

# RELIGIOUS TRADITION RESILIENCE DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

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## **Abstract**

*The Indonesian government's policies during the Covid-19 pandemic, which has hit since 2020, include social distancing policies and restrictions on community activities to stop the spread of the virus. As a result, many social and religious activities in the community had to be stopped. However, the people of Balingasal Village in Kebumen Regency, Central Java Province, objected to the cessation of local traditional activities and continued to carry out their various religious traditions. This article aims to reveal the practice of religious traditions in Balingasal Village and their resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic. This research was conducted qualitatively by collecting data through literature studies, documentation, observations, and interviews with religious leaders and community leaders. This study found: First, the people of Balingasal Village have various religious tradition agendas, including the merti Bumi tradition, nyadran tradition, and raja kaya tradition. These traditions are a form of gratitude to God as gifts given to the community, so if they are not implemented, it is feared that these gifts will be reduced or even lost. Second, based on this belief, the community continues to maintain and carry out religious traditions even during the Covid-19 pandemic. The activity committee adapted several elements of tradition and implemented health protocols to maintain public health. However, some participants break the set rules. Third, the community maintains religious traditions because they consider this as an ancestral cultural heritage that has a positive impact and becomes social capital for development.*

**Keywords:** *Resilience, Religious Traditions, Covid-19 Pandemic, Local Wisdom*

## INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic 2020 has had a vast impact on the lives of Indonesian people. The Covid-19 virus spreads through physical contact between humans, so the government has issued policies in the form of physical restrictions and social restrictions. This policy's impact is that various community social activities must be limited or even stopped because of the risk of spreading the virus. In Central Java, the outbreak resulted in 50,563 workers being laid off (Suwiknyo, 2020). Covid-19 data until August 2022 recorded 6,282,774 cases, with the number of deaths reaching 157,226 people. The epidemic greatly affected human life in health, economic, and other social aspects, including cultural traditions in the community.

Indonesia has approximately 1,239 items of cultural inheritance, including religious traditions throughout the archipelago. Some of the traditions have been held despite the Covid-19 pandemic. Some traditions that have still been preserved during the Covid-19 pandemic are *nyadran*, *sedekah bumi*, and *sedekah laut*, *kupatan*. Melina's study showed that urban communities still performed life cycle rites in the new normal period (Melina, 2020). This finding asserts that Indonesian people still perform the rites of religious traditions differently by following health protocols set by the government (Jubba, 2021). (Susanto, 2020; Saputri & et al., 2021).

Tradition has a significant meaning in developing a nation's culture. According to Toha (2016), tradition refers to the sacred ceremonial activities within the religion of the Javanese people, specifically for the Javanese culture followers. The statement is supported by Sumbulah (2012), stating that tradition has played a role in sticking harmony into society. Indeed, strong or weak tradition has become a resilience marker for the wider community, either locally or nationally. In Indonesia, the cultural tradition has been arranged through Law Number 5 of 2017 Regarding Cultural Advancement. Article 1 Verse 1 mentions that culture refers to all aspects of the community's creativity, taste, intention, and artwork (Undang-Undang RI, 2017).

Public awareness of the importance of local traditional values has motivated the people who own the culture to maintain their traditions and carry them even during the Covid-19 pandemic. As explained previously, socio-religious traditions are still preserved during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially by village communities. However, the pandemic still significantly impacts human life regarding health, economy, politics, socio-cultural traditions, and socio-religious traditions. In Central Java, the pandemic has caused 50,563 workers to suffer from work termination (Suwiknyo, 2020). Looking at the figure, it is apparent that the pandemic will significantly impact family resilience and welfare and traditional preservation involving all community members.

One community still steadfast in preserving local culture and religious traditions is the community of Balingasal Village in Kebumen Regency, Central Java. In this village, various local traditions are preserved as ancestral heritage in the form of traditional ceremonies such as *the Merti Bumi* tradition, *Nyadran* tradition, and *Rajakaya* tradition. Even amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the people of Balingasal Village still maintain their various religious traditions. Therefore, it is crucial to conduct studies on religious traditions in society during the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, this study aims to describe the resilience of the religious traditions of the Balinese village community, Padureso District, Kebumen Regency, especially the implementation of *the Merti Bumi* tradition, *Nyadran* tradition, and *Rajakaya* tradition during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Literature Review

Many researchers and academics have studied local traditions during the pandemic. The theme of this study is not new since many other studies have reviewed traditional performance during the pandemic period. However, the current study seeks to precisely understand the roles of the religious figures, the community figures, and the community members in manifesting the socio-religious tradition resilience in the village setting since such a kind of study has rarely been conducted. Despite the specific

nature of the study, the current study still shares some relevance with several studies that have been previously conducted.

One of the findings is that the urban communities still perform religious traditions, although they must make several changes due to the health protocols. First of all, Melina's study found that a tradition is typically performed in the village, but the case is different regarding the fact that a tradition is performed in the city (Melina, 2020). Some traditions still performed by the urban communities are *mapati*, *mitoni*, *puputan*, *selapanan*, and *tedhak siten*, which have been based on the living Qur'an.

In addition, other studies deal with religious activities during the Covid-19 pandemic (Saputri & et al., 2021; Susanto, 2020; Arrobi & Nadzifah, 2020; Nugraha, 2020; Yunianto, 2020; Wijoyo & Surya, 2020). For example, the Saputri et al. (2021) study emphasized reinforcing tradition as a national identity. In contrast, the study of Susanto (2020) focused on the aspect of rites before, during, and after the pandemic. During the pandemic, traditional performance was postponed. Whereas after the pandemic, the tradition is performed under the strict implementation of health protocols.

In the meantime, the study by Arrobi & Nadzifah (2020) emphasized the aspect of Muslim cleric authority during the Covid-19 pandemic. In contrast, Nugraha's study (2020) dealt with the religion and the culture of the Baduy Tribe within the era of the new normal and disaster mitigation. Last but not least, the study by Yunianto (2020) has highlighted the transition from a formal educational institution to the family (parents), while the study by Wijoyo & Surya (2020) has emphasized the aspect of family resilience during the pandemic.

As an alternative, the review of the Covid-19 pandemic from the aspects of the economy was done by (Budastra, 2020 dan Yusuf & Abd. Basyid 2020). The results indicate that the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in the breakdown of value chains and the survival of business domain threats in multiple sectors. According to Yusuf & Abdul Basyid (2020), the calamity caused by the pandemic can be repelled by performing the tradition of *Mbeleh Wedhus Kendhit*. Despite such belief, the efforts to

mitigate the Covid-19 impacts have also involved religious figures through a scientific approach. A study (Aula, 2020) at least can shed light on the fact that religious figures are considered quite effective in educating the community regarding Covid-19 mitigation. The statement is also supported by the results of Muchammadun's study (Muchammadun et al., 2021), which state that religious figures can serve as a social agent in mitigating Covid-19 through their religious activities. Media, demographic characteristics, residents, and strict rules and regulations can influence their influential roles.

The study in this article differs from the studies above, although it has intersecting sides, especially related to local traditions and the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Besides describing the activities of religious traditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the study in this article also examines the traditions' values. The studies carried out on local traditional activities during the Covid-19 period have focused more on the activities and roles of the leaders. In addition, other researchers have not conducted the locus of research in Balingasal Village, Kebumen, Central Java, especially related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, the novelty of this research is to provide a new perspective on the values of *merti bumi*, *nyadran*, and *rajakaya* religious traditions and the resilience of these religious traditions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is religion as a belief. Religion refers to the teachings of God containing the norms which serve as the reference for humanity's behaviors in the world. Regarding language, religion can be considered a set of rules regulating human life so that life will be balanced. According to Arabic, religion is known as *al-din* and *al-millah*. The word *al-din* itself contains numerous meanings such as *al-Mulk* (kingdom), *al-khidmah* (ministry), *al-adah* (habit), *al-ibadah* (dedication), *al-tha'ah* (obedience), and *al-Islam wa al-tawhid* (submission and attestation toward God). Based on these meanings, religion is the attachment of a group of individuals to God of gods (Kahmad, 2003).

According to the sociological perspective, religion is not something transcendent. Instead, it is profane based on the social reality of understanding it. Robert N. Bellah defines religion as a meaningful structure that humanity has used to connect itself to its central concerns (Jamali, 2008). In addition, Parsudi Suparlan also stated that religion could be defined as a system of faith adopted by a group or a society in interpreting and responding to what they have perceived and believed as something magical and holy (Robertson, 1988). Concerning the statement, Emile Durkheim states that religion is one of the strengths of having the capability to shape moral responsibility within individuals who adopt it to meet society's demands. His work entitled *"The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life"* (Durkheim, 1965) states that religion is one system of unity based on relative belief and practice toward sacred matters, namely prohibited matters. Since the earliest presence of humanity, religion has become essential for those who have adopted it individually and collectively. The religions that have developed within the society can be seen from theological and sociological perspectives. However, both perspectives will meet each other and lead to the same thing: the community or the society itself. Religion itself can be considered a characteristic of humanity's universal social life since all people have the mindset and behavioral patterns that are considered to be addressed as religion being manifested into the form of symbols, impressions, beliefs, and specific values in order to display or to understand the existence within themselves (Sanderson, 1993). The close association between humanity's life and religion's continuation within a society displays the interdependency between the two aspects in building the humane subjective, and objective toward the history of the community (Berger, 1991), namely the mundane and the profane within the beliefs and the behaviors of the personal members of the society.

According to Thomas Luckmann (in Berger, 1991), religion refers to the capacity of the human organism to glorify its biological essence through the development of an objective, morally binding, and the culture-encompassing universe. Therefore,

religion is not only a social phenomenon but also a par-excellence anthropological phenomenon, as has been argued by Durkheim. Thus, religion is considered equal to symbolic self-transcendence; consequently, all mundane aspects are considered religious. Regards to statement (Sanderson, 1993) stated that three main elements form the definition of religion, namely: (1) religion always includes a set of rites or practices or a set of beliefs in which the beliefs on the rites have been socially organized and implemented by the community members or the community segments; (2) the pertinent beliefs are considered to be based on the conviction until in general there is not any desire to empirically validate the religion because such validation does not have anything to do with the scientific proof or validity; and (3) religion covers the concept of supernatural existence world that is situated above and behind the daily life that has been witnessed and that has been scientific.

From the explanation, the definition of religion is thus more appropriate to be approached as religiosity since every act of individual and community admitting the undeniable presence of the sacred and profane elements in life is considered a religious act. Therefore, within the study, religion is interpreted as an integral part of the culture of the embracing community manifested in the form of life perspective, social values, and traditions. The differences within the rituals are the ones that lead to the categorization of the followers.

In point, religion and culture go hand in hand. It is also mentioned that culture belongs to the religious tradition benefitted as one of the efforts for empowering cultural advancement objects in order to strengthen the ideology, the politics, the economy, the social affairs, the culture itself, the defense, and the security in order to achieve the national objectives (Undang-Undang RI, 2017). Unfortunately, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has caused the cultural resilience of the community to start stumbling. One community impacted by the Covid-19 Pandemic in Central Java is the community of Balingasal, Kebumen. Despite the pandemic, the community members in the Village Balingasal strive hard to adapt themselves to the pandemic.

In addition to using the theory of religion and culture, this study also used the theory of resilience. It refers to the capacity to deal with hardships, the toughness to recover from stress, and the power to recover from trauma (Hendriani, 2018). In this theory, a family has a vital role in cultural resilience. Its central position is to serve as the intermediary for the wider community. As the personal connection with the more comprehensive social structure, the community will not survive if the fundamental demands such as food, clothes, health service, and spirituality are unmet. (Goode, 2004).

Herdiana (2019) defines resilience involves strength under pressure due to prolonged crisis or hardship. It is clear then that the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted religious tradition resilience. Without a proper attitude toward new situation adaptation, the pandemic will cause community members to suffer from prolonged stress for numerous reasons, such as work termination and the loss of beloved people. Thus, the theory of resilience is believed to be able to solve problems and involve positive transformation and development (Herdiana, 2019). In building relational resilience, families form a stronger bond and provide more solutions to future challenges.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach that emphasizes the meaning of the phenomenon under study. The research was conducted in Balingasal Village, Padureso District, Kebumen Regency, Central Java Province. This village community is loaded with Javanese cultural traditions, with various religious traditions still preserved. Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, the people of Balingasal Village continued to carry out religious traditions such as *Merti Bumi*, *nyadran*, and *Rajakaya*, even though the government implemented a social restriction policy.

Data was collected using observation, interview, and documentation techniques. Observation is intended to obtain data on socio-religious conditions in Balingasal Village. Interviews were addressed to community leaders, religious leaders,

cultural actors, and participants considered representative. This interview was conducted to explore the experience, understanding, and knowledge of the people of Balingasal Village as traditional actors. Meanwhile, the documentation review supports the results of observations and interviews, especially related to socio-religious activities in the village where the research is located.

This study was a descriptive analysis that aims to create a systematic, factual, and accurate illustration of the facts, traits, and relationships between or among the phenomena under investigation. The attained data are later elaborated and analyzed using a descriptive technique which consists of three activities: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Moleong, 2013). In general, qualitative analysis is not used to search data in terms of frequency. Instead, it is used to analyze the social process and the meaning of facts coming up to the surface. Thereby, qualitative analysis is used to understand several processes and facts instead of to explain the facts (Bungin, 2007).

## DISCUSSION

### Social Setting of Balingasal Village

Regarding religion, all residents in Balingasal Village are Muslims consisting of 1,476 males and 1,498 females. The village has 11 worshipping places consisting of 3 grand mosques and 8 prayer rooms. The development of Islam in Balingasal Village cannot be set apart from the Muslim clerics or *kyai* from the previous periods. One of these figures is Chief Mentayuda. Under his leadership, Islam developed pretty well. The preliminary Muslim figures are Haji Yasin, who gave birth to Dulah Syamsi and, in that period, also gave birth to Kyai Chabib in Kenayan Hamlet. Kyai Chabib administered the Nurul Ulum Mosque in 2015. There is another figure named Kyai Mukhlas, Chief Sahroni's son. In Bleber Village, the quite famous *kyai* is Surawijaya, who gave birth to Imam Dikrama and Ahmad Islam. Ahmad Islam bin Ahmad Tegal Iman gave birth to Kyai Nasrudin, and in the present time, the Kyai in charge is Kyai Komarudin. Furthermore, in Pepedan Village, there is another Kyai named Ahmad Rohman who gave birth to Ahmad Sazali, and in the

present time, his descendant is Kyai Sodikun Al Hafid.

Indirectly, the *kyai* have a considerable influence over the rapid development of the religious traditions in this region. The traditions in Balingasal Village are related to or adopted into the local traditions or religious traditions. The traditions still preserved in Balingasal are (1) *merti bumi*; (2) *nyadran*; (3) *raja kaya*; (4) and life cycle rites such as *ngupati*, *kebah*, *puputan*, *nyunati*, wedding, and funeral. Another tradition preserved is *gombrang* (graveyard cleaning), which takes place twice in a year, namely every *Suro* (*Muharram*) and *Ruwah* (prior to the fasting season) according to the traditional lunar calendar. In this study, the focus of the research is on *Merti Bumi*, *Nyadran*, and *Raja Kaya*.

Geographically, Balingasal Village is located at 7,6637 South Latitude and 109,7938 East Longitude. Balingasal is one of the nine villages in the District of Padureso, Regency of Kebumen, with a 262.50 ha-wide area or 10.00% of the total area under the District of Padureso. Eighty percent of Balingasal Village is dry land, while the remaining serves as a farming area with the following composition.

**Table 1.** Allotment of Balingasal Village Land

No	Farming Area	Coverage (ha)
1	Technical Irrigation	15.00
2	Semi-Technical Irrigation	0.00
3	Basic Irrigation	0.00
4	Rainfed	24.00
No	Dry Land	Coverage (ha)
1	Buildings	90.50
2	Moor / Plantation	100.00
3	Market	0.23
4	Graveyard	1.74
5	Village Hall and Office	0.11
6	Field	0.64
7	Early Childhood Education and Elementary School	0.34
8	State Forestry	00.00
9	Others	29.94

Based on Table 1, it is apparent that the farming areas, both the technical ones and the rainfed ones, are 39 hectares in total. These areas can yield 3 times of rice crops in a year, depending on the condition during

the planting season. In addition to growing rice, the people in Balingasal also grow soya beans before the upcoming dry season. It is through the farming areas that the village community harnesses rice as their staple food. Then, as a token of their gratitude toward God the Merciful One, since a long time ago, the village community members preserved a tradition related to the homage of the Goddess Sri in the planting season as well as the harvest along with the *Raja Kaya* tradition.

### The Ritual Practice of Merti Bumi, Nyadran, and Raja Kaya

As having been explained by Komarudin, the traditions in Balingasal have existed ever since before 1922. During the normal period, *merti bumi*, *nyadran*, and *raja kaya* are performed festively within the village. The tradition in Balingasal is inseparable from their occupation and income as farmers, be they field or crop farmers. Even prior to the construction of the Wadaslintang Dam, the farming areas were rainfed. However, after the dam's construction in the 1980s, the farming areas were watered down from the Wadaslintang Dam.

In cultivating the farming areas within Balingasal, the farmers always made their calculations based on *mangsa* (time) (an interview with Komarudin, June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021). According to Herusatoto (2019), *mangsa* refers to the extended term that marks the climate periodization on earth's movement of the solar orbit. *Mangsa*, or climate, is divided into four stages of rounds, namely: (1) *Mangsa Mareng* (transition climate in which all things are in a catastrophe due to the transition from the rain season to the dry season with intermittent heavy rain, stormy rain, heavy wind, and freezing weather); (2) *Mangsa Katiga* (dry season in which the conditions have been arid); (3) *Mangsa Labuh* (the beginning of the rainy season in which the farmers start to cultivate their farming areas); and (4) *Mangsa Rendheng* (rainy season).

In the past, the cultivation of farming areas was done by human beings with assistance from cows or water buffalos. As long as the researchers have observed, the villagers who keep water buffalos in their houses are a few parts of the population in



Jatiteken Kulon Hamlet. Indeed, in the past, the farmers had harnessed the power of water buffalos to cultivate the land known as *mluku* and *garu*. However, sometimes they also harnessed the power of cows, just like what Komarudin and other farmers had done from the 1980s to 1990s. Along with the times, since the 2000s, the village people have started using machines, namely tractors, to cultivate the farming areas. The use of tractors has been caused by the decreasing number of human operators within the farming area cultivation.

Regarding the situation above, *merti bumi* is held prior to the planting season of the rice in the rainy season. The villagers perform this tradition when the farming areas are ready to be sown with rice. One day before *merti bumi*, the villagers prepare all items related to the tools and the equipment for the ritual. Since Balingasal is known as the center of coconut production, which has been the peculiarity of the ritual, woven coconut leaves are used as the container for rice and side dishes.

The *merti bumi* tradition is held to preserve the culture and to serve as a token of gratitude for the Lord the Almighty upon His Grace in the form of crops. The people from six hamlets in Balingasal hold *merti bumi* every year. In 2019, *merti bumi* was held in *Jum'at Kliwon* on Friday, December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019, whereas in 2020, it was held in *Jum'at Kliwon* on Friday, December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020. As previously explained, in addition to serving as a token of gratitude, the tradition is also held to preserve the culture and the custom that becomes the nation's identity, especially from Java, since it has been passed down from one generation to another. In the past, Sunan Kalijaga introduced Islam to the community using art and culture. Then, during the procession of *merti bumi*, the prayers and the *tahlil* are performed by the *kyai* from each hamlet. The *merti bumi* is a token of gratitude and respect to the universe using thanksgiving. Thus, it can be defined that the tradition of *merti bumi* is the tradition of Javanese Islam so that the community can benefit from the tradition to sow the values of Islam to future generations within the village. According to (Purnomo, 2019), the ritual of *merti bumi* in Balingasal is performed to keep the village harmonious, clean, solicitous, in order, and

convenient so that the resilience of the village can be maintained. At the same time, the tradition of *merti bumi* also aims to deliver salvation and happen in both the world and the afterlife to the villagers.

Figure 1. The tradition of *Merti Bumi* in Bleber Hamlet



Source: Private Document 2021

Not all villagers were in *merti Bumi*'s traditional ceremony during the pandemic. The village salvation, which is identical to a plate made of yellow leaves (called *paseman*), is delivered by family members to the house of the hamlet head to be prayed for by religious leaders (*kaum* or *modin*). In the event, *modin* conveyed the intent and purpose of the ritual of the *merti bumi* tradition. The term *siege* in this village has become common knowledge for villagers, namely the gentlemen sitting face to face facing the *uborampe* in the form of rice and side dishes packaged in plates made of yellow leaves.

The sequence of the prayer led by the *kyai* is divided into several steps. First, the *kyai* sends the *fatihah* or the prayers to: (1) the Prophet Mohammad; (2) the four companions of the Prophet (Abu Bakar, Umar, Usman, and Ali); and (3) the *tabiin*, *tabi'it*, *tabi'in*, and the descendants of the Prophet. Second, the *kyai* sends the *fatihah* to the Syaikh Abdul Qadir Jaelani. Third, the *kyai* sends the *Fatihah* to the elders of the village, namely: (1) Wirakerta; (2) Jayakerta; (3) Demang; (4) Naya Dikrama; (4) Dongkol Kunting; (5) Kyai Umpak; (6) Kyai Bengawan; (7) Pringgowongso; (8) Nayuda; (9) Dul Sujak; (10) Kyai Kandang Luh; (11) Mentayuda; (12) Cohdiwiry; (13) Sumodiwiry; (14) M. Chadirin; and (15) Chief Sahroni. Fourth, the *kyai* also sends the *fatihah* to the *kyais* of the village,

namely: (1) H. Ibrahim; (2) Kyai Turmudzi; (3) Haji Yasin; (4) Imam Dikrama; (5) Ahmad Islam; (6) Ahmad Tegal Iman; (7) Kyai Nasrudin; (8) Kyai Ahmad Rohman; (9) Kyai Nurhadi; and (10) Kyai Khabib. Fifth, or the last one, the kyai sends the *Fatihah* to all graveyard workers whose names cannot be mentioned.

It is this characteristic that the *Fatihah* discerns the tradition in the village from that in the city. In the city, the reading of the *Fatihah* is made practical. In terms of the sociological-cosmological perspective, the establishment of a village has certainly involved the elders who opened the settlement for the first time. The figures who opened the village for the first time are often associated with religious-mythical stories. According to Herusatoto (2019), the tombstone of the elders establishing the village are always provided with offerings, and the villagers always pray for their names so that the village will always be fertile, prosperous, and avoid any catastrophe. A similar situation also applies to the rituals of *merti bumi*.

### Tradition During a Pandemic

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the tradition is still under strict health protocols. Unfortunately, not all people in Balingasal obeyed the strict health protocols. For example, the villagers put on their facemasks improperly. However, their seats were adjusted by the required distance to keep physical distance. Such a situation was found in the procession of *merti bumi* rituals in Kenayan Hamlet. On this occasion, it was found that only one out of four people sitting around put on the facemask. A similar situation was also found in the procession of *merti bumi* in Bleber Hamlet.

Figure 2. The tradition of *Merti Bumi* in Kenayan Hamlet



Source: Private Document 2021

As has been reported, the celebration of the *merti bumi* tradition in Balingasal has been performed ever since the establishment of the village or before 1922, according to the records of the village archive. This tradition serves as an offering toward the Goddess Sri or the Goddess of Fertility. Within the development, the tradition of *merti bumi* has undergone some transition and encounter with the entrance of Islam. Prior to the entrance of Islam in Kebumen and Balingasal generally, the tradition of *merti bumi* and *nyadran* has been the inheritance of the elders in the past with the influence of Hinduism–Javanism. In the era of Walisongo, the tradition still thrived in villages, including Balingasal Village. Then, in the era of Sunan Kalijaga, the elements of Islam were slowly adopted into the tradition of *merti bumi* so that the teachings of Islam could be perceived by the community quickly (Zarkasi, 1997).

The tradition of *slametan* or thanksgiving, also related to the tradition of *merti bumi*, is performed by praying together with the community members in each hamlet after the cultivation of the farming areas or after the harvest (*nyadran*). In practice, the tradition of *merti bumi* is performed as a token of gratitude for God the Almighty in the form of *cone-shaped rice* with side dishes over the container (*paseman*) made of yellow woven coconut leaves. In the past, the tradition was held in the house of the village's chief or kyai. However, in the present time, the tradition of communal prayers is performed in the house of each hamlet chief throughout the Balingasal (an interview with Komarudin, June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021). Like in the celebration of *merti bumi* in Bleber Hamlet, the tradition is led by Nasekun (the Kyai of Bleber Hamlet).

In the context of religion and tradition, the community has preserved *merti bumi* for years (Herusatoto, 2019). A similar situation also occurs with the tradition of *nyadran* and *raja kaya*. Furthermore, Heru Satoto explains that culture includes all manifestations of noble and spiritual human life, such as religion, art, philosophy, science, state constitution, and the alike. Regarding the statement, the tradition of resilience in Balingasal during the Covid-19 pandemic shows that the spirit of spiritualism portrayed through the village



still exists. However, the celebration of the tradition is not as festive as the normal time. At the same time, such a situation shows that tradition is not something unchangeable; instead, tradition is something that can be combined with human action following the era (Herusatoto, 2019).

The tradition of resilience within the village during the pandemic has been maintained religiously. The religious rites were set in existence by the village elders even long before the establishment of Balingasal. The theologians argue that the origin of all religions can be divided into two categories: cultural religions (also known as worldly religions) and revealed religions (known as heavenly religions). Specific to the latter, revealed religions are believed to be revealed by God from His angels through His chosen messengers among humanity. Then, the tradition of *merti bumi* and *nyadran* in Balingasal combines the local tradition and the religion into the custom, which has been preserved from one generation to another. Despite the strong development of Islam, such tradition has been vital in a spiritual-magical sense. In the 1980s, the influence of Hinduism-Buddhist-Javanism was quite strong. For example, heading toward the harvest, at that time, the village community held the tradition of *jabel* (bringing together food and side dishes over small trays and putting these trays on the corners of the farming areas throughout the village) as the offering toward God through the Goddess Sri. However, along with the development and the influence of Islam, the ritual of *jabel* is not performed on the corners of the farming areas anymore; instead, it is performed in the house (an interview with Tamziz, June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021).

According to Syafii Mufid, in the 1980s, the spirituality of Javanese people underwent significant development, especially in villages. Furthermore, he states that Islam (spiritualism) has a highly significant position since this spiritualism is the third part or dimension of Islam, namely the stages toward *ihsan* or good deeds. The dimensions of Islam are *syariah* or sharia, *akidah* or faith, and *ihsan* or good deeds (Mufid, 2006). Islam has developed through the roles of the kyais in the village, such as Kyai Turmudzi, Kyai Nurhadi, Kyai

Chabib, Kyai Tafur and more. Indirectly, the religious teachings delivered by these kyais are influential toward the transition of the culture and the tradition practices such as being found in *merti bumi* and *nyadran*.

Thus, such practice of religious rites is also undergone by the community of Balingasal.

Concerning *nyadran*, the tradition is performed after the harvest in the rainy season. (interview with Tamziz and Komarudin, June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021). The readings for the procession of *merti bumi* and *nyadran* are the same; the only things making them different are found in the *uborampe*, or tools and equipment, and the number of *paseman* or the container. In *merti bumi*, the *uborampe* consists of two kinds: one *paseman* containing cone-shaped rice and one *paseman* containing side dishes. On the contrary, in *nyadran*, the *uborampe* consists of three kinds: one *paseman* containing small-sized cone-shaped rice, one *paseman* containing side dishes, and one *paseman* containing *pacitan* (traditional snacks).

The third tradition, *raja kaya*, is performed as a token of gratitude toward God through the cattle. In the past, the people of Balingasal showed gratitude toward God for the cattle they used to cultivate farming areas. However, along with the advancement of technology, cattle use for cultivating has rarely been found or has even disappeared. Since the tradition has been passed down from one generation to another, the tradition is still performed in the present time. The procession of this tradition is different from that of *merti bumi* and *nyadran*. Then, the tradition of *raja kaya* is held at the crossroads of several hamlets, such as Bleber Gunung, Kalapacung, and Jatiteken. The only equipment for the procession of *raja kaya* is cone-shaped rice seasoned with herbs and spices. The ingredients for the cone-shaped rice themselves are rice and grated coconut seasoned and stuffed into the middle of the rice; eventually, the cone-shaped rice is steamed until it is thoroughly cooked. In addition to the cone-shaped rice, the other tools and equipment are traditional snacks and sweet potatoes. There will always be *kupat* (diamond-shaped rice) and *lepet* (oval-shaped sticky rice) among the traditional

snacks. The prayers read in the tradition of *raja kaya* are *slametan* or thanksgiving without any *tahlil*, such as the ones found in the tradition of *merti bumi* and *nyadran*. An example from the celebration of *raja kaya* in Kalapacung Hamlet is provided in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. The Situation in the Tradition of *Raja Kaya* at Kalapacung Hamlet



Source: Private Document 2021

Indeed, the tradition of *merti bumi*, *nyadran*, and *raja kaya* has profound intention, objective, and meaningfulness for the village community. Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, the procession of the three traditions was very festive. Unfortunately, after the outbreak of the pandemic, these traditions were held under simplicity. For instance, prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, in the tradition of *Raja Kaya*, the cattle such as cows and goats were gathered at the crossroads or were even put on a parade through the village such as the one that has been done in the neighboring village, namely Pejengkolan Village.

### **The Meaning of the Tradition of Merti Bumi, Nyadran, and Raja Kaya**

The three traditions, *merti bumi*, *nyadran*, and *raja kaya*, have a religious, harmonious, and economic function. In the context of daily life, humanity always hopes for salvation and blessing from God the Almighty. A similar situation also applies to the community of Balingasal. To attain salvation, security, peace, peacefulness, and blessing in their life, the village people hold some thanksgiving processions in the form of *merti bumi* and *nyadran*. Both traditions are performed as a token of gratitude for their crops since God's intervention through

the rains from the sky enables their farming area to be fertile.

The token of gratitude by performing both traditions can be considered toward Allah. The intended worship is the social one, which leads to the social piety of the community. The reason is that worship is not only related to prayers and good deeds but also related to social practices within the society. The practice of harmonious life by not abandoning God the Almighty thus can be considered a form of humanity's obedience toward Him.

The tradition developed and preserved in Balingasal has specific intentions, objectives, and functions within the community. At the same time, the religious teachings are manifested into a sacred ritual that changes the moral power of the community into the religious symbols that bind the embracing individuals to the group. The symbolic system makes the community aware of themselves so that every community member has religious beliefs in different schools of beliefs (Ritzer, G. dan Goodman, 2011).

One function that culture and religion play is serving as the tool of devotion (to the Lord) or, in other words, serving the function of religion. As Spiro explained, humanity has both sociological and psychological needs. The human sociological needs display numerous functions of religion as communal needs, whereas the human psychological needs display religion as a source of motivation (Spiro, 1969). The practice of religion in Balingasal asserts that religion is a central and vital part of the life of humanity, be it at the individual level or the communal level (Wach, 1983). Furthermore, Joachim Wach explains that religion essentially contains sacred values that encourage humanity to contemplate them in a harmonious relationship with God, fellow humanity, and the universe.

Humanity is a social creature that cannot live alone. Throughout its life, humanity needs one another. In meeting their life needs, an individual demands assistance from the life tools supplied by other individuals. This situation also applies to the procession of the tradition such as *merti bumi*, *nyadran*, and *raja kaya*. The practice of the tradition in this village serves

as a social institution and a worshipping institution toward the Lord. According to Durkheim, religious traditions can ensure the development of social cohesion. Through this social cohesion, the community of Balingasal establishes the values of harmony, mutual assistance, cooperation, farming assistance, and network building among cattle traders. The statement is also supported by the argument of (Sumbulah, 2012), which states that Javanese traditions such as *slametan* have a very significant role in weaving harmony within specific communities.

## CLOSING

It can be concluded that Balingasal has a strong bond with socio-religious traditions. The traditions related to the universe, *Raja Kaya* (cattle), and the life cycle are still preserved. The village's founding fathers (elders) have internalized a robust spiritual ideology for the next generations. As a result, despite the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, these traditions are still performed by the local wisdom of the village. Second, the procession of *merti bumi*, *nyadran*, and *raja kaya* during the Covid-19 Pandemic is performed in simplicity.

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