

The Meaning of the Ngaben Ceremony Tradition in the Process of Accepting Grief: An Indigenous Psychology Approach in Bali

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Abstract

Keywords

Ngaben, grief, Balinese culture, indigenous psychology, acceptance of loss

Abstract

This reflective paper explores the Balinese community's interpretation and performance of the Ngaben ceremony, emphasizing its role in the grieving and acceptance process following the loss of a loved one. The main focus of this paper is to examine how cultural rituals, such as Ngaben, provide psychological support and assist individuals and families in coping with sorrow. The author was motivated to investigate this theme upon realizing that Ngaben is not only an obligatory tradition but also a form of collective healing that continues to resonate today. The objective of this paper is to describe and analyze the meaning of the Ngaben ritual within the framework of Indigenous Psychology. A reflective and contextual writing method was employed, considering the cultural context and spiritual significance as understood by the Balinese people. The results indicate that Ngaben plays a vital psychological role, providing a structured way for individuals to navigate grief while fostering communal solidarity. This paper contributes to the understanding of how culturally specific rituals serve as effective psychological mechanisms in the grieving process and highlights the importance of incorporating culturally-based approaches into psychological studies. The implications suggest that integrating local cultural practices can enhance therapeutic models for emotional healing..



INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is known as a pluralistic nation with invaluable cultural wealth. Each region has a tradition full of meaning and philosophy of life that has been passed down through generations (Putri & Suryani, 2022; Sari, Wayan, & Kadek, 2019). These traditions are not only symbols of ethnic identity, but also reflect the way people understand, respond to, and manage emotional experiences, including in dealing with death and grief. One of the traditions that is interesting to study further from a psychological point of view is the Ngaben ceremony in Bali. Ngaben is a procession of cremation that aims to purify the spirit and deliver it to the next realm. More than just a religious ritual, this ceremony contains a strong social and psychological function (Yanti et al., 2024).



Figure 1. Ngabe Procession

In Balinese culture, death is not seen as the end, but rather as a spiritual journey that must be passed with full respect and awareness. The Ngaben procession involves the entire extended family and community, making it a means of collective healing that brings together spiritual, emotional, and social aspects. Through symbolism, prayer, and active community involvement, these ceremonies assist individuals in processing feelings of loss and achieving a deeper form of acceptance of grief (Sukanata, 2023). This is in line with the concept of culture-based coping, where local values are the main foundation in the psychological recovery process (Harianja, Wibowo, & Kusuma, 2024).

The Indigenous Psychology approach becomes relevant in seeing the role of traditions such as Ngaben. Indigenous psychology emphasizes the importance of understanding human behavior and experience based on local meaning systems that grow in a particular culture (Swetasoma, 2022). In this context, the Ngaben ceremony can be understood as a culturally constructed adaptive mechanism to deal with existential crises such as death. This tradition provides a space to express emotions symbolically and in a structured way, as well as strengthening a sense of social attachment as a form of support during the bereavement period (Widana, 2022).

Several studies have explored the role of cultural rituals in the grieving process, particularly from a psychological perspective. For instance, Yanti et al. (2024) highlight the psychological functions of the Ngaben ceremony in Bali, noting its role in both religious and emotional aspects of grief. However, the study primarily focuses on the ceremonial aspects and fails to delve deeply into how the specific psychological mechanisms of grief are addressed through this ritual, particularly from an Indigenous Psychology viewpoint. Similarly, Sukanata (2023) discusses the social and emotional benefits of community involvement in the Ngaben procession but does not integrate a psychological framework that links cultural practices directly to coping mechanisms in the grief process.

This paper aims to explore the psychological meaning of the Ngaben ceremony in the process of accepting grief, as well as examine how the cultural values contained in the tradition can be understood and appreciated through the lens of Indigenous Psychology. By raising local wisdom from a psychological perspective, it is hoped that awareness will arise of the importance of preserving traditions as an integral part of an authentic and contextual psychosocial support system in the lives of Indonesian people.

RESEARCH METHODS

This paper uses a reflective-conceptual approach, which combines reflective thinking on cultural experiences and spiritual meanings of the Balinese people, with a theoretical foundation from the study of the psychological literature, especially Indigenous Psychology. The author plays an active role in interpreting the cultural values inherent in the practice of Ngaben, through a perspective that prioritizes contextuality and local wisdom as the main foundation in understanding the phenomenon of grief. The sources used in this writing include literature reviews from scientific journals, academic books, and cultural documents related to Ngaben ceremonies and Indigenous Psychology, as well as phenomenological observations on the social and spiritual significance of practices carried out from generation to generation in Balinese society. The author also draws on personal reflection on the collective meaning and symbolic value that emerges in the rite of death, to contextualize psychological processes within a cultural framework.

All the literature data and reflective thinking are processed narratively and analytically, to build the argument that the Ngaben ceremony functions not only as a customary rite, but also as a legitimate and psychologically meaningful healing mechanism in the Indigenous Psychology paradigm. Through this approach, this paper seeks to show that local cultural practices can make an authentic contribution to the understanding of cross-cultural psychology, especially in the context of grief management and existential crises. Thematic analysis is then applied to identify and explore recurring themes that emerge from the reflections and literature, such as the psychological impact of cultural practices on grief, the role of social support, and the importance of spiritual meaning in coping with loss. These themes are examined through the lens of Indigenous Psychology, focusing on the local wisdom embedded in the Ngaben tradition. This analysis enables the identification of psychological functions, such as emotional expression, social bonding, and healing, that are facilitated through this cultural practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the process of writing this writing, the author also conducted direct observations and interviews with several Balinese who have been involved in the Ngaben ceremony, both as grieving families and as part of the indigenous community. The results of this field finding strengthen the understanding that Ngaben has a much deeper function than just a religious ritual.

A respondent, a traditional chief in one of the banjars in the Gianyar area, said that every time the Ngaben ceremony is held, residents will automatically help without being asked. *"We don't just come because of customary obligations. We are here because we know that they are*

grieving. If they are alone, it feels heavy," he said. This expression shows that togetherness in Ngaben is not only a tradition, but a real form of social empathy.

In an interview with a mother who had just lost her husband, she said, *"When I was in Ngaben, I cried, but I also felt strong. Many people came, helped us, and I felt not alone."* He also said that after the entire procession was over, his feelings became calmer, and the nightmares he often experienced before began to decrease. This is an indication that the ritual procession has served as a means of emotional channeling and release.

Observations during the Ngaben ceremony show a solemn atmosphere but also full of warmth. Gamelan music, dance, and prayers create a transcendental atmosphere that makes the procession feel not as a sad farewell, but as a final tribute full of serenity. The family members seem to be dissolved in emotions, but are still cared for and accompanied by the people around them.

This field data shows that Ngaben is not only a form of symbolic rite, but also an authentic social and spiritual experience in helping Balinese people manage their sense of loss. This tradition unites grief and togetherness in a natural, contextual, and meaningful healing process. In the context of Indigenous Psychology, Ngaben acts as an adaptive mechanism formed and nurtured by local culture to deal with existential crises such as death, through emotional, spiritual, and social engagement in a structured manner.

Indigenous Psychology: Concepts and Approaches

Indigenous psychology is an approach in psychology that seeks to understand human behavior, emotions, and psychological dynamics based on the value systems, beliefs, and meanings that live in a certain cultural community (Tri & Salis, 2022). This approach has grown as a critique of the hegemony of modern Western psychology that tends to generalize its findings universally, without taking into account the cultural diversity and local values inherent in non-Western societies. Indigenous psychology not only revises conventional approaches, but also proposes new perspectives that are contextual, emic (originating from within culture), and transformative to psychological dynamics.

Essentially, this approach places culture not as a neutral background, but rather as a major actor in shaping the structure of human cognition, affection, and behavior. Culture is seen as a system of life that forms subjective meanings of experience, including in terms of social relations, spirituality, and existential crises such as death, loss, or suffering (Hifni et al., 2025). Therefore, this approach is very relevant in the context of a society that has a rich local wisdom and is still actively living in daily practice. In practice, Indigenous Psychology does not simply adapt Western theories into local languages, but instead places local sources (such as life philosophy, myths, rituals, and cultural symbolism) as an epistemological and methodological basis for understanding human psychology. For example, in Asian and Pacific societies, concepts such as *kapwa* (Philippines), *gotong royong* (Indonesia), or *cosmic harmony* (Bali) are central to the understanding of social relationships and inner balance that is very different from the concept of individual autonomy in Western psychology.

Indigenous psychology is also emancipatory in nature because it frees the study of psychology from the dominance of colonial frameworks and opens up space for the development of knowledge that respects the sovereignty of local cultures. This includes

validating traditional psychological practices such as healing ceremonies, meditation, and death rites as mechanisms for coping, restoration, and the search for academic and contextually valid meaning of life.

Thus, in examining human behavior, especially in situations of crisis or suffering, the Indigenous Psychology approach proposes that cultural meanings, values, and practices should be used as the center of analysis, not just additional variables. This makes an important contribution in expanding the horizons of psychology as a science that is not only scientific, but also humanistic and inclusive of the cultural diversity of mankind.

The Meaning of Culture in Psychological Processes

The experience of grief is one of the most universal forms of emotional crisis in human life. However, the way a person understands and copes with grief is greatly influenced by the cultural context in which he or she lives. Culture provides a conceptual framework that helps individuals interpret the event of loss, respond to emerging emotions, and establish the forms of behavior that are considered appropriate in responding to the situation (Ahmadi, 2023). Therefore, grief is not only a psychological phenomenon that is personal, but also a social and spiritual process that is carried out in the space of community and shared values.

In many traditional societies, including Bali, grief is understood not as a weakness, but as an inner transition process that must be undertaken with awareness, appreciation, and collective support. Culture provides a symbolic "map" through rituals, language, and actions that allow individuals to navigate feelings of loss in a structured manner. This is where culture plays a role as a collective coping mechanism, which is a set of practices that function to:

- a. Acknowledging and expressing grief,
- b. Accommodating the emotional transition from attachment to release, and
- c. Facilitate social reintegration after loss.

Syafi'i and Pd (2025) explain that every culture has a value system that shapes people's perception of life, death, and the universe. In this value system, cultural practices play a role as psychological support because they create a sense of order, stability, and continuity in the face of uncertainty due to death. For example, ceremonies, prayers, and spiritual symbols are not only religious, but also a means of channeling emotions, social validation of a sense of loss, and strengthening family or community identity and solidarity.

Wibiyanto and Syaifullah (2024) state that, in the view of cultural psychology, grief is not seen as a universal linear process, but as a social narrative shaped by certain languages, myths, and cultural structures. This means that each individual experiences grief through a "cultural language" that is inherited and interpreted together. In this context, the cultural significance of grief becomes an integral part of the psychological recovery process because it provides a symbolic meaning that enriches the experience of loss.

Thus, understanding cultural significance in psychological processes not only broadens the psychological horizons of grief, but also affirms that authentic psychological recovery cannot be detached from the local system of meaning. This is where the importance of cross-cultural approaches and Indigenous Psychology lies in examining human emotional experiences in a complete and contextual way.

The Value of Collectivism and Spirituality in Balinese Culture

Balinese culture inherently integrates the values of collectivism and spirituality in every aspect of its people's lives. Collectivism in the Balinese context refers not only to human relationships, but also to the awareness of the overarching connection between humans, nature, and ancestral spirits. This is reflected in the philosophical concept of Tri Hita Karana, which teaches that happiness and harmony in life are obtained from the harmony between humans and God (*parhyangan*), humans and others (*pawongan*), and humans and nature (*palemahan*) (Sukmayasa & Mahardika, 2024). These values are not just symbolic doctrines, but real living principles in social practices and daily rituals. In responding to death, Balinese society does not position it as a terrifying ending, but as part of a spiritual cycle that continues to rotate: birth, life, death, and reincarnation. Thus, death is interpreted as a transitional phase, not the termination of existence. This reduces existential anxiety and allows people to face grief with a broader, more spiritual outlook.



Figure 2. Procession to Ngaben

Balinese collectivism is also seen in the way people carry out death ceremonies, especially Ngaben. This ceremony is not only the responsibility of the nuclear family, but also social-communal affairs involving banjars (customary organizations at the local level), traditional elders, and local residents. This social solidarity not only helps ease the logistical and economic burden of grieving families, but also provides emotional and spiritual support that is very important in the grieving process. From a psychological perspective, practices like this reflect community-based coping, which is a model of managing stress and emotions through social participation and symbolic unity. In addition to collectivism, the spirituality of

the Balinese people is closely integrated with various rites and religious symbols that color every stage of life. In the context of death, this spirituality is reflected in a series of cleansing ceremonies, prayers, offerings, and cremations that are believed to liberate the spirit from worldly attachments. This process is not just a symbolic ritual, but also a form of inner transformation for the family left behind, because through these rituals they actualize sincerity, respect and release.

Thus, the values of collectivism and spirituality in Balinese culture have a dual function: maintaining social cohesion and providing existential meaning in the face of death. This blend becomes a cultural force that maintains the psychological stability of people, especially when they are faced with intense emotional experiences such as the loss of a loved one. Therefore, cultural practices such as Ngaben are not only traditional heritage, but also adaptive mechanisms that are psychologically and socially relevant today.

Ngaben Ceremony as Cultural Therapy

Within the framework of cultural psychology, traditional rituals are not solely seen as symbolic practices that are ceremonial, but have a profound function as a means of psychological recovery embedded in community values. This concept is known as *cultural healing*, which is a healing process that uses cultural elements such as symbols, music, narratives, and collective engagement to help individuals manage crises, grief, or life transitions in a meaningful and structured way (Harianja et al., 2024). In this context, the Ngaben ceremony in Bali is one of the most vivid examples of how a cultural practice can serve as social and spiritual therapy for grieving families.



Figure 3. Harmony of Nature and Ancestry

Ngaben is not only a ritual of releasing the spirit, but also a medium of grief processing that harmoniously combines emotional, social, and transcendental aspects. Abandoned families are not allowed to experience grief in isolation or emotional isolation, but instead are embraced in a symbolic space that allows them to express grief in an organized way. In this procession, each stage has an interrelated meaning and forms a whole healing structure. The procession to the cremation, for example, not only shows the displacement of bodies, but also symbolically

represents the process of emotional release from the abandoned. Joint prayers accompanied by the sound of gamelan provide a sacred and reflective atmosphere, creating a psychological state similar to meditative effects, calming, and opening up a spiritual space for the process of acceptance.

More than just a spiritual act, Ngaben also has real social power. The involvement of the community in the ceremony strengthens the social solidarity that is a characteristic of the Balinese people. Through this engagement, the grieving individual receives emotional support directly from his or her social environment. The presence of the community in the ritual is not only a form of respect for the deceased, but also as a manifestation of empathy and brotherhood in the face of grief. This shows that Balinese culture does not separate psychological and social aspects, but rather integrates them in a collective experience.

From the perspective of indigenous psychology, Ngaben represents a form of psychological intervention born from local wisdom, where no modern counseling approach is needed to respond to the trauma of loss. Society has a social and symbolic structure that functions similarly to therapy, but is more contextual and culturally meaningful. This is proof that cultural practices can be an effective instrument of healing, since they are rooted in a value system that is understood and lived together.

Thus, Ngaben is not only a ritual of death, but also a recovery mechanism that unites the dimensions of spirituality, emotional expression, and social solidarity. It is a form of cultural therapy that teaches that grief does not have to be hidden or resolved alone, but can be celebrated, interpreted, and processed together in a space full of meaning and wisdom.

Ngaben as a Reflection of Indigenous Psychology: Between Sacredness and Restoration

Akilah et al. (2025) state that in the framework of Indigenous Psychology, every cultural practice is not simply understood as a local tradition, but as a system of meaning that is formed and inherited collectively by a community to answer various life problems, including in dealing with death. Indigenous psychology proposes that the understanding of human experience must be returned to the cultural context in which it took place. Therefore, traditions such as the Ngaben ceremony in Bali deserve to be positioned as a whole psychological practice, not only in a religious or customary sense, but also as a system of emotional recovery that is firmly rooted in the spiritual consciousness of the people.

Ngaben, in this perspective, is not just a procession of spiritual release, but a process of collective meaning of loss. It provides a symbolic space in which emotions can be socially channeled, spirituality can be lived together, and relationships severed by death can be given a new form through sacred rites. Indigenous psychology sees that values such as *mutual cooperation*, *connection with ancestors*, and *cosmic balance* are not complementary elements, but rather the core of psychological recovery in traditional societies.

In Ngaben practice, there is no dichotomy between body and soul, individual and community, or the real world and the spirit world. All come together in a ritual action that symbolizes the cycle of life. This process shows that healing from grief in Balinese society is done through deep collective spiritual experiences. There is no verbal therapy, but there is a narrative that lives in dance, the sound of gamelan, the symbol of fire, and the prayers of

ancestors. All of these elements, within the framework of Indigenous Psychology, are psychological languages that can only be understood through the depth of local culture.

Thus, Ngaben can be interpreted as a concrete reflection of the practice of psychology based on local wisdom, which has functioned for hundreds of years to maintain the inner balance of individuals and communities. This tradition proves that healing, acceptance, and meaning do not always have to come from modern psychological approaches, but can grow from its own culturally rich, spiritual, and symbolic roots. In this case, Indigenous Psychology not only opens up space for appreciation of culture, but also gives scientific legitimacy to cultural practices as a legitimate, contextual, and meaningful form of psychology.

CONCLUSION

This paper reflects that the Ngaben ceremony in Bali not only has spiritual and cultural value, but also holds deep psychological strength in helping individuals and communities cope with grief. Through the Indigenous Psychology approach, this ritual is understood as a system of recovery that comes from collective values, local spirituality, and mutually supportive social structures. The Ngaben ceremony shows that the grieving process does not have to be taken individually or clinically, but can be passed communally, through symbols, prayers, and meanings that are rooted in culture. Every element in the Ngaben procession from processions, joint prayers, to the cremation of the body has a deep psychological meaning. This ritual becomes a bridge between personal grief and collective recovery, between the real world and spiritual transcendence. This proves that cultural practices not only function as traditional heritage, but also as a living, relevant, and legitimate psychological instrument in helping the process of accepting loss. The implications of this paper emphasize the importance of opening up a space for appreciation of local cultural practices within the framework of psychology studies. The Indigenous Psychology approach not only broadens the scientific horizons, but also gives legitimacy that emotional experiences such as grief can be effectively addressed through a time-tested system of local meaning. In a world increasingly uniformized by the dominance of Western therapy, recognition of traditions such as Ngaben is part of the effort to decolonize psychology. A recommendation that can be put forward is the need for academia, particularly in the fields of psychology and social sciences, to more seriously integrate cultural approaches in the understanding of mental health and healing mechanisms. Researchers and practitioners are expected to not only focus on universal interventions, but also consider local values as an integral part of psychological recovery strategies. In addition, the preservation of rituals such as Ngaben needs to be supported as part of efforts to preserve cultural heritage that not only has aesthetic value, but also is emotionally and spiritually functional for the community.

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