

# Between Obong and Ngaben: A Study of The Dynamics of Obong Kalang Jawa and Ngaben Bali

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the dynamics of the Obong Kalang ritual in Java and the Ngaben ritual in Bali, focusing on their transformations, meanings, and social functions inside of contemporary cultural contexts. Obong Kalang, a traditional Javanese mortuary ritual, and Ngaben, the central cremation ceremony in Balinese culture, both embody profound religious and cultural significance. Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach, this research collected data through in-depth interviews by community elders and local participants, participant observation during ritual performances, and a review of relevant literature. Thematic analysis was used to identify key ritual elements and to examine the factors driving changes in both practices. The findings reveal that both Obong Kalang and Ngaben represent cultural and spiritual expressions rooted in Hindu and animistic influences. Despite differences in form and execution, both serve as means of releasing the soul by worldly attachments, honoring ancestors, and maintaining harmony among humans, nature, and transcendent forces.

**Keywords:** Obong, Ngaben, sacrality, symbolism, ritual.

## INTRODUCTION

The diversity of death rituals in Indonesia reflects the nation's cultural richness. Each ethnic group has its own unique way of honoring and bidding farewell to the deceased, such as Ngaben in Bali (Ardika, 2000; Kiriana, 2017), Tiwah among the Dayak people (Lestari et al., 2022; Nugraha & Wardani, 2021), Rambu Solo' in Toraja (Sasongko et al., 2019), and Obong among the Kalang Jawa community (Kholiq et al., 2022). These rituals are not merely expressions of grief but also manifestations of spiritual beliefs, cultural identity, and social values passed down through generations (Ahimsa-Putra, 2006; Koentjaraningrat, 1985). This diversity enriches Indonesia's cultural heritage and highlights the contribution of each ethnic group in shaping the complex and interconnected cultural mosaic of the archipelago (de Graaf, 1985; Pratasari et al., 2023).

Death rituals reflect the religious responses of communities, related to beliefs in reincarnation and life after death (Sumiati & Khairiyah, 2019) and eternal life in Islam (Hendrajaya & Almu'tasim, 2020). By a social and cultural perspective, death rituals strengthen social cohesion and reinforce community structures, such as in the Rambu Solo' ritual in Toraja (Rima, 2019). Death rituals reflect a society's religious response, tied to beliefs in reincarnation and life after death (Geertz, 1973; Filippo, 2006). Meanwhile, ecological and philosophical approaches emphasize death as a natural part of the life cycle (Becker, 1973). Death rituals are spiritual expressions of culture confronting the meaning of human existence.

Ngaben in Bali and Obong Kalang in Java are two rituals that illustrate how the same cultural traditions can develop differently due to geographical and religious influences. These rituals demonstrate enduring traditions, adaptability, and unique cross-cultural communication (Ayunita et al., 2022; Kholiq, 2017). Ngaben and Obong reflect the

same Hindu roots, though they differ in execution and cultural distinctiveness. Before Islam became dominant, Hinduism had a strong influence in Java-Bali (Ramdhani et al., 2020; Sulaksono et al., 2023; Yuliadi, 2023). Spiritual similarities reveal shared traditional roots that evolved according to context.

Historically, the relationship among Java and Bali is close and complex, shaped by centuries of cultural, political, and religious influences (Covarrubias, 1974; de Graaf, 1985; Vickers, 1989). Before Islam, Hindu-Buddhist traditions dominated, and the Majapahit Empire historically strengthened cultural ties among Java and Bali (Linggih, 2024). After the fall of Majapahit, Hindu-Javanese nobles moved to Bali, bringing their traditions and culture by them (Lansing & Stephen, 1995). This strengthened cultural ties, by Bali preserving Hindu-Javanese heritage while Java underwent transformation through Islamic influence (Yasa et al., 2023). This relationship is reflected in religion and art, by Bali preserving Javanese culture.

Research on death rituals, both Obong Kalang and Ngaben, has been conducted by a number of researchers. Studies on Obong Kalang, for example, have been detailed by experts such as de Graaf, H. J. (1985), Damais, L.C., (1970), Heine-Geldern, M., (1956), Ricklefs, M.C., (1991), Zoetmulder, P.J., (1982), Lelono, (1989), Ahimsa-Putra, H. S., (2006), Kholiq, (2013, 2017); Kholiq et al., (2022), Azizah, (2017), and Sulaiman, (2018). Meanwhile, research on Ngaben has been extensively conducted by Geertz, H., (2004), Lansing, J. Stephen., (1995), Barth, F., (1959), Bandem, I. M., & Sudarsono, R. M. N., (1991), de Graaf, H. J., (1988), Kiriana, (2017), and Patera et al., (2023). Research focusing on the comparison among Obong and Ngaben has been conducted by de Graaf, H. J., (1985), Sudarsono, R. M. N., (1993), and Ardika, I. W., (2000). Unlike previous studies, this research also explores the dynamics of death rituals in the context of changing times and culture. The Obong Kalang–Ngaben study reveals cultural adaptation to modernity and the transformation of religious rituals.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach using ethnography combined with a descriptive-comparative design to examine the dynamics of mortuary rituals in two distinct cultural settings: the *Obong Kalang* ritual among the Kalang community in Kendal, Central Java, and the *Ngaben* ritual in Balinese Hindu society. This methodological framework was chosen to capture the lived religious experiences, symbolic meanings, and socio-cultural functions embedded in both rituals, as well as to explore their transformations within contemporary social contexts.

Fieldwork was conducted through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews were carried out with key cultural and religious actors who possess experiential and ritual authority, including Kalang shamans (*dukun Kalang*), community elders, local leaders, Hindu priests (*pemangku*), ritual specialists (*tukang banten*), and customary leaders (*Jro Bendesa*). A total of seven informants were purposively selected based on their roles, knowledge, and long-term involvement in ritual practices, representing both ritual communities in Java and Bali. To protect confidentiality, all participants were anonymized using coded identifiers.

Participant observation was undertaken during the performance of *Obong Kalang* rituals in Kendal and *Ngaben* ceremonies in Bali, allowing the researcher to document ritual sequences, symbolic objects, verbal expressions (mantras and prayers), and patterns of communal participation. These observations were complemented by visual documentation and field notes that recorded spatial arrangements, ritual atmospheres, and interactions among participants. In addition, a literature review was conducted to contextualize empirical findings within existing scholarship on death rituals, syncretism, and religious transformation in Java and Bali.

Data analysis followed a qualitative descriptive-analytical procedure. Interview transcripts, observational notes, and documentary sources were systematically organized and coded thematically according to recurring patterns related to ritual structure, symbolism, religious values, social functions, and processes of change. Comparative analysis was then applied to identify convergences and divergences between *Obong Kalang* and *Ngaben*, particularly in relation to their cosmological foundations, ritual technologies, and adaptive strategies in response to modernization, religious pluralism, and socio-economic pressures. The interpretation of findings was

grounded in anthropological theories of ritual, symbolic meaning, and religious syncretism to ensure analytical coherence and theoretical rigor.

This study involved human participants and was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for qualitative research. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection, and their identities were safeguarded through anonymization and careful handling of sensitive cultural information. The research was carried out with respect for local customs, religious norms, and community values in both research locations.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Obong Kalang Ritual

#### The History of the Kalang People in Kendal, Central Java

The Kalang community reflects the historical and cultural heritage of Hinduism, deeply rooted in the local traditions of Javanese society (Sulardjo, 1971). Historians offer various interpretations of this term; (Roorda, 1847) defines it as "kejaba" or something separate, while (Altona, 1923) associates it by the words "kepalang" (closed) or "alang-alang" (wandering beings) (Muslichin, 2008). Sociologically, the Kalang community has been marginalized by the caste system, that limits their social interactions (Jodhka, 2016; Liu & Hilton, 2005).

Historically, the Kalang people were known as experts in woodworking and forestry. Bryne (1951), as cited in Muslichin., (2008) , noted that they served as loggers and timber transporters in construction projects during the Majapahit era. During the Mataram period, the Kalang were appointed as Kalang ministers responsible for bubakyooso (funeral rites) and tomb carving (Munawar, 2021). Despite their expertise, the Kalang remained marginalized and lived in remote areas (Setio & Putra, 2024). However, Sultan Agung attempted to integrate them into the system by utilizing their skills. In line by this, Lombard, D., (1999) describes the Kalang as a marginal and semi-nomadic group that began settling and working in settlements during the reign of Sultan Agung. They were autonomous, preserving traditions of endogamy and the ritual burning of symbolic remains of the deceased (Riyadi & Rokamah, 2023).

The Jaka Sona myth reflects the cultural identity of the Kalang people, passed down orally by generation to generation as an ancestral heritage (Pontjosoetirto, 1971). This myth symbolizes divine descent, strengthens solidarity, legitimizes social structures, and passes down the traditions of the Kalang ancestors (Eliade, 1963; Lévi-Strauss, 1969). The Kalang myth depicts the sacred relationship among humans, the supernatural world, and noble values in Javanese spiritual life.

The distribution of the Kalang community in Kendal is an important part of the historical narrative of the Kalang community in Java. Raffles, T. S., (1978) notes that some of the Kalang people, who previously lived in a semi-nomadic pattern and were separated by the general population, gradually began to settle and embrace Islam, particularly in areas such as Kendal, Kaliwungu, and Demak (Muslichin, 2008). Colonial reports mention that the Kalang Ulujami District was led by a Demang, by its center in Ploso Village, that had a closed endogamous system. Mbah Coyudo, a student of the Demang of Kalang, was a pioneer in spreading the teachings and values of Kalang in Wanglu Krajan.

### Beliefs and Traditions of the Kalang People

The Kalang tradition, a legacy of ancient Java, has survived through Hindu-Buddhist-Islamic influences, rooted in ancestral mythology and the veneration of sacred figures (Sunyoto, 2016). Kalang beliefs are documented in the Serat Darmagandul, upholding the teachings of Kapitayan and the worship of Sang Hyang Taya, the divine (Warto, 2011). Kalang beliefs demonstrate cultural integrity that is adaptive yet authentic (Mulder, 1984).

In Kendal, the myths of Demang Kalang and Mbah Coyudo as danyang are present in the ngunduh mantu and nyekar leluhur rituals. The Kalang myth remains alive in oral tradition, linking misfortune to the anger of the

danyang and its healing through traditional rituals passed down by ancestors (interview by R2 (65 years old), Kendal).

Belief in ancestors underpins the Kalang rituals, such as obong and ewuhan, that reinforce identity, cultural values, and educational heritage for the younger generation (Harvilahti, 2003). Although similar in form to the ngaben ritual in Bali, the obong tradition is deeply rooted in the local context of Kalang, reflecting the continuity of pre-Hindu animistic elements in their culture (Muslichin, 2008).

Meanwhile, the ewuhan or gegalungan ritual is performed domestically by Kalang families every Friday Wage and Tuesday Wage as a form of respect for ancestors, particularly Kalang figures such as Demang Kalang. The ritual is marked by the offering of traditional offerings, including sepet bananas, gemblong, kuluban rice, and coffee, accompanied by the recitation of mantras containing prayers for safety (Interview by R.4, 72 years old, Kendal). This ritual embodies respect for ancestors, protection by evil, and spiritual harmony among the Kalang people. By a cultural perspective, the ewuhan ritual also serves as a collective memory device (mnemonic device) that strengthens communal memory, solidarity, and the reproduction of ideological values in Kalang society (Piliang, 2012).

### **The Obong Ritual of the Kalang**

The Obong ritual in the Kalang tradition is held one year after death, aiming to open the path for the spirit to the afterlife or heaven (Pontjosoetirto, 1971). This ritual reflects the Kalang belief in the importance of maintaining balance among the natural world (the real world) and the spiritual world (the world of spirits), as well as emphasizing spiritual ethics such as pilgrimage (tilek kubur) and asking for blessings by the spirits before the procession begins. Symbols, offerings, and mantras reinforce the veneration of ancestors, collective identity, and the cultural values of the Kalang people, passed down through generations (Geertz, 1973).

Based on observations of the Obong ritual in Teratesari Village, Kendal (December 14, 2015), it was found that the procession includes the preparation of offerings by symbolic food items such as white and red rice cakes, sego ambeng, baro-baro, and various other staple foods. Each element of the offerings holds deep symbolic meaning: white rice cake symbolizes goodness, while red rice cake represents evil that can be neutralized by goodness, and sego ambeng represents the microcosmos (jagat cilik) and the harmonious relationship among humans, nature, and the Creator. The completeness of the offerings determines the smooth flow of spirits; their absence leads to misfortune, highlighting the spiritual, social, and moral values of the Kalang (Wessing, 1997).

Another important element in the Obong Sependak ritual is the puspa, a wooden doll representing the symbolic form of the deceased. This doll serves as a spiritual medium used by the Mak Dukun to "invite" the soul and sense the condition of the spirit in the afterlife. The puspa symbolizes the soul, while the Mak Dukun's mantras, combined by the sounds of the pethel-tatah, create a sacred and intense atmosphere. The sounds open communication among the spiritual and physical realms, strengthen vibrations, and summon the sacred power of the combination of sounds, mantras, and the puspa forms a ritual space connecting the real world by the transcendent dimension of Kalang (Waluyo, 1978).

The Obong Sependak procession continues by dodol sego kuku or nyangoni, a tradition of offering alms to ancestral spirits through the medium of Mak Dukun. This tradition emphasizes the reciprocal relationship among the physical world and the spiritual realm, by offerings preventing the anger of ancestors and embodying the spiritual ethics of Kalang. Next, the andegan procession takes place—where flowers and offerings are kept overnight in the kajang house—marking the transitional phase before the entasan or the release of the spirit to the afterlife. The climax of the entire procession is the burning of flowers, the deceased's personal belongings, and coins, that are believed to symbolically escort the spirit to the realm of the afterlife. The fire used is called sacred fire (geni suci), that is not merely a tool for burning but is believed to possess spiritual power to illuminate the path of the spirit toward perfection (Harvilahti, 2003).

The end of the Obong Sependak procession is marked by the burning of small coins, that are then thrown and scrambled for by visitors as a form of alms (sedekah arwah) for the deceased. This tradition is interpreted as a



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*May you be forgiven for your sins, forgiven for your mistakes.*

*May you be blessed, you who are the guardian, yes, sir...*

This phenomenon reflects the Islamization of local rituals through the integration of the basmalah, tahlil, and ancestral prayers. However, the core structure and content of the mantra remain rich in animistic and magical elements, such as the invocation of spirits, the use of pethel and tatah, and the belief in the spiritual power of certain objects. This blend illustrates the distinctive spirit of religious compromise in Kalang society, as referred to as (Geertz, 1973), where local religious expressions undergo symbolic transformation to align by the teachings of major religions while preserving the roots of their original traditions.

Kalang syncretism is evident in the meaning of Obong offerings. Although the majority of residents now embrace official religions such as Islam, they still maintain traditional offerings such as red and white rice cakes, market snacks, and sego ambeng. These offerings reflect Hindu and animistic symbolism about balance and the relationship among humans, spirits, and nature. The arrangement of offerings shows the influence of Hindu-Buddhist dharma and cosmic harmony in the collective memory of the Kalang community. As explained by (Woodward, 1989), religious syncretism in Java often occurs through symbolic and ritualistic adaptations that allow old traditions to continue inside of a new belief system. The flower doll symbolizes the enduring presence of spirits, yet the ritual is framed by Islamic values such as prayer and the sacred time before dawn.

Thus, the Obong tradition is a complex form of religious and cultural syncretism. The flower dolls represent the cultural resilience of the Kalang people; syncretism serves as a strategy to maintain harmony amid change.

## **Hindu Ngaben Ritual in Bali**

### **Background of the Ngaben Ritual in Bali**

Historically, Ngaben is a Balinese ritual believed to have been practiced since ancient times. The indigenous Balinese people, known as "Bali Aga," such as those in Penglipuran Village, used the term "Miyadin," meaning "cost," before the term "Ngaben" was popularized (Wirabumi et al., 2022). The term "cost" refers to the essence of expenditure, financing, or offerings to the deceased (Yanti et al., 2024). Over time, the term Miyadin underwent an etymological construction process, evolving into Ngaben around the 19th century. Etymologically, the word ngaben originates by the words ngaba+in, meaning "to prepare for burial." Since then, Ngaben has been recognized as a ritual deeply rooted in religious beliefs.

Religiously, Balinese Hindus believe that humans are born by three debts that must be repaid. These three debts are known as Tri Rna (Perdana et al., 2022). Generally, Tri Rna encompasses the debt of the human soul to Ida Sang Hyang Widhi (God), known as Dewa Rna; the debt of human life to one's parents, known as Pitra Rna; and the debt of knowledge to teachers and holy people, known as Rsi Rna (Patera et al., 2023). The concept of Tri Rna teaches humans to think nobly and repay kindness through offerings to those who have done good deeds as a manifestation of spiritual awareness (Wiana, 2002).

Offerings themselves in Hinduism are more commonly known as Yadnya. Etymologically, Yadnya derives by the root word "yaj," that in Sanskrit means sacrifice, worship, or offering (Wiana, 2004). Based on the sacred text Atharva Veda XVII. 3, Yadnya offerings are based on sincere devotion and are presented as sacred sacrifices intended to repay debts to Tri Rna (Sudirga & Segara, 2017). Yadnya is generally divided into five types, known as Panca Yadnya, by classifications linked to Tri Rna as follows (Madaio, 2021):

- 1) Dewa Yadnya, as a sincere offering to God and His manifestations as the guardians of the universe. This offering is performed by one of the foundations to repay the debt by the Dewa Rna side.
- 2) Pitra Yadnya, as a sincere offering to parents and ancestors for their services in caring for and giving life. This offering is performed by one of the foundations to repay the debt by the Pitra Rna side.

- 3) Rsi Yadnya, as a sincere offering to teachers and holy people for their services in educating and guiding humans. This offering is performed by one of the foundations to repay the debt by the side of Rsi Rna.
- 4) Manusa Yadnya, as a sincere offering to fellow human beings for their services in building solidarity and mutual assistance as social beings. This offering is performed by one of the foundations for repaying the debt by the Pitra Rna side.
- 5) Bhuta Yadnya is a sincere offering to the energy and elements of nature for their service in sustaining all life in the world. This offering is performed as a means of repaying a debt to the god Rna.

Through the foundations of Tri Rna and Panca Yadnya, it can be understood that the existence of Ngaben is present as one part of Pitra Yadnya (Perdana et al., 2022). Balinese Ngaben involves a gradual offering to ancestors, guided by the sacred Hindu text Lontar Yama Purwana Tattwa (Pitana, 2022).

Despite its ritualistic implementation, Ngaben still considers the influence of Desa (Place), Kala (Time), and Patra (Atmosphere) by culture, as well as the customs of the indigenous community that have become ingrained (Wikarman, 2002). Ngaben connects the earthly and spiritual realms and remains sustainable through the adaptation of contemporary Balinese culture.

### **Types of Ngaben Rituals in Bali**

As part of a dynamic religious ritual, Ngaben is divided into several types depending on the circumstances and condition of the deceased to be cremated (Widiyanti et al., 2022). This demonstrates the flexibility of Hinduism; the type of Ngaben is adapted to the condition of the deceased as well as the local Desa, Kala, and Patra.

- 1) Ngaben Sawa Wedana, is the Ngaben ritual performed when the body is still intact (not buried). The Ngaben is conducted 3–7 days or a month later, by the body temporarily preserved (Paraswati et al., 2021). Before Papegatan, the body is treated as if it were still alive—given coffee, food, and clothing (Widiyanti et al., 2022). Furthermore, in the Ngaben Massal ritual, if death occurs several days before the designated auspicious day, the family may keep the body (sawo) while waiting for the auspicious day (Dewasa Ayu). During this waiting period, the family has the opportunity to prepare all necessary arrangements or register the body or sawo to participate in the Ngaben Massal procession (Paraswati et al., 2021).
- 2) Ngaben Asti Wedana, is a form of Ngaben ritual performed on a body that has already undergone a previous burial process. The procession includes Ngagah and bone rituals, following local traditions in exhumation and honoring the deceased. by a social and cultural perspective, the performance of Ngaben Asti Wedana is highly dependent on several factors, including village regulations (Awig-Awig), that sometimes prohibit holding funeral ceremonies simultaneously by weddings (Pawiwahan). In certain circumstances, the body is temporarily buried in a ritual called "Makingsan ring Pertiwi," that means temporarily entrusting the body to the earth or Mother Earth (Paraswati et al., 2021). by an economic perspective, Ngaben Asti Wedana is chosen when the family's financial situation is insufficient, while waiting for an auspicious day for a mass Ngaben ceremony involving many families in an efficient and cooperative manner (Widiyanti et al., 2022).
- 3) Private Ngaben, is a unique form of Ngaben ceremony conducted devoid of the presence of the deceased or their remains. This ceremony is performed when the body is lost, washed away, not found, or dies abroad (Paraswati et al., 2021). During cremation, the body is replaced by a symbolic substance, such as sandalwood shaped like a body (pengawak), painted and filled by magical symbols, representing the skeleton or body of the deceased being cremated. This process is performed as a symbolic representation of the physical body (Sthula Sarira) of the deceased, that will undergo the Ngaben ritual. Private Ngaben ceremonies maintain the spiritual essence through the use of sandalwood carved by magical symbols representing the soul.

- 4) Ngaben Ngelungah, that is the name given to the Ngaben ritual for the remains of children who have not yet lost their baby teeth. The Ngaben Ngelungah ritual is generally simpler than other types of Ngaben. This is because the main purpose of this type of Ngaben is to return the Panca Maha Bhuta elements of the child, who is still considered sacred. A similar ritual is also performed in Ngaben Warak Kruron, that is a Ngaben ritual for the remains of a baby or fetus found dead in the womb (Widiyanti et al., 2022).

### **The Dynamics of the Ngaben Ritual Stages in Bali**

As part of a complex ritual, Ngaben requires several preparations and items for its execution in Bali (Suartina et al., 2024). During the preparation stage before the main Ngaben ritual is performed, holy men or priests, along with family members and the surrounding community, prepare various items needed for the ceremony (Kaler, 1993). Preparations include ritual tools, materials, and equipment such as bathing utensils for the deceased, offerings for burial, and special offerings for cremation during the main Ngaben procession (Cudamani, 1993).

In line with the discussion above, the Ngaben ritual in Bali requires several types of sacred offerings as ritual items and media for offerings (Kaler, 1993). These offerings include banten that symbolize purity and nobility, Banten Pejati, that signifies sincerity in performing a task, and kwangen, that has a symbolic meaning as worship of Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa, the supreme deity in Balinese Hinduism (Suastini et al., 2018). Furthermore, regarding the Ngaben ritual in Bali, in addition to the use of offerings, there are various ceremonial tools (uparengga) with profound philosophical meanings (Ayunita et al., 2022). First, there is Tukon, that serves as equipment for the removal of the kajang tattoo, symbolizing the unity of the human body. Panjang Ilang symbolizes the guide for the spirit to the realm of moksa, while Pisang Jati represents the true self of the deceased. Sekar Ura acts as a light to illuminate the path, dispelling darkness so that the spirit can find its way to the afterlife or heaven.

Next, there is Adegan, that symbolically depicts the deceased's body, while Bade represents the physical body of a human. Ubes-ubes is visualized in the form of a bird of paradise, and Lembu, a sacred animal in Hinduism, is presented as the embodiment of Lembu Nandini, who will escort the spirit to the realm of Shiva. Damar Kurung serves to limit negative energy (kaletahan) to the family courtyard, while Damar Angenan symbolizes the spirit or Sang Hyang Atma, manifested as the heart/ulu hati. There are also Iber-iber in the shape of doves symbolizing the release of ancestral spirits, while village chickens symbolize the release of the Panca Maha Bhuta. Sugarcane and dadap are used in the bone-grinding process. Additionally, there is a Penuntun acting as a guide for the spirits, and the Bale Gumi, a three-tiered structure by an earthen floor, serves as the cremation site for the deceased (Ayunita et al., 2022).

The priest and family determine the auspicious day while preparing the necessary items (Wirabumi et al., 2022). Once the auspicious day is determined, the general stages of the Ngaben ritual can be systematized using terms commonly used by the Balinese community as follows:

- 1) Ngulapin is a ritual of exhuming graves in cemeteries to collect the remains of the deceased, that will be used in the Ngaben procession (Paraswati et al., 2021). Some also say that Ngulapin is a process of summoning the spirit or Sang Atma so that the Ngaben ceremony can proceed as it should (Widiyanti et al., 2022). This process is carried out at the request of the deceased's family. After Ngulapin is completed, the priest and family then proceed by the Nebusin ceremony, that is performed at a crossroads. The Nebusin ritual aims to neutralize any negative energy that may have arisen due to the deceased's misdeeds during their lifetime. The Ngulapin and Nebusin rituals vary by region to region depending on local customs or traditions.
- 2) Nyiramin is a ritual bathing of the deceased or their remains in Balinese Hindu tradition, typically performed in the family's courtyard. Prior to this, the body is lifted and placed on a Paga, a bamboo bed used for purification (Perdana et al., 2022). Spiritual symbols such as jasmine flowers, glass, and intaran leaves symbolize the restoration of the body's functions and the hope for reincarnation (Paraswati et al., 2021). In terms of the procession, Nyiramin is performed by cleansing the body using water mixed with flowers, starting by the lower part of the body and moving upward. Family members cleanse the body as a symbol of sincerity, resilience, and the sacredness of life and death (Perdana et al., 2022).

- 3) Ngeringkes is a ritual where the body, after being bathed, is wrapped in white gauze or a shroud, resembling clothing. In this process, the body undergoes Ngeringkes to cleanse the physical form of all impurities. The body is sprinkled by Tirtha Pengeringsan, then wrapped in white cloth and Hindu prayer garments such as kamben, saput, and udeng, along by floral decorations for women. This attire is based on the belief that even though the person has passed away, the body needs to be fully clothed so that it may be reborn by a perfect body. Next, the nails of the deceased are cleaned using a Sudha Mala knife to remove the influence of Sad Ripu (the six inner enemies according to Hindu belief). This process is followed by sprinkling Tirtha Pembersihan and Tirtha Pengeringsan again to complete the purification of the (Perdana et al., 2022).
- 4) Ngajum Kajang is a ritual of pressing the kajang three times. The kajang itself is a plain sheet of paper or white cloth filled by sacred writings by traditional leaders, priests, or community elders. After the writing process is complete, the family and descendants of the deceased perform the Ngajum Kajang ceremony by pressing the kajang three times. This symbolizes the family's resolve to let go of the deceased and unify their intentions for the smooth journey of the soul (Paraswati et al., 2021).
- 5) Ngaskara is a ritual that signifies the purification of the deceased's spirit. This ritual unites the soul by the Creator and seeks guidance and protection for the family (Paraswati et al., 2021).
- 6) Mamas is a ritual whose etymology comes by the word 'peras,' meaning achieved, successful, or accomplished. The ritual is performed when the deceased has grandchildren, who are believed to guide the spirit through prayers and acts of kindness (Paraswati et al., 2021).
- 7) Papekatan is a ritual derived by the word "pegat," meaning "to cut off" or "to sever." Thus, Papekatan signifies the severing of ties among those left behind and those who have departed. This ceremony breaks worldly bonds and affection, helping the soul journey toward the Creator by offerings and dapdap branches (Paraswati et al., 2021).
- 8) Pakiriman Ngutang is a procession in that the body is carried along by various offerings to the Bade, a tower used to carry the body in Bali. During this procession, relatives and family members scatter sekar ura and wave ubes-ubes that have been prepared. Residents carry the body and ceremonial items accompanied by baleganjur or angklung music, that is played by a mix of joy and sadness (Suastini et al., 2018). During the journey to the cemetery, the body is paraded in three counterclockwise circles, symbolizing the return of the five elements (Panca Maha Bhuta) to their origins. The ritual of turning three times signifies the deceased's farewell to their family at home and the community at the village crossroads (Paraswati et al., 2021).
- 9) Ngeseng is a cremation ritual where the body is placed on a cow or a prepared platform along by various offerings (banten). Next, a sprinkling ceremony is performed using various types of Tirtha (holy water), including Tirtha Penembak, Tirtha Pengentas, and Tirtha Marajan by the family of the deceased (Perdana et al., 2022). Various ceremonial items such as Kajang, Adegan, Ampilan, and Ponjen are then placed inside the cow (coffin), by Damar Angenan placed on top. Other items such as tukon and banana leaves are arranged beneath the coffin. The cremation process begins by a prayer for Agni Prelina (sacred fire) to the Sulinggih. After this procession is completed, the body is cremated until all parts of the body are reduced to ashes, leaving only small bone fragments (Paraswati et al., 2021).
- 10) Ngereka is the process of collecting the ashes and small bones remaining by the cremation. The ashes and bones are collected separately as a symbol of returning to the elements of nature, then stored in Tamas and sometimes placed in a coconut shell (Perdana et al., 2022).
- 11) Ngayud is the process of dispersing the ashes of the deceased and the remains of the cremation into a river or the sea. The Ngayud ritual symbolizes the final purification to release any remaining worldly attachments still clinging to the spirit of the deceased (Paraswati et al., 2021).

- 12) Ngeroras/Pangerorasan or Nyekah is the final stage in the Ngaben ceremony, also known as *atma wedana*. This ritual frees the spirit by the physical body, transforming it into a deity that resides in the sacred realm of the gods (Perdana et al., 2022).

The stages of the Ngaben ceremony in Bali are rich in symbolic meaning, representing an offering among the physical and spiritual worlds (Puspa & Saitya, 2023). The aesthetics of the offerings reflect the art and culture of Bali, that remain preserved amidst modernization. Socially, the complexity of the Ngaben stages requires cooperation and a structured division of tasks, aligning by the theory of symbolic functionalism in the performance of Balinese religious rituals. Syncretism makes Ngaben an integral part of Balinese life (I. W. A. Adnyana et al., 2022).

### The Construction Of Ritual Values In The Ngaben In The Present Day

Ngaben is a sacred Balinese ritual that serves as the final offering, performed regularly and by deep meaning (Wikarman, 2002). It is no surprise that the frequency of Ngaben rituals in Bali makes it one of the most meaningful *Yadnya* ceremonies, rich in the values it embodies. The syncretism of religion, culture, tradition, and economy blends together, forming a complex and distinctive ritual (Pitana, 2022). Analyzing the values and challenges of Ngaben is essential to ensure its relevance in the modern era.

When delving into the Hindu cosmological values, humans are drawn as a microcosm composed of elements by the macrocosm (the natural world) to sustain their existence. Based on various sacred texts such as the Lontar Yama Purwana Tatwa, Lontar Yama Tatwa, and Yama Purana Tatwa, there are five natural elements borrowed by Hindu cosmology, known as the *Panca Maha Bhuta*, comprising solid (*pertiwi*), liquid (*apah*), heat/energy (*teja*), gas/air (*bayu*), and space/ether (*akasa*) (Pitana, 2022). Ngaben is considered an efficient way to return the natural elements of the deceased after death (Jayanti et al., 2024).

By this cosmological perspective, the essence of the Ngaben ritual can be understood as a means of returning the elements of *Panca Maha Bhuta* while purifying the *atman* (soul) of the deceased (K. S. Adnyana, 2025). Ngaben frees the soul and bodily elements to return to their origin (Pitana, 2022). Thus, it can also be concluded that in the Ngaben ritual in Bali, there is a significant pattern of syncretism. The value system of Ngaben is formed by the syncretism of Hindu scriptures and environmental ethics that are upheld and preserved by Balinese society (Long, 2025).

This syncretism is also evident in the use of banten materials as ritual media for Ngaben, that are primarily derived by natural elements. Plants and animals in the Ngaben ceremony hold spiritual significance while also teaching the importance of preserving nature and its contents. Considering these materials, that are environmentally friendly and easily biodegradable, they reflect the cyclical nature of the universe, that must always be accompanied by the creation (I. W. A. Adnyana et al., 2022), maintenance, and ultimate dissolution of all things. The challenge of Ngaben now arises by the massive use of plastic, styrofoam, and other non-environmentally friendly materials (Wijaya & Putra, 2021). This often results in the remnants of the *Yadnya* ceremony (*Lelayudan*), including those after the Ngaben ritual, being considered a significant contributor to the volume of waste in Bali. The religious values and environmental ethics need to be nurtured once again in the performance of the Ngaben ritual in Bali.

The aesthetic value of Ngaben reflects the syncretism of religion, culture, and tradition through art and traditions that are deeply intertwined (Indarwati et al., 2025). The Ngaben ceremony is accompanied by religious and aesthetic elements created by the creativity, emotions, and intentions of the Balinese people (Wirabumi et al., 2022). This is evident in the architectural art used to create the *Bade* and *Lembu*, as well as the creativity displayed in the making of offerings in the form of *Bebantenan* Ngaben (Ayunita et al., 2022). Although rooted in authentic religious and cultural values, the Ngaben ritual sequence, all its paraphernalia, and the offerings are also aligned by the local customs or *dresta* of the place where they are performed. Even the customs that manage and regulate the functional aspects of the Ngaben ritual ensure it proceeds systematically and structurally (Puspa & Saitya, 2025). The syncretism of religion, culture, and customs serves as a strong shield safeguarding the

existence of Ngaben in the era of globalization.

The syncretism of Ngaben encompasses aesthetics, culture, tradition, and economy; it was once synonymous by an exclusive, high-cost ceremony (Suartina et al., 2024). Some families even allow the deceased to be buried temporarily in a cemetery while they gather sufficient funds to hold the Ngaben ritual (Perdana et al., 2022). Empirically, the deceased are often delayed in being buried, contradicting the Hindu principle of valuing humanity and consciousness.

by the perspective of sacred texts, this also raises some irony regarding its existence. Considering the essence, all Yadnya rituals in Hinduism are performed by sincere devotion (*sreya*), and their scale can be adjusted according to the circumstances, conditions, and capabilities of those offering them (Wirabumi et al., 2022). This includes the Ngaben ritual, that can be performed on a small scale (*Nista*), medium scale (*Madya*), or large scale (*Utama*) (Kaler, 1993). As a response to the challenges of the times, Mass Ngaben emerged, performed simultaneously by traditional villages, banjars, or families (Paraswati et al., 2021). Mass Ngaben reduces costs, preserves spirituality, and promotes community economic development through efficient collective implementation.

Although the economic value of Ngaben has begun to be addressed, social challenges have emerged due to the stigma of modern society's fast-paced and instantaneous lifestyle (Patera et al., 2023). It is not uncommon for Ngaben rituals conducted in traditional villages to have shifted to crematoriums (Suwindia & Made Ferry Kurniawan, 2023). The demands of time and society have led people to focus more on productive time to meet their basic needs (Iskandar et al., 2022). Additionally, there is a stigma that classifies Yadnya, including the Ngaben ritual, as a determinant of social class (Puspa & Saitya, 2023). Families that perform Ngaben by a minimal quantity are considered to have a lower social class compared to those who can perform the ritual by the main quantity (Perdana et al., 2022).

Empirically, social challenges weaken the values of cooperation, compassion, unity, and mutual assistance in Bali (Indarwati et al., 2025). Therefore, these noble values need to be re-examined and realigned, accompanied by the strengthening of ethical, socio-cultural, economic, and religious syncretism inside of the Ngaben ritual to ensure it remains a harmonious bridge among worldly life, spiritual life, and the universe.

## CONCLUSION

This study affirms that Obong Kalang and Ngaben represent cultural-religious expressions of the Nusantara region rooted in Hindu spirituality and animism, by social, symbolic, and spiritual functions in releasing the soul, honoring ancestors, and maintaining cosmic harmony.

Obong Kalang reflects the syncretism of Hinduism, Islam, and local traditions as a subtle form of resistance against modern cultural homogenization. Ngaben reflects Hindu flexibility in responding to change through innovations such as mass Ngaben and crematoriums. Obong Kalang and Ngaben demonstrate the resilience of local culture through the adaptation of the ritual of the " " devoid of losing its sacred meaning and collective identity. This study confirms that death rituals function as cultural strategies, producers of collective meaning, and resisters of values, thus necessitating their preservation through an interdisciplinary approach involving anthropology, theology, ecology, and ritual communication. This study is limited geographically and in terms of informant participation, necessitating further extensive and multidisciplinary studies to comprehensively understand the transformation and sustainability of rituals.

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