry. This identity serves not only as intangible cultural heritage, but also as an active statement of resistance against the homogenizing forces of modernity and the commodification of sacred rites (Indarwati et al., 2025). The Pujungan *pengabenan* thus functions as far more than a mortuary procedure; it operates as a dynamic socio-religious institution reaffirming core Hindu values. The ecological dimension of *mependem ring pertiwi*, viewed as inherently more sustainable than cremation, explicitly embodies harmony with nature (*palemahan*), while the egalitarian use of *lalang* fosters social cohesion (*pawongan*), actualizing *Tri Hita Karana*. The ritual becomes a lived expression of

satyam (truth/authenticity), sivam (purity of intention), and sundaram (spiritual beauty), demonstrating that Hinduism's flexibility encompasses principled resistance against changes eroding spiritual essence.

Consequently, this localized tradition offers a vital counter-narrative to prevailing studies of Balinese Hinduism that often focus on grand ceremonies or commodification pressures. Pujungan presents a model where deep tradition provides resilience, preserving theological depth and prioritizing spiritual-ecological alignment over socio-economic display. The community's agency lies in their consistent application of inherited values to maintain ritual sanctity. To critically examine this counter-hegemonic model and its implications for ritual sustainability, we employ an integrated ethnographic and theological lens. Therefore, this study focuses intently on analyzing the unique form, intricate process, multifaceted socio-religious function, and profound theological meaning embedded within the Tutuan pengabenan tradition in Pujungan. By examining how awig-awig and localized interpretations of *desa kala patra* shape this sustainable practice, the research illuminates how Hinduism maintains relevance through context-rooted enactment of sacred wisdom

## 2. Method

This study employs a qualitative research design adopting a case study approach, conducted in Pujungan Traditional Village, Pupuan District, Tabanan Regency, Bali. Data were collected through triangulated methods: (1) participant observation of ritual practices; (2) in-depth interviews with 25 purposively selected key informants, including Sulinggih (Hindu priests), Pemangku (temple caretakers), Serati (ritual artisans), and community elders; and (3) document analysis of village records and relevant scholarly literature. Data analysis followed a three-phase qualitative process consisting of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. This process employed a descriptive-interpretive analytical framework that integrates both inductive and deductive reasoning, supported by argumentative interpretation. The findings are presented descriptively through narrative exposition.

## 3. Results and Discussion

Pujungan Village, nestled on the southwestern slopes of Mount Batukaru in Tabanan Regency, Bali, is renowned for its enduring commitment to ancestral customs and spiritual traditions. As a Bali Aga community, Pujungan has preserved a distinctive cultural identity shaped by its highland geography, rich oral history, and cohesive social structure organized around the banjar system. The village's ritual life is deeply intertwined with its ecological surroundings and collective memory, as evidenced by the continued veneration of ancient temples, sacred artifacts, and the ongoing practice of traditional ceremonies. Among these, the Tutuan pengabenan (mortuary ritual) stands out as a unique adaptation of Hindu mortuary rites, reflecting both the community's theological worldview and its ecological sensibilities.

Unlike mainstream Balinese cremation rituals, the Tutuan pengabenan integrates symbolic minimalism, ecological stewardship, and egalitarian values into its ritual form and process. This study analyzes the unique form, intricate process, multifaceted socio-religious functions, and profound theological meanings embedded within the Tutuan pengabenan tradition in Pujungan. By examining how local adat, historical consciousness, and Hindu doctrine converge in this ritual, the research illuminates the ways in which indigenous communities negotiate the preservation of spiritual integrity, social cohesion, and environmental harmony in contemporary Bali.

The Ngaben ritual of the Tutuan community in Pujungan Village embodies a distinctive Kusa Pranawa framework, characterized by symbolic substitutions and ecological adaptations that diverge from mainstream Balinese Hindu practices. Central to its form is the replacement of physical remains with a pengawak effigy crafted from lalang (cogon grass) or bamboo, coupled with burial instead of cremation (Handayani, 2024). This is a deliberate choice rooted in awig-awig (customary law) to prevent leteh (spiritual pollution) in Mount Batukaru sacred forests (alas luhur). This ritual minimalism extends to material culture, where mantra-inscribed kajang shrouds and bamboo pepaga biers replace ornate bade towers. The ritual affirms that

spiritual efficacy arises from intentionality (bhakti) rather than material display (Indarwati et al., 2025; Putra, 2025).

The process unfolds through nineteen stages. It begins with mekarya uparengga (ritual tool crafting) and matur piuning (temple notifications) at lineage-specific sites such as Pura Manik Terus. These ritual implements, known as uparengga, include symbolic ornaments, sacred textiles, and ceremonial structures that visually and spiritually prepare the space for the soul's-journey.



Figure 1. Uparengga in the Pengabenan Ceremony

This is followed by pilgrimages to Pura Kawitan Bukit Buluh in Klungkung for nunas kajang (lineage shrouds). The kajang, often inscribed with sacred syllables and cosmological diagrams, serves as a metaphysical map and protective layer for the soul's passage through the liminal space between worlds



Figure 2. Kajang in the Pengabenan Ceremony

Core acts include summoning the soul into the effigy (ngulapin) at the setra cemetery, purifying it with Vedic mantras and tirta (holy water), and wrapping it in three layers during ngringkes. These layers consist of white cloth (suksma sarira, subtle body), plaited mats (antakarana sarira, mental body), and bamboo (sthula sarira, physical body). This Tri Angga

layering materializes the Upanishadic concept of bodily sheaths (koshas), mapping Hindu cosmology onto Batukaru's ecology. In this mapping, soil corresponds to sthula, mist to suksma, and the forest canopy to antakarana.



Figure 3. The Implementation of the Ngringkes Ceremony

The climax of the ritual, known as palebon, involves the burial of the effigy after caru tedun layon offerings are made to neutralize ecological impact. Unique adaptations such as the meseh lawang purification at the cemetery gate (cangkem setra) reflect a localized theological interpretation of liminality and ancestral transition. The banjar (customary unit) plays a crucial role by mobilizing over one hundred participants in ngayah (communal labor). This includes collective cooking (nyamuh) and the construction of the effigy, transforming the ritual into a form of territorial stewardship. This practice aligns with Elinor Ostrom's theory of communal resource governance (Indarwati et al., 2025).



Figure 4. A Cremation Tower (Wadah) is used to carry the Deceased (Layon) to the Cemetery (Setra)

These features collectively illustrate the unique form and intricate process that define the Tutuan pengabenan tradition in Pujungan, fulfilling the core objectives of this study. The ritual's distinctiveness is inseparable from the historical and ecological context of Pujungan, a highland village whose origins are preserved through oral tradition and the presence of ancient artifacts such as bronze kukul, ceramic jars, and old graves (Adnyana, 2025). The village's social structure, organized into banjar with its own kelian, ensures the systematic transmission of adat values and the collective implementation of rituals, including Ngaben (Indarwati et al.,

2025). These rituals are always conducted with strong communal solidarity and mutual aid (*ngayah*) (Dahlan, 2023).

The sacred geography of Pujungan, with its protected forest zones (*alas luhur*) and ancient temples such as Pura Manik Terus, Pura Manik Geni, and Pura Batur, underpins the community's spiritual worldview and informs the ecological adaptations embedded in the ritual (Qodim, 2023). Thus, the Tutuan Ngaben not only manifests a unique ritual form and process but also serves as a living expression of Pujungan's historical consciousness, social cohesion, and environmental ethics (Adnyana, 2025; Indarwati et al., 2025). This aligns closely with the aims of this research.

The Ngaben ritual for Pujungan's Tutuan community serves as a multidimensional socio-religious engine that seamlessly integrates spiritual liberation, ecological guardianship, and cultural continuity. Spiritually, it functions as a soteriological mechanism. By returning the *panca mahabhuta* (five elements) to nature through burial (*pakiriman*) and employing *kajang* shrouds inscribed with *Ongkara* mantras, the ritual accelerates the soul's journey toward *moksha* (liberation) while fulfilling *Pitra Rna* (ancestral debt), as prescribed in the *Lontar Tattwa Loka Kreti* (Wiasti, 2024). This process, in which soul-release rites (*papegatan*) sever karmic bonds, transcends individual salvation and affirms collective spiritual responsibility.

Socially, the ritual acts as a catalyst for communal cohesion. It mobilizes over one hundred participants through *banjar*-coordinated *ngayah* (mutual aid). Activities such as collective cooking (*nyamuh*) and effigy construction transform grief into solidarity, particularly during youth-led processions (*medeeng*), reinforcing *menyama braya* (kinship solidarity) and transmitting intergenerational knowledge. For instance, elders teach youth how to craft *kajang*, ensuring cultural continuity (Adnyana, 2025; Indarwati et al., 2025). Psychologically, the ritual enacts emotional transformation. Through collective labor and shared rites such as *mapegat* (symbolic soul-severing), private sorrow is converted into communal catharsis. This reflects Durkheim's theory of ritual as social healing, while also expressing the unique cultural specificity of the Bali Aga tradition (Suastini, 2020).

Ecologically, the ritual serves as a form of sacred environmental stewardship. By replacing cremation with forest-friendly burial, it embodies the principle of *palemahan* (human-nature harmony) from *Tri Hita Karana* (Darmadi, 2021). This practice prevents *leteh* (pollution) in *Batukaru's* sacred forests (*alas luhur*) and enforces *awig-awig* (customary laws) that prohibit logging. As a result, ritual actions such as grave-digging and *lalang* planting become acts of ecological preservation, aligning with Elinor Ostrom's principles of communal resource governance. Culturally, the ritual resists commodification. The egalitarian use of *lalang* effigies challenges status-based hierarchies and rejects the commercialization often seen in tourist-oriented Ngaben ceremonies (Suastini, 2020). Pilgrimages to Pura Kawitan Bukit Buluh for *nunas kajang* (lineage shrouds) reinforce trans-local lineage identity and spiritual continuity. Theologically, these dimensions converge into a ritual-ecological synthesis. Liberation, or *moksha*, is achieved through engagement with nature rather than separation from it. This challenges orthodox Hindu thanatology and demonstrates that *adat* can dynamically reinterpret scripture in ways that remain both faithful and adaptive (Ningrat et al., 2025).

The distinctiveness of this multidimensional function is inseparable from Pujungan's historical and social context. The village's origins, preserved through oral tradition and reinforced by ancient artifacts such as bronze *kukul*, ceramic jars, and old graves, shape its collective memory and ritual life. The social structure, organized into *banjar*, facilitates the systematic transmission of *adat* values and the collective implementation of rituals (Adnyana, 2025; Indarwati et al., 2025). Strong communal solidarity and mutual aid are evident in every major ceremony. The sacred geography of Pujungan, including protected forest zones and ancient temples such as Pura Manik Terus, Pura Manik Geni, and Pura Batur, underpins the community's worldview and informs the ecological adaptations embedded in the ritual. Thus, the Tutuan Ngaben not only fulfills religious and social obligations but also serves as a living expression of Pujungan's historical consciousness, social cohesion, and environmental ethics.

These findings demonstrate that the Tutuan Ngaben ritual functions as a multidimensional institution. It fulfills religious obligations while simultaneously reinforcing

social solidarity, ecological stewardship, and cultural resilience. In doing so, it fully addresses the core objectives of this study.

The Ngaben ritual of Pujungan's Tutuan community embodies a profound theological reimagining of Hindu eschatology, where ecological sanctity becomes the conduit for spiritual liberation. Central to its meaning is the radical reinterpretation of Pitra Yadnya. Burial (pakiriman) replaces cremation not as a compromise but as a sacred necessity, positioning Mount Batukaru's forests (alas luhur) as the medium through which Siva's transformative power, or tandava, operates. This subverts orthodox fire-centric liberation theology and asserts instead that moksha is achieved through nature's purity, not in spite of it (Indarwati et al., 2025). The effigy (pengawak), crafted from lalang grass, epitomizes this theology. As it decomposes in the earth, it enacts the Upanishadic return of the panca mahabhuta (five elements) to the cosmos, transforming Batukaru's soil into sacred ground where physical decay becomes spiritual ascent. The kajang shroud, inscribed with Ongkara mantras, further theologizes the soul's journey as a metaphysical passage guided by forest spirits (Sang Bhuta Wirangga), anchoring liberation to local geospiritual landscapes rather than abstract realms (Gunada, 2021).

Crucially, the ritual actualizes what may be called kinetic theology, where communal labor (ngayah) becomes sacramental. When more than a hundred participants dig graves or plant lalang, they perform Tri Hita Karana in motion. Parahyangan (divine harmony) is enacted through toyah penembak (sacred water) rites, pawongan (social harmony) is embodied in medeeng processions that transform grief into collective joy, and palemahan (ecological harmony) is realized as burial enforces awig-awig prohibitions against forest exploitation (Adnyana, 2025; Kirani et al., 2022). This transforms Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence into territorial liturgy, a theological innovation in which stewardship becomes worship. The meseh lawang purification at the cemetery gate (cangkem setra) deepens this symbolism, localizing liminality. The gate becomes a theological threshold where ancestors transition not through fire but through Batukaru's living ecosystem, collapsing the binary between material and spiritual worlds.

Egalitarian symbolism, such as the use of uniform lalang effigies that reject caste hierarchy, further theologizes social equity as a divine imperative. By dismantling status-based ritual commodification and countering what Picard terms the "tourist Ngaben," Pujungan asserts that liberation theology must resist materialism (Suastini, 2020). The ritual's ultimate meaning lies in adaptive transcendence. It demonstrates that desa kala patra, or contextual wisdom, is not a dilution of doctrine but a revelation, where forest guardianship, communal action, and ancestral memory converge to redefine moksha as an ecological sacrament (Indarwati et al., 2025). In this way, the Tutuan Ngaben becomes a theological manifesto of the Bali Aga tradition, in which nature is not a backdrop to salvation but its very architecture.

The distinctiveness of this theological meaning is inseparable from the historical and social context of Pujungan, a highland village whose origins are preserved through rich oral tradition, ancient artifacts such as bronze kulkul, ceramic jars, and old graves, and the enduring presence of sacred temples like Pura Manik Terus, Pura Manik Geni, and Pura Batur. The village's social structure, organized into banjar, enables the systematic transmission of adat values and the collective implementation of rituals (Adnyana, 2025; Indarwati et al., 2025). Ngayah (mutual aid) and reverence for sacred forest zones (alas luhur) form the foundation of daily life and spiritual practice (Suastini, 2020). These findings demonstrate that the Tutuan Ngaben ritual in Pujungan constitutes a living theological innovation, where local ecology, communal action, and ancestral memory are inseparably woven into the pursuit of spiritual liberation. In doing so, it fully addresses the core objectives of this study

#### 4. Conclusions and Suggestions

This study demonstrates that the Ngaben ritual of the Tutuan community in Pujungan Village transcends the boundaries of conventional mortuary practice. It emerges as a holistic socio-ecological sacrament that harmonizes Hindu theology, cultural identity, and environmental ethics. Rooted in the Kusa Pranawa framework, the ritual's form and process reflect profound adaptability. The substitution of cremation with burial, the use of lalang effigies as symbolic representations of the body, and the nineteen-stage ritual enacted through communal labor known as ngayah collectively reconciles the liberation theology of Pitra Yadnya and the ecological sanctity of Mount Batukaru. These ritual adaptations are not merely pragmatic responses to environmental constraints; rather, deeply theological acts that reimagine moksha as a process achieved through nature, not separate from it.

The functions of the ritual extend far beyond spiritual liberation. Socially, it fosters cohesion by transforming grief into collective catharsis, particularly through youth-led processions (medeeng) that reinforce kinship solidarity. Ecologically, it enacts stewardship by enforcing customary laws that prohibit forest exploitation, thereby preserving the sacred landscape of Batukaru. Culturally, it resists commodification by maintaining egalitarian symbolism, such as the uniform use of lalang effigies, and by rejecting the status-based excesses often associated with commercialized 'tourist Ngaben' ceremonies. Theologically, the ritual redefines orthodoxy through adaptive transcendence. The sacred forests of Batukaru become the medium for Siva's cosmic dance of transformation, where decomposition returns the five great elements to the earth and liberation is realized through ecological participation.

These findings affirm that contextual wisdom, known as *desa kala patra*, enables Hinduism to evolve without compromising its spiritual essence. Pujungan thus stands as a paradigm for heritage sustainability, offering a compelling model for how indigenous ritual can remain theologically robust, socially cohesive, and ecologically responsive. The research has successfully addressed all core questions, including the unique form and process of the ritual, its multidimensional socio-religious functions, and its profound theological meaning. In light of these insights, several practical implications emerge. For the Tutuan community, there is a pressing need to systematize intergenerational transmission of ritual knowledge across generations. This can be achieved through banjar-led workshops, where elders document and teach techniques of *kajang* inscription and the recitation of Vedic mantras to younger members. Such efforts would ensure the continuity of customary law and practice in the face of modernization. Local governments, particularly the Tabanan Regency Cultural Office, should consider integrating Pujungan's burial protocol into regional eco-cultural policies. This could involve subsidizing lalang cultivation to support the craftsmanship of effigies and designating Batukaru's sacred forests as protected ritual-conservation zones that are shielded from the pressures of tourism development.

Hindu religious councils, especially Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia, are encouraged to revise theological guidelines to formally recognize burial as a valid expression of Pitra Yadnya in ecologically sensitive areas. Furthermore, Pujungan's model should be incorporated into seminary curricula to inspire adaptive liturgical practices that remain grounded in scriptural integrity. Non-governmental organizations and academic researchers can contribute by developing digital archives of oral histories and ritual processes, thereby safeguarding intangible heritage and supporting advocacy for the recognition of Bali Aga traditions by institutions such as UNESCO. Finally, eco-tourism operators should collaborate with local communities to design programs that allow visitors to engage in reforestation activities rather than merely observing rituals. This approach transforms tourism into a participatory act of ecological restoration, preserving the sanctity of the ritual while fostering environmental awareness.

Through these combined efforts, the Tutuan Ngaben tradition in Pujungan can continue to thrive as a living expression of theological innovation, cultural resilience, and ecological stewardship. It offers a powerful example of how sacred tradition can evolve meaningfully in the modern world without losing its spiritual depth or cultural integrity.

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