



RURAL BUDDHIST AGENCY IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA: TRIBUANA MANGGALA BHAKTI AS A NEW PRACTICE

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: Buddhism, though practiced by a minority in Indonesia, a country with the world's largest Muslim population, represents a religion of rich multidimensional traditions, with Mahayana, Theravada, and Vajrayana coexisting across the archipelago. Within this landscape, Javanese Buddhists occupy a particularly complex position. They live within a state framework on religion largely shaped by a monotheistic paradigm that conceives religion as a singular, exclusive, and clearly bounded belief system. Yet their lived religiosity embodies a hybrid religious life shaped by the historical layers of Hinduism, ancient Buddhism, Islam, and Kejawen, which continue to inform how the Javanese Buddhist community perceives, practices, and expresses its religiosity. This tension between a singular conception of religion and a hybrid experience has prompted Javanese Buddhists to construct practices grounded in their own cultural identity, particularly within Theravada communities, which, though inspired by mainland Southeast Asian Theravada traditions, increasingly incorporate indigenous Javanese elements. One significant outcome is Tribuana Manggala Bhakti, a Javanese Buddhist religious-cultural rite developed in Jatimulyo, Kulon Progo, Yogyakarta. This research aims to examine the principles and patterns through which this community negotiates Buddhism and Javanese cultural identity through the invention of the Tribuana Manggala Bhakti, and to reveal what this negotiation discloses about the working of religious localization within a state framework oriented toward homogenous religion.

Methodology: This research applied an ethnohistorical approach, combining ethnographic fieldwork with historical analysis. Fieldwork was conducted with the Javanese Buddhist community in Jatimulyo, Kulon Progo, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, which was purposively selected as the primary site where Tribuana Manggala Bhakti is actively practiced. Field data were complemented by historical records and relevant scholarly literature on Buddhism in Indonesia and Southeast Asia.

Main Results: The findings revealed that the Javanese Buddhist community demonstrated significant agency in negotiating its religious identity. Rather than passively reproducing transnational Buddhist traditions, the community actively engages in a creative process of cultural negotiation by selectively integrating Javanese values, symbols, and ceremonial forms into Buddhist practice.



Tribuana Manggala Bhakti emerged as the product of this negotiation, a ritual framework that was simultaneously Buddhist in doctrinal orientation and Javanese in cultural expression. For practitioners, the rite was not merely ceremonial but functioned as a way of embodying Buddhist values within a familiar cultural world, where reverence toward all sentient beings, gratitude toward ancestors, and harmony with nature became lived practices rather than abstract teachings.

Involvement to Buddhadhamma: From the perspective of applied Buddhism, this construction reflects a meaningful engagement with core Buddhist teachings, expressed through locally meaningful cultural forms. Tribuana Manggala Bhakti is essentially a form of puja, a widely shared devotional practice that serves as a vehicle for expressing core teachings. The community preserves the structure and intent of puja by integrating Javanese expression into its execution, cultivating wisdom and moral sensibility through the doctrinal principle of reverence and loving-kindness toward all sentient beings across the three realms (Tribuana): Air, land, and water, from which the ritual derives its name. This illustrates how Buddhadhamma can serve as a flexible yet principled foundation that accommodates cultural diversity without compromising its essential doctrines.

Conclusions: The Javanese Buddhist community in Jatimulyo, through its construction of Tribuana Manggala Bhakti, occupies a dynamic position at the intersection of transnational Buddhist tradition and local cultural identity. This case exemplifies a broader pattern of religious localization in which a Buddhist community asserts cultural agency while maintaining doctrinal integrity. Tribuana Manggala Bhakti stands as a quiet testimony that religious life, when allowed to breathe within its layered historical roots, can remain faithful to doctrine while resisting the demand to become a homogenous, sealed-off form.

Keywords: Tribuana Manggala Bhakti, Javanese Buddhists, Religious Hybridity, Rite Invention, Contemporary Indonesia

Introduction

The contemporary growth of Buddhism in Indonesia raises pressing questions about how a religious tradition that has long been absent from the official landscape continues to negotiate its place within a modern nation largely influenced by other religions. Buddhism, once prevalent in Indonesia during the eighth to thirteenth centuries in ancient dynasties, nearly disappeared by the Dutch colonial era due to the spread of Islam and lack of official recognition. The golden age of the Hindu-Buddha religion in Indonesia occurred during the Mataram Kuno to Majapahit Kingdom era, in the 8th to 14th centuries (Brown, 2004); (Ricklefs, 2013). From the 13th century onward, Islam began to make significant inroads into the archipelago. In Java, the impact was equally profound, where Buddhism rapidly lost influence among the aristocracy. However, the spread of Islam did not erase pre-existing beliefs but produced a syncretic blend known as Javanese Islam or Kejawen, which incorporated Islamic principles with local Javanese spiritual concepts inherited from the Hindu-Buddha period (Brown, 2004); (Woodward, 2011). During the Dutch colonial era, outward expressions of Buddhism had largely disappeared, and Buddhism was not recognized as a religion alongside Islam and Christianity (Brown, 2004). Interestingly, although their numbers were not



confirmed, Buddhism was practiced and studied by the Chinese, European, and Javanese people. A recent study by Yulianti (2024) explained that these communities took Chinese temples (Locally Known as Kelenteng) and Theosophical Society Lodges as places where Buddhist activity was being conducted.

In post-independence Indonesia, Buddhism experienced a phase of development. It attracted more followers from diverse ethnic backgrounds. In this period, in parallel with the decolonization spirit, the Buddhist community in Indonesia showed more intensified networks and connections with Buddhists in Asia, particularly South and Southeast Asia (Brown, 2004); (Yulianti, 2024). These layered beliefs, rooted for centuries and intermingling with local religious practices alongside other existing religions and culture, have continued to enrich one another's spiritual realms, with each religious period adding to pre-existing religiosity (Smith, 2020). Consequently, the Indonesian people are not new to syncretic religious practices, such as Javanese Islam, Balinese Hinduism, and Tengger Buddhism (Ramstedt, 2004); (Woodward, 2011).

Furthermore, another crucial element that shapes religious practice in Indonesia is the state. The state, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, regulates religion by recognizing only six official religions: Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, while local beliefs (Aliran Kepercayaan) are classified under the category of culture rather than religion (Maarif, 2019); (Picard & Madinier, 2011); (Sutrisno, 2018). Indonesia's effort to establish a unified national identity has frequently suppressed the diverse beliefs that have long been an essential component of the Indonesian identity (Abdullah, 2006). In the case of Buddhism, although Buddhism remained as a practiced religion, it has not been experiencing a monotonous developmental trajectory. Buddhists in Indonesia have been facing continuous challenges in conceptualizing their Buddhist characteristics and practices. In the post-independence period, Buddhists rebuilt their religious infrastructure through monastic ordination, the establishment of viharas, and the formation of organizations, while extending Buddhism into various regions and ethnic communities, including Javanese (Brown, 2004); (Yulianti, 2024). Furthermore, the practice of Buddhism has consistently incorporated other elements of traditions and cultures. As Buddhism is adhered to by communities of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, Buddhism thus has been subject to a mixture of those elements. Beyond cultural integration, Buddhism in Indonesia has also had to adapt to state regulation. The study of Iem Brown shows how Buddhism has to reformulate its "Theology" on the notion of God to suit the national ideology Pancasila, particularly on the issue of belief in one God (Brown, 1987); (Chia, 2018). This polemic gave rise to Buddhayana, an intersectorian Buddhist movement formulated by Ashin Jinarakkhita that responded to state regulation while also representing an indigenous Indonesian Buddhism (Agama Buddha Indonesia) (Chia, 2018). During the early Soeharto regime, anti-communist policies caused many followers of local beliefs to convert to officially recognized religions, including significant conversions among Javanese adherents of Kawruh Naluri (KWN) to Buddhism (Sulani, 2025). Rizzo (2024) similarly argues that the incorporation of Javanese culture into Buddhist activities in Central Java represents a form of multi-revivalism, in which Buddhism is not understood as a replacement of local identity but as an integration of both.



The development of Buddhist identity in Java has been fundamentally shaped by the active agency and creative engagement of local practitioners. Rather than treating Buddhism as an external replacement, local communities have interpreted its meaning, adapted its practices, and reshaped Buddhism to fit their cultural context (McDaniel, 2010); (Buaban, 2025). Similarly, the Jatimulyo, Yogyakarta community accessed Buddhist teachings through radio broadcasts and formed independent study groups that later connected with urban Buddhist figures in Yogyakarta to strengthen their knowledge and practices (Totok, 2022). The Jatimulyo community offers a particularly compelling case for examining this dynamic, as it represents a rural Javanese Buddhist community that has actively constructed a distinctive ritual, *Tribuana Manggala Bhakti*, through the negotiation of Theravada teachings and Javanese cultural heritage. While previous studies on Buddhism have largely focused on doctrinal developments (Brown, 2004); (Chia, 2018), state-religion dynamics (Brown, 1987), and transnational networks (Yulianti, 2024), fewer have examined how rural and non-elite Buddhist communities concretely invent new ritual forms that integrate local belief and Buddhist doctrine in their everyday religious life. Hence, this study examines rural Buddhists by specifically emphasizing their agency in shaping Buddhist characteristics in Indonesia through their creativity by inventing new Buddhist practices. The significance of this study lies in its demonstration of how rural Buddhists, who at the same time are deemed a minority in Indonesia, articulate their own identities that traverse both local and global spheres.

Objectives

This research aims to examine the principles and patterns through which this community negotiates Buddhism and Javanese cultural identity through the invention of the *Tribuana Manggala Bhakti*, and to reveal what this negotiation discloses about the working of religious localization within a state framework oriented toward homogenous religion.

Methodology

Research Design: In order to understand the process of religious identity construction in Jatimulyo, this study applied an ethnohistorical methodology. This method enabled the integration of ethnological elements with the examination of historical time sequences and sources (Carmack, 1972). Specifically, the ethnohistorical approach in this study combined ethnographic fieldwork, focused on the lived practices of the Javanese Buddhist community in the present, with historical analysis of how the community's religious identity has developed over time, drawing upon both oral histories from community members and documentary sources on the broader history of Buddhism in Indonesia and Java. Consequently, this research investigated the meanings, motivations, challenges, and strategies of the Javanese Buddhist community in Jatimulyo in navigating its hybrid reality within Indonesia's complex religious dynamics.

Sampling: The research site was selected purposively because Jatimulyo represented one of the most active rural Javanese Buddhist communities in Yogyakarta, where *Tribuana Manggala Bhakti* was practiced and developed. The community comprised 617 Buddhist adherents distributed across five monasteries: *Giriloka*, *Giridharma*, *Giri Surya*, *Dharma Mulya*, and *Vidya Dharma*,



as recorded in the religious affiliation data of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Kulon Progo Regency in September 2023. The study employed two complementary layers of engagement. First, fifteen key informants were selected through purposive sampling for in-depth interviews based on their roles and direct relevance to the research focus, including historical actors of Buddhism in the region, historical witnesses, Javanese spiritual leaders, Buddhist religious figures, monastery heads, lay practitioners, and the village head. Three Theravada monks were also interviewed as supporting contextual informants to clarify doctrinal questions. Second, the broader community of approximately 600 lay Buddhists across the five monasteries was engaged through participatory observation and informal conversations during three months of fieldwork, allowing the researcher to capture collective patterns of religious life that complemented the depth of the key-informant interviews. This dual structure enabled the study to balance interpretative depth with broader community representation, thereby addressing the limitations of relying solely on a small number of key informants.

Data Collection: The primary instruments of data collection were life-history interviews and semi-structured interviews, complemented by participatory observation and document analysis. Life-history interviews were used to elicit narratives from historical actors and senior community members regarding the formation of the Buddhist community, while semi-structured interviews enabled focused exploration of specific themes such as ritual meaning, doctrinal interpretation, and the negotiation of Javanese cultural elements. Participatory research enabled the researcher to engage in activities organized by Buddhist communities in the five monasteries and among the broader village population, participate in personal and communal discussions with the community, and visit the homes of historical actors to listen to their life experiences. Fieldwork was conducted over three months, from December 2023 to February 2024, during which the researcher resided at the research site and participated in all community activities. Document analysis covered local archives, monastery records, ritual texts, and relevant scholarly literature on Buddhism in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, thereby providing the historical dimension that complemented the ethnographic data.

Data Analysis: Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, specifically through data coding and interpretive analysis, to elucidate the patterns through which Javanese Buddhist communities conceptualized and negotiated their religious identities (McCombes & George, 2025). Coding proceeded inductively from the interview transcripts and field notes, while emerging themes were refined through cross-data comparison across informants, monasteries, and documentary sources.

Trustworthiness: Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Triangulation was achieved by cross-checking information obtained from key informants against participatory observation and documentary sources. Prolonged engagement during three months of immersive fieldwork enabled rapport-building and reduced the risk of superficial interpretation.



Results and Discussion

Javanese Buddhist in Jatimulyo, Yogyakarta

The findings revealed that Jatimulyo represents a distinctive case of the rural Javanese Buddhist Community whose religious life was rooted in deep historical layers. Jatimulyo was a small village in the southern part of the province of the Special Region of Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The majority of Buddhist live in that village, with approximately 617 people of the total 628 Buddhists in Kulon Progo Yogyakarta. There were five Buddhist monasteries or vihara distributed across four hamlets: Giriloka Vihara, Giridharma Vihara, Giri Surya Vihara, Dharma Mulya Vihara, and Vidya Dharma Vihara. The Javanese Buddhist community in Jatimulyo, Yogyakarta, was an example of a community that had existed in a hybrid condition throughout history. The Hindu-Buddhist artifacts in the region were an early indication that the beliefs of the ancient Mataram-Majapahit empire influenced the landscape of their lives. Until the Islamic civilization took hold in Indonesia, including in Jatimulyo, for hundreds of years, the majority of the population there embraced Islam ndeso (Villager), which Geertz classified as the abangan (Geertz, 1957); (Ricklefs, 2013). Before embracing Buddhism, aside from Islam, the people of Jatimulyo also embraced kejawen practices known as Kasampurnan, one of the Javanese belief forms.

The data revealed that the introduction of Buddhism in Jatimulyo emerged through grassroots initiative rather than through institutional or monastic missionizing, with a local spiritual figure as its central agent. The narrative of Buddhism in Jatimulyo began in the 1960s. A local figure named Mbah Slamet became the key person for introducing Buddhism in the region. Mbah Slamet was a spiritual figure of Javanese mysticism who had spent decades in Banyuwangi, East Java, before returning to Jatimulyo to impart his knowledge. As a local spiritual leader of the village, Mbah Slamet earned the respect of the community. The religious landscape in Jatimulyo shifted due to political turmoil in 1965 Indonesia, where anti-communism developed across the country. Mbah Slamet suggested that the disciples of Kasampurnan adopt a new religion that was blessed by the new regime and also coherent with their local beliefs.

The findings showed that the conversion to Buddhism in Jatimulyo did not result in the abandonment of pre-existing Javanese practices but rather produced a layered religious identity in which Buddhist affiliation and Javanese inheritance coexisted. Shortly thereafter, a merchant who was a practitioner of Kasampurnan received a Buddhist manual from the Purworejo, another region nearby in Central Java. In 1969, they were legally recognized as Buddhists. Interestingly, the newly converted Buddhists continued to adhere to their previous teachings and traditions. Valuable information obtained from the interview indicated that the people of Jatimulyo who had converted to Buddhism also wanted to practice their Javanese elements and cultures together with the new religion simultaneously.

"Here, Buddhists also Continue to Practice Kenduri, a Javanese Tradition. Buddhism and Jawi are Essentially the Same; In Practice, They Follow the Same Teachings" (Sb, 2023).



The strong foundation of their identity was established by their spiritual heritage, history, and attachment to their narrative and place. For those who lived through the political turmoil of 1965, the formal turn toward Buddhism was not experienced as the loss of who they had been. It was, rather, the discovery that becoming officially recognized as religious did not require severing the threads that tied them to their parents' prayer, their grandparents' rituals, and the soil their families had tended for generations. Identity categorization frequently establishes the superiority of one group over another. Identity is dynamic and non-essentialist in nature, and it is formed through the interaction of numerous encounters (Bhabha, 2004). To them, their religiosity should not exclude their Javanese-ness, which was the foundation of their identity that was connected to their history, memory, and place.

The Buddhist community in Jatimulyo did not wait. They articulated their religiosity by formulating new forms of religious practices that reflected their cultural identity and heritage. The invention of new traditions is a set of ritual or symbolic practices to instill certain values and imply continuity with the past (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992). They created a new practice called Tribuana Manggala Bhakti in 2016. It was a new ritual practice that represented a hybrid practice of religiosity; It integrated Javanese culture and Buddhism as an embodiment of Javanese Buddhism. The ritual practice of Tribuana Manggala Bhakti reflected the relation and awareness of Buddhism in Jatimulyo with nature and their environment.

The ritual represented the embodiment of both the religiosity and culture of the people of Jatimulyo. The Jatimulyo people referred to it as a religious traditional ceremony that exemplified the harmonious blending of Javaneseness and Buddhism. Interestingly, as it developed, the practice, which was initially exclusively for the Buddhist community, became accessible to other religious communities. Hence, it became a catalyst for inter-religious harmony and social cohesion. The consistent practice of Tribuana Manggala Bhakti earned the attention of the local and district governments. The village was later awarded the title Desa Mandiri Budaya (Culture Independent Village). Non-Buddhist communities and related agencies were subsequently involved in the implementation of the ritual, as it fell under the category of cultural wealth that was produced and grown by the community itself.

New Tradition: Tribuana Manggala Bhakti

The data revealed that the invention of Tribuana Manggala Bhakti was motivated by a specific gap perceived by the community: The absence of a Buddhist practice in the region that prioritized environmental preservation. This is reinforced by the statement that.

"In Hinduism, there is Wana Kerti, but in Buddhism, there isn't. Since Buddhism Seems Unconcerned with the Environment, We Created that Ceremony" (Sh, 2024).

Wana Kerti was a Hindu ceremonial tradition centered on tree-planting for forest preservation, commonly practiced by Hindu communities in Indonesia, particularly in Bali, as an expression of



reverence toward Bhuana Agung (The Macrocosm) and Bhuana Alit (The Microcosm) (Saputra & Heppyana, 2023).

The name Tribuana Manggala Bhakti was used to express the significance of the activities that emphasize respect for the three spheres of nature: Land, water, and light or air. The Jatimulyo community was heavily dependent on nature, particularly water, for their daily lives and religious activities. The majority of villagers worked as farmers and livestock keepers, with a livelihood that tied their daily rhythms: Planting cycles, irrigation needs, the care of animals, etc., to the availability and health of natural resources. The Buddhist leader, in this case represented by Surahman, came to the realization that there was an interdependent relationship between humans and nature that could not be disregarded. He was motivated by this idea to locate Buddhist scriptural sources as a "Religious" foundation, in order to introduce the practice to the public sphere. The Vanaropa Sutta (Discourse on Forest Planters in Samyutta Nikaya 1) and the 49th verse of the Dhammapada section Puppaha Vagga (Poem on Flowers) were the primary reference sources. The two scriptural references suggest a shared beneficial act of ecological efforts between humans and the available natural resources. Furthermore, in addition to Buddhist philosophy, they also included the Javanese philosophy "Memayu Hayuning Bawana" to safeguard the well-being of the world. This philosophy reflects Javanese values for the preservation or enhancement of the world's beauty or appearance. Bawana, which in this context refers to the world, is a profound Javanese cosmology that is associated with jagad gede (The Universe) and jagad cilik (The Human Body and Soul) (Nugroho, 2019).

He then engaged in a discussion with other leaders to bring the concept to a conclusion. From 2014 to 2015, discussions persisted in order to ensure that this concept would not be discontinued as a festival, but rather become a tradition or a living culture for the Javanese Buddhist community in Jatimulyo. Initially, a water collection ritual was included in the series preceding Vesak. Consequently, the new ceremony was intended to be integrated into the ritual at the same time, but it was also intended to contribute to the conservation of nature, with a particular emphasis on water sustainability. The conservation action was implemented by planting tree seedlings in the soil dimension, releasing fish seeds in the river in the water dimension, and releasing endemic Kulon Progo birds in the air dimension. The first ceremony was conducted on May 15, 2016, and it was performed in the Mudal River as the highest water source in subsequent years until 2019. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ceremony was suspended from 2020 to 2022 and began again in 2023.

July 2, 2023: A new experience to Buddhist performance

The ethnographic data revealed that the 2023 performance of Tribuana Manggala Bhakti embodied the principles of cultural negotiation identified earlier in this study, expressed through the integration of Javanese ceremonial forms with Buddhist devotional structure. On a foggy and frigid morning, three of my colleagues and I departed from the homestay for the location of Tribuana Manggala Bhakti. We were part of the first ceremony that occurred in 2023, following a two-year hiatus caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. This ceremony differed marginally from those of previous years in terms of the location, the utilization of kirab (A Procession Performed by Walking Together in An Orderly Manner during Traditional or Religious Ceremonies) facilities, and



numerous other aspects of the ritual. The ceremony, which was originally conducted at Mudal River, was relocated to Mount Tumpeng, Gunungkelir, Jatimulyo Village that year. Due to the challenging terrain, the Buddha statue was not included in the procession as it had been in the past; However, it was positioned at the designated location the day before. Additionally, water collection was not conducted in the Mudal River; Rather, it was conducted in the Sepanggal water source, which was situated in a nearby location to the site.

Upon reaching the gathering point in the heart of Branti Village, Gunungkelir, a lengthy lineup of hundreds of Buddhists was present, all of whom were attired in traditional Javanese attire. Women of all ages, including children, were seen wearing Javanese traditional attires, kebaya tops that are predominantly modern and come in a variety of colors, with jarik (Batik Fabric Made a Skirt). Their hair was perfectly curled using a hair net or net hairpin, which enhanced the appearance of the traditional clothing. Men wore the surjan lurik (A Javanese Men's Suit or Attire with An Upright Collar, Long Sleeves and Downward Stripes), which includes a belangkon (Javanese Head Covering for Male) of batik-type fabric, and jarik. The attire was known as the tradition since the Majapahit kingdom and had since been the traditional apparel of the people of Central Java and Yogyakarta has featured the lurik weaving motif (Musman, 2015). The purpose of incorporating lurik clothing into this ceremony was to preserve the traditional clothing of Yogyakarta, which has endured for an extended period. For the participants, however, wearing kebaya, surjan lurik, and belangkon was not merely a matter of cultural preservation but a way of inhabiting their identity as Javanese Buddhists. The dress became a wearable affirmation that one's Buddhist devotion did not require the abandonment of Javanese-ness, rather, the body was situated as embodiment of their culture and religion.



Figure 1 Kirab of Tribuana Manggala Bhakti heading toward Mudal River, 2019.

Source: Buddhazine (2019). Retrieved June 17, 2024, from <https://buddhazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/tribuana-27.jpg>



As shown in Figure 1, the procession was long, and the frontmost persons carried puja (Offering) items. Two teenage girls, who were donning kebaya kutubaru, were at the forefront, carrying sewn flowers. The pandita (A Term Formerly Used to Refer to Buddhist Spiritual Leader) Buddha named Totok, the chief of the ceremony, was the next person carrying offerings. He wore a pandita attire, a white suit which he complemented with a belangkon and a jarik. Next, the religious leaders in Jatimulyo were holding the Indonesian national flag, the Buddhist flag, and the Tribuana Manggala Bhakti flag. The line of offering carriers consisted of two men who were carrying incense, two women who were carrying agricultural produce, and five individuals who were carrying tuberose flowers. The water carrier was the only offering carrier that did not depart from the procession point with the ceremony. This was because the people performed the ritual to collect water from the water source in close proximity to the site.



Figure 2 Kirab Tribuana Manggala Bhakti line

Following the line of offerings carriers, Figure 2 shows that there were two men carrying tree seedlings, flanked by two men who were carrying incense in front and behind them. Then, a long line of two rows was formed, with hundreds of laity people from all five monasteries, each holding incense. The groups were composed of a mixture of adults, young people, children, men, and women. A birdcage was carried by four men in pairs at the rear of the lineup to reach the procession. The master of ceremonies led the participants to chant the Buddhist paritta Namakara Patha (A Sentence of Respect for The Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha) to start their spiritual journey once all the preparations were complete. The congregation proceeded to the summit in silence and solemnity, enduring cloudy weather, cold air, and low temperatures. The ritual was not impeded by the passage through a relatively precipitous mountain path, which reached a height of nearly one thousand meters above sea level. This procession functioned as a meditative practice of the Javanese Buddhist community in Jatimulyo, which ensured that they remained solemn in silence and performed anjali while holding incense sticks throughout the challenging journey. For practitioners, the silent ascent transformed the physical difficulty of climbing into a form of devotional discipline. The mountain path itself



became a site of spiritual practice, where breath, footstep, and silence were integrated as embodied expressions of reverence toward the three realms of nature that the ceremony honored. This bodily form of devotion shows how Buddhist practice in Jatimulyo operates not primarily through doctrinal recitation but through embodied engagement with landscape, a dimension that resonates with McDaniel's (2010) observation about lived Buddhism in Southeast Asia.

Upon reaching the summit of Mount Tumpeng, the devotees ignited the incense and subsequently affixed it to one side of the outer location of the ceremony as a gesture of reverence for the destination and its contents. The ceremony attendees were greeted with gamelan (A Traditional Javanese Musical Instrument Ensemble). The highest Javanese language was used by the host throughout the ceremony, which included prayers, aspirations, and significance. Meanwhile, the attendees seated themselves on the mats that were provided at the summit of the Tumpeng Mountain.

The water used in this ceremony was collected from the Sepanggal water spring and was part of the main ritual of the event. The spiritual leader commenced the recitation of prayers that represented the request for permission to use water as a form of puja and for the protection of the entire community and village. Offerings were also prepared, but they were not brought to the designated location. Instead, they were prepared in one of the residences and prayed over by the spiritual leader prior to the commencement of the ritual. The Buddhist pandita chanted a brief paritta as an offering of merit and protection after the spiritual leader had finished reciting the prayers.



Figure 3 Plant tree seedlings and release bird ritual

The puja carriers, including the water carriers who had completed the ritual of taking water, were prepared to make offerings at the altar while enjoying a moment of rest. The puja offerings at the altar were accompanied by the gamelan performance of Asung Puja performed by the Giridharma team. The host of ceremonies also provided a narration in the highest Javanese language that elucidated the significance of the symbols in each offering. The Tribuana Manggala



Bhakti puja was subsequently conducted through the recitation of the paritta. Following the conclusion of the puja, religious leaders and followers proceeded to plant tree seedlings and release birds, as shown in Figure 3. The water in the jug was then poured on the seedling after the tree was planted, as a symbol of faith for its sustainability. The series of events continued into the evening with a theatrical dance and various local art performances. Pratama Krida, a theatrical group dance performance, showed the starting point of the Tribuana Manggala Bhakti ceremony and emphasized the importance of environmental preservation. Taken together, all the events were performances from a single continuous ritual experience in which Buddhist doctrine, Javanese culture, and ecological commitment are not separate elements brought into momentary alignment but lived as a single integrated devotional act. For participants, the ceremony was not simply attended; It was inhabited as a renewal of who they were as a community and what they held sacred. The integration of ecological action into religious devotion further illustrates how environmental ethics emerges not from abstract moral reasoning but from the lived sense of land as ancestral, sacred, and intimately remembered (Campbell, 2017).

Inventing Tradition, Affirming Javanese Buddhist Identity

Taken together, the findings demonstrated that what unfolds in Jatimulyo is more than a sequence of historical events leading to the emergence of a new ritual. It is the gradual articulation of a way of being religious that refuses the choice between Buddhist devotion and Javanese inheritance. The trajectory traced thus far, from Mbah Slamet's spiritual message fitted in the post-1965 conversion, through the careful construction of Tribuana Manggala Bhakti, reveals a community that has negotiated more than one religious paradigm together rather than choose between them. This trajectory directly answers the principles and patterns this study set out to identify: Buddhist doctrine is engaged on the community's own interpretive terms, Javanese cultural forms are mobilized as devotional vehicles, and ritual creativity is exercised collectively rather than authorized from above. This indicates that tradition does not always operate as a static or unchanging force; It can be subject to adaptation and negotiation in accordance with the requirements of the situation, even as other traditions exhibit strong continuity and resist change. This can involve the utilization of historical objects in new settings or the application of outdated models for new purposes (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992). The concept of "Invented Tradition" is particularly instructive here. They argued that traditions presented as ancient often emerge from contemporary needs, drawing on historical materials to forge a sense of continuity that legitimates new practices. This extends previous studies by demonstrating that, although they originally analyzed invented traditions in nation-state contexts where political elites consolidated identity, grassroots communities can also invent traditions to legitimate new religious practices through historical continuity. The case of Tribuana Manggala Bhakti illustrates this dynamic in a specifically religious register: The rite was deliberately constructed by community leaders, yet its symbolic vocabulary draws from cultural reservoirs that long predate the ceremony itself. The community is not fabricating a false past; Rather, they are mobilizing genuine historical resources to articulate a religious identity that the present moment requires. In the case of the



Jatimulyo Buddhist community, the conditions that enabled adaptive negotiation were specific: A minority religious community with hybrid historical roots, situated within a state framework that compelled new forms of religious self-articulation, and equipped with a living memory of layered Javanese-Buddhist practice. The traditional format of a kirab, or procession, is frequently employed in royal events or celebrations of ordinary people in Java to commemorate significant dates (Hughes-Freeland, 1991). The kirab or procession format is employed as a series of rituals for at least three main events in a year at the Yogyakarta palace: Garebeg Mulud, Ngabekten, and Suran (Pusat Data dan Analisa Tempo, 2019a). This supports the argument that the kirab functions not only as a ceremonial form but as a culturally embedded ritual language that can be borrowed across religious boundaries.

The same format is also implemented in the context of Buddhist rituals as a form of puja, which is typically performed on religious holidays, particularly Vesak. The Tempo Data and Analysis Center report illustrates the structure of rituals that are enclosed in processions. The procession utilized during the Vesak commemoration at Borobudur on May 10, 1971, is described as follows:

The procession of religious processions from various villages marched solemnly to the Borobudur temple. The sound of gamelan instruments and puja chants accompanied the movement of Buddhist flags, colorful flags, flowers, and a variety of ceremony instruments. At the Mendut temple, three kilometers from the center of the ceremonial spillover, the bhikkhu chanted prayers in a limited ritual. The sound can be heard in the distance. The Vesak commemoration was finalized when all participants convened at Borobudur in the evening for a samadhi and Dharma ceremony under the full moon. According to the same source,

"...Since the Construction of Borobudur in the Ninth Century Through the Era of Mahapatih Gadjah Mada and king after king. And as of May 10, 1971, the Tradition Continues to be conducted in Substantially the Same Manner" (Pusat Data dan Analisa Tempo, 2019b).

Subandiyo, a Buddhist from Jatimulyo who participated in these commemorations in the 1970s, described his journey to Borobudur to participate in the international Vesak commemoration. He stated that

"During Vesak, We're Sometimes Invited to Borobudur, where We're Told that Many of Our Buddhist Friends from Abroad are there, So We Hold a Vesak Celebration Together at Borobudur" (Sb, 2023)

The Jatimulyo Buddhists were invited to Borobudur to recognize and engage with the international Buddhist community gathered there. Another figure named Sastro also described his involvement in Vesak 1976, stating that



"In Borobudur, Holy Water is Indeed Drawn from Seven Water Sources, and a Procession is Conducted from Mendut to Borobudur" (SW, 2024).

The use of seven sources reflects ritual conventions established in earlier Vesak commemorations at Borobudur, though their precise origins and theological rationale lie beyond the scope of this study. The individual historical experience of Buddhists from Jatimulyo has become a central memory that is connected to the present practice of ritual procession in the event of Tribuana Manggala Bhakti.

The participation of Jatimulyo Buddhists in national Vesak at Borobudur during the 1970s also reflects the wider historical process documented by Yulianti (2024), in which Buddhist networks across Java gradually connected rural communities to the broader institutional landscape of Indonesian Buddhism. Where Yulianti (2024) traces how rural communities were drawn into wider institutional Buddhism, the Jatimulyo case shows what these communities did with the connection: Not simply absorption into a centralized tradition, but a creative reworking of shared ritual repertoires into forms expressive of local identity, suggesting that institutional Buddhism in Indonesia flows in both directions, not only from center to periphery. The encounter with international Buddhists at Borobudur did not dilute Jatimulyo's locality; It gave them confidence that their religiosity could speak meaningfully within a wider Buddhist world. These shared ritual memories became the living cultural reservoir from which Tribuana Manggala Bhakti would later draw. Therefore, it is legitimate to perceive that Tribuana Manggala Bhakti also has its roots in these rituals. It is confirmed through the memory of Sumardi, who stated.

"When I was a Child, I Once Took Part in An Event that, as Far as I can Remember, was Very Similar to a Procession Like this, but I don't Remember Exactly What It was" (Sm, 2024).

This implies that Kirab Tribuana is a form of reinvention of ancient traditions to serve new purposes and convey new meanings. For the community itself, this reinvention represents more than a scholarly category; It is a way of staying connected to the spiritual memory of ancestors while engaging with the present. The Javanese Buddhist community is capable of reconciling its present requirements with its past life experiences by reimagining well-known practices. The procedures and rituals of Tribuana, which are characterized by Javanese attributes and attire, are the product of a new tradition that demonstrates the identity of the Javanese Buddhist community in Jatimulyo. The practice of Tribuana, therefore, can be understood as a new tradition that aims to maintain a connection to a past that is profoundly significant to them by acknowledging their multidimensional spirituality.

This indicates that the Jatimulyo community's identity is deeply rooted in their birthplace and land. For them, the land is not merely a geographical location, but a living entity intertwined with spiritual traditions and history. The land holds personal significance and memories to the people of Jatimulyo and, therefore, inspires them to have ethical commitments to their environment



(Campbell, 2017). For practitioners, this means that environmental practices such as planting seedlings or releasing fish/birds are not abstract obligations but expressions of love for places that have shaped generations of their families. This framework of place-based ethics suggests that ethical relationships with the environment do not arise from abstract moral reasoning but from the lived sense that a particular place is meaningful, remembered, and inhabited. This insight illuminates why Tribuana Manggala Bhakti is not simply an ecological campaign dressed in religious form. The planting of seedlings, the release of fish, and the freeing of birds become ethical acts because they take place on land that the community recognizes as ancestral, sacred, and ongoingly alive, land that has held their grandparent's footsteps and will hold their grandchildren's. Hence, their relationship with nature can be described as sacred. This sacred relationship extends beyond the physical realm, connecting them to their ancestors who, though no longer physically present, continue to offer blessings and protection.

"Practicing Javanese-ness means Maintaining those Bonds, because We are Born from Our Mother's Wombs; They Provide for Us, and Even After their Passing, They Continue to Offer Protection to their Children and Grandchildren" (Sr, 2024).

In Javanese belief, various spirits continue to play significant roles in society, a dynamic long observed in classical studies (Geertz, 1960) and reaffirmed by more recent scholarship on contemporary Javanese spirituality (Woodward, 2011); (Sulani, 2025). The community expresses its gratitude and maintains connections to these ancestral spirits through traditional practices like slametan (Communal Prayers and Meals) and offerings (Woodward, 1988). There is a parallel diachronic relationship that exists between the current community and the ancestors of the village, demonstrating a connection between the spiritual and human domains as well as the past and present (Holt, 2009). Another pivotal aspect of the practice of Tribuana is the engagement of grassroots figures as key persons. This study shows that local actors are not passive objects; In contrast, they become the central actors and agents in the formation of their religious identity (Dressler & Mandair, 2011). They actively engage in the process of meaning-making and claim the ability to create religious identity narratives by emphasizing their hybrid traditions and lived experiences, which are rooted in the noble values of local wisdom, accumulative cultural memory, and their intimate connection to lived history. This implies that, beyond their academic significance, these findings carry tangible meaning for the community itself. In a religious landscape that often demands clear and homogenous categorization, the people of Jatimulyo have done something quite remarkable. They have made a religious life that is neither a compromise nor a synthesis, but a fuller home, one in which Buddhist devotion and Javanese inheritance are embodied by the community as part of their identity. For the children growing up in Jatimulyo today, Tribuana Manggala Bhakti is becoming part of their everyday religious vocabulary, suggesting that this invented tradition has practical significance not only for the present generation but also for those who will inherit it.



Originality and Body of Knowledge

This article contributes a distinctive body of knowledge by demonstrating how a religious community actively constructs a new Buddhist tradition through the negotiation of Buddhist doctrine and Javanese cultural identity. The originality of this study lies in its ethnohistorical approach, combining historical analysis with ethnographic fieldwork to reveal the dynamic agency of a grassroots community (The Javanese Buddhists of Jatimulyo, Yogyakarta) in inventing Tribuana Manggala Bhakti, a ritual and ecologically grounded religious tradition. Unlike most studies of Buddhism in Indonesia that foreground elite monks or institutionalized organizations, this study centers non-elite, rural Buddhist practitioners as the primary agents of religious tradition-making. The Jatimulyo community invented a new tradition without dependence on Buddhist ecclesiastical authority.

The model presented in Figure 4 maps how this contribution is positioned within the existing scholarship and what gap it addresses. Three established fields of study form the broader intellectual landscape in which this research is situated: Studies on transnational Buddhism, which examine doctrinal traditions and sectarian networks; Studies on state and institutional Buddhism, which analyze the role of politics and regulation in shaping religious life; And studies on cultural syncretism, which have long documented religious mixing in Java, including Kejawen. This study addresses that gap by examining how the Javanese Buddhists of Jatimulyo do not depend entirely on elite monastic structures and beyond the centers of institutional Buddhism to articulate their religiosity. Instead, they have emerged as an active agency that has invented a new tradition that emerges from their own cultural negotiation. This study shows how the rural Buddhist community emerges as a pivotal local actor that exercises interpretive authority to determine which Buddhist scriptures speak to their historical and ecological concerns. Hence, Tribuana Manggala Bhakti can be understood not only as a new Javanese Buddhist tradition but also as a manifestation of local power over their knowledge related to their religious and environmental landscape.

From this new tradition, three interrelated outcomes emerge that constitute the substantive contribution of this study. First, the case demonstrates the formation of a hybrid religious identity in which Buddhist devotion and Javanese inheritance are not held in tension but woven into a single way of being religious. Second, it reveals a new Buddhist ritual form that expands the repertoire of Buddhist devotional practice in Indonesia beyond what has been documented in the existing literature. Third, it articulates an ecological ethic that draws simultaneously from Buddhist scriptural sources, such as the Vanaropa Sutta and the Puppha Vagga of the Dhammapada, and from Javanese cosmological principles, such as *memayu hayuning bawana*. These outcomes produce a body of knowledge about religious localization that locates the sources of religious creativity not in centralized institutions or doctrines, but in the lived agency of grassroots communities navigating their layered cultural inheritance.



Figure 4 Body of Knowledge Model religious localization Through Buddhist Teaching and Javanese Cultural Negotiation

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study contributes to the scholarship on Indonesian Buddhism in three ways: Theoretically, by extending the concept of invented tradition to grassroots religious creativity; Empirically, by documenting Tribuana Manggala Bhakti as a previously rare, studied case of rural Buddhist ritual invention; And methodologically, by demonstrating how an ethnohistorical approach can illuminate religious phenomena that institutional or doctrinal approaches alone cannot capture. The invention of a new tradition, Tribuana Manggala Bhakti, by the Javanese Buddhist community in Jatimulyo carries three significant implications. First, it underscores the community's hybrid identity and autonomy in conceptualizing their religious identity, a hybridity demonstrated throughout the analysis from the post-1965 conversion to the integration of Javanese ceremonial forms in the present-day rite. Second, it has the potential to expand the narrative surrounding religious identity beyond the confines of dominant power structures, showing how a rural community's cultural knowledge has power that enables it to articulate religious life on the basis of its cultural, religious, and historical experiences. Third, it shows the grassroots community and non-elite Buddhists as active agents to create a new Buddhist tradition that suits their locality,



history, memory, and belief without depending on elite Buddhists, especially Buddhist monks. Through that new tradition, the community asserts its authority to define and conceptualize religious practices while remaining inseparable from institutionalized religion. Rather than resisting the state's religious framework, the Jatimulyo community works within it by drawing on local memory, history, and cultural inheritance to articulate a distinctive Buddhist character. This model of religious tradition-making, in which marginal communities emerge as primary sites of religious innovation, opens space for further discussion of decolonial approaches to Buddhism that take seriously how communities outside dominant institutional centers contribute to the reconstitution of religious tradition. The findings carry several practical implications. For policymakers, the case suggests the value of recognizing locally invented religious-cultural practices as legitimate expressions of recognized religions rather than as doctrinal deviations. For Buddhist organizations and monastic networks, the study points to the importance of supporting grassroots creativity in rural communities where Buddhist devotion is woven into local cultural inheritance. For local Buddhist communities, the Jatimulyo experience offers a working example of how to articulate a religious identity that is faithful to Buddhist teachings and rooted in local heritage at once. Several avenues for further research can be explored based on this study. A comparative study could examine whether similar patterns of grassroots religious community creativity occur among other religious communities in Indonesia, testing the generalizability of this model beyond the Javanese Buddhist case. Longitudinal research could track how Tribuana Manggala Bhakti evolves across generations, whether consolidating into a stable tradition or being adapted by other Javanese Buddhist communities. Further work could also engage more deeply with decolonial theory to examine how grassroots religious creativity participates in broader processes of intellectual and spiritual decolonization.

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